The Qualifying Exams

The purpose of these notes is to provide some suggested guidelines for graduate students, who are at the beginning stages of preparing for exams. The Department and Graduate Division guidelines for these activities are both general and flexible, allowing a great deal of leeway to the student's Committee, and in particular, to the principal advisor. This often leads to an initial period of confusion, trial and error, and timing problems, which might in part be avoided by having suggested guidelines as a point of reference from the outset.

A special emphasis should be placed on the qualifier "suggested." Very little of what is written here is set in stone - a certain amount of experimentation and creative re-invention is an essential part of the process. If these notes were turned into rigid "rules," their purpose would be seriously misconstrued. Rather, they are meant to serve as an orientation, a point of departure for discussion, and for eventual adaptation to the individual student's needs and intellectual inclinations. *Ultimately, the student, the advisor, and the committee decide what is the most appropriate format and content of the written exams and orals.*

The one exception to this message of flexibility is guidelines for timing. These need to be taken seriously - the process almost surely will suffer if they are not followed fairly closely.

It is imperative that the Graduate Student Handbook be consulted in conjunction with these guidelines.

Rather than merely a rigid one-time evaluation, the exams should be approached in the following manners: as an opportunity a) to confer with your committee before beginning fieldwork; b) to define your professional profile's areas of specialization; and c) to reflect on the courses that you will minister once you graduate.

There are two basic components of the process, the "written" and the "oral."

To start preparing for your exams, **you need to think about and refine your research as soon as you begin the program**. ANTH 210A in particular will provide you the tools and environment for that task. By the time you complete your Preliminary research statement, ideally in Quarter 5 (Winter of your second year), you should have a well-formed idea of what you are going to research, where, the methodology you are going to employ, and the theoretical literature you are going to engage. *This means your first summer should be devoted to preliminary fieldwork and bibliographic research.*

First year: ANTH 210A, summer research
Second year: Preliminary Research Statement
Third year: Research Proposal, Qualifying Exams (written and orals)

In your third year, you should be ready for your Qualifying Exams and submit your Research proposal (Q7 or Q8).

Your Permanent Advisor, in consultation with the dissertation committee, will generate the written exam questions. In general, the exam addresses three areas of expertise, one on a geographic area and two on different bodies of theory. **Prior to the exam, the student's advisor submits the Written Exam question for approval to the Graduate Committee** using this form https://anthropology.ucr.edu/sites/g/files/rcwecm3806/files/2020-10/documentreviewcoversheet.pdf (linked from https://anthropology.ucr.edu/current-graduate-students-information) as a cover sheet.

Barring any concerns, the Grad Committee approves the question. You may schedule your exam with your advisor and committee in the meantime, but the question must be approved preferably two weeks before the actual exam begins.

After the question has been approved, you will have a specified period (determined in consultation with your Advisor, usually but not necessarily two weeks) in which to complete the exam. The Graduate Affairs Assistant (GAA) will administer the exam. *Only if absolutely needed, and if approved by the committee*, you may take the written exam during the summer [SB2] or quarter breaks. The Written Exam must be approved by your faculty advisor and dissertation committee before submission to the Graduate Committee along with a Document Review Cover Sheet. The Written Exam should be developed in conjunction with the Research Proposal, and it is strongly recommended that the exam be taken at the 8th quarter.

As long as the exam question is submitted within the first 3 weeks of the quarter, you can take your exams in that same quarter.

Before you take your Oral Qualifying Exam, you must submit a final copy of your research proposal along with the signed Document Review Cover Sheet to the GAA. The length and format of the proposal should be similar to that required by a major funding agency, such as the NSF (10 pages single-spaced), generally comprising a subfield-specific discussion of the research questions/objectives, the grounding of the project in the anthropological literature, methodology, and the project's expected contributions to the discipline. Plan on submitting drafts to your Advisor and dissertation committee, and making adjustments as deemed appropriate by these advisors. **In addition, we strongly recommended that the proposal be submitted to the appropriate granting agencies.**

You must schedule the oral exam with the committee and the GAA. The exam should not be scheduled during quarter breaks, or over the summer. Graduate Division must be notified of the exam date and the makeup of the orals committee at least two weeks (and preferably one month) prior to the exam via the *Nomination for Qualifying Examination Committee for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy* (**see the GAA for more information**).

For your oral exam, five faculty members need to be on your committee, at least three of whom are in Anthropology. One member, designated the "outside member," must be a voting member

of the UCR Academic Senate who does not hold an appointment in the department. The outside member serves to ensure that the exam has been carried out fairly, in accordance with university standards. The committee needs to be approved by the Graduate Committee.

A petition is required for remote participation, and ordinarily only one committee member is allowed to do so. See the form at https://graduate.ucr.edu/sites/g/files/rcwecm1796/files/2018-08/petition_for_remote_participation.pdf Please check with the GAA about this as circumstances and rules change.

