Guidelines for Major and Minor Exams
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The major and minor exams are designed to test your knowledge and familiarity with a field of expertise in which you have an interest. Note that the designations "major" and "minor" are meant to indicate primary and secondary fields of expertise, not the relative levels of knowledge or expertise one is being asked to demonstrate. When you pass either of these exams, you should feel comfortable claiming a basic knowledge of the arguments and issues that involve the area of interest. You should feel that you could draft out a course syllabus that could cover the basic issues of that area, through both primary and secondary sources. While nobody ever feels they know <u>everything</u>, you should a feel you have a solid foundation in the area of choice. Remember, the real test is not the actual written exam, but rather sitting in front of a search committee of some kind and being able to run through your expertise on, say, "postmodernism" without fear and without notes! This is what you want to strive for as you prepare for the exams.

Remember that every advisor has particular ideas about what and how you should be studying for the exam. The following is a general guideline, but specific to my own preferences and training. Other advisors may have different expectations or demands that you should be attentive to; if you are unclear on what is expected as you begin your study, it is imperative that you ask your advisor for guidance.

1) Area of focus

After you have determined the area with your advisor, you should generate a series of questions which will guide your reading. Remember that topics are not the same as framing questions; the latter are based on the kinds of problems and interest raised by the area you are considering.

> Example: Modernism/Postmodernism: Is there an epistemological break between these concepts? If so, where and how would you locate it? What are the major theories on modernism/postmodernism, and how would you represent the arguments? Can visual material be connected to these arguments and if so, how?

2) Bibliography

Once you have determined the area, you should generate a bibliography as quickly as possible. The advisor can suggest particular works for topics under discussion, but it is primarily your responsibility to come up with a list of readings. After generating the initial bibliography, it should be typed and submitted to your advisor, organized under the rubrics of study you intend to pursue. It should cover the key texts of any particular area. If you are unsure of what these are, it can be useful to look at introductory texts (e.g. in readers, etc.) and see which works are consistently cited. These cited works are the works that you should know. Do not rely on summaries and introductions to take the place of this primary reading. You should be able to gloss the key arguments, and put them in some kind of working relationship to your own ideas on the subject.

> Example: Can a distinction be made between Clement Greenberg's early work [e.g. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"] and his later writings [e.g. "Modernist Painting"]? How would these differ, if at all, from Dwight MacDonald's "Masscult/Midcult"?. Note that you would need to have read the full texts of each cited work in order to really discern the differences and/or similiarities; an abridged or secondary commentary on these texts won't give you the answers.

The bibliography should be representative of the field and also of what you are capable of reading over the time allotted. It should include primary sources (e.g. if you're doing modernism, you want to read Baudelaire's "Painter of Modern Life" rather than reading a summary of it through Briony Fer, or an abridged version of it in a reader). Introductory texts or overviews are fine to use for your own study purposes (e.g. to help you begin to summarize overall arguments, or to locate key texts), but these are not to be substituted for the actual texts discussed. Remember that the purpose of the bibliography is to identify key works, or ones that help shape an argument, rather than exhaustively listing everything you find through a keyword search on Melvyl. Make use of bibliographies generated by students who have already done their exams; in addition, you might see if you can get a copy of their exam or at least the exam questions (remember to be generous with your peers once you have passed as well!).

In all cases you should know why you have chosen to include a particular work in your bibliography and how it pertains to the topic at hand. When you meet with your advisor to discuss the bibliography, certainly ask for further suggestions but you should not be coming in with a random list of selections. You need to have some idea of why you have

included what you have in your bibliography already. Your advisor can help you expand or eliminate readings, but don't rely on your advisor to do it all for you. Part of the preparation for the exam is to start with a topic and know why you are choosing particular research resources, and this is something that will be a key to all your subsequent research for the PhD and in your post-graduate scholarly life.

3) Preparation for exams

Obviously you should meet with the committee members once you have established questions. As noted above, after the initial meeting when the topics are chosen, you should prepare a bibliography and be able to justify the reasons for the works featured. This doesn't mean you need to know the works at this point, but you should have a sense of why you should be spending time reading them. Be prepared to address how you would begin to answer the questions you've outlined, or what materials are still needed to prepare. It is advisable to meet at least two to three weeks before the exam so that the committee members can assess your progress and confirm or adjust the dates of the exam with you. In the meantime, it is imperative that you read, read, read! Your advisor isn't going to tell you to do that (since that is the assumption!), nor is it her/his responsibility to make sure you are doing this. Meetings should be devoted to clarifying ideas, arguments and positions, based on the readings that you have done. This means you should be <u>prepared</u> (not to be confused with "knowing everything") when you meet with your advisor to discuss the topics in subsequent meetings. Have questions ready, but also be ready to present what you know and how your thinking is developing on the subject at hand. Your advisor is there to help you out, so the better sense you can convey of your own levels of understanding, the more help the advisor can be.

On your own time, as the exams approach, you should begin preparing mock questions (a friend/colleague can often be helpful in terms of "testing" you in this way). Outline your responses, or write up a response. This can help you see where you feel you need to flesh out particular areas. It will also give you a sense of the amount of time you need to organize your thoughts and then proceed to writing – in other words, it will help you pace yourself. What kinds of visual examples would you use to clarify particular arguments? How does the period of art under consideration work with the kinds of arguments you have been reading? Have you looked at works and tested these against the arguments in print?

Example: if you were to argue that postmodernism was a movement designed to undercut the stability of "high art", what objects would you use to support this claim? How would they fit into particular theories you have read? Are there objects that would contradict this claim? How would they be accounted for?

There is often anxiety about knowing enough, or reading enough to cover the area in question. Obviously one can't read <u>everything</u> nor are you expected to do so. Invariably there is anxiety (especially just before the exam), and one way to deal with this is to review what you should ideally be capable of doing once you have passed. Since the major and minor fields are designed to give you an expertise in an area, you might ask yourself if, based on what you have read, you could teach a course or construct a syllabus on the topic. What would you designate as the key texts and why? How would you explain these to (imaginary) students? What is your own point of view vis-à-vis the positions you would cover in such a course? If you wanted to clarify a position, or go into a particular area in more depth, do you feel you have enough background to proceed? These are questions that should guide your study, since "passing" the exam is pointless if you can't <u>use</u> the work you have done (the cram and dump method isn't useful). Your exam should demonstrate that you have a command of the literature, to the point of being able to converse comfortably about the major arguments, works, styles, etc. that are being considered.

Good luck and happy reading!