

Tips for Oral Qualifying Exams

While admittedly stressful, orals preparation allows you more time to read than you will ever enjoy again. The process will take you to the next level of *historical thinking*, to borrow a term from Sam Wineburg. Here, we will explore the intellectual task of orals preparation – one intended to help you articulate the distinct shape of your field and a clear vision of the discipline.

Coordinating different registers of history

During orals prep, we learn to “see the forest for the trees,” the contours or “shapes” of our fields of study, and to punctuate breaks in scholarly conversations. We learn to wield examples rather than simply enumerate facts. To borrow a musical metaphor, we learn how to follow the “registers” of history, to contextualize flat data within historical depths. Here are a few such registers and ideas about how to identify them:

Theoretical frameworks

Examples include Marxism, Weberianism, etc.

- If you took a “history and theory” class, start with that syllabus as an outline.
- Draw on “the historian’s toolkit.” For example, using class as a category of economic analysis or gender as a lens for social analysis. Because of the value we place on particulars, few historians self-identify as a strict adherent of some grand theoretician. Don’t be reductionist about pigeonholing complex arguments, but think carefully about the tools historians bring to their work.
- Major journals have “state-of-the-field” historiographical reviews that clarify scholarly conversations.

Schools of thought

An example would be the Kyoto and Tokyo schools regarding Chinese early modernity.

- Skim the acknowledgments to identify networks of historians with similar approaches.
- Search for patterns among graduates of certain schools or students of particular advisors.
- Ask: What creates the coherence among scholars of a particular school? Do they use similar source bases, analytical vocabularies, or methodological approaches?

Scholarly arguments (monographs)

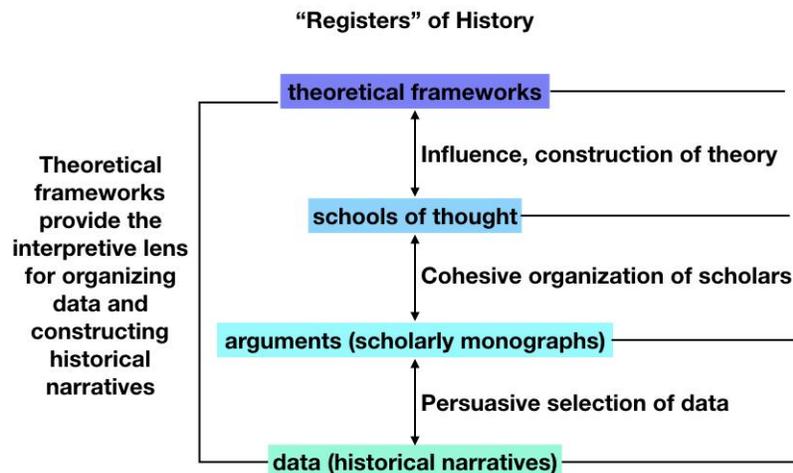
- Pay close attention to the title, which may provide clues about the key terms and concepts.
- Pay close attention to the construction of the table of contents. How does this “skeleton” develop a particular line of inquiry?

- Look for discernable patterns:
 - a. Does the narrative focus shift? How?
 - b. What type of relationship connects chapters? For example, an outline of Julia Kristeva's *About Chinese Women* shows her reliance on binary relationships and Structuralist approach.
 - c. Does the historian narrow or broaden the geographical scope of inquiry? If the historian's pen were a camera lens, does it zoom in and out, or move from one location to another?
 - d. Are there gaps in the chronology, and why? Does the author shift from a chronological to a spatial focus, and for what reasons?

Data (historical narratives)

- Read a textbook for background alongside the monographs. This background knowledge allows you focus on the arguments of monographs rather than mining them for information.
- At the same time, *be critical of your textbook*. Are there newly discovered sources or scholarly interventions that are sufficiently convincing to require that it be revised?

Approaching the registers



How do we think across the registers? Here is one example from Chinese history:

- *Theoretical framework and schools of thought*: "Scholars from the People's Republic of China like Li Zhiting complain that "New Qing historians" over-emphasize the importance of Manchu ethnicity in order to stress the imperialistic origins of the modern Chinese state—and thereby weaken China in the face of American aggression."

