Study Guide for Comprehensive Exams

A Ph.D. signifies that you have made the transition from knowledge-consumer to knowledge-producer. To do so, requires going beyond memorizing and rote preparation for exams to analyzing and thinking independently. We expect you to have a solid command of the literatures in the subfields in which you are testing. This includes not only knowing the major theoretical frameworks and arguments within these literatures, but also being able to critique and analyze these ideas on your own terms. We do not expect you to know every debate or theory, but to know the core theoretical frameworks and a reasonable range of the scholarly debates.

Graduate coursework is designed to help you make this transition and comprehensive exams provide the needed incentive to achieve it. We ask you to take comprehensive exams in two fields because you need to demonstrate fluency with the broader political science literature before focusing on your own specific field of research. When studying for your “comps” keep in mind that the purpose is not to prepare answers to particular questions (i.e., the way you have likely studied for almost all exams until now). The purpose is to digest a set of literatures and construct your own mental “map” of the field and your own take on the arguments and controversies you encounter.

With these thoughts in mind, here are some tactics for preparing for your comps. There is a lot to do to prepare, but it is all very manageable if you break it down into steps. The list of steps below may seem intimidating at first, but the goal is to help you minimize the amount of reading and make the studying process more efficient. It will also help if you get a head start by taking good notes of the reading in your seminars — this way a lot of the work will be out of the way before you begin studying in earnest during the summer before you take exams.

1. Begin with the syllabi in your coursework that are relevant to your exams (cores plus substantive seminars). If there were any relevant field seminars you were not able to take, ask faculty if you could get a copy of their syllabi. These will point you to the exemplars and live controversies within the subfields in which you are testing, but they will also be incomplete.

2. Conduct a reference citation search (e.g., Google Scholar, Social Science Citation Index) in which you identify articles and books that cite the important works you identify in step 1.

3. Step 2 will produce a large list of things to read, but don’t worry, because no one expects you to know everything. Therefore, cull this large list by focusing on recent work and work in prominent venues (e.g., top-tier journals and university presses). This will produce a more manageable list of work with which to become familiar.

4. “Familiar” is the operable word, because you won’t have time to read everything cover-to-cover. If graduate coursework has prepared you for anything it is the ability to get the gist of an article or book quickly. Rule of thumb: you should be able to reduce the major argument of an article or book to a few sentences. In addition, you can also find good
organizations and discussions of the literature though on-line searches of graduate syllabi at other universities and reading literature reviews published in Oxford Handbooks, *Annual Review of Political Science*, etc.

5. As you read through the literature, you will likely identify sources that steps 1 – 3 missed. If they seem important (i.e., lots of people are citing them), add these to your list.

6. Organize all of these summaries into a categorization system that you think best characterizes the literature. A tree analogy might be helpful, with the trunk representing a major area of research (e.g., Congress, Democratization, International Organizations, Identity) and the branches representing the different ways in which research has articulated these major areas of research. The leaves on the branches are the citations that hold the arguments and controversies (i.e., ideas) in which you are trying to be conversant.

7. After you have a picture of the literature in your mind, contemplate the overlap among literatures. Scholars in different research programs often study the same phenomenon from different angles. To what extent does this overlap reflect scholars saying the same thing in different ways (i.e., a difference in terminology) and to what extent does it reflect scholars saying different things?

8. Take a look at previous exams to get a feel for the form that comprehensive exams questions take. Try your hand at answering some of these questions.

9. Now, create some of your own questions and answer them. The act of creating questions forces you to step back and think about literatures holistically — exactly the sort of thinking that will increase your likelihood of success on the exams (and your quest for a dissertation topic as well!)

10. If you are lucky enough to have colleagues who are taking exams at the same time you are, bounce your ideas, exam answers, and exam questions off of them. Let them critique your organization scheme of the literatures and you should critique theirs. The same with practice exam answers. One caveat here: avoid using study partners as a way to gain “efficiency.” It is tempting to divide up the labor, but in doing so, you lose out on forming your own evaluations of the literature. A better approach is for you to duplicate each other’s efforts and see how your colleagues’ perspectives of the literature diverge from or converge with your own.

Each of these steps is similar to the one you will take while writing your dissertation and pursuing an active research program as a scholar. Our entire enterprise is built on the notion that we do not know all the answers, but we know how to search for them.

**Coda: Preparing for Orals**

Once you have passed your written exams, you will sit for an oral examination. You should view this examination as a conversation. The examination committee may ask you
questions about your written exam answers, so you should reflect on the written feedback they give you on these answers. However, also be prepared to talk about issues beyond your written questions. If you’ve followed the steps above, you will be prepared to discuss literatures beyond the ones in the written exam.

The purpose of the oral is for you to think on your feet. It is not possible to prepare for every possible question you might get in an oral. You must be able to construct an answer on the spot. This ordeal mimics what you will face in a job talk or major research presentation. People often ask questions that are beyond the scope of your talk and often ones you have not yet considered! But this won’t be an issue if you have made the transition from knowledge-consumer to knowledge-producer.