Upon successful completion of your oral exam, the GAA must submit the **Report of Oral Qualifying exam & nomination of Dissertation committee**

Below are more specific guidelines regarding the Qualifying Exams and the planning for them.

THE WRITTEN EXAMS

Typically, the written exams are taken in two weeks. Other formats are possible. For example, they can be taken in three weeks, or three consecutive full days, i.e. roughly 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. This latter option allows for about four hours of writing time on each of two questions, with a break in between. There are various other formats, which can be adopted if the case is made. We are strongly against the practice whereby the student knows the questions well in advance, and prepares essay responses over a longer period . In our view, the exam essays are meant to be "thought pieces" composed during the exam period, without undue attention to references cited, or other formal attributes of graduate school essays. The primary emphasis is on your ability to answer the question by putting forth original, synthetic, analytical thinking – drawing on the literature in your bibliography, and answering the question. Exam answers that work *least* well are those that attempt to achieve comprehensive reviews of a given literature.

In general, we favor three bibliographies covering two theoretical topics and one geographical area. There should be a methodological section in one of the bibliographies. Other configurations can be adopted upon proposal, justification, and discussion. The two theoretical topics should be clearly differentiated from one another, although a certain amount of overlap is often inevitable. They should strike a balance between achieving a broad enough scope to cover a substantial body of literature and a sufficient focus so that you can achieve mastery over the most important literature that comes under a given topic (e.g., the topic "Race, Class, Gender, and Nation" is almost surely too broad, instead a topic like "Ideologies of Whiteness" alone, is probably too narrow). However, in general, it is probably best to be comprehensive with a slightly narrower topic than visa versa. The theoretical topics should not be limited to a single geographic area, rather they should be comprehensive irrespective of area. The literature included in the two topic bibliographies should not be limited to anthropology, and it should include at least a sampling of the most important literature on the topic regardless of disciplinary affiliation. Incorporating a "sociology of knowledge" perspective, whereby you examine the theoretical roots of the present topic, is always helpful and illuminating. Overall, you should keep in the back of your mind the idea that these are two areas in which you want to develop and

claim expertise, as a researcher, theorist, and a teacher. They also should inform directly some aspect of your dissertation research, but they should not be constrained by the criterion of "relevance" to the dissertation.

The geographic area bibliography can be defined in different ways, but generally revolves around a geographic area, and at times, a people or group of people within that area. The area should encompass, but again, should not be limited to, the future dissertation topic. The point here is to develop an expertise, and a deep cultural, political, historical knowledge, related to the people/area. The literature included in this area bibliography can be beyond anthropology; it could be chosen based on a much broader set of criteria. What has been written that best helps us to understand the area / people in question, and at times, selected key issues that the people / area bring to the fore. A certain amount of historical depth is essential. Beyond this starting point, there are many different directions that the bibliography outline can take.

The methodological section of your bibliography should be specific to whatever approach you will execute in your research (i.e., data collection approaches and essential studies underpinning the efficacy of these methods). A tactic that includes every single possible methodology for your study will not be valuable. Instead, consider a systematic approach to how each potential avenue for data collection will be performed. It is perfectly acceptable if these methods are standards in the field. It is also suitable if they are cutting edge. It may be that your methods are a combination of both well-researched standards and unique or new techniques. In all cases, you should be able to discuss these methods in relation to how they help you answer your research question(s) and should provide the path to which data collection can be performed.

Once the focus of each of the three bibliographies is chosen and approved, the most important task that needs to be accomplished, as you compile the list of works to be included, is the *analytical organization* of the literature. This involves creating broad substantive divisions by contents, and further sub-divisions, which correspond to important differences in theoretical approach or argument. For example, a category devoted to "racial identity politics" might have sub-divisions corresponding to:

post-structural approaches: race as "floating signifier"
Gramscian approaches: racial formation theory

The point is to detect and register *major* analytical divergences, which are crucial to understand and come to grips with as part of reading and thinking through the literature. This analytical organization of the bibliography, though the hardest part of the task, will also be the most useful in the exam preparation process. Your categories, of course, will often be controversial and contested by others. That's precisely the point: through the establishment of these categories and distinctions, you engage in substantive discussion and debate with others with regard to the literature at hand.

Each topic bibliography, upon completion, should include the following components. **We suggest about 50 entries per bibliography.**

1. Summary outline

This presents the main sub-categories into which the topic has been divided, without citations included. It should fit on one page.

