

Department of Anthropology | Stanford University

Department of Anthropology Best Practice Reference, Doctoral Qualifying Examinations for Area and Topic

The purpose of the qualifying exam is to test and ascertain that the student has full command of the relevant literature pertaining to his/her chosen field of study. The field of study covered in the bibliographies is always broader defined than the field outlined in a dissertation proposal.

All the components of the qualifying exam process – bibliographies, literature review, exam questions, the written exam, and the oral exam – are the joint responsibility of the student and the faculty on the exam committee.

A systematic preparation that involves all members of the committee as early as possible holds the key to a successful and intellectually enriching exam process.

The qualifying exam process includes the five components: Bibliographies, Literature Review, Setting the Examination Questions, the Written Examinations, the Oral Component meeting and examination

1. Bibliographies

Each student should prepare two bibliographies – one on TOPIC and one on AREA.

Each of these bibliographies should have app. 100 titles – book and/or articles. The exact number of titles on the list should depend on whether these are whole books or shorter articles.

Each of the bibliographies should have some subheadings to organize the content – three to five is advisable.

The preparation of the bibliography, including the discussion of exact topic and area content, begins in the beginning of the second year (or before) *in close collaboration with the advisor and the members of the area and topic exam committee* who the student identifies in the course of the second and third year.

2. Literature Review – How to Prepare for the Written Examinations

The safest way to pass the qualifying exam is to prepare early and well by discussing the selected texts with members of the committee. The most successful and proven method to review and understand the selected literature is the following:

- Schedule regular (bi-weekly) meetings with members of your topic and area committees. This should begin in the second year already. Enroll in 451 Directed Reading course with Advisor and/or committee member
- In preparation for each meeting, select a cluster of related texts (four to six) from your bibliography and write a two-three pages succinct summary and discussion of the texts, what they say, how they are situated in relations to one another, etc. This forces the student to read and digest the texts early, and to get used to the brief and precise style of writing that is expected for the exam.
- The précis should then be sent the committee member(s) one day ahead of the meeting. This will allow the works and the elements that are most difficult to be discussed with the committee member.
- Make sure to enroll in the Qualifying Examination 5 unit course in the Winter quarter of the third year.
- After about a year's gradual preparation of this kind, each student will have an archive of notes and précis that will be immensely helpful in writing the exam.

3. Setting the Written Examination Questions

As students prepare and read for the exam, it is a good idea to indicate areas and themes that they would like to have questions set in. It is important to discuss these well ahead of time with members of the committee.

The actual exam questions are NOT to be framed by the student *but always by the chairs of the topic and area exam committees. It is ultimately the responsibility of the advisor to make sure that appropriate questions that are approved by the committee are submitted before the deadline.*

Each exam questions should be broad enough to allow the student to demonstrate mastery of a wider literature, and precise enough to be answered meaningfully in an essay of app. 8-9 pages.

There should be a minimum of five questions set for Topic and five for Area. The student must select three questions from each list.

4. The Written Examinations

A written exam is an essay that addresses a contradiction, tension, paradox within a body of literature, *and/or* an essay that traces the permutations and continuities of certain frames and themes in a body of literature.

The style and economy of presentation should be akin to that of (good) Annual Review articles that present and discuss various positions while developing an argument of its own.

The style should be precise and it should demonstrate an ability to summarize large and complex arguments succinctly; an ability to situate various works in relation to one another; an ability to develop a clear and reasoned argument, and an ability to situate theoretical and conceptual positions within a larger field of debate as it has developed over time and in different geographical and historical contexts.

5. The Oral Component Meeting of the Written Examinations

The Oral component of the Qualifying Examinations should be scheduled over a minimum of 90 minute period of time.

- The exam should begin with a 10-15 minute presentation by the student on central themes arising from the exam answers.
- Following this, the Exam committee discusses the exams and the bibliographies with the student for about 30 minutes for Topic and 30 minutes for Area. Students may be asked to clarify and expand on arguments made in the written exam and/or explain the specific arguments of various authors. There are three golden rules for a successful oral exam: (a) Make sure to answer the questions that are posed; (b) be prepared to discuss authors and perspectives from the bibliographies that may not be included in the written exams; (c) be as precise and brief as possible to make the most of the discussion.
- Following the discussion, the student is excused and the committee discusses the exam as a whole and decides to approve, or not approve, the exam.
- The committee members invite the student back in and communicates the result to the student. Qualifying Examination submissions and committee approval of the exams must be completed by the end of Spring quarter of the third year.
- If the exam is not approved, the committee members will present recommendations for improvement and a suggested time frame for revision and resubmission of the written exams directly to the student. Alternatively, the comments and required revisions can be relayed to the student by the Advisor.
- A student can revise written exams and retake oral exams a maximum of three times. The final submission must be made by the end of Autumn quarter of the fourth year.