



General Preliminary Examination Guidelines

Approved September 14, 2017

General Overview

The General Preliminary Examination (hereafter, “General Prelim”) is a three-day, take-home exam designed for students to demonstrate their general knowledge of (1) basic theoretical approaches in sociology, and (2) the department’s focus on social inequality. Students also need to show they can effectively make arguments by synthesizing a large amount of information. The process is intended to help students develop their own ideas and identities as scholars. Thus, the exam asks students to apply their knowledge to make arguments, not simply write summaries.

Timeline

Before taking the General Prelim—ideally by the first day of spring semester of the second year—students must name a faculty advisor to aid the student in preparation for the exam. Students are advised to choose an advisor with research interests in common with the student, though they may not necessarily be the advisor with whom the student will work on the specialty exam paper and dissertation.

The General Prelim should be taken at the beginning of the third year in the program (or equivalent for part-time students). The Graduate Program Committee (GPC) will consider petitions to take the exam earlier or later than the third year, but this timeline is strongly advised.

The exam will be posted on Blackboard on Friday of the second week of fall semester (or the third week if the second Friday coincides with Labor Day) at 12:00 p.m. and is due to the Director of Graduate Studies (via email) at 12:00 p.m. on the following Monday. There are two exceptions to this timeline:

1. Students with a documented disability may petition for more time; and
2. Students who both (1) are non-native English speakers and (2) do not have a post-secondary degree (e.g., BA, MA) from a college or university where English is the primary language of instruction will have until Thursday at noon to submit their exams.

Format

Students are required to answer three questions from four given. While there is no absolute page limit or requirement, approximately 8-12 pages per answer is a good benchmark (double-spaced, 12-point font, one-inch margins, excluding references). All questions can be answered on the

basis of the material covered on the reading list and students are expected to heavily rely on that material when constructing their answers. Additional references are allowed but not required.

When taking the General Prelim, students should be prepared to:

- Discuss major theoretical approaches in sociology, as well as more specific theoretical approaches pertaining to the department's core areas;
- Provide overviews of relevant empirical research;
- Critically evaluate the major empirical research; and
- Identify avenues for future research.

The Reading List

The reading list, compiled by the General Prelim Committee, consists of core readings in sociological theory/foundations and social inequality (class, gender, and race). The reading list is provided by the department and is designed to expose students to key scholars and key works. Some of the readings can be found on the syllabi of the department's courses. Others have been excerpted and/or discussed in graduate seminars even if the texts in their entirety have not been part of any particular course. Still others constitute significant contributions to their fields. Taken together, the reading list is designed to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of the inequality-related subfields it comprises.

Preparing to Take the Exam

There are three crucial strategies for completing the exam successfully.

First, students are expected to read everything on the reading list. This is an opportunity for students to become fluent in key sociological works and develop their own ideas about these classic texts. Extensive reading is an important part of this process, but reading is not enough. In order to gain mastery over the literature, students must read productively. There is no one model of how to read productively, but at the very least the department recommends that students take good notes on everything they read. Good notes are not just good summaries but also analytically driven synopses concerning the theoretical framework, key concepts, the methodological approach and data sources, policy implications, and the body (or bodies) of literature to which a particular piece contributes. Students should also be familiar with the criticisms of these works (this is where book reviews and summary articles are helpful). Students should think about how different pieces approach the same topic and what similarities and differences exist between scholars. Building these critical reading skills and organizing the field are fundamental to students' training as sociologists.

Second, the committee strongly recommends that students practice writing answers to some of the sample questions (available on the Department's Graduate Programs web site, the General Prelim site on Blackboard, and in the Sociology Department office) and receive feedback on these answers from their faculty advisor. Because good answers develop an argument, and do not simply summarize prior research, it is imperative that students attempt to develop such arguments in practice questions.

Finally, the Department holds an annual Proseminar session on preparing for the preliminary exams each spring semester. During this session, students will learn about both how to study for the exam and how to write successful answers.