2. Essay

This is a *brief* explanation of the topic, including an intellectual justification for its particular contents and limits. **Note that this is not a copy-and-paste of the abstract. You should create your own description. It should also include reference to the major sub-categorical divisions.**

3. Outline with *brief* citations inserted in their respective categories

To use the same examples:

a. post-structural approaches: race as "floating signifier"

Appiah [, 1992 #905] (Appiah 1992: 905)

b. gramscian approaches: racial formation theory

Omi and Winant [, 1987 #780]

4. Proposed exam questions:

This should be done last, in the final month after the bibliographies have been approved (see below). You write two questions, which you believe get us to core issues at stake in the given bibliography. This can be thought of as a final exercise in synthesis. It also can help nudge Committee members toward thinking along a given line for the questions they formulate. These questions can be used for the exam, but more often will be taken by the Committee as advice for their own formulations.

5. A bibliography, which includes the full citations of all the literature present in the outline categories

<u>Miscellaneous Notes</u>:

All this cannot be created from whole cloth. It needs to be a gradual, cumulative process, where each new work read is incorporated into the outline, at times leading to alteration of the outline categories, at times leading to other works that need to be included, etc. It makes this whole process much, much easier if you use a bibliography organizer program such as “Endnote” or “Zotero.” Once you start this, you will never have to create a bibliography from scratch again.

In your preparation, you should work through how you might respond to the questions you propose and others you might anticipate being asked. This may be most effective when you go beyond thinking, and write a page or so of notes or an outline, writing out what scholars and works you might engage, and how you would put their work in dialog with one another and your own. These notes will likely have value beyond the exam process, as the basis for a lecture or even a graduate syllabus, the theoretical introduction to an article, etc.

THE ORAL EXAM (the Prospectus)

The idea of the prospectus or oral exam, in contrast to the many grant applications that you will have done prior to the prospectus defense, is to present what you *really* intend to do in full detail. Prospectus defenses are most useful when they move beyond the basics—i.e. what is your central question. how is it framed theoretically? – to focus as well on the nuts and bolts of how you are going to do the research, how your broad dissertation objectives are to be operationalized in specific research methods.

The very best prospectus will often move beyond the bounds of these standard categories, turning innovative or experimental in one or many ways. However, it is extremely hard to pull off this innovation successfully, without having mastered the basics. The suggestion, then, is to begin writing in a fairly linear, step-by-step fashion and then, when you are sure you have the basics down, innovate.

Based on the prospectus, the oral exam typically consists of the following: (a) a presentation by the student, of about 20-30 minutes; (b) a series of questions from committee members addressed to the student; (c) the student responses to those questions. Depending on the committee’s discretion, steps (b) and (c) can be and often are repeated. At the end of the session, the committee communicates with the student if they have passed or not, and if there are revisions to be completed.

What follows is a list of standard components of a prospectus, with brief explanations. There is some sense of sequence in the presentation of these, but in general there are many equally valid sequences of the components. These notes are largely valid for research proposals as well, but proposal requirements will vary widely.

<u>Introduction</u>: a good prospectus will always state the central problem, and summarize the broader implication (i.e., intellectual merits) of your research, succinctly, on the first page. Minimally, the reader should be told up-front what question or questions will drive the research.

If you have more than three principal questions, you probably have too many, and need to focus more.

Previous research: give us a sense, to the extent possible, of the where and with whom; give us some historical and cultural-political background on the topic under study; tell us how much is known about the problem, who has written about it, what that previous work contributes, what is wrong or missing. Restate your central analytical questions, and develop them in greater detail than in the introduction, now in empirical context. End with analytical propositions: preliminary arguments, in response to your key questions, initial attempts to explain what is going on.

Theoretical backgrounds: tell us what theoretical tools will be most useful in guiding your thinking about the topic, and your approach to data collection. Ideally, the theoretical frameworks should stem from your anthropological questions. This discussion of the theory will also come upon key debates or differences in emphasis, which need to be worked through in order for you to complete your own research. In a sense, then, this theoretical discussion should both specify how the theory will be useful to you, and how your research will be useful, even transformative, in relation to the existing body of theory. Avoid simply saying: 'my work will be guided by this or that theory.' Instead, your assessment and critique of the relevant existing theory should help frame, or re-frame, your central research questions.

Hypotheses: if your subfields are archaeology or biological anthropology, you have to develop specific hypotheses regarding your research. This is a requirement for the NSF proposal. You should develop useful hypotheses. This means even if your hypotheses are refuted, alternative answers should contribute to anthropology.

Methods: this is probably the most important section in the entire prospectus. You need to work out, in considerable detail, how you are going to gather information, collect data, learn, etc. enough to be able to address and answer the central questions that you address. This section is crucial not because it will be set in stone, but because it obliges focused and concrete thinking about what you are going to do. This is also where advice from your committee can be most constructive: helping you to think through which methods will work best, how they can be justified, etc. The methods you choose should be well articulated with your theoretical backgrounds. Each analytical question should have corresponding methodological notes, which indicate how data will be collected to answer the question.

