GUIDE TO WRITING EXAM BIBLIOGRAPHIES AND TAKING EXAMS

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One way of looking at a doctoral program in anthropology (or in anything else) is as one of those "function" problems in math, where a number goes into a box and comes out as a different number, and you have to figure out what the function in the box did to it (multiply by 2 and add 3, or whatever). The doctoral program turns bright and motivated students into (still bright and motivated, one hopes) scholars of anthropology, with specializations in particular geographic and theoretical areas. This memo and its companion on the dissertation proposal are intended to help you look inside the box and see exactly how this transformation happens, before and as it is happening.

Until the qualifying exam process, which – barring exceptional circumstances - takes place in the third year of the program, most of your direct assignments have been formally similar to things you did in your undergraduate work. Of course, you have also been attending colloquia, defining your research question, becoming an expert in your chosen field, doing preliminary fieldwork, and so on. But the exams are the first time that these new scholarly activities are formalized, and they represent the first extended work you are doing almost entirely on your own. For this reason, they are both extremely daunting (especially at the beginning) and extremely rewarding (especially at the end).

Here's what two of your colleagues have said about these aspects of the process:

"Having to write a long bibliography, and then having to read and take notes on all those items, seems very daunting unless you fragment the job a little bit."

"I think that the process of preparation for the exams is a very productive and useful experience because you are actually forced to read a significant amount of literature on the subjects you have chosen to work on and so should anyways know a lot about."

I hope that this memorandum will help to reduce the first feeling and increase the second.

The Qualifying Exam Process in Context: Where do the qualifying exams fit into the doctoral program – the process of turning you from a student into a scholar – as a whole?

I sometimes find it helpful to think of the various "literatures" in anthropology, for example on Mexico or the anthropology of value, or theories of practice, as a set of conversations, sometimes overlapping and sometimes diverging widely. Your coursework aimed at teaching you the content of those conversations and their significance within the larger field of anthropology. ***The exams are your opportunity to***

review and complete what you have learned and to synthesize and evaluate the different conversations you've chosen to focus on, in two directed essays and an oral defense. In your dissertation proposal, you locate and describe a point in the conversation where something more needs to be learned and said in order to push the conversation further. Your fieldwork and resulting dissertation are then what you learn and say about that point you've identified in the proposal.

Getting Started

As with many large, new tasks, the hardest part of putting together your exam bibliographies is starting. Students have found it helpful to begin with materials they have already worked with, such as syllabi, lecture and seminar notes and works cited sections from seminar papers. Literature review sections from works you admire and any review articles you have at hand are also helpful (you'll return to some of these later as well).

If you have not yet finished your coursework, you should be keeping a list of books and articles you expect will be on your exam list. Citation software such as Endnote – available for free from Brandeis – is extremely useful for this, and the immediate time investment in developing an annotated Endnote bibliography will pay off in the long run.

Categories and Contents

As you begin collecting citations that you know will be on the list, you should be thinking about the different subcategories you wish to group them into. These should be divided into one "area" bibliography and another "theory" bibliography, with 3 or 4 subcategories for each. As the handbook states, "The theoretical section, building on readings in graduate courses, covers the student's subdisciplinary concentrations: e.g., "Language and Society," "Theories of State Formation," or "Culture and Power." The area section addresses relevant regional, historical, and ethnographic literatures: e.g., "Gender and Generation in South Asia," "East Asian Popular Religion," "Maya Kingdoms." Taken together, the readings in the subsections should constitute an 'argument' or intellectual conversation."

As you define your categories, there are a few ways to think about whether you are successfully identifying a theme or problem that will serve to tie together a body of literature and to move you further toward the dissertation proposal. This can be a bit difficult. Some ideas of ways to test your categories to see if they make sense as subcategories of your bibliography: try writing an undergraduate or graduate syllabus on the category. Would a class like this make sense? What would it need to include? Or, try to imagine an annual review article on the theme or concept (or cluster of concepts) defined in your subcategory, and ask the same questions. Finally, some students will find it useful to ¨graph¨ the concept (connecting it to other concepts and ethnographic work by means of lines or arrows, perhaps distinguishing between a core and related terms or works). You needn´t do all of these exercises, but you may find one or more of them useful.