Other “best practices” for preparing to take the exam include:

- *Start early.* Students should begin preparing for the exam at least 9 months before they plan to take the exam. They should also consult the reading list in their first year to identify which texts on the list will be used in their classes to insure they take especially thorough notes.
- *Create a reading calendar.* A good way for students to make sure they are not cramming at the end of the summer is to plan ahead and complete a certain number of articles and/or books per week. Students may also want to schedule question writing sessions.
- *Use a citation manager.* Refworks (free at <http://guides.libraries.uc.edu/RefWorks>) and EndNote are excellent programs that help scholars manage citations and notes. Langsam library often holds trainings for these programs. Check the library calendar for more details.
- *Join a study group.* The purpose of study groups is to supplement students’ independent reading, not to replace it or “split up the work.” Study groups are helpful for asking questions, discussing difficult topics, and keeping students on schedule.

Grading of the Preliminary Exam

The General Prelim Committee is responsible for grading the exam. All exams are blinded to the graders, and Committee practice has been to grade each group of questions together; i.e., not to grade the exams one at a time. Each question on the exam will be graded as a pass or a fail.

In grading the exams, the committee will pay particular attention to the following questions:

- Does the answer address the question?
- Is the answer well organized?
- Is the evidence (the cited literature) relevant and sufficient?
- Is the student’s representation of the evidence (the cited literature) accurate?
- Is the writing clear? Are the grammar and style acceptable?

Pass

All three questions must receive a pass for a student to pass the entire exam. If the committee deems an exam as a whole to be of exceptionally high quality, the committee may award a high pass.

Conditional Pass or Fail

A conditional pass will be granted if a student fails one question. In such cases, the student is expected to rewrite the failed answer (i.e., not just add to or edit the original answer) and submit it no later than January 1 of the following calendar year. If the question is judged not to be satisfactorily rewritten, students will receive a failing grade on the General Prelim.

Students who fail two or three questions will receive a failing grade.

Re-taking the Exam

Students receiving a failing grade after their first attempt are automatically allowed to take the exam a second time.

Students who fail the General Prelim twice will be dismissed from the program at the end of the term in which they were notified about the failing grade.

Students may petition the GPC to be allowed to take it a third time. The petition should include a statement of the student's progress towards the degree and a statement of how the student plans to prepare for the exam differently from the first two times. The petition must be accompanied by a letter of support from the student's advisor. If the GPC approves the petition the student can take the General Prelim a third time. If the GPC does not approve the petition, the student is dismissed from the program. If a student fails the exam a third time, they will be dismissed from the program.

Feedback

After students receive their exam results, they should schedule a meeting with the chair of the General Preliminary committee to discuss their answers. The chair of the committee will summarize the committee's feedback on all three questions. Students should then work closely with their advisors to prepare to re-take the exam (if necessary) or to begin work on their specialty papers.

Academic Integrity and Intellectual Property

Students taking the General Prelim are expected to adhere to the principles of fair use and academic integrity in their studying and writing. There are three issues that students should consider, and a fourth relevant to students in category 2 in the "Timeline" section above:

- *Plagiarism.* All sources used in answers should be properly cited. Students should consult any edition of the ASA Style Guide for instructions. Students are also encouraged to review a variety of documents regarding plagiarism, including the UC Student Code of Conduct, particularly section 24 on plagiarism, at http://www.uc.edu/conduct/Code_of_Conduct.html, and the American Sociological Association's discussion of plagiarism in the Code of Ethics, section 14 (<http://www.asanet.org/membership/code-ethics>) and at <http://www.asanet.org/teaching->

[learning/faculty/teaching-ethics-throughout-curriculum/topic-plagiarism.](#)

- *Use of article and book summaries.* It is perfectly ethical and acceptable for students to read book reviews, commentaries, and review articles to supplement their reading, as long as those materials are properly cited in exam answers. These items, however, are not sufficient replacements for primary texts. Reliance on article and book summaries limits understanding of the literature, which makes arguments less effective.
- *Student interaction.* The UC sociology faculty encourages group studying and collaborative efforts to master the material on the reading list. As such, students may communicate as much or as little as they wish prior to the examination. However, the faculty has decided that students may not interact for the purposes of collaboration or feedback during the three-day exam period.
- International students may, at their own arrangement and expense, have their exams copy edited by a non-sociologist (i.e., not a faculty member or current or former student in sociology). If you rely on a copy editor, send the name and contact information for the editor to the Director of Graduate Studies prior to utilizing these services.