



Qualifying Exams

Using your Reading List

Developing Practice Questions

Troy Mikanovich | Graduate Writing Coach

Annenberg School for Communication

Today's workshop

- Reading lists
 - + Effective organization, reading schedule
- Annotated bibliographies
 - + Important information
- Brainstorming Questions
 - + A typology of questions
 - + Answers vs answer steps

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APRIL 7, 2022 BY TROY
Qualifying Exam Questions

Prepping for your qualifying exams can feel a bit aimless at times. One way to help you organize your study is to brainstorm specific questions that you might use all of your readings to answer. Here's a worksheet to help you develop some practice questions.

If you have to come up with your own questions anyway—perfect! If you will be working with your advisor or committee to develop questions, use this as a place to start. And even if you aren't going to have a hand in coming up with your quals questions, give it a shot to help you identify what you do and do not know about the fields you will be tested in. Feel free to bring the worksheet to a session with me, too.

USC Annenberg Graduate Writing Coach
Qualifying Exam Questions Brainstorming Worksheet
Depending on your program and your advisor, you may not know the questions that you'll be asked on your qualifying exam (aka quals). For some programs, you will have the questions that you will have to answer in advance. Other programs require students to write out their committee members to engage with the questions after they're asked. To assist the advisor you're in a class to help you brainstorm possible questions. Before you can write them in response to your reading, you'll need to know the questions. This worksheet will help you identify the types of questions that might be asked to you. Use it to come up with your own questions about your subject area and bring it to your next grad program advice session.

Identifying Relevant Themes and Planning Your Reading Schedule
First, identify your PhD and each field.
Next, brainstorm a list of topics and themes that are relevant to your PhD, your interests, and the interests of your readers.
Identify any topics/themes that are shared across all three groups (or maybe just two of the three) and create them a color.
Now, if you've been given a reading list, go through it and mark each entry with the color(s) that best represent the themes and ideas that the reader finds with (or doesn't find) it, or are related to it, or are relevant to it, or are different from it.
Lastly, group the readings together according to color/theme. Reading them in groups will give you a better chance of identifying ways to connect them. Brainstorming content or good connections or responses to them, understanding your readers is key.
As this post, check in with your advisor about the way that you're organized your classes. This will help you get a sense of whether or not you are approaching the process in a way that makes sense to them.
If you are required to write your own questions, it's important to write your questions, consider what the questions are likely to be, and what you'll be asked to write your answers to.

Reading lists

- Your reading list is a guide of what you should read to prepare for your exams; it is not a guide of **how** you should read to prepare for your exams
 - + What order should you read your materials in?
 - + What kinds of information/content should you focus on?
 - + ~~How much time should you give to each piece?~~

Reading lists

This is a sample reading list – I don't think you should use it as an example of what to read (that's between you and your committee); rather, I want to use it as a way to figure out **how** to read.

Ryan Stoldt About Blog C.V. Research▾ Teaching Creative Professional

Comprehensive Exams Reading Lists

It's time for my comprehensive exams in my Ph.D. program, meaning I get to spend the next few months reading non-stop. I've decided to share my comprehensive exam lists in the interest of helping anyone looking for resources to understand digital media industries and culture. [A.J. Christian undertook a similar task](#) in 2010 because he had difficulty finding lists in media industry studies, and things haven't changed much.

The following lists provide a non-comprehensive account of key issues in each of my five comprehensive exam areas (Digital media studies; global media industry studies; labor, participation, and exploitation; neo-Marxist cultural theory; and qualitative methods. Because each section of my comprehensive exams focuses on a unique area, it would take years to read through everything written on the topics.

Primary focus: Digital media studies

Ryan Stoldt, "Comprehensive Exams Reading List," October 28, 2018
<https://ryanstoldt.com/2018/10/22/comprehensive-exams-reading-lists/> (Accessed June 16, 2022).

Ordering your reading schedule

- Consider major themes and how they relate
 - + BUT, don't over-divide your reading list
- Look for existing conversations and debates
 - + BUT, also look for people who are talking to each other that don't know they are talking to each other (i.e. implicit debates)
- Consider lines of development (theoretical, methodological, etc.)
 - + BUT, don't fall into the trap of only reading old-to-new

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 - + Helpful/compelling examples
 - + Details (esp. about minor theories)

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- Things to consider once you have that together: ~~CONTENT~~
 - + Helpful/compelling examples
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Questions: Where you find yourself (maybe)

- You do not (and will not) know what questions are going to be on the exam
 - + Challenge: What is important? What isn't?
 - + Challenge: Scope (How broad/general/specific will the questions be?)
- You and your committee will work together to come up with a selection of questions that you'll choose from on the day of.
 - + Challenge: How can you come up with questions that your committee members will like?
- ~~• You will be given advance notice of the questions (or, at least, the kinds of questions) that are going to be on the exam.~~
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Some assumptions

- Even if you aren't required to write your own qualifying exam questions, coming up with potential questions is a useful way to prepare for the exam
 - + Helps you consider the major issues in your field
 - + Gives you a way to organize your readings
 - + Practice tests

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 - + Helps you consider the major issues in your field
 - + Gives you a way to organize your readings
 - + Practice tests
- Even if you don't know the questions that you will be answering, you can prepare partial answers (answer shards, answer steps) that you will use across a variety of answers.
 - + The process of answering questions during your exam, then, becomes an exercise in organization and argumentation rather than simple recall

Kinds of questions

- “Dumb” Questions with Smart Answers
 - + What is religion?
 - + Is the United States a Christian nation?
- “So-and-so says” Questions
 - + Proponents of Agenda Setting Theory argue that a population’s sense of what ought to be considered “news-worthy” is influenced by the work that mass media organizations do to make their own agendas salient to the public. What other theories are proponents of AST arguing against with this assertion, what have other scholars said on this same issue, and what do you think? Provide relevant evidence and citations where necessary.
 - + For Karl Marx, religion functioned as an “opiate;” on the other hand, Weber describes religion as a kind of energizing mechanism (an amphetamine, if you will). Which framing do you think is more accurate and why?
- Public-Facing Questions (Contemporary issues)
 - + You are invited to speak on a CNN panel about voter suppression in the United States. Keeping your audience in mind, detail the history of voter suppression in the United States, dominant theories about voter engagement, and how you think this information should influence the average voter going into the 2020 election.