In assembling and categorizing your bibliographies, you will tack back and forth between the citations you include and the categories you create. As you add citations, they will likely outgrow your original categories, and your categories will also require additional citations. At this point you'll return to review articles and literature review sections that sum up your main area and theoretical concerns, in order to further build your lists. Then the question becomes, how do you know if you have sufficiently covered the categories or themes you have defined? Going back to the tests described in the previous paragraph, you should include all the works that would be an undergrad *and* graduate syllabus on the topic, as well as all the works that should be in an annual review article, or all the works without which the graph of your category or concept would be incomplete.

You should *not* include: works that would tend to weaken the central core of your category, by introducing extraneous issues; anything that you think would be deleted from the annual review article by a scrupulous editor; anything that is a commentary on on a commentary, without original material; anything that is there only because you like it, have read it, or because it looks interesting.

This process should take place in consultation with your committee, either in a group or in individual meetings. Committees and students develop a variety of strategies for dealing with new texts that come up in the course of the reading period, communicating during the reading period and preparing the exam questions. These procedures are not set at the department level, but emerge out of your conversations with your committee, which should take place at least once and possibly several times during the bibliography and exam process.

Similarly, the department does not have a required minimum or maximum for exam bibliographies. This will depend in part on the fields you have designated for inquiry in your exams, and on your conversations with your committee. Most exam bibliographies fall within the 200-250 range, for books, articles, and book chapters.

In addition, you should feel free to consult other faculty members (not on your committee) and your student colleagues for further suggestions on how to refine your categories and what to put on your list. If there is anyone else taking exams around the same time as you, you should think about starting a reading/studying partnership at this point (see below for more discussion about this).

Once you have reached consensus with your committee on your lists and have worked with them to set up a date for your exam (this might already have taken place, depending on your schedules; however, since only you and your committee participate in exams, they are relatively easy to schedule), you will enter the next phase of the process, reading and taking notes on your bibliographies.

The amount of time between getting your list approved and taking the exam will vary, but tends to be about a semester. Students recommend getting your bibliographies finished as early as possible to leave more time for reading. Sometimes, however, there's a lag

before final approval, especially if some members of your committee are traveling, on leave, etc. You need not wait for final "approval" to begin the process of reading for your exams, as long as you have had some conversations with your committee so that you know are all basically on the same page.

Reading: Not a Spectator Sport

Your bibliographies are meant to represent your understanding of different conversations within your geographic and theoretical areas, and thus, as you all know, reading them is not a passive activity. Your notes on specific readings - and perhaps also short synthetic statements you write during the course of your reading - will be enormously helpful in taking the exams, as well as writing the dissertation proposal, and your future intellectual life.

When you begin this period, it is helpful to divide your list into what you read before and what you have not. One student highlighted readings according to whether she had read something once before, read it recently, and read it and taken notes. This helped give her a sense of where she needed to focus, and also broke down the task into smaller chunks, which is always a good idea.

If you haven't already teamed up with others also taking exams (and if there are people in the same boat), you should definitely consider doing so. If not, you might consider forming an *ad hoc* reading group, or, as one student did, informally joining a readings course on a similar topic. This will help you structure your time and make the process less lonely, as well as giving you people to bounce ideas off of.

Time management is a big aspect of the reading process, and something that is hard to teach, in part because people's minds work so differently. Structuring your time helps break the task up so that it's not too overwhelming. Pace yourself; don't spend all of every day reading, or you'll burn out. If you can spend 4-6 hours every day, and keep to that pace, you'll be in great shape. You might divide your time into reading and taking notes. For instance, you could read several things in the morning, then take a break and take notes in the afternoon or evening. Schedule some pleasant outings and events throughout your time, so that you don't feel too ground down or isolated.

One thing that helps in this period is learning how to read at different levels of intensity. Some works, which are absolutely central to your theme and project, extremely difficult, or extremely influential, will need a day or *maybe* two to digest, but these are a small minority. You should get to the point where after spending 2-3 hours with almost any book or article you can control its argument and implications for the theme or conversation you're using it for, and write cogently about it. Some works will take longer, as I said, but many should take even less time (and often not because they're less theoretical or nuanced; here's where you really start to appreciate good writing). Let's say you have 250 items on your list, and four months (@ 120 days) to do it. If you allow for some days without reading (since life does occasionally intervene), you might end up with 100 days of solid work. That would give you an average of 2.5 works per day.

Your notes on the readings may be the most important tangible product of this time, especially since your written exams will only cover a fraction of the readings you actually did. One student structured her notes in the following way
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[I included] a short description of what the article or the book is about (even the place names and years when the research was done - it really helps later, as you don't have to go and find out when and where exactly did Scheper-Hughes did her project, etc), then the key points and some quotes, connecting to other readings and theories, always in the end marking how this could relate to my research, what questions I could ask from this perspective if I applied it to my subject area, what my criticisms are. Although this last - subjective - part of the notes did not end up very helpful for the exams, now, writing my proposal, I find these notes to myself extremely useful.... Now I have a huge folder full of these notes, all arranged by subject and within the subject by author and I am very proud of it!

