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Advice for Comprehensive Exams

I used to think of them as a meaningless hurdle (i.e., when I was in grad school) but now I see that, in the right circumstances, they can have some value.

If you are taking a comprehensive exam you should think of them as an opportunity to sit down and synthesize the state of the literature. Ideally, they help you identify strengths and weaknesses of a literature and they reveal how your interests connect to the larger questions of political science.

They also help illuminate the history and development of social science. What counts as progress? What steps and missteps have been made along the way? What does the past imply about the trajectory of future work? Especially given that fields are increasingly converging, this is a useful exercise to think about when you think about what that might imply about your future.

Finally, perhaps less relevant for research, they are hopefully good preparation for teaching PSCI 101. Your studies should enable you to write a very good syllabus for an introductory class in that field and the ability to teach intro-level classes is always desirable for job candidates.

Ideally, comprehensive exams would not be needed. All of the value lies in the preparation -- if we could measure preparation, you could just show up and pass.

Some general guidelines:

Studying begins on Day 1 of Grad School. Noting arguments and connections across the literatures you have read. Knowing what authors say (and why) is necessary, but not sufficient. You also need to know connections across literatures – how does what X argues relate to what Y argues and what does it mean for the larger questions? Think about connections in terms of both concepts and methods.

Study Groups are good. Working with others can help reveal differing perspectives and interpretations. That said, the whole point is to see what your evaluation and interpretation of the literature is, not to simply parrot what your peers wrote down on the collective study guide you produce.

See what past questions were. Political science has been grappling with the same fundamental issues for a long time. Past exams are probably a good indication of future exams. Take advantage of this! Spend time researching and writing the perfect answer. This will not only prepare you in case a related question arises, but, more importantly, it will force you to think broadly about the connections that exist for this question.

Find out what faculty are working on and be familiar with their work. Ego being what it is, what your faculty are working on is often a very good indication of what they think is important and relevant. The goal is not to simply cite faculty in comp exams (extraneous citations are bad), but to use their work to get a sense of the areas where they think the most progress can be made (perhaps forecasting a possible question on the topic?).

Talk with the faculty. If you are taking a comprehensive exam that I wrote and I do not know you are taking an exam that is a problem. Not that the content of the exam will change, but if you are taking the exam the faculty should know this (perhaps because of the prior point). Faculty may also have different expectations for what a good answer is that you should be aware of beforehand. My reactions and impressions of what constitutes an acceptable answer are not necessarily always shared by my colleagues and you should be aware of the possible differences in opinion.

Comp exams are not “screen dumps.” Your exam should not be a listing of every possible reference on the topic. Nor should you try to divert from the question being asked and try to answer a different question. Answer what is being asked. *We are looking for the ability to construct an argument about the literature*, not to test how many citations you can recall.

Think before you write. You should outline your answer before you write anything. What is your argument? How do the pieces of the literature fit together? If you are outlining at the same time you are writing your answer will be bad (unless you are brilliant). You need to think about the connections and the argument before you start writing to craft a good answer. I do not want an intellectual travelogue or a regurgitation of what you read. I want a focused argument that leverages the literature to show connections and make your case. Simply copy and pasting abstracts is failing.

Proofread and edit. Writing and speaking is the currency of our profession. If you cannot express yourself in the written word that is a problem. You should edit your answer before turning it in. 10 well-written pages are strictly preferred to 20 incoherent and unfocused pages.

Remember, at the end of the day comp exams are ultimately a test of your ability to synthesize a literature and identify the connections and opportunities that exist in a well-reasoned and supported argument.