

Guide to the Comprehensive Exam in History

When are comps offered?

Comps are given twice a year: in the spring on the first Friday after the Martin Luther King holiday, and in the fall, on the Friday after Labor Day.

How long do comps take?

Comps are scheduled to last from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. You will need most of this time, so be prepared to spend the day.

What should I bring with me?

Water, snacks, and writing utensils (if you want to jot notes on the exam paper). You will be provided with a secure laptop. We will serve you lunch around noon.

Where is the exam given?

Usually the exam is held in either the history department lounge or the department's small conference room. If the location is changed, you will be informed.

What if I physically cannot write for eight hours?

If you can document this disability with a doctor's note, you may take the exam under the auspices of Student Support Services. Note that these arrangements must be made at least two weeks in advance of the exam. This is true for any student who requires a special accommodation, whether for physical or learning disability.

What is the format of the exam?

You will be given three questions from the list of ten given out in advance. (If you did not receive or have lost your list, please see the grad program coordinator at once. They are also on our website.) You must answer two of these. Questions should be answered in essay or narrative form, but you are free to jot down notes or make an outline.

What should my answers look like?

Both of your answers should explicitly draw upon relevant historical works where possible. They should cover the broad span of history (from the colonial era to at least the 1980s for American history; and either from ancient to 1517 or from 1517 until at least the post-WWII era for European history). They should demonstrate a strong command of the historical content, while making an argument that answers the question based on historical evidence. Answers should also address historiographical developments.

Who will read my exam?

Three people will read your comps: the graduate director and two other faculty members from either American or European history. In case of a disagreement over your exam, a fourth reader will be assigned. When you take the exam, you will be given a number rather than signing your name to the comps. Readers will read the exams “blind,” not knowing whose exam they have.

What constitutes passing or failing?

Both questions must be judged satisfactory by each of the three readers. As noted above, in case of a disagreement among readers, a fourth reader will be brought in. In some cases, the full graduate committee discusses the exam.

What criteria do readers use in grading my exam?

Readers look for three things: a good grasp of the broad sweep of American or European history; a solid understanding of books assigned in coursework and read outside of class; and the ability to synthesize information or analyze problems in American or European history. You need to be able to write clearly, organize your thoughts coherently, pinpoint and summarize the arguments of books you have read, and utilize both facts and historiography to create your own arguments (in answer to our questions).

Here are the criteria outlined in the grading rubric faculty use in evaluating exam essays.

High Pass

- Answers the question clearly and imaginatively, grounding it solidly in historical fact and historiography
- Demonstrates solid mastery of the span of history required
- Engages in a meaningful way with relevant literature (understands arguments, can draw connections, make critical observations)

Pass

- Answers the question lucidly, grounding it in historical fact
- Demonstrates general mastery of the span of history required (but may be thinner in some areas than others)
- Understands the arguments of the books discussed, is able to use them in answering the question

Fail

- Doesn't really answer the question; answers it partially or unconvincingly, without much understanding of historical facts
- Leaps over huge chunks of time, does not seem to have minimal grasp of key eras or events
- Does not appear to grasp arguments; fails to discuss many books; books seem dragged in at random, without being relevant to the question

What if I never took a class on, say, nineteenth-century Europe, but I'm taking my comps on the latter half of European history?

In the case of a gap in your knowledge of the basic narrative of history, we expect that you will take the initiative to remedy the situation. Textbooks and books from the recommended readings list can help you to plug these gaps.

How soon will I know if I have passed or failed?

The readers understand how anxious you are about your exam, and will do their best to have the exams read within two weeks. Keep in mind that three faculty members—and sometimes more—must read your exam. When faculty members have determined how you did, you will receive a letter from the graduate director informing you whether you have passed or failed.

What happens if I fail?

You cannot receive your MA in History without passing comps. You may retake comps one time, at the next scheduled time they are offered. They may not be delayed except in extraordinary circumstances.

Are passing or failing the only options?

There is a third score, a "High Pass." It is sparingly awarded and should be regarded as a significant commendation of your abilities.

Why are you making me do this?

Comprehensive exams are commonly given to Master's and Ph.D. students in history. Their purpose is to allow students to demonstrate their general knowledge of history and relevant historiography and to showcase their ability to think creatively about history. The graduate committee tries to devise questions that will require a certain amount of reorganization of historical and historiographical knowledge as well as demonstrating the student's breadth of understanding.

How should I prepare for this exam?

Here are some tips from a student who successfully passed the comprehensive exam:

I worried more about having a grasp of the relevant texts (argument, trend, theme) than about historical facts, dates, events, etc.

I created bibliographies that covered race, class, gender, and environmental history [this student's specialty], as well as regional history [this student took courses in Appalachian and Western history]. These bibliographies were organized in one of two ways:

In the case of my specialty, I organized the literature by publication date to understand the development of this field's analytical arguments.

In the case of race and gender, I organized the relevant literature in terms of historical event/period (regardless of publication date), beginning with early history and moving through the accepted periodization.

To get a general grasp of the periodization and facts/dates/events, I created a timeline and read a survey-level textbook.

Other suggestions:

Simple answers to the questions will not present themselves, so be prepared to sweat over your reorganization of what you know about history.

Study together on a regular basis with other students who are preparing for comps. Teach each other and learn from each other. This will help you to organize relevant information and conceptualize what you know.

Outline your answers before you begin. This will help the tired mind to work late in the day.

Carefully allot your time. You have eight hours, and two questions. Make sure you do not bog down on the first question and then have to rush to complete the other one.

If you are at all unsure about what any of the questions are asking after you receive them, please ask the graduate director immediately.