Best Practices Sheet for Exams and Reading Lists

This guide was prepared by GEA Representatives Rachel Gevlin and Chris Huebner in collaboration with fellow graduate students with the intention of demystifying the process of assembling a committee and preparing for exams.

Initial Questions to Ask Advisor and Committee Members

- What do you believe the reading year is for? Am I reading to gain comprehension of the field, to prepare for writing my first chapter, or to “explore” areas?
- How often should we meet? How often should I meet with other committee members? When do I need to start thinking concretely about a dissertation topic?
- What method/theory do you admire? What writers/critics do you like as a model? (This is a question that you could ask your advisor as well as a general question to consider yourself)

Constructing Lists

- How should I build my lists? Should I start big and cut? Should I start small and add?
- Is each list the domain of one advisor? Should my committee members collaborate to construct lists?
- What should the balance of prose/poetry/visual media be (for applicable projects)?
- How general/canonical should my lists be? How specific should they be to my own interests or to the specific “niche” of my project?
- How closely should my minor lists relate to each other? How closely should my minor lists relate to my major list?
- Should secondary texts be on primary lists (and vice versa)? If so, what should the ratio be?
- Should minor lists have sections?
- Do you have general formatting preferences for my lists? (Citations, numbering, ordering chronologically/alphabetically, etc.)

How to Handle Reading

- How should I prioritize which texts to start reading? What are the 20 most important?
- How closely should I be reading each text?
- How should I read? For argument? For factual or historical background?
- As I read through my lists, should I produce any writing?

Preparing for Exams

- What is the procedure for oral exams? What should I prepare? Who starts? Will there be times when I will be asked to leave the room? Is it acceptable to take notes or record audio during the exam?
- Who will draft the questions, and will I have any input in what they are?
- How much ‘quizzing’ on small details (dates, character names, etc.) from the texts will there be? Am I likely to be asked questions about texts that aren’t on my lists?
• What types of questions should I expect? i.e. Will I be asked to give a survey of a period? Will each question entail making an argument? Will I be expected to respond to specific critics?
• How many questions will there be? Different advisors have different expectations, but the general outline (from the handbook) is the following: "The major exam is typically scheduled first. The format is usually to answer 2 or 3 questions from a choice of between 4 to 6 questions. For the minor exam, the format is usually to answer 1 or 2 on each minor field (2-4 in total) from between 4 and 6 questions."
• In my oral exam, should I have an answer prepared for every question that was asked on the written exams, or only for those that I answered in writing?
• What kind of feedback can I expect after my exams are completed?