

Professor Glas' IR Candidacy Exam Study Suggestions

Caveats at the onset: This is a set of recommendations that I often share with students orally. I've written them down to act as a *potentially* useful resource. They are not required. All students have different preferences and means of studying. Committee supervisors or POLS690 supervisors may have different preferences, suggestions, or requirements. Please follow those. This document is a series of recommendations based on my own preferences. Your preferences, needs, and results may vary.

Step 0. Familiarize yourself with the exam requirements.

Before starting on the below steps, first reach out to the IR faculty. You must request permission to sit the exam and they must approve it formally.

Each year a different 'IR convener' leads preparations for the exam. You should meet with them and follow their requirements to prepare. Generally, this prep requires you to take a 3-credit 690 with the convener (and other exam writers) in the semester prior to you sitting the exam. The convener will also share the "International Relations Comprehensive Exam Guidelines" document, which describes the exam structure and offers suggestions. After reviewing that guide, you should devise your study plan. Below, I offer three steps to consider as you make that plan.

Please check in with your supervisor and/or the IR convener and faculty whenever you have questions. As your IR faculty, we want you to do well and for your preparations to be as smooth and straightforward as they can be. Reach out for help when needed.

Step 1. Get your notes in order.

As the "Exam Guidelines" document notes, your IR course syllabi contain all the materials we require and expect you to know and to use for your exam. To start your studying, you need to know those materials reasonably well. To do so, I suggest producing two versions of notes.

1a. Amass your reading notes: From your course work, you should have amassed a relatively cohesive set of notes on required readings. Those notes are the foundation for your exam prep. During this first step, you should revisit, review, and organization those notes, then fill in any gaps (i.e., readings you've missed, or notes that are sparse), and expand into recommended and other readings (if you deem that necessary). The scope and detail of your reading notes will vary by student. But you should have some notes for each required reading.

Going beyond the required readings? Having your set of notes on all required readings important. In deciding what if any materials to engage with beyond those required readings, I see two rationales. You may wish to review recommended and other readings for topics that you are less conformable with (and thus want some more information on). Or, you may wish to do so for those topics feel like you can go above and beyond on (likely, those you really like or seem most pertinent to your own research interests).

1b. Condense your study notes: After you have your over-long set of reading notes, the next step is to condense those notes into some manageable and usable to you. It's hard to work through 5, 6, or 10+ pages of notes on an article. I'd recommend aiming first to condense your notes down to a 1-page, 1-sided (or less) summary or short set notes for each reading (e.g., using point form/dot-jot). Your concise study notes should offer the basics of each piece, just as you likely did in your reading summaries if you took a course with me. That means noting the central arguments and key contributions. It could mean noting theoretical or conceptual claims, details of methodology, methods, or data, the research design, and or key cases and examples. The particulars will vary. This step may require revisiting the original

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reading to ensure you have a sound grasp of it. This is likely be the last time you want to consult readings directly. From here out, you'll want to rely on your internalized knowledge and your concise notes.

Repeating the step: Some students may wish to repeat the process of condensing notes more than once: reading through your notes again and again, and making them increasingly concise as you do. For me, I find the act of writing down the key elements of the text is important for my leaning. I would repeat this step multiple times for each reading, condensing my notes down to a small 'flash card' for each reading. Those very brief notes – reminders, really – can become the notes used for future steps. Doing so also provides a manageable set of notes to consult if or when needed in the exam itself.

Why do this step? Amassing your notes and then condensing them can provide (or reinforce) the level of knowledge required for the exam and give you a usable set of notes as you think through would-be themes for the exam (step 2) and then develop more nuanced responses (step 3).

Working with others: Yes, work with others. Talking aloud about the core elements and take-aways from readings is a good way to internalize knowledge and start thinking about their relevance to others. And, discussing your views on the major contributions of a reading is a good check to see if all agree with your take. Similarly, using AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT) could be useful to help organize your thoughts at this stage. However, I do not recommend it and I discourage its use. Your notes – and the process undertaken to arrive at them – should be your own, and in your words, to ensure you fully grasp and can, yourself, articulate and engage with the nuance of the readings. Note now that your exam responses must be entirely your own.

Step 2. Map out topics.

Once you've got your foundational knowledge and your useful concise notes, it's time to explicitly draw out connections between readings (and courses) and start making systematic sense of particular areas of our field. To do this, I find it useful to 'map' out the field based on the topics, themes, and debates.

Use your notes to think about major topics, themes, and debates within and across courses. Many such issues are apparent in titles of seminar weeks or sets of readings, or clear from reviewing previous exam questions. Some are 'bigger' than others. The exam asks you 'big' questions that cut across courses and 'smaller' questions likely particular to one course. So cast a wide net and develop a long list of topics you suspect you may see on the exam – and not just those you *hope* to see on the exam. Write them down. Then, write down the relevant authors or readings to each. Then, think about the dialogue between pieces; the overlapping or contesting arguments, varied concepts, and the wider contours of debates and issues you see. Everyone's maps will be different, but aim to write out and draw connections between topics, authors, concepts, etc. as you see fit. Once you feel like you have a good grasp of potential topics and how you can explore each, then it's time move on to thinking about questions themselves (step 3, below).

Why do this step? This is a useful step for at