

PURPOSE

One of the most important steps in the doctoral program is the qualifying examination process. Qualifying examinations serve to demonstrate that students have acquired the skills and knowledge necessary to function as independent scholars in political science generally and in their chosen fields of specialization. Breadth of knowledge is expected as well as a deep, critical understanding of the literature. Equally important is the ability to apply that understanding to the central, enduring and practical questions of politics and government. As the qualifying examinations constitute the last qualifying step prior to the dissertation, significant emphasis is placed upon ensuring that students are well prepared to move on to the final phase of their studies.

TIMING

When can you take qualifying exams?

PhD qualifying exams are taken after all coursework is completed. With permission of the Director of Graduate Studies, students may be permitted to take qualifying exams *during their final semester of formal coursework*. However, students may not take doctoral exams if they have Incomplete or In Progress grades in previous courses (that is, prior to the semester in which exams are taken), which *are part of their formal program of study for the doctorate*. To be eligible to take the qualifying exams, students must also have an overall GPA of at least 3.4 and have taken at least three graduate courses in each of the three exam fields (no double counting of courses). In addition, students should have completed their course distribution and methods/language requirements. Students are expected to take the exams after completing no more than 36 hours of coursework beyond the MA degree. To confirm eligibility to take the exams, students should meet with the Director of Graduate Studies prior to the semester in which they plan to sit for the exams. Students must enroll in POLS 8900 Qualifying Readings in the semester in which they take their exams.

Students will take three written exams, either (1) exams in three separate fields of the discipline (choosing from American Politics, Comparative Politics, International Politics, Political Theory, Public Law, and Research Methodology) or (2) exams in two major fields and in one sub-field (for example, Political Behavior or European Politics). Eligible sub-fields must be confirmed in consultation with the Director of Graduate Studies. Students wishing to take a qualifying exam in Research Methodology must complete at least two approved graduate methods courses beyond POLS 8800 and 8810.

When will the exams be scheduled?

All students taking PhD exams in a given semester will take the written exams on the dates scheduled for that semester. PhD qualifying exams will be scheduled in February and September of each year. No exceptions will be made, and no exams will be scheduled in the summer. The Director of Graduate Studies will announce the scheduled dates early in each semester. If an oral examination is requested by a committee, the Director of Graduate Studies will schedule it no later than two weeks after the request is made. Oral examinations should be 30 minutes to one hour per subject. Students must be physically present for oral examinations, and oral examinations will be both closed-note and closed-book.

CONTENT

What do the exams consist of?

The PhD qualifying exam consists of three eight-hour open note written exams in the student's major and minor fields of study and, if requested by the committee, an oral exam. Oral examinations are normally requested when a committee judges the written exam to have been on the border between pass and fail. In writing their qualifying exams, students are expected to demonstrate competent knowledge of major theories, methods, and substantive understandings prevalent in the discipline and in their specific fields of study.

PREPARATION

How should you prepare for qualifying exams?

The purpose of a doctoral qualifying exam is to ensure that students gain sufficiently broad and deep knowledge of the literature in the fields in which they plan to teach and/or conduct research. The requisite knowledge is acquired both through coursework *and* through the process of preparing for the qualifying exams themselves. The student's ability to cite, synthesize, and analyze the existing literature should not be limited to textbooks or to other readings from the core courses, but should draw from readings done for research papers as well as supplemental readings that are relevant to the core courses of your exam fields. Thus the preparation process, in addition to the exam itself, represents part of the value of taking qualifying exams.

Questions will require students to demonstrate familiarity with literature of the discipline, to examine major explanatory and normative theories, and to discuss and integrate theories, ideas, and substantive information in their respective fields of study.

To prepare for qualifying exams students must consider prominent theories and ideas in their chosen fields of study, and should consult early in their preparations with faculty members in those fields to discuss expectations and essential reading. It is the student's responsibility to determine what will constitute your reading list – students should not expect faculty to furnish you with a ready-made list. They can however expect faculty to offer suggestions for readings beyond their syllabi, and to offer comments on a reading list that the student compile. Students should be sure to acquire copies of the latest syllabi from professors for the core courses of their exam fields. Students should consider making sheets summarizing briefly the main arguments of each of their readings, for quick reference when taking the exam. Most important, note that the material covered in each of your courses provides an introduction to the main topics in the particular fields, and not the totality of the essential literature; rather, students should develop a reading list early on to ensure they have adequate time to read the literature not covered in their seminars.

A file of questions posed in previous doctoral exams is also available in the department office—it is imperative that students request access to these from the Assistant to the Graduate Director so as to better familiarize themselves with the format, content, and style of written examinations. Students are advised to practice writing out an answer to an exam question or two, under constraints resembling those that will be encountered when taking the exam itself. This will ensure that the exam succeeds or fails based on the student's knowledge of the relevant literature, and not on the absence of familiarity with the test format.

