

Comprehensive Exam Guidelines

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The Basics

The comprehensive exam, or “comps,” is one of two capstones to the M.A. program. Typically you take the exam after you’ve completed all your coursework, although some students have taken comps during their last semester of classes with permission from their advisor. The exam consists of five questions: one from HIST 570, the mandatory methods course, and four from courses you select. On the day of the exam you must answer the 570 question and three others, meaning that you skip one question. You will not see the questions before the exam.

You will write or type (your choice) your answers in one sitting, although you are allowed to take breaks. You won’t have access to any notes or other reference materials, although some professors may give you or allow you to have a book list if they expect you to refer to specific books in your answer. There is no time limit.

As the name implies the exam tests your comprehensive understanding of the subjects you’ve chosen, not your mastery of specific details. Traditionally graduate programs use comprehensive exams to certify their students’ ability to teach the subject being examined. The goal is to demonstrate that you have a strong understanding of the “big picture” of a given part of history and are able to express that succinctly and clearly. One way to think about the comps questions, and sometimes the way your professor will chose to express it, is “how would you teach this subject?”

Picking Your Courses

Other than the 570 question, which all students have to answer, it’s completely up to you which courses you decide to take a question from. Pick the courses that you are most confident about, that you remember the most clearly, or that are closest to your area of expertise. If you’re unsure about which courses to pick, talk to your advisor, but the most important consideration is that you are comfortable with the courses you’ve chosen.

How to Study

The most important thing to do once you’ve picked your courses is to talk to the professors who will be providing you with questions. You can even do this before making your final selection, to help make your decision about which courses to pick. The courses in our program are very different, so each professor will have different expectations for comps answers. For example, some courses focus on specific historical events or periods, such as the French Revolution, while

others are much broader. Naturally, a comps question for the former might demand a higher level of detail than one for the latter. The professor who writes the question can best give you an idea of what they expect and how to prepare.

In general terms, however, it's best to think of studying for comps as a refresher of what you already know. Given the importance of the big picture to your answer, start with the course syllabus. Think about how the professor framed the topic and what you might do differently. Review your notes from the class to make sure you remember the main themes of the course. It's usually unnecessary to re-read course material unless you find that you have absolutely no memory of it after reviewing the syllabus and your notes.

Studying for the 570 question is a bit different, because the question is more specific. The clearest example of this is footnotes: you will be asked to produce properly formatted footnotes for some of the most commonly cited types of material, so that's something you have to memorize. But even in this case, talking to the professor who will be providing the question is key. They will tell you what specific information you need to know for the exam.

The Day of the Exam

You schedule the exam in consultation with your advisor. It usually takes several hours, so most students find it best to begin some time in the morning and leave the whole day free. Your advisor will give you the questions and find you a quiet room, with a computer or blue books depending on how you've chosen to record your answers, to take the exam.

Taking the exam can be grueling. It takes a long time and you are doing heavy intellectual labor. So dress comfortably, bring some snacks and water, and take breaks. Stretch your legs and even go outside to clear your head for a few minutes. All these things are allowed.

Pace yourself in the exam. Students are almost always well-prepared; the thing that most commonly trips them up is spending hours on the first question or two, going overboard in their answer, and then being burned out for the remaining questions. Remember that this is a pass/fail exam with an emphasis on the big picture. You're almost always going to be fine with two or three single-spaced typed pages and if you're taking more than two hours (maximum) on any question it's probably time to move on.

To reiterate: most students write too much rather than too little, making the exam a more difficult experience than it needs to be.

What Happens Next

After you finish the exam, your advisor will collect your answers and distribute them to the relevant professors to be graded. This usually takes about a week, longer if you take the exam in the summer or at other times when classes aren't in session. For each question there are three possible outcomes: you pass, you fail, or you're asked for clarification.

If you pass all four questions, congratulations! You've successfully completed the comps!

If you fail one or more questions, you are allowed one re-take of the exam. You only have to retake the question(s) you failed, not the entire exam. So if you passed three questions but failed one, you just re-take the one you failed. Since you just get one re-take, definitely talk to the professor for any questions you failed and make sure you know what's expected for that question before taking the exam again. Usually you will be given a slightly different question for your second attempt.

The third possibility is that a professor asks you for clarification about a question. This happens when your answer is basically good, but there is something that is wrong or ambiguous. This often happens with the footnotes in the 570 question: perhaps you made a minor error or you forgot the format for one type of source. The professor will ask you to "clarify" that mistake, usually either in a brief in-person meeting or in an email. Once you do that, you've passed the question.

Almost every student passes. It's not uncommon that they need to provide clarification and occasionally a student has to re-take a question they failed. But it's extremely rare for a student to have gotten this far in the program and not be able to pass comps. So you should certainly take the exam seriously and prepare accordingly, but you should not see it as an insurmountable hurdle.