

For Graduate Students and Faculty:

First, a few comments about procedures, then (a) some informal practical advice, and (b) words of encouragement to bear in mind (also offered informally)

To summarize current practice:

** As soon as you can, let me know that you intend to take preliminary examinations this fall. I will then contact the chair of the American General Field Committee, Professor Sanders, and he, in conjunction with other members of this committee, will determine the date of the general field examination. Needless to say, if there is a Europeanist wishing to take preliminary exams, I will contact the chairs for the early modern or modern European committees, Professors Linder and Stone respectively. But I suspect that only U.S. students will be taking exams this fall. Once the general field committee has determined a date, Professor Sanders will contact me about this date, and I will make sure that this information is given to you, and also to Shelly in the main office so that she can set up a KSOL account where you will eventually find the exam questions. So, at this point, notify me of your intention to take the exam; I'll notify Professor Sanders; he in turn will notify me of the date; and I will let you as well as Shelly know about this date. Recall that current practice is that the examination can take two forms: a six-hour exam taken in two three-hour sessions, or, as is the more general practice of late, a take-home examination to be completed and returned via electronic submission within 72 hours. In any given semester, all students taking the exam will have the same format. The general field exam committee, likely acting via Professor Sanders, will notify the student about the format to be used this fall. The examination itself will be submitted to Shelly so that she can place it on KSOL. I will work with Shelly to ensure that I also receive a copy of the questions. When the exam is completed, the student will send the exam to Shelly for distribution to the general field committee.

** The next step: after notification about the date of the general field examination, the student should consult with his/her major professor and the faculty involved in the three special field examinations in order to set up the dates for the three special examination fields. I suggest that you also keep me abreast of developments on this matter. In setting up the special field exams, bear in mind (a) the expectation that these three exams will be taken the week following the general field exam, and (b) that, according to recent changes in the graduate handbook, three formats are possible: four-hour closed book and closed note with no internet access; or eight hours, open book and open note, with internet access at the discretion of the examiner; or forty-eight hours, open book and open note with internet access. The four-hour exam will be administered on campus. The eight hour exam may be taken on campus or at a location chosen by the student, with the determination to be made by the examiner in consultation with the student. The forty-eight hour examination may be taken at a location chosen by the student. Each examining professor will determine the format for his/her examination. The

student should anticipate some diversity of formats with respect to the three special field examinations. I have appended a form to this e-note that should record the results of all these negotiations: "Request to Schedule Doctoral Preliminary Examinations." Please complete this form and submit it to Shelly. With dates and formats established, the examining professors will submit questions to Shelly for posting on KSOL. I will ensure that I also receive a copy of the questions asked by the field examiners.

** Oh, joy, still more! While you are pursuing the matter of setting the dates for the special fields, you have another task: establish a date for the oral examination covering all of the exams noted above, the general field one and the three special fields. The oral will cover all the examinations, general as well as special, and will involve the participation of the general field committee as well as the faculty of the special fields. You should think about scheduling the orals about two weeks after the completion of the special field examinations. Think of this as the best way to operate: general examination in a hypothetical week 1; the special exams in week 2; the orals in week 4. To get everyone on board might take some effort, akin to herding cats! But the faculty want you to do well and will work with you in earnest. But the point is that it is your responsibility to get a time, date, and place for the orals that can please everyone, the general field as well as the special field examiners. The history office will work with you for a suitable room for the orals. On all matters, keep your major professor informed. After you have secured a date, place, and time for the oral examination, fill out another form that can be accessed on the graduate school website: "Request for Preliminary Examination Ballot" (go to the graduate school website, click on "form finder," then click on this form). Your major professor must sign this form. After the form is completed and signed--it is brief--give it to Shelly, who will send it to the Graduate School. What the Graduate School then does is review your record to ensure that all the requirements of your program of study have been fulfilled as well as any other requirements, such as the foreign language. If all the requirements pass muster, the Graduate School will then send a "ballot" to your major professor. If you pass the written exams, move directly to the orals, and then pass the orals, this one ballot will suffice. If you fail any part of the written examination, there will be no oral examination. Arrangements will need to be made for a "re-take" of the failed written examination(s), but that is another bridge to cross if this should occur. It is not the subject of this e-mail. After your written exams have been assessed by the examiners--general field as well as special fields--the results (whether you have passed or failed) will be sent to me, and it is I, and I alone, who will convey the results to you. Again, if you have passed all the exams, you proceed to the orals; if you fail one or more written exams, there will be no oral examination.

** If you pass all things--hooray!--the ballot must be signed by all members of your graduate supervisor committee and submitted either by you or by your major professor to the Graduate School. You will then be a "candidate" for a degree, which in practical terms means that you begin working on your dissertation. The Graduate School will appoint an "outside chair" from

another department, who will attend the defense of the completed dissertation. While you are in candidacy, you must stay "continuously enrolled," that is, register for at least one credit hour each semester as you work on your dissertation.

NOW...on to some practical advice offered informally. You are not at all bound by it.

** There is an "urban legend" that graduate students routinely fail one or more of the written examinations; worse, that it is an ordinary expectation among the faculty. False on both accounts. Plenty of graduate students pass all phases of the written exams, then the oral exam, and the faculty is delighted when you succeed! So, go into the exams with a positive attitude.

** About a week before the exam process begins, you might consider as your final preparation reading a solid, comprehensive textbook in U.S. history. You and your U.S. faculty know best what this text might be. But my essential point is that reading a general text will enable you to recall the large issues at stake in U.S. history and recall as well some specialized literature that might have slipped your mind during the process or studying. This advice is especially pertinent for the general examination: this exam expects you to think big, so why not read big at the end of your preparation?

** The day prior to the beginning of the exam process do nothing at all related to the exams! Take the day off and do something you like to do: physical exercise, watch some goofy videos, go to the movies, sleep late, drink a martini or two, whatever! Relax and clear the mechanism. Get mentally refreshed! Really, if this one day at the end of your work must be devoted to intense study, then you are likely behind the eight ball in any case! Chill. I still recall that back in the day when I took pre-lims, I went to see a double feature (they existed back then), and one of the movies I saw was "The Dirty Dozen" (ouch!). I still remember that day when I said, in effect, to hell with it, I'm ready."

NOW...a positive spin. Yes, pre-lims are a mighty chore, no doubt about it. I don't think that anyone here yearns for a return of those halcyon pre-lim days! But this: (1) at the moment of your pre-lims, you probably have a better grasp of a whole range of large issues than you will as time proceeds. Enjoy this mastery. (2) look at pre-lims as liberation. Once they are completed, you can get down to devoting yourself to your dissertation and the subject in history that excites you the most! No more exams, but instead focused reading, plenty of archives, and writing...the three things that historians were born/trained to do!

Do not hesitate to contact Shelly or me if you have specific questions. Best, A. Hamscher,
Director of Graduate Studies