- *Scholarly arguments*: “Mark Elliot’s definition of ethnicity differs significantly from Pamela Crossley’s, which lead them to disagree on particular features of the Qing’s construction of power.”
- *Data*: “Newly accessible Manchu-language documents has allowed contemporary historians to discern unique functions of Manchu ethnicity in the Qing bureaucracy.”

The ‘shape’ of conversations changes across different contexts. When you read for orals, you will see little gears that rotate in different directions within the larger computational systems.

Students with a propensity toward synthesis tend to gravitate toward historical narratives and their frameworks; those favoring analysis gravitate toward scholarly arguments and schools of thought. The former facilitates building narratives, while the latter deconstructs them. Graduate seminars sometimes stress discerning distinctions and deconstructing monographs but ultimately, analysis and synthesis go hand-in-hand.

Types of orals questions

Teaching questions

Sometimes professors will signal that you should expect teaching questions. For instance, if your professor says that qualifying exams are the “traditional qualification for teaching as an instructor of record,” it’s a clue *that* examiner will ask a “teaching question.” Even if you don’t get a hint that you should be prepared to talk about teaching, thinking about how you would teach courses in your fields will help you prepare for possible lines of questioning and clarify the main debates, periods, and themes of your fields.

Variations include:

- How would you represent a particular field or topic to a non-specialist audience?
- How would you structure a certain class session or a syllabus?

When answering teaching questions, give a sense of the overall “shape” of a possible course with examples from the beginning, middle, and end, a specific assignment, or an example of how you would handle a particular topic on a given day. Some things to consider:

1. How would you divide large sections of a survey class? What is the arch of the class? This question implicitly asks you to make decisions about *periodization*.
2. What are the larger themes? The featured actors? The major factors? How would you revise the standard textbook of the field?
3. What are some possible readings that you would require of students? How would you teach students to approach primary sources? What is the tension or relationship between secondary-source readings that you would like to draw? How does that tension develop over the course of the semester?

4. What skills and concepts would you want students to learn, and how would those develop over the term? For example, how would students' understanding of contingency change?

Event questions (identifying continuity vs. discontinuity)

Variations include:

- “What was X, and what was its impact on history?”
- “Narrate Y.”
- “Should Z be considered a ‘revolution’?”

Frame these questions in terms of their significance. For example, defining Z as a revolution might require a consideration of contingency or a focus on specific historical actors. Draw upon the various registers of history to shape your answers and punctuate them with relevant historiographical information.

Begin with the big picture before providing detailed examples. Your professor might ask for further detail to see how finely you are able to describe the texture of historical facts, or might shift to another question once you demonstrate proficiency.

Concept or methodology questions

Variations include:

- Do you agree with scholar X on using category Y?
- Is it right to characterize this historical era as A?
- Are B-type sources valid for writing history?
- How do we do the history of C, when sources are often limited to D?

Begin with a brief ‘thesis’ statement indicating that you will examine the question from X, Y, and Z angles. Use context to shape your examples and explain how they address specific methodological concerns.

Qualifying exams are a rite-of-passage on the road from student to colleague. Part of what this involves is articulating your own stance. As you answer questions, look for chances to articulate how different disciplines and fields approach research questions. For example, how do art historians approach material culture differently from historians? How have historians appropriated ethnography, and anthropologists appropriated the archives? What challenges do historians face when they study time periods traditionally reserved for political scientists? These are larger methodological concerns to explore as you articulate the boundaries of the discipline and the shape of your field.

Tips for Qualifying Exams: Formulating Lists

You know it's orals season whenever whispers of "lists" echo in the grad student lounge. The ritualized exchange of lists among graduate students deserves the attention of a sociological study. This section aims to demythologize the compilation of lists.

Turn to your own advisors for specific advice regarding your department's regulations and campus culture. Some campuses include a written exam, upon which the orals component builds for further conversation. Other campuses separate a written master's exam from an oral qualifying exam, a structure that puts an even greater premium on concise and structured responses during orals.

Your professors may provide you with fixed reading lists, or work with you to create an individualized list. If you are creating your own list, start with what you already know: syllabi from your graduate coursework. Some students feel it would be redundant to list books they've already explored in their papers. On the contrary, doing so will allow you to integrate your coursework in a broader context.

