

Many times I've wondered
How much there is to know.

Jimmy Page/Robert Plant
“Over the Hills and Far Away”

WHAT TO EXPECT AT AN ORAL QUALIFYING EXAM FOR ADVANCEMENT TO DISSERTATION RESEARCH

1. Bring a pen and piece of paper for taking notes during the exam. Some questions can be long, convoluted, and multi-tiered. Also consider bringing a bottle of water. You're going to be talking a lot.
2. Before the exam begins, you may be asked to leave the room temporarily while the committee reviews your dossier and confers about the division of labor. Don't get spooked by this. Typically, when you return, you will be asked your preference regarding the order of sub-fields in the exam. If this matters to you, it's good to give your preferences some thought in advance. If not, the committee will decide.
3. In general, the oral exam gives faculty incredibly little time (2 to 3 hours) to test your knowledge of vast historical terrains. This means that things can get pretty rapid-fire. It may also mean that you are interrupted in your answers when the committee senses that you clearly know what you're talking about (no need to spend more time on that subject) or someone wishes to reorient your answer. Don't be spooked by this either. What in normal conversation would be rude is, during the oral exam, sometimes unavoidable. Time is precious.
4. The best kind of exam feels like a conversation. The worst feels like an inquisition. You have considerable influence over which genre obtains. Some students enter the exam in a defensive posture: their job, as they see it, is to minimize revelations of ignorance and other gaffes. They play defense. I think this is a mistake. Better to play offense, and to concentrate on showing the committee what you do know. Nobody knows everything. The committee wants to see what you know and how you think your way through various historical issues.
5. There are various genres of questions. It's important to realize which kind you're being asked. Many questions are interpretive: what's *your* view on such-and-such an historical issue (usually a major one)? Others are historiographical: reconstruct for the committee the history of how various scholars have dealt with a certain issue, perhaps organize that history into key debates, turning points, schools, generations, etc. Bring us up to the present state of

what we know. Take a position yourself. This question calls for an approach that I like to think of as “set the table before you eat.” Show the committee that you know who has said what about the topic at hand, and then stake out your own place at the table.

Another genre is purely factual: Who was the author of such-and-such a text? When did such-and-such a reform take place? With these, you either know the answer or you don't. Yet another genre involves teaching-related questions. How would you present a certain topic to undergraduates in a single lecture? What would you have them read? What primary-source document (in translation) would you use, and why? This is where examinees sometimes slip: they can't get out of grad-student mode, and launch into a description of their lecture that involves a lengthy historiographical exposition about a dozen different historical schools and approaches - something totally unsuitable for undergraduate teaching purposes. Teaching questions invariably test your ability to distill complex issues into relatively simple arguments or vignettes. They are often difficult. And they differ markedly from questions designed to test the subtlety and complexity of your thinking about historical topics.

6. Any question can be followed up by a request for a specific example: a person, a text, an event. Try to have these ready at hand. If a faculty member keeps asking follow-up questions that get narrower and narrower, more and more factual, don't worry. This is the “search and destroy” technique, and is simply designed to find out where your knowledge ends. Eventually everyone comes face-to-face with their own ignorance.
7. If you're asked a not purely factual question about something you feel ignorant of, there are ways to respond other than silence and a blank face, or “I have no idea.” You can, for example, say something like, “I'm not really sure about that, but here's how I would go about putting together an answer.” That gains you a few extra seconds to gather your thoughts, and shows the committee that you have the tools to think constructively about historical issues even in cases where you don't have a solid command of the relevant literature.
8. The most important last-minute thing you can do to prepare is to get some good, solid sleep the night before the exam.