Politics of Research: it is often not possible, for strategic reasons, to reflect specifically on this dimension in your research proposal (although it generally is *more* possible than most assume). But in your prospectus, it is important to square off in relation to a series of questions: What is your relationship to the people / topic under study? How might the history of research in your area affect your positioning? What knowledge will result, and who might find it useful? Has there been any effort to formulate the research topic in dialogue or cooperation with the interests / needs of a specific group of "research subjects" or the communities where the research is conducted? What are the power inequities in the research relationship, and how do

you plan to mediate them? Are there ethical concerns (including, but clearly going beyond, those that come under the rubric of "human subjects protocol")?

Broader Significance of the Research: this section can be brief, and can double as a conclusion. In it, you need to step back and suggest what the longer-term trajectory of the research might be. Significance can (and probably should) come in terms of new empirical knowledge, theoretical contributions, and political impact. Avoid stock phrases like: "I will contribute to the literature on…." (As if expanding the amount we have to read is itself a good thing). Further, the potential to benefit society and contribute to the achievement of specific, desired societal outcomes. You should address the question of what your research provides to the local community, other scholars, and students with. You may also describe how the proposed activities will enhance/broaden training, learning, teaching, networking of people mentioned above beyond scientific advance. How the results will be archived and disseminated also needs to be explained.

Intellectual Merits: this section describes how your research will advance our current knowledge of theory, method, and culture history, and how it will contribute to anthropology beyond the geographic area of your research. It should also state how your research solves the problems and questions emerged from the results of previous research. Your statement encompasses the explanation of how your research will still be able to contribute to anthropology even if your hypotheses are refuted.

CALENDAR, SEQUENCE AND PLANNING

This is far and away the most important part of these notes, and it is also the part that is least flexible and least subject to negotiation. It is an extremely frustrating experience, both for you and for the Committee, to go into the exams and prospectus defense rushed, pressured by externally imposed deadlines, needing another month to prepare. Often this confronts the Committee with the untenable dilemma of having either to grant a pass, or to create untold problems for the student. These notes are intended to anticipate, and therefore, avoid such dilemmas. Further, contrary to this, it is also important that this process not be the subject of unnecessary anxiety, or worse yet, procrastination due to perceived lack of preparation. The hope is that we can specify about how long, on average, the process takes, and the steps necessary to prepare properly in order to avoid both extremes.

The Written Exam

The suggested calendar will be based on a hypothetical May 1 exam date. There are four additional deadlines, beyond the exam date itself, which must be kept in mind, working backwards:

Step 3, no later than April 1 in the example: final approval of all three bibliographies. This is the one and only draconian rule among all these notes. **All three committee members must sign**

off on all three exam bibliographies one month prior to the exam date. The bibliographies should be circulated to the committee members for sign-off with sufficient time for them to review and approve (around March 17 in the example, or earlier depending on the spring break and winter exam schedules). This approval date gives the student one month to read and prepare from an approved set of bibliographies, and helps us to avoid the all-too-common last-minute rush.

Step 2, e.g. week of January 15: presentation of first drafts of each of the bibliographies (all components) to the three Committee members. These can be very preliminary, and still subject to much change, addition, etc. However, the principle is: have a minimum of two months to work on refining the bibliography, after an initial round of feedback. This step should involve a brief meeting with all the three Committee members.

Step 1, e.g. December 1: initial discussion of bibliography categories, etc. with principal advisor (and perhaps others). This can be a general, brainstorming session, meant to come up with directions to pursue.

This means that the entire process can be completed in roughly five months. If this is done during the school year, you must have at least one independent study course devoted exclusively to the process. Otherwise, time is almost sure to be short. The ideal is to have a significant amount of open-ended reading time, to be able to process what you are learning.

The Oral Exam

Lead time is crucial here, as well, but there are fewer steps to consider. It is virtually impossible to do a good prospectus without going through numerous drafts of revision, reformulation. **The crucial objective, here, is to have one thorough, critical reading of your draft prospectus from each Committee member six weeks before the defense date.** This gives you five weeks to take into account three sets of feedback, and to produce a final version for Committee members one week before the defense date. Calculating a minimal week turn-around time for Committee members to read and schedule a feedback session (again, recognizing that at certain times of year, a week will not realistically be enough), this means you need to have a draft read to circulate nearly two months before the oral exam date. This draft can be preliminary in many respects; follow-up meetings are possible in the intervening six weeks (and surely will be necessary with the principal advisor).

As a general rule, the oral exam date should only be defined after feedback has been received from all five Committee members (the “outside member” may elect not to be involved prior to the exam, but that is up to them, not you, to decide). The date will then be set for a minimum of six weeks hence.

(Some of these guidelines are based on notes Charlie Hale crafted in 2001 for the Department of Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin.)