

**Higher Education Program
Department of Educational Organization and Leadership
Incomplete list of ideas to help prepare for qualifying exams**

1. Respect the exam and the process

Passing qualifying exams is a significant step in your doctoral education and represents a significant academic achievement. The exams serve as both the culmination of the first phase of doctoral work and the beginning of the dissertation process. In essence, passing indicates that you have accumulated, organized, processed, and become able to articulate in meaningful ways both a general body of knowledge and knowledge specific to your special focus. This is a significant academic endeavor and successful completion of it is a significant intellectual accomplishment.

Qualifying exams are an important part of the doctoral process and should be respected as such. This respect will help you focus and commit to the preparation necessary for success. It is important to note, however, that *respect* is different than *fear*. While the exams should be taken seriously, they should not be feared as an insurmountable obstacle or an unfairly difficult challenge. The faculty has confidence that the students who have been admitted to the program and have succeeded in the coursework have the potential to excel on exams. Just as importantly, the faculty is committed to helping students prepare for and pass qualifying exams.

2. Start Early

Perhaps the most important thing that you can do is begin your preparation early. The exams will pull together knowledge, ideas, information, issues, etc. from your entire time in the program. The earlier you devise systems and schema to organize and use knowledge from your coursework and beyond, the easier it will be to draw upon them. This program-long activity is just the beginning, however. Your explicit exam preparation will still take many months. You will be reading new pieces, reviewing authors and texts with which you are familiar, and practicing taking exams. While some students have found taking vacations from work or otherwise setting aside the last week or two before the exams as useful supplements to earlier preparation, history has shown that such actions on their own are only seldom effective. Expect your preparation to take place over a number of months- and then live up to the expectation.

3. Do a self-assessment

As you are beginning your explicit preparation, it will be helpful to assess where you are in terms of your existing knowledge, organization, materials, and preferred learning style. Go through your course materials, syllabi for courses that you have not taken, and other important readings in the field. What are the main issues that reappear? What is your understanding of the basic issues involved? Determine whether you know what important authors have said about the topic. It is important to assess your strengths and weaknesses so that you know where you might need to focus extra effort and time. This can also allow you to think strategically about how knowledge in one area might relate to and build on knowledge in another (for example, how does your historical knowledge supplement your understanding of federal financial aid policy?). As you progress, be sure to continually evaluate where you are and what needs to be done.

It can also be helpful to assess your organization and learning style. What types of notes are most useful to you? What type of organizational schemes will allow you to both access materials and be flexible in your use of them? Do you study best by taking notes, writing summaries after reading pieces, identifying key words to which you can hold on, or other strategies? Might a computer program such as Endnote help you organize or would it be a distraction? The earlier you can figure some of these things out, the better use you can make of your time.

4. Get in the habit of working toward exams on a regular basis

While exams may seem far off, be careful not to put aside studying for more imminent matters. Schedule exam preparation time and value that time rather than expecting that you can make up for it later.

5. Don't assume that coursework enough

Your doctoral coursework is a wonderful place to start your preparation but it is only a start. While coursework covers major issues relevant to higher education, the limited number of hours per course, limited number of courses, new literature, and changes in the field necessitate that you look beyond your classes. Be sure to consider issues not covered in your courses and to explore the issues in your courses more deeply than you did in class. In other words, courses are a jumping off point; jump both in and out.

6. Talk to your advisor, colleagues, professors, etc.

Taking the exam might be a solitary activity but your preparation should not be undertaken in solitude. Talk to your colleagues, advisor, other students who have passed the exam, etc. The faculty want to support your efforts, as do many of your classmates. Ask them about sources, reading lists, and strategies for success. Share your ideas, plans, and preparations. The sooner you have conversations with them, the sooner you will be able to build on their suggestions and insights.

7. Work with a small group

While each person has different preferred learning styles, it is often helpful to form a small study group. Members of small groups can hold each other accountable, ensure continued efforts, serve as sounding boards for ideas, and exchange important information about texts and issues. Small groups can also be extremely useful for exchanging answers to practice questions. Which brings us to...

8. Practice

Sitting in front of a computer on exam day is not the time to remember how difficult it can be to organize and present your thoughts in a limited amount of time. Plan to take timed practice exams and to then review the exams both on your own and with others. Exchanging answers with partners can be mutually beneficial. Not only will you receive feedback from a colleague, but you will see how s/he approached the same question, perhaps from a very different angle.

9. Think Broadly

A key part to successfully completing these exams is thinking broadly across areas and ideas. As you prepare, look for connections and try to integrate your knowledge. You will not get a question asking you something specific that has been covered in a single course. Instead, questions will require you to pull from a number of authors, areas, and ideas. As you think about educational issues, try to relate different topics, authors, and ideas to each other. How do they build on each other? How do they conflict? This integration should be an important part of your graduate work.

10. Relax

Qualifying exams can seem daunting. As noted above, they are serious academic challenges and should be taken seriously. That said, both during preparation and during the exams, you should focus on the intellectual task rather than the potential outcomes. Using your time wisely, organizing yourself and your review, and putting in concerted effort should help you relax and produce thoughtful responses to interesting and important questions.