FAQs for Anthropology Grads

**Qualifying Exams**

1. **What is the purpose of these exams?**
   There are two primary goals. First, the exams mark the end of all your coursework (usually forever). The exams thus certify that you have enough knowledge to teach appropriate graduate and undergraduate courses on your own. Second, they test whether you have the knowledge you need to undertake your dissertation project.

2. **When should I start worrying about this?**
   It varies, but for the great majority of cases, you should start planning really concretely by the end of your second year. (It’s not impossible actually to be taking your exams then, but it’s rare and not usually recommended.) At that point, in consultation with your advisor, you should identify a committee of three, discuss with them the broad areas in which you will be examined (see the Bulletin for more detail), and begin developing your bibliographies. Of course, in another sense you should be thinking about this right from the first day you join the program, since all of your coursework should really aim at the goals discussed above. The majority of our students take exams in the fall or spring of the 3rd year. Although this FAQ is not about research grant proposals, bear in mind that most of those deadlines will also be in the fall of the 3rd year. Hopefully, all or almost all of your coursework is finished at that point so you can devote full time to proposals and exams.

   Note that it is often impossible to organize an oral exam during the summer because faculty are not around. Also note that to remain in good standing, we expect you to have finished this entire process of becoming ABD (including prospectus defense) before the end of year 4 at the absolute latest. Finally, remember that you cannot take the exams until you have completed all your coursework, you have no incompletes on your record, and your language requirement is satisfied.

3. **Who should be on my committee?**
   The right committee is the three people who are most qualified to test you, who know your work, and who will be most helpful to you as you continue in the program. In consultation with your primary advisor, you should put together a group that should be able to help you develop appropriate bibliographies in each of your areas, work with you as you prepare, and (in most cases) continue helping through the dissertation process. Ideally, you would have had courses from all of them. All three share responsibility for all parts of the exam, although of course their areas of expertise may differ. Normally at least two should come from our department.

4. **What should the bibliography look like?**
   Finalize the bibliography several months in advance of your exam date. It is sort of a contract between you and your committee, so it is in your interest to clarify it early. Each of the three
major sections normally has about 40-60 references in it, though your specific needs might vary. Check with your committee members! Bibliographies are always divided into three major sections, as described in the Bulletin. Within each section, committees often vary in their expectations, but it’s often good practice to have an introductory paragraph about what primary issues you are trying to address. It may also be helpful to think about what the big, interesting, focal questions are within each section, and to divide it up into subsections accordingly. Annotating each selection, even very briefly, is also helpful (some committees may require this).

5. How should I study?
Read your bibliography, of course. While you are reading, keep good notes… you will use them forever! And just as importantly, save some weeks at the end where you stop reading and just think. For instance, think about what questions you might ask if you were the committee, and try to answer them. Think about how you might write a literature review essay for aspects of your bibliography. You can also look at one or two sets of questions that have been asked of similar students in the past (ask Nicholas, who has a collection of them). You should not, however, look at their answers. In addition, some students ask committee members for independent studies to go over readings together. In any case, you will benefit from regular meetings with your committee members.

6. What are the expectations for the exam itself?
Exams consist of three sections (each based on one of the three sections of your bibliography); each section will have three questions, of which you will choose two to answer. You will have ten days from start to finish, during which you may consult your notes and read texts, but not consult with colleagues. There are no strict rules about length, but typically answers for each question run about 12-15 pages, double-spaced. Do not write more than 20 pages. Please also repeat the question at the beginning of each answer, include references cited for each answer, and number the pages.

7. What happens at the oral exam?
The oral takes place at least a week after the written exam is turned in, to give the committee time to read it. In principle, the committee can ask you anything at all based on your bibliography. In practice, the questioning usually ties directly to the six answers on the written exam. For that reason, there really isn’t much you can do to prepare, besides reminding yourself of what your written answers were.