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Kinds of questions

- **Straight Literature Review Questions**
 - + **More than many other academic disciplines, the field of Communication Studies (and Mass Communications) has had to directly confront a shifting social and technological landscape. Where would you locate the beginnings of the modern field of Communication Studies and what major advances/arguments have marked its development?**
- **Methodological Questions**
 - + **For the following case-study synopsis and research question, please detail a mixed methods approach of study. Discuss, also, the relative merits (strengths and limitations) of a longitudinal research design and a cross-sectional research design for this project:**
- **Theory Questions**
 - + **Detail the history of Adaptive Structuration Theory and evaluate its merits for evaluating the contemporary mass media landscape.**
 - + **Discuss the differences between how “candidate-centered” theories and “party-centered” theories consider the role of (1) election-seeking politicians, (2) policy goals, (3) party insiders, and (4) intense policy demanders. Give examples for each.**

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Contextualize AST within the broader development of Comm Studies

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Identify major developments of the field of Comm Studies

Identify major developments in mass media

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Examples of answer steps

- Descriptions of major works within your field
- Descriptions of major arguments, divisions, and conversations in your field
- Short responses analyzing the development of major theories and assumptions
+ i.e. “research stories”
- Analysis of the major methodological and analytical approaches in your field
+ Strengths and weaknesses of different approaches
+ Appropriateness of different approaches for answering different kinds of questions
- Descriptive histories relevant to your topics/sub-topics
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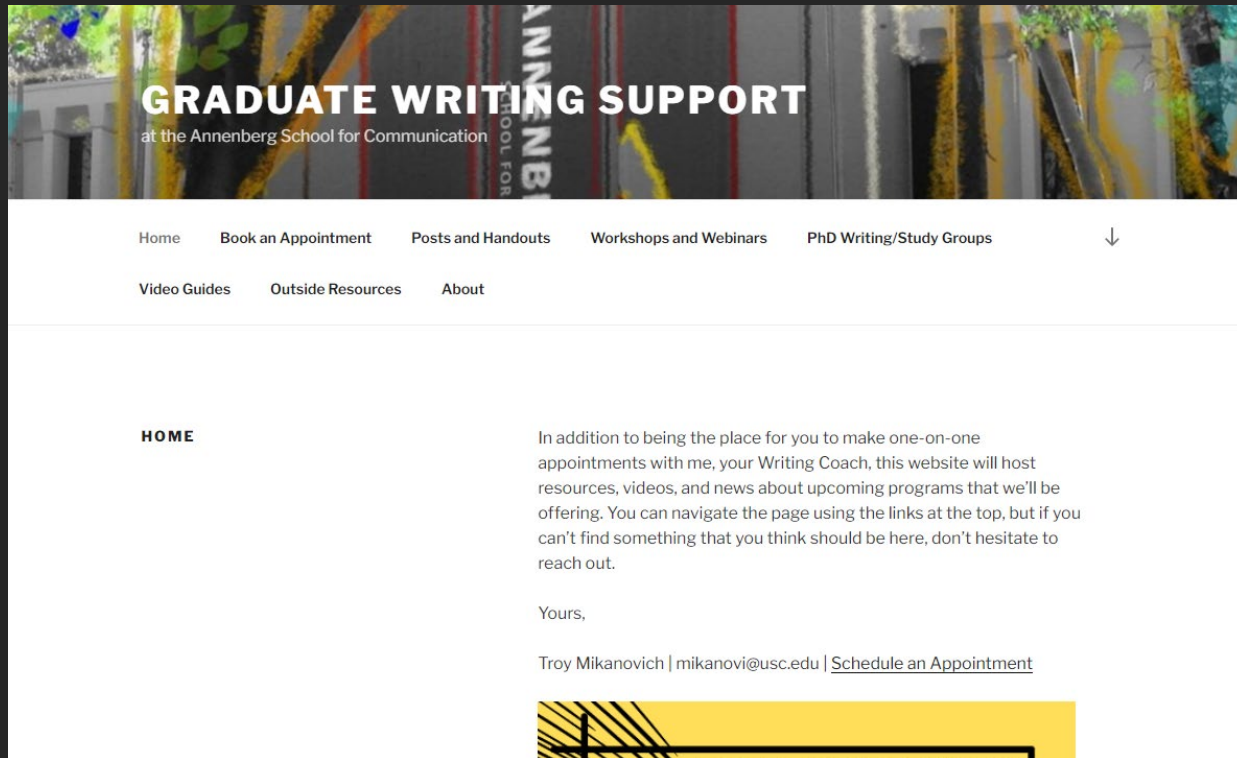
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More summer webinars



The poster is yellow with black text and features a stylized graphic of a window or frame on the left side. It lists four webinar topics with dates and times, and includes a registration link.

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- 6/16 2:00pm** Organizing Your Qualls Reading List and Brainstorming Questions
- 6/23 2:00pm** Outlining Your Prospectus
- 6/28 11:00am** Developing Research Questions
- 7/7 4:00pm** Literature Reviews and Creating a Research Space

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