PhD students should set aside adequate time to study for qualifying exams; at least one semester and a summer of readings in preparation for the exams is suggested.

TAKING THE EXAM

What can I expect during the exam week?

During exam week, students can expect to have an exam every other day. Exams will be administered on campus, in a closed-note format, and must be completed individually with no external assistance. All written exams last for 8 hours. Students may not utilize any notes or other materials and sources, nor may they collaborate with anyone. Students will sign an honor pledge in advance of taking their exams stating that they agree to abide by these policies and informing them that the consequences for cheating, plagiarism or collaboration will be severe, including the possibility of dismissal from the program.

What are the best strategies for answering the questions?

The best advice is to answer the questions directly and fully as posed. Masterful answers that do not actually address the questions as posed are not passing answers. Likewise, brief answers that demonstrate technical accuracy but which stop short of demonstrating the student's mastery of the field's breadth and depth are not rewarded. For an excellent (and somewhat humorous) discussion of how to avoid the pitfalls of essay exams, see Charles King, "Battling the Six Evil Geniuses of Essay Writing," *PS* (March 1998, <http://www.apsanet.org/PS/march98/king.cfm>). Students should also pay special attention to time management. Writing two excellent answers but failing to allot ample time to a third exam question can result in a failing grade on the overall exam.

In your responses, devote special attention to demonstrating your knowledge of the relevant concepts and the supporting literature. Compare and contrast, through reference to the existing scholarly work, the different theoretical and analytical positions on the subject. Reference to a scholar and his/her work adds nothing unless it is placed in the broader context of the literature's development. It is not wrong to criticize the literature or the field, only to do so poorly. Provide answers rich with examples. Answers that have clear introductions, arguments that are logically organized, and conclusions that are persuasive are naturally advantaged.

How are the exams graded?

A two-member faculty committee, chosen by the Director of Graduate Studies, is responsible for reading and evaluating all exams in each field. Each student will thus have six faculty members evaluating them, two for each of the three exams. The same faculty committee grades all exams taken simultaneously in the same field by multiple students. Students' names are removed from the exams, and the composition of exam committees is anonymous as well.

Written qualifying exam answers are evaluated according to the following criteria:

- Has the student answered the question asked on the exam? Has the student provided a sufficiently qualifying answer to the question or has s/he neglected to address areas of importance?
- Has the student interpreted the question as expected and if not, why not? Does this difference in interpretation affect the performance? How?
- Has the student addressed and included the most important literature relevant to the question? If not, what is missing?
- Has the student made factual errors in interpreting the literature? If so, what are those errors?
- Has the student shown an appreciation of whatever controversies exist in the field or does s/he tend to present only one view?

The faculty evaluation committee will submit a unified assessment of the exam to the Director of Graduate Studies, assigning a grade of "Pass with Distinction," "Pass," "Referral to an Oral Examination," or "Inadequate." Once all three evaluation committees have submitted their reports, the Graduate Director will inform the student in writing of the exam results and provide any written comments supplied by the faculty evaluators.

What happens if a student fails the written exam?

In the event of unsatisfactory performance on a written exam (i.e., a grade of “Inadequate”), the student can repeat the exam once. Any re-take of an exam must take place the next time exams are offered. Students not passing a qualifying exam are strongly encouraged to meet with the relevant faculty members in the field and with the Director of Graduate Studies to discuss strategies for improvement. Faculty members writing questions for an exam re-take have the discretion to ask entirely new questions, a mix of new questions and those appearing on the initial exam, or the exact same questions from the original exam.

What happens if my committee requests an oral examination?

Individual examination committees may, at their discretion, require students to complete an oral examination. This would normally be required in cases where the written examination is judged to be on the border between pass and fail. In cases where committees require an oral examination, no result will be communicated to students before the oral examination takes place, although feedback on the written exam may be provided. Oral examinations will normally be scheduled within two weeks of being requested, and they will normally take 30 minutes to one hour per subject. If requested, students must be physically present for the oral exam. The oral exam is an opportunity for faculty to probe the student's depth of understanding and to follow up on points and issues raised by the student in the written exam. It is an opportunity to see if the student has reached a sufficient level of sophistication to apply what s/he has learned to the task of formulating and developing a dissertation. The oral exam will be closed-book, closed-note. After the oral exam, the committee will then consider the student's performance on both the oral and written components in rendering its decision. This decision will not normally be given to the student immediately following the oral, although committees should attempt to let students know their results as quickly as possible. If a student fails the examination after the orals, the same rules apply as if he or she had failed the written examination.

After I pass, what's next?

Within six weeks of passing all three of their qualifying exams, students should formally constitute their dissertation committees and should schedule a joint meeting with their committee members to discuss the direction of the dissertation project. Within two semesters, they should defend a dissertation proposal.