

Department of Transnational Studies

COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION RECOMMENDATIONS

DISCLAIMER: The instructions below are intended to *supplement* and **NOT** replace the instructions for comprehensive examinations specified in the departmental Graduate Student Handbook—a hard copy of which should be in your possession (or alternatively you may access a PDF version of it on our website). You are strongly urged to consult the Handbook *before* you go through the instructions below. (The instructions in the Handbook take precedence over anything stated below.)

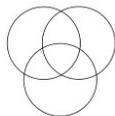
Please bring a copy of these recommendations to meetings with your advisors, especially those who are not members of the Department of Transnational Studies or those who do not have previous experience with the Department's exam process.

I. Fields

When working on the three broad fields that together constitute your comprehensive exam, you should keep the following considerations in mind.

1. Have you identified the larger scholarly debates and existing secondary literatures you plan to address in your dissertation?
2. Think of your long-term objectives, as scholar (and intellectual). The exam preparation period is one of the only times you will have in your career to comprehensively deepen and broaden your knowledge of the existing scholarly literature in your area of expertise. The fields should demonstrate your *passion* for the ideas debated within them, your interest in their intersections, and a general hunger for knowledge about all aspects of the questions you will be pursuing in your dissertation.
3. On field boundaries: It is important that the boundaries you determine for your fields, both as embodied in each of the questions you are working on and in their interactions in the overall exam, have breadth *well beyond the dissertation*. This will be very much to your advantage. (The dissertation will be the appropriate place to demonstrate the depth of your thinking and your research abilities.) Hence permitting the comprehensive essays to anticipate or replicate the focus of your dissertation serves no real purpose. Some students have found it helpful to “test” their draft exam essays by asking if the essays, considered together, would usefully represent to a prospective employer the students' capacity to teach very broad undergraduate courses or do public work requiring a breadth and command of knowledge. In this way, your exam essays can complement the testimony that the dissertation abstract will provide as to research focus and depth. If your essays do not suggest this type of broad interest and comprehensive understanding, they are probably not yet ready for submission.

4. Another helpful way to “test” your evolving field definitions is to imagine the questions you are addressing as three broad circles inscribed on a blank page. If that page is taken to represent the total fields of “your” American Studies, or African and African American Studies, then the three circles should ideally end up literally “covering,” much of the page—but at the same time overlapping at some point, as in a Venn diagram. Your dissertation project should be aimed at this point of convergence.



5. About the relevance of your coursework: Ideally the fields you choose will in some meaningful way reflect or build upon courses you have taken with the members of your committee.

II. Bibliographies

The bibliography is the skeletal structure of a field; hence, much care and thought must go into its construction. It ought to include at the very least 20 books and major articles that cover the key perspectives in the scholarly debates within each field. However, this is only a minimum; therefore, you and your advisor may want to include substantially more items to meet the considerations listed above for your essays. Moreover, be prepared to further add (and possibly subtract) items to your bibliography as you work on your essays.

III. Essays

1. Once the fields and approaches for the examination have been defined in consultation with your committee, you have the basis for responding to the *committee-supplied* questions that you will answer in the three written essays. It is helpful to consider these two aspects of this process as related but distinct. In the first, you focus on the overall structures, issues, problems, and conception that guide your broad preparation and reading. In the second, you work specifically on the questions taking into consideration “instructions” from your committee members for answering them that will permit you to write clear, focused, and grounded essays in response.
3. One good way to proceed with the essays is to develop outlines on the basis of your readings. You could begin by writing subparagraphs on particularly influential works in the field and their critics. You can also ask how well scholars in the field have collectively addressed the big questions of the field. Have they done a good job, or have they ignored particular approaches leaving big questions unanswered? Where do you see room for further advancement of knowledge on these questions—preferably, areas you yourself will explore in your dissertation?
4. Some students who produced the most successful examples of great exams adopted a three-step, or three- short paragraph form for their responses: The first paragraph framed the issue in the broadest terms--the “Big Problem” or Issue or Theme, in the most

encompassing or general terms. The second paragraph then brought this down to the specific issue or frame the essay would focus on as a way to wrestle the big problem down to earth in a useful way. The mandate of the third paragraph was to take up the “charge”—that is coming up with specific issues to be covered and in what sequence. In sum, the process involved moving from those big issues to a set of specific instructions that literally map the essay—it’s in that third step, for instance, that you can name the authors or theories or works the essay should engage, etc.

5. Be prepared to write several drafts of your essays. Your willingness to explore your fields and wrestle with its conundrums is one of the crucial things your committee members will be evaluating. By working in this way, you focus your work in advance, discover the organizational holes in a poorly prepared draft that would undermine the writing, and in general come up with a framework and flight-plan that—if followed— will produce essays that you can be proud of, and that in turn will provide the basis for a meaningful oral exam propelling you into the dissertation phase of your program.

You are about to embark on an important intellectual journey; we wish you all success.