

Preparation tips for Comprehensive Exams

The AHA's Committee for Graduate Students has compiled a series of suggestions to assist students preparing for written and oral comprehensive exams. Given that comprehensive exams can vary by field and by department, these should be viewed as broad guidelines.

PREPARING FOR WRITTEN AND ORAL EXAMS: THINKING STRATEGICALLY ABOUT EXPECTATIONS AND READING LISTS

- Find out what the exam committee expects well in advance of the exam - e.g. balance between history and historiography in your answers, amount of time allotted for your responses, degree to which the answer has to be perfectly polished, working conditions (e.g. whether you can take the exam at home in front of your laptop or in a lecture hall with a bluebook) etc.
- Obtain copies of old exams and department reading lists. If you cannot obtain a copy of an old exam, ask your exam committee for sample questions. Sample questions will give you a sense of what is on their minds and what they expect you to have mastered.
- If your department does not have an official reading list, carefully compile your reading list with faculty in each of the fields you will cover. Try to be as focused as possible. Putting 200 books on your list might sound impressive, but it won't necessarily enable you to engage thoughtfully with the readings.
- When possible, build your reading list around historiographical debates and themes and/or geographical regions. This will make it easier to locate each book in its context and to discern broader developments in the field.
- Solicit advice from others who have taken exams with your committee members.
- Choose your classes strategically. Take the Literature of the Field course(s) in the area(s) you will be examined

THE READING GROUP

- Form a reading group of 3-6 people (more might make task management unwieldy). A reading group counters the isolation of reading alone, forces you to be more critical while you read, and group discussion draws attention to arguments and counterarguments that you might have otherwise missed. Start meeting on a weekly or biweekly basis the semester before the exam. Study strategically and hold yourselves accountable.
- If the reading list is not already divided thematically, divide it by topic and assign each person a particular work to report on at your next meeting. ... Teach each other.
- Create a timeline with deadlines for the completion of each item on the reading list well in advance of the exam. This will give structure to your preparation and smaller, less daunting goals to work toward. Try your best to stick to the schedule you've created so that you feel confident that you are making progress!

- Consider meeting with your reading group in the summer when you can focus and minimize distractions.
- From time to time, invite a faculty member to attend to discuss outstanding issues or questions.

NOTETAKING, ETC.

- Annotate everything! Every time you read an article or a book (in seminar, while studying, whenever), make sure that you make some kind of bibliographic notation.
- Develop a note-taking system from the time you enter graduate school - whether on file cards or using a computer-based program like EndNote or Scribe. Keep all notes on the books and articles you read during the coursework phase of your graduate career. File your notes by your major fields or subfields. In each entry include notes on the work's argument(s), intervention in the field, and chapter summaries. Include quotes if you think they're useful. The important thing is to articulate a work's argument in your own words since doing so will be useful not only for exams, but also for the dissertation. Also be sure to add a sentence or two of critique in each entry.
- Supplement your reading list and notes with book reviews, review essays, and textbooks - book reviews will help you keep track of key arguments in the books on your reading list, review essays provide useful overviews of the state of the field/historiography, and textbooks can fill in the dates/facts that you may need.

THE DRY RUN

- Write outlines based on old exam questions; even if the same question isn't used, a similar query will probably appear on your exam.
- As the exam date approaches, simulate actual exam conditions. Try answering a sample question in the allotted time period. Practice in an environment similar to the one you will have on the exam day.

DURING THE EXAM

- Manage your time. Give equal time and attention to each question.
- Read the question carefully
- Outline your essay or brainstorm to warm up before you begin.
- Once you have decided how you are going to answer the questions start writing. A quick introduction with a few sentences that directly answers the question is an effective way to start. Be sure to structure your responses. Use headers and strong topic sentences so that the exam committee can easily recognize when you are addressing each part of a question.
- Answer the questions but do not try to tell the examiners everything you know about the given topic. Craft your responses.

- Write in complete sentences and full paragraphs.
- Make sure you cite referenced materials in the text.
- If you get stuck on a section, move on to the next section and return later. Or, try another approach such as starting in the middle and tacking on the first paragraph with your thesis statement at the end.
- Allow time for editing and review. Check dates and facts for egregious errors.
- Take intermittent breaks to rest, stretch, and have something to eat. Keep snacks handy during the test to keep your energy level high without having to leave your desk.

ORALS

Generally, preparing for Oral Exams is like readying yourself for written exams, but here are few specific suggestions:

- Meet with each member of the exam committee well in advance of your exam. Make sure everyone agrees on the period and geographic coverage of your exam, the reading list, etc. Also make sure that you and your committee members both have a clear sense of the expectations and purpose of oral exams at your institution.
- Practice for the exam by having a friend serve as your examiner. You can provide a list of questions or themes to guide the mock exam. Rehearsing will allow you to practice formulating answers aloud. It will also force you to see where the gaps are.
- During the exam, be sure to listen carefully to the question. Rephrase the question in your own words to make sure you answer the question, with ALL of its constituent parts
- Avoid the urge to just start talking and, instead, take a minute to gather your thoughts before you answer the question. The hardest part of an oral exam is expressing your thoughts in sequential order since you can't go back to reorganize the way you can on a written exam.

STRUCTURE YOUR PREPARATION WITH THE EVALUATION CRITERIA IN MIND

- Keep in mind that the general criteria used to evaluate your responses may include:
 - the development of an argument or thesis in response to the question
 - the evidence you marshal in support of your thesis
 - the concision, organization, and clarity of written expression
 - evidence of comprehension of theoretical concepts and ideas
 - evidence of breadth of knowledge as well as depth in particular areas
 - ability to make connections within and across theoretical schools of thought
 - ability to apply theoretical concepts in a synthetic manner
 - insight and creativity

YOUR ATTITUDE AND MENTAL STATE

- The context you create for studying and performing at the exam is critical: try to develop a positive attitude towards the exam prep period. Rather than thinking of the exams as a competition or a 'grill session,' consider the experience as an opportunity to indulge in your own intellectual development.
- Manage your stress since exams can be a nerve-wracking time. Eat well, sleep, get exercise, go for a massage the night before -- do what it takes to allow your brain to work at its best.