A Simple Guide to the Written Exams in the European Field

It is expected that you will take the written exams after five quarters in residence, that is between the winter and spring quarters of your second year. To be eligible to take the exams, the following requirements must have been met:

- You must have taken HIST 225 and the usual load of courses during your first five quarters.
- You must have taken one two-quarter research seminar and have started another one.
- You cannot have any incompletes in any of the above minimum courses. If you have taken additional courses and have incompletes in them, that will not prevent you from sitting the writtens.
- You must also have passed one language exam.
- Finally, you must also have found a member of the European field to serve as chair of your doctoral committee.

You choose three fields to take the exam in. These are the possible fields: Europe, 1400-1650; Europe, 1550-1800; Europe since 1740; European Social and Economic History since ca. 1450; European Intellectual and Cultural History since ca. 1450; Russia since ca. 800; Jewish History; East Central and Southeast Europe since ca. 1450; Germany since ca. 1450; Britain since ca. 1450; France since ca. 1450; Italy since ca. 1450; Spain and Portugal since ca. 1450; The Low Countries since ca. 1450; European History of Science since ca. 1450; Women’s History.

You must register for the exam, picking your three fields, before the end of the Fall Quarter preceding the exam.

Each field exam has 10 questions or more. All of the national and “genre” sections begin at the Renaissance, except for Russian history, which begins in the 9th century. Each exam is divided into an “early modern” and “modern” section and students are required to answer one question from each. You can see examples of previous years’ exams to get a better sense of what the ones you’ve signed up for look like (at History Graduate Intranet: http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/history/graduate/intranet/).

The entire written exam is given over 3 days, with one field exam lasting five hours, each day between 10.00 AM and 3.00 PM. The order of the field exams is your choice. The exams are closed-book. Though you may compose your answers on your own laptops, you are required on your honor not to make use of any information other than what is found at that moment between your ears.
The examination is intended to test a comprehensive, broad understanding of European history, both of the modern and early modern periods. Different facets of history (political, social, intellectual, etc.) are included. An ability to synthesize factual information, sometimes across long chronological periods is essential. Knowledge of the scholarly literature and of the most important historiographical controversies may be tested. Questions relating to the planning of college-level history courses may, and sometimes do, also appear on the exam.

Since you and your cohort freely and individually choose which fields to take, preparing for the exam is of necessity an ad hoc affair. For fields where there is a sufficiently large cohort signed up, a faculty member may be persuaded to organize an official course to help you prepare or, more likely, an informal study group. In other cases, you may meet individually with a faculty member for advice on what and how to read in preparation. Sometimes particular fields are specialized and are associated with individual faculty members and you are advised to touch base with them. The graduate advisors and older students can help you on this. In other cases, the fields are sufficiently broad that any number of faculty could be of equal use to you. There are official reading lists for each field, intended to help you organize your preparation (http://www.history.ucla.edu/academics/fields-of-study/modern-europe-1/reading-list).

It is the European field’s policy that the identity of the two faculty members setting the exam is not revealed. We mean to discourage any overly close association between preparation for and administration of the exam. Complete anonymity is not, of course, possible in small and highly specialized fields, but it is the ideal we strive for. The exams are tailored neither to particular faculty members, nor to particular students.

The possible outcomes of the writtens are that you pass, that you merit a high pass, that you fail the entire exam, or that you fail one section of it. If you fail one part of it and you want to remain in the program, you may take that part again before June 30 of the same year. If you fail the entire exam, you may petition to take it the following year. You may retake it only once. It is also possible that your performance in one field was poor, but that, on balance, the faculty decides to pass you. In that case, you may be advised to do further work in the weak subject, or otherwise bring your performance up to snuff. In the worst case, you may be offered only a terminal MA, which means that your tenure in the department comes to an end.

The entire European faculty in residence administers the exam and decides the results. Two faculty members grade each individual field exam independently of each other, with the exam itself rendered anonymous so that no one knows whose exam they are reading. That is, however, only one part of the overall assessment that is made of the student. Taking into account the total picture of each student’s performance in HIST 225, in the research seminars, in terms of the overall GPA and language proficiency, as well as on the basis of the writtens, the entire European faculty together decides whether to pass the student on to the next level.