

Writing and Studying for PhD Comprehensive Exams: Tips and Suggestions:

Preparing for Comprehensive Examinations can be a challenging task. These examinations are different from many other students undertake in their academic career. In preparing for a comprehensive exam, your objective is to master a body of knowledge so that you can demonstrate your ability to integrate the readings (show connections and points of contrast), to think analytically about them, and to know and engage in central debates in the field. The following suggestions are intended to clarify what is expected of you in a comprehensive examination, and to provide some suggestions for how you might prepare for one.

Study Tips:

- Read the works carefully. Think about how they fit together (or don't). What events, trends, and theoretical issues do they shed light on? Do they contradict each other? How do they contribute to our understanding of the issue at hand?
- Think critically about the works. What arguments would you develop to support their strengths and criticize their weaknesses? What is most useful or intriguing about them? Understand others' opinions, and develop your own.
- Review old examinations in the area if possible. Develop answers to these questions. Talk to others about your answers.
- Talk to the examination committee members about their expectations for the examination. If you have questions about the literature you are reading, ask them about it.

Exam Tips:

- You may feel short of time in the examination, but it is important that you take time to think about the questions and develop coherent answers. Committee members need to see that you comprehend the key issues and can think coherently about them.
- Take time to organize your thoughts, and your answers. Try to present ideas in a logical way. Answer the questions asked directly. Do not go off-topic.
- Make an argument. Answers must do more than summarize the arguments of all who have written on a given topic. They must bring the relevant works to bear on an issue, while making an argument that is directly relevant to the question being asked.
- Be critical when appropriate. Again, your goal is not simply to summarize the works you read, but to harness others' arguments to make a point. A good comprehensive examination answer demonstrates not only comprehensive knowledge of a field, but understanding of the key issues and debates, and generally, the ability to think critically about these issues and debates.
- If you don't understand a question, ask the professor supervising the examination for clarification.
Note that when writing the exam, you are not limited to the reading list. Yours answers should draw primarily on material from the reading lists but you are also encouraged to bring in outside/additional readings and materials if they help answer a question better.