

The Comprehensive Examination in International Relations (IR) Instructions to Candidates

Format and Evaluation

For students entering the program prior to AY2019: This is a closed book/note examination, taken over a period of eight hours (10 hours for ESL students). It consists of four sets of questions. The first three sets of questions are: international relations theory, international security, and international political economy. The fourth set of questions is based on the candidate's fourth graduate IR class (e.g. international law, international organizations). Candidates are required to provide the Director of Graduate Studies and Field Chair with the details of their fourth course one month before taking the examination. Candidates are required to answer one question from each set. No answer should exceed 1,000 words.

For students entering the program in AY2019 and after: This is a closed book/note examination, taken over a period of nine hours (12 hours for ESL students). It consists of three questions, one each on international relations theory, international security, and international political economy (three hours per question, or four hours each for ESL students). Each answer will be limited to 2,000 words. Students will submit their answers anonymously using ID numbers that will allow the DGS to tie students to their exam answers without revealing the students' names to the faculty grading the exam until after grading is complete. Students must earn a passing grade on all three questions on the exam in order to pass. A student who fails one or more sections can make a second attempt to pass the exam, retaking those sections of the exam that s/he failed at a future comprehensive exam date.

For all students: Good answers will answer the question directly, make cogent arguments, use and cite scholars and scholarship appropriately, and use empirical examples as needed. Poor answers fail to address the question, are poorly written, contain little in the way of original argument, miss obvious literatures or authors required to demonstrate mastery of the subject, or are incomplete. Very short parenthetical citations (e.g. Keohane, AH) are sufficient.

Preparation

Candidates should create their own examination reading lists, drawing from the syllabi of their Notre Dame courses and supplemented with readings from graduate-level syllabi from other universities, books from the major presses, and articles from a wide range of journals in the field. Candidates may also find it useful to look at past questions when preparing for the examination, which are available on the department website, although they should remember that the breadth of the questions and the expectations about the answers may have changed somewhat with the change in the exam format beginning with the cohort that entered the program in AY2019. Ordinarily, candidates will complete the IR field's core courses before attempting the comprehensive exam.

Candidates must do more than simply master the major theories and concepts within each area of inquiry. They should also develop an understanding of the methodological debates in the sub-field and build a substantial base of empirical knowledge—both quantitative and qualitative—regarding major historical events and regions of the world.

Rationale

The goal of the IR comprehensive exam is to ensure students are up to speed with the trajectory of the field by demonstrating competent command of classic and recent works, including showing understanding of the development of central concepts and current debates. In short, the exam should show that students have a solid foundation to be international relations scholars, capable of making significant contributions to significant debates.

Preparation for the examination is an opportunity to build a broader and more integrated view of the field. Candidates should try to knit together theories, themes and arguments from their courses and outside readings so that they form a more coherent whole, and they should try to integrate international relations with their other field(s). This examination is part of the passage from being a student consuming IR courses to being a professional producing political science knowledge. In other words, the comprehensive examination is an integral part of candidates' intellectual development.

The examination is also the faculty's chance to gauge students' progress in our program. Success means that we certify you as a competent scholar in international relations. If we pass you, it means we believe you could hold your own in general international relations discussions at conferences or at a job interview and that you could teach an introductory international relations class. Our field, our department, our university, and your peers on the job market have a vested interest in maintaining high standards.