

Preparing for Prelims

The usual purpose of preliminary exams is to determine whether a student has a sufficient grasp of the canon to be able to teach. An honors performance on a preliminary exam rewards not only a solid basic grasp of a field but also demonstrated capacity for original thought.

Most departments use written exams or a combinations of written exams and an oral. The substitution of research papers for exams has been shown to produce narrowness and to consume extra time. Typically the time to degree increases when students are required to submit a research paper in lieu of an exam.

How should a student prepare for a preliminary exam? People vary in their learning styles, but some advice from a few years' experience may be helpful.

What Takes Place in a Prelim?

Typically, faculty members want to see students use theories they have learned to understand a new problem. That means a frequent exam format is to describe a pattern in some data or focus on a situation recently in the headlines, then to ask the student to come up with two or three different explanations. Rarely do political science problems have a single, durable answer. Instead, we want to know what kinds of explanations are useful in different circumstances. Once there are several possible answers on the table, it is common to ask which one is strongest or preferable and why.

An alternative approach is for an examiner or exam question to point to an important finding in the literature and ask a student to explain deviations from what political scientists expected. For instance, an examiner might say, "You have indicated an interest in explaining patterns of participation. One of the most robust findings in the discipline is that people with higher SES participate more. But there are differences in the degree to which SES affects participation across countries. Why?" An answer would reasonably consider the effects of institutions, especially policies like voter registration.

If explanations require the use of important or controversial concepts, examiners may want to make sure that a student can define the concept adequately and can speak about the problems associated with using the concept. For example, in comparative politics exams, the question, "What is a collective action problem?" surfaces quite often. A competent student should be able to say what the collective action problem is, what kinds of conditions give rise to it, and how to solve it.

It is important to be specific in the use of language. Vagueness causes alarm and is likely to result in points off or, in an oral, to trigger a cascade of ever more specific questions.

Generally it is wise to know the most important theories in some detail—not just the key independent variable, but also the story line that links the cause to the effect.

When to Take an Exam

Proseminars or general field seminars come closest to the structure of the exam itself, and it is a good idea not to let too much time elapse between taking this gateway course and completing the exam itself. At the very least, you will want to pay particular attention to your notes from the introductory course. The best exams often draw on the field seminar and two to three other courses, max.

Don't delay the exam. Take it at as soon as you feel prepared. Treat it as an opportunity to pull your notes together before going on to more advanced coursework, a different kind of coursework, or the dissertation. And remember, if you don't pass on the first try, no one is going to remember or say anything about it. Employers never ask about these things. Just do it, and if for some reason it doesn't work, try again.

Some Ways to Study

Preparing for an exam is a strategic enterprise. Here is the way I would approach this challenge for exams in most subfields (but not political theory, which presumably has its own lore about how to study).

1. Identify a set of key questions and isolate the dependent variables in each. Sometimes the exam reading lists will do so for you. Sometimes you will have to take this step yourself.
2. Identify main readings that speak to these questions. Again, focus on the dependent variable. Try to accumulate three different explanations for roughly the same phenomenon. If there are more explanations in a particular literature and it is common in your field to debate these, then you may need to push the number above three.
3. Take a pack of 4x6 file cards. On each card, write a concise statement of the theory a key author offers. Make sure you have a clear grasp of the main independent variables and the story line that links the independent variables to the dependent variable. At the bottom of the card, note any important elements of intellectual history—a finding that disconfirms the theory, a reference to another theory that has replaced this one in popularity (and why), a widely-perceived flaw, etc. In the top right corner, note the dependent variable. Usually you can use your reading notes from classes to carry out this work, but you may want to refer back to the originals if your notes don't seem clear enough.
4. When you come to an important concept in the field, write out a card for the concept too. Remember to be clear and specific. The details matter.
5. If the exam is written and open-note, then make sure your notes are organized so that you can find things easily.

6. Review the cards often. Shuffle them around and pay attention to new ways to combine them.
7. If the basic proseminar included handouts that sketched the intellectual history of a subject matter, review the handouts before the exam. If not, or if you want to amplify your understanding, you may want to turn to review essays in the *Handbook of Political Science* or the *Annual Review of Political Science* (or in some fields, the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*).
8. Think about what you like and don't like. Quite often, an exam question will ask you to choose your favorite work, explain its contribution to the field, and offer reasons why others should think it is important or useful. Or you might be asked, "If you could recommend three books for an undergraduate course on x, what would you choose and why?" (The intellectual task is similar in these two questions.)
9. Another common question (usually thrown at the most confident) is "So how would you study this problem?" This kind of question reaches to your knowledge of research design and method. In oral exams it usually surfaces only when someone is clearly comfortable with the material, but you can always take the initiative and say, "If I planned to study this subject, I would proceed differently. Specifically, I would do..."

There is no reason why one can't prepare for a prelim in most fields in a month to six weeks (while doing other things). If you read carefully the first time and took good notes in class, you should have most of what you need written down already.

Some Common Mistakes

People make several common mistakes. One is to fail to prepare strategically. Knowing the names of the authors is irrelevant if it isn't accompanied by a crisp statement of the theory the authors offered. Don't go back and re-read material. Read only for the points you will need in the exam, and many of those are already in your notes.

A second mistake is to cram too much. Material learned quickly generally goes in one ear and out the other. It is better to take a week or so just to review your file cards every once in a while and to let things sink in than it is to prepare suddenly and invest a lot of time right before the exam.

A third mistake is to misunderstand the level of specificity required. The majority of graduate students lack a sense of the sharpness or clarity needed. Remember the field seminar and the detail the instructor sought. That's about where you want your answers to be.

Be wary of "group think." It is easy to tell when students have studied together because they all tend to make the same mistakes. Make sure your study group contains a

range of talents, or try to get together with members of a different group at some point, as a check on this problem. Sometimes people are better off studying on their own!

Lots of people worry about freezing on prelims. But prelims are no worse than teaching classes in one's first year as an assistant professor or presenting at a professional meeting. Think about the times you have kept your head about you—maintained your ability to think under pressure—and the times you have blanked out under pressure. We all have these ups and downs. The key thing is to figure out what makes you feel in control. Is it feeling you have prepared thoroughly? Does sleep matter? Does spending 40 minutes “centering” on the task, with no distractions, make you perform better? Figure out what your own pattern is and plan accordingly.

Finally, listen to your instincts. Does a literature make you feel uncomfortable? Do you think, “I just don't get it?” Reflect on the reasons behind the feelings. They may tell you something about a shortcoming in the field. You may be able to build an original idea or claim instead.