There is an emotional benefit to starting with books you have already read because you will realize that you are already familiar with many important books. You may be able to brush up on some of these books simply by reviewing your seminar notes, but even if you need to re-read some of them more carefully, you are still hitting the ground running.

When you re-examine your syllabi, you may also discern something about the way that your professors approach the field. This process can help you organize your own thoughts about the major registers, themes, and methodologies shaping your fields of study.

Secondary and Outside Fields

Because qualifying exams are the culmination of your coursework, you have already laid the groundwork for selecting your secondary and outside fields, particularly if your committee members are professors with whom you've already taken courses.

However, let's say your intellectual interests have evolved since your first year of grad school. You may need a new methodological skill or comparative focus to address a revised dissertation topic. If that is the case, consider auditing a course in that field while preparing for orals.

One suggestion, from Andrew Green of UC Berkeley's Career Center, is to peruse the [American Historical Association's Career Center](#) for job listings in the first and second fields currently desired by search committees. For example, are there more opportunities for early modern European historians with a second field in the Atlantic, or in the Mediterranean? More jobs for US historians with a second field in world history, or a disciplinary field like digital humanities? More importantly, job listings might allow you to structure your lists in anticipation of audiences for your future dissertation/book project.

Nevertheless, sometimes it's good to push against prevailing academic trends, especially in response to current events. For example, it may soon be intellectually expedient for scholars in the East Asia/China field to study a secondary field in Africa, or vice-versa. Look beyond the confines of the academy to discover issues that *you* want to address.

Types of Orals Lists in History

Every school constructs committees differently, and committees and faculty have their own expectations. There is no absolute standard. That said, there are some basic distinctions among approaches. Understanding these basic typologies will help you develop your own list or discern the logic of lists that are assigned to you.

The Narrative-event List

This list follows a chronology, with subheadings defined by events. The relatively long lists help train us to teach the major survey course of the field. One student approached her major field in US history through the lens of teaching. Each subheading represented a lecture in the survey series, and her stellar performance demonstrated her teaching qualifications and earned her passing with distinction. Narrative-event lists often lend themselves to questions about major historical events or about teaching.

The Thematic List

This list is organized around particular thematic issues. These lists help us contextualize our dissertation topics and identify potential audiences. These lists also tend to highlight methodological innovations, such as the intervention of spatial networking analysis in revolutions. These lists lend themselves to questions about method and historiography.

The Historiographical List

In some ways a subset of the thematic list, this list explicitly outlines major historiographical debates in the field. Those who gravitate toward this sort of list tend to be interested in theory and/or intellectual history. It may be helpful to pose the subheading as a question, and to organize items in terms of date of publication, to chart how these conversations have developed across time.

These lists help the student to define his own intellectual contribution. In response, professors may ask students where *they* stand in relation to these major areas of contention in the field; therefore, this list demands a lot of confidence and poise on the part of the student.

The Enumerated List

A relatively short, enumerated list may be the best approach in some cases. For example, one student offered only one book per subheading on a narrative-event style list; he thus unwittingly communicated that he might believe history should follow an official narrative with only one sanctioned adjudication per topic. The enumerated list avoids that concern; the downside is that it does not readily signal a particular set of questions. It can be a helpful exercise to consider how you might reorganize your reading lists into different formats. Can you convert your

chronological list into a thematic or methodological one or vice versa? Doing this will help you see books in multiples contexts, increasing your ability to draw examples on the fly.

Lists as helpful resources

As the late Professor Yuqing Tian noted, historical scholarship begins with a deliberate selection of material. In a sense, an orals list is like a bibliography for your graduate education. The lists begin with your coursework but expanded to include a broader sense of the field.

Lists suggest questions and answers. They also help to structure our reading. Once your professor has approved your list, it's good to read books in groups, in order to transcend the confines of individual books and "see the forest for the trees."

Tips for Qualifying Exams: Note-taking

Orals preparation is also an excellent opportunity to improve your note-taking methods. Note-taking provides an external technology that allows you to process larger amounts of information – and, by extension, to draw more convincing arguments.

