



Guide to Graduate Comprehensive Exams

The following handout contains tips and information for both written and oral comprehensive exams, in all the numerous forms they take. Before you begin planning for your exams, you should understand what the exams will contain. Always consult your student handbook for your department exam directions and ask for previous years' exams, if possible. If directions are not listed, ask your department graduate coordinator/contact for directions. Other students can also provide helpful tips and offer their own insights for managing the exam. Remember that at the end of your exam, you will have taken important steps towards specialization, refreshed your memory on lower-level topics, and moved closer to your degree.

Reading List

From there, you should begin to make a list of readings, both from your course work as well as suggested readings from your instructors, and start annotating them by subject matter. You may also be required to work with your advisor or other faculty to establish specific questions you will respond to in the exam; this should happen in conjunction with creating your list. You will have some say in how to tailor readings that will be specific to your exam questions.

So well before the exam you will start to compile and work through a reading list. Work on the readings well before the exam and do not wait until the last minute. As you read, also consider how you will take notes for the exam. Here are a few recommendations on establishing and organizing your notes:

- Keep a notebook or digital file; title each file with keywords that describe the set of notes in a way that will help you remember them.
- Consider Zotero or Endnote in particular, as those are popular reference apps.
- Some people find that the Cornell Notes System can be effective for organizing their notes.
- Utilize technology: Explore note-taking specific apps for your computer that can help your better organize your material.
- Annotate your references, if needed, for the exam.

Part of many exams is the preparation of a dossier; the dossier usually includes your reading list, a writing or other work sample, and may include an annotated bibliography, course syllabi, and other materials that prove you are ready to undertake the exam.

Written Exam Tips

Here are a few other tips for written exams. First, never spend too much time on any one topic so as to take away time spent studying other topics. Some topics will be more challenging than others, and others will be less relevant to the questions, so allocate your time to the greatest challenges and spend less time reviewing material you are already comfortable with. Second, ask questions of other students and faculty that will help you understand how to write essays specifically for the exam. For example, ask if the exam questions are about making arguments/providing content and exposition/reviewing a test case? Also ask whether citations are necessary on the exam itself. Third, before you write create an outline/concept map which should include keywords and notes for ideas about each topic.



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Time and practice are also key elements of a successful exam. Before you get into the exam, write on some sample questions and time yourself. This will help you to build speed and feel comfortable with the format of the exam. It will also help you from going over the time limit of your exam. Note that exams differ in their time limits; in some cases they are in-person and have strict hour limits, or they could be less strict and allow for you to take the exam home. In these situations, exams could last from a couple of days to more than a week. Regardless of the type of exam, practicing written responses is an important component of your preparation.

Oral Exam Tips

Much of the information presented in the Written Exams section on reading lists and consulting with previous exams will still apply here; however, an oral exam requires its own preparation as well. For example, rather than writing with your books and articles available, you will have to remember the relevant information without aids. In essence, an oral exam is a high-stakes version of the discussions that most graduates are familiar with from seminar courses.

When you are getting ready, remember to practice early and often! Practice oral exams with faculty (who have the time) or other PhD students and candidates. This will help you understand the format of the exam, and you will grow more comfortable responding to academic questions. We at CTL can also offer some assistance in providing a mock exam room with feedback to help in your preparation. Even if your committee members are not forthcoming about what specific questions they will ask, you should meet with them regularly to understand what topics they expect you to know.

Also keep in mind that oral examinations can be public, or have a public presentation component alongside the faculty discussion. You will need to prepare your materials for that presentation in advance, and come in with confidence. If you struggle to talk in front of crowds, we recommend that you rehearse your speech alone and also practice with fellow graduate students.

Here are some further tips for the days right before an oral exam, as well as the exam itself:

- Sleep well for a few days beforehand—you should avoid cramming your study in the days leading up to an exam.
- Eat well and stay hydrated before your exam, and take a bottle of water with you.
- Schedule your exam during a time of day that suits you best (when you are most awake), if possible.
- Speak slowly, clearly, and confidently.
- Ask for clarification if you need to, or if you misheard a question.
- Breathe and focus; avoid feelings of panic and remember that you won't know everything they ask you about.

Theory

In many disciplines, especially the social sciences and humanities, you will be expected to answer questions about theories from your readings list, much like a short version of theory discussion in seminars. Here are some of the common questions you will receive about theories:

- Who developed the theory, and what were they responding to?



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- What utility does the theory have?
- Who used it and in what subfields?
- What are the critiques of this theory?
- Expect to answer questions that relate to both the major theoretical frameworks of your field as well as specific thematic or subfield theories.
- A general question you may ask yourself: Are you approaching the material and analyzing the subject matter as a graduate student should?

While you read and study, you want to keep a few things in mind. Discipline content will be important, of course, but theory, method, and framework are also vital for many exams. It helps to understand the overarching concepts of the readings and prepare examples to display your understanding; for example, if you are an art student, you might be tested on your knowledge of 19th Century Art and Architecture in America; you would need to discuss the major themes of this era and you might choose to explain how the unique design contributions of Henry Hobson Richardson were so important.

Studying

Here are a few more general tips on studying effectively for the comprehensive exam. Once you have your reading list, your questions (or topics), and have a date, what should you do? Develop a reading and review schedule—it should include at minimum an hour or two for several days of the week. This type of distributed studying will give you time to store information in your long-term memory.

Also be aware of other resources that can help you out. For example, look for annotations and notes among your peers and online—they might be in book and article reviews, in meta-analyses, or even in textbooks. Other students sometimes upload their annotated notes for important works and theories too, which you should take advantage of. You are not being tested on writing all the annotations yourself, but it can still be helpful to look through a work on your own even if you do get notes elsewhere.

If you study using note cards or flash cards, do not write or put questions in the same way every time. Instead, try to mix up your format for maximum effect. This challenges you to remember information and connect it in different ways, which will be beneficial when you get a question in an oral exam that comes from a different angle than you were expecting.

We also recommend creating a study group in order to prepare for exams, as they give you a space to discuss questions, share notes, and build a more robust understanding.

- Meet with other graduate students going through comprehensive exams, and keep a regular schedule.
- Ask friends or family to help keep you accountable to your study and/or writing goals.
- Studying in isolation works for some, but not all. Try including others to see what works best for your preparation.
- At CTL, we facilitate writing camps that assist grad students with achieving goals in a structured and supportive environment. We welcome comprehensive exam prep as part of those camps!