

## PhD Exams – 20 Tips

1. If possible (depends on committee members), make sure you have your questions far in advance of the exams; this will make your reading directed and clearer. Discuss with your committee preparation techniques as well as the best way to prepare for questions. Remember individual faculty members likely have different processes.
2. Make sure your notes on articles are as detailed as those you might take for a book. Writing in the margins of an article will not be helpful when it comes time to review.
3. For books, read the introduction then read a few detailed book reviews, looking for how the author sees his or her book in relation to the historiography, and what questions interest the author and the reviewers. Then turn to the rest of the book (or as much as you realistically have time to read). When looking at reviews, it is especially helpful if you can find reviews by other scholars whose books are on your list; this can help you to situate different scholars and start putting them in conversation. If you are writing your own questions, reading reviews can help point you to some of the main questions in the field
4. Leave a good chunk of time before exams (2 weeks on the short end and maybe 1-2 months if possible) to review all your notes and really begin synthesizing ideas, themes, arguments etc. This is what is usually called for on exam questions and is thus an important skill to develop.
5. Review a few good synthetic histories/textbooks for your fields or even encyclopedia entries (ex. for American History see *The Readers Companion to American History*, ed. Foner and Garraty) to help with contextualizing key terms, idea, events and people.
6. Look into software that would help to organize your notes, for example *growly notes*, a free program available online. It allowed me to make easily accessible folders for each field, and subfolders for books and articles; programs like that allow you to move back and forth between notes without constantly opening new files.
7. Stay in touch with your advisors throughout the process, so that you can be sure that you both have the same expectations about the exam. Discuss the format of the exam at the first meeting--knowing how the exam will be structured (and whether you will have a choice of questions to answer) will help you to read more strategically. Contact your GSR at least two months before the exam as well to remind them about you; a GSR gone AWOL can be a ludicrously unnecessary headache.
8. On the day of the exam, make stacks of articles and notes pertaining to each exam question preferably in another room. Then, when you receive your questions, take them to your writing space with you.
9. In terms of note taking - Read a book. Once you're done, write a one page summary highlighting the key points, methods, sources, and how and to which historiography it speaks. Once you've done this, print out a reliable review and staple it to the back. Start on your first day of grad school and your exam prep will be easier.
10. For the oral exam exam, pay close attention to the comments on your written exams as they will come up. Also, be prepared to address the questions you may not have answered on the written (if you had a choice.)
11. Practice answering questions out loud, perhaps with another graduate student, before the oral exam exam.

12. Meet with you Chair and other committee members if possible between the written and oral exams to discuss expectations as well as procedural matters for the oral exam.
13. Think carefully about the order of our written exams. By the end of process, you will likely be pretty exhausted.
14. Make sure you can define/explain key terms and theoretical concepts in your fields, for example “liberalism,” “colonialism,” “empire,” “agency,” and “hegemony.”
15. During the oral exam, try to connect your fields, and show how readings in different areas connect and/or inform one another.
16. During the oral exam, give long(ish) answers. Short answers may lead to rapid fire questioning, which can be nerve-wracking.
17. Try to take control of the oral exam as much as possible. Don’t worry about pausing to think before answering a question.
18. Be prepared to discuss your dissertation, even if it is still in a general form.
19. When creating a reading list, first note all the texts you have read. Then, meet with a committee member to expand with other texts and articles. Think carefully about sub-fields. How can you move texts around to create new “conversations,” among authors and approaches? Don’t be afraid to ask for advice on which books or articles are key texts that require close reading.
20. Know the historiographical debates, but also be able to generate your own interpretations and arguments.