Again, consistent use of EndNote can be really helpful in this part of the process.

Writing your Exam

The essays you write as part of your exams belong to a genre of which you probably have little to no experience, and like all genres of writing, they are difficult to explain in the abstract. It is perhaps easiest to begin by describing your stance going into the exams, the position from which you will be writing the essays.

In building your bibliographies in the way that you did, you are telling the faculty (and anyone else who reads them) that you consider your categories to constitute a legitimate field of inquiry, and that you consider the works on your list to delineate and populate that field of inquiry better than others you might have chosen. Then, in reading the bibliography and presenting yourself for the exam, you are saying that you have built your capacity to discuss that field of inquiry in an authoritative way, as a scholar who is preparing to add to this field through her or his research.

Your committee poses you questions in this spirit and successful essays demonstrate your hard-won authority to speak about these issues. You need not feel that you must claim to be the world's expert on the subject; rather you are expected to answer thoughtfully and with a strong base of reference material. Nor should you cast your net too broadly. But your essays should reflect your understanding of the field you've delineated as a coherent one, even if you're not directly citing everything within it.

When scheduling your exams, try to pick a week when you have a clear schedule, if at all possible (those of us with children may find this especially difficult, but everyone will have some trouble with it). However, you should schedule some time every day to do something you enjoy, like taking a walk, watching a movie, going out for ice cream, or whatever. As with the reading period, it's important to pace yourself. You may wish to

schedule two or three sessions of work per day, with short breaks between. Make sure you eat healthily, get to bed early, and generally try to treat yourself well.

The Defense

Students whom I asked for input into this memo seem to have enjoyed the defense itself, and ideally it should be a stimulating and exciting experience. One student says,

This is a chance to clarify and/or further develop anything you wrote about in your exam. It's great, really, since chances are you have a whole lot more to say than you were able to put in ten pages, and the questions from your committee may even prompt you to move your project in directions you hadn't considered before. It's actually an opportunity we may not get a lot, and ideally, the oral defense is a great stepping stone to writing proposals. Take notes, and it's great if your committee sends you their notes too.

Another student expressed a similar feeling:

[the defense] was a theoretical negotiation on an interesting and sophisticated level that helped reveal the gaps in my thinking so far and encouraged me to look into the things I had not thought of before. In other words, it was once again very productive.

Both of these remarks capture well what the defense is supposed to be about.

As with the written part of the exam, it's important to go into them with a sense of confidence in your ability to synthesize and comment on the field(s) of study you have delineated in the bibliographies. The faculty will be asking you questions, which will likely point to areas of your essays they would like to hear more about, probably because they believe you can push yourself further on this point. The questions are meant to invite to discuss the points raised in the essays from the standpoint of a scholar in control of and preparing to contribute to the field. So your answers should be aimed at further participation in a conversation, rather than simply providing a closed response.

Since we look for the capacity to negotiate the relationship between ethnography and theory, it is often a good idea to illustrate your answers to theoretical questions with specific ethnographic examples (taken from the literature, not your own work). An attention to the ways in which others have treated the relationship between theory and ethnography is one sign of a good anthropologist, and a strong addition to any exam or other performance.

Once the exam is finished, you may well be tempted to drop all academic thinking for a week or two (indeed, this is probably recommended). Make sure that before you do this, you review your notes on the exam. You should try to sit down within 48 hours of the exams (preferably right afterward) and do some free writing on the issues raised in your conversation. As one student who did this said, "*I had a few important brainstorms in those moments that I'm very glad I typed up right then.*"

Taking Stock and Moving On

Once the exam is done (you may be asked to write something in response to faculty comments in the oral defense, which you will need to do within the week, which would prolong the process slightly), you may feel a bit strange for a few days. This might be a good chance to go away for a weekend, or do something you've been wanting to do (Bungee jumping? Tuvan throat singing? Marriage?). You should also make sure to congratulate yourself on successfully passing what was probably the most difficult academic test you have ever taken (and probably, I hope, one of the most rewarding).

In a couple of weeks, you should be ready to start thinking about the dissertation proposal. For advice on that, see "So You Have to Write a Dissertation Proposal," by the same author.

Congratulations!!