This section focuses on note-taking—inextricably tied to categorization (see "Formulating Lists") and thinking (see "Registers of History"). As historians, we all know the importance of records and the *very* idiosyncratic ways people keep them. There is no one right method but it is important to develop one that works for *you*.

Note-taking to know ourselves

My undergraduate mentor, Wen-hsin Yeh (to whom this entire piece owes a significant debt), advised me to keep a reading diary. Write down three or four sentences per book: one sentence to summarize the argument; the second to outline the methodological or analytical approach; the third, a personal response. As David Sedaris also observes, keeping a diary teaches you a lot about yourself.

Just as we try to teach students according to the ways in which they learn best, so too should we study in ways that we *naturally* learn best, which may suggest strategies for note-taking habits that work well for you and help you organize your thoughts.

"Learning type" and note-taking

Visual aids

Some people print out short synopses onto index cards that they reshuffle, in different groupings, onto a cork board; others like to use a whiteboard to map out connections between books. Some color-code sticky tabs along the side of a binder, or files on a computer. The point is to externalize your thoughts through abstract representation.

Technological aids

Electronic systems—like Zotero, Endnote, or Bookends—help with bibliographies and metadata. In the world of ever-expanding hard drives, it's okay to duplicate information across different platforms for unique purposes (e.g., Zotero for bibliographies vs. a PDF reading platform). It's easiest to accumulate citation information and notes *as* one is reading.

Many software systems aid with various forms of visual and digital work. For example, graphing software many help you create flowcharts for political or institutional systems across time. GIS will help with spatial analysis, GELPHI with networking systems.

Some things to note as you read:

1. State a one-sentence synopsis of the book incorporating the elements of its title.
2. Create an outline of the argument of the book based on its table of contents.
3. How would the scholar define the major terms of the field? Do those definitions differ across scholars? Do they bespeak disciplinary norms?
4. What types of sources does the scholar use? What conclusions do they draw from different types of evidence?
5. What audience is the scholar addressing? Compare the acknowledgments with the bibliography. Compare the scholars mentioned “above ground” in the text with those “below ground” in the notes only. Are there any discernable discrepancies, and why?
6. Any fact, example, or quotation that especially surprises you or supports the author's argument. Is there a type of example that serves as a key that unlocks our memories, like the taste of a madeleine cookie? Why does this example function so powerfully?
7. Connect this monograph to widely accepted historical narratives.
8. Any idea that comes to you regarding how to define this scholarship in any particular context, or any sense of how it might be applied in your dissertation, or in a future class.

Essentials: easy to retrieve and re-assemble

No matter what one's system is, notes should be easy to retrieve and re-assemble. When we “retrieve” notes, we identify and locate relevant information. When we “re-assemble” notes, we re-arrange them in new groupings. How these features translate into concrete practice will be different for everyone.

One example is a trusty paper notebook. A notebook allows you to collect the information in one place, to reassess that information with further highlighting and sticky tabs, and to read without the distraction of being online. For some, it is better to access a series of notebooks, than, say, files scattered across platforms or even computers.

The downside of paper note-taking is that it may not be easy to “retrieve” or “re-assemble.” Years later, you may have to thumb through the whole notebook to retrieve information about a specific topic. One fix is to create a table of contents at the beginning of a notebook and jotting down a kind of index of frequently explored topics at the end. In terms of “re-assembling,” you may scan and create a digital copy of your notebook so that you could re-arrange the books and make them “talk” to each other in different ways. You could also scan the copies in Evernote. Evernote has the advantage of an optical character recognition (OCR) function, for searching scanned handwritten notes.

Conclusion

When we read for orals, our brain synapses are firing. We plot wonderful seminars with fascinating reading assignments, lectures featuring illuminating examples, and assessments employing new technologies. If scholarly fields were mountains, during orals preparation, we see all the gaps where we could leverage a foothold for an article or even a second project; afterward, these trials grow over with a verdant brush, unless we navigate our way back with our maps. In addition to notes as maps, orals reading in general creates a larger internal compass to navigate that landscape.

Ultimately, orals preparation is not simply an assessment. It is a process that does not terminate with the qualifying exam. We take the habits, the skills, the approaches, and the thinking we learned in orals with us onto the dissertation stage and beyond. This period of intensive reading opens a new door to one’s life as a historian.