**The Comprehensive Exam: Strategies for Success**

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## Our Expectations

The “Comps” are an occasion for students to demonstrate their analytical acumen and to apply what they have learned in their coursework, teaching, research, writing, and comps preparation. Students should bear in mind that the comps test one’s ability to engage in historiographical debates and to establish narratives of patterns of change across time. Your ultimate aim is to show that you have mastered your fields of study, and can think and talk like a professional historian.

## First steps

Identify examiners for your fields. The standard practice is to pick faculty with whom you have done coursework and already established an intellectual rapport.

Each field examiner will follow his or her own standard practice as regards the reading list: some will ask you to compile the list from scratch, others will give you a template list. In consultation with your adviser, you should group the readings both chronologically and thematically, dividing the list into discrete sections, so you can focus on one section at a time.

Meet with each examiner regularly as you are studying. How often you meet depends on the standard practice of each faculty member; some meet with students weekly or bi-weekly, others meet 3-4 times over the course of the period in which you are preparing. You should meet a minimum of three times with each adviser, to chart your progress.

## Reading

Instead of taking copious notes on each book, create a template for preparing a precis of each book that briefly states the book’s thesis, method, sources, strengths, weaknesses, and significance.

Always think in terms of conversations. Don’t read each book in isolation and check it off; put each into relationships with others, sharpening your own sense of the historical arguments you want to make.

Find a partner or group of people to talk about the books with regularly.

As you read through your list, consult a basic field textbook or two, of recent vintage, to aid you in the task of integrating material that you have learned and of thinking critically about the periodization of each field. Consult book reviews in a field’s leading journals, too, but as a supplement to, not substitute for, reading the books themselves.
Some advisers will ask you to prepare short think pieces on clusters of readings; such writing assignments are very helpful preparation for the written and oral parts of the exam. Whether or not you write such short essays, you should take the time to think through and process each cluster of readings.

DO NOT READ UNTIL THE LAST DAY. The final stages of preparation for comps should aim at the consolidation of your knowledge rather than the acquisition of new knowledge. Group your readings around the key historiographical debates and questions, which they address (i.e. identify five such questions for each field).

## The Written Exam

In consultation with your advisers, set a date on which you will receive their questions, the date on which you will submit your answers, and the date of the oral exam. You will have two weeks to prepare your written answers, and your oral exam should take place about one week later (sample dates: receive questions, March 15; submit answers, March 29; oral exam, April 5).Â You must inform the graduate secretary and the DGS of these dates at least three weeks prior to the scheduled written examinations; the graduate secretary will receive the faculty questions, forward them to you, and then forward your answers back to the faculty. Do not depend exclusively on the graduate secretary to remind faculty to submit questions. Drop each professor a note yourself.
The written exam questions will be broad. You will not be able to provide comprehensive answers in the 3500 word (10-12 pages) allotted for each field essay. The goal instead is to craft a persuasive argument that mobilizes the most relevant historiography.
Your essays should have footnotes or endnotes, with full first citations of each source.
In the week after you have submitted your written exam, try to anticipate what specific questions you might be asked in the oral, so you can prepare some answers.

## The Oral Exam

Be prepared to 1) elaborate on your written answers 2) discuss major scholarly debates in your fields, and the development of the fields 3)Â synthesize information into narratives 4) speak in informed way about the key features, turning points and transformative moments of each era or period you’ve studied 5) address how you might teach a course in each field.

Have your own agenda or set of “talking points” that you would like to share over the course of the exam. These can be, for example, observations that did not make it into your essays; appreciations or critiques of the works you found most compelling or controversial; and questions you have formulated to move research in the field forward.

Be prepared to direct the conversation to your areas of strength and specialty: have a number of books in each section of your list on which you are prepared to go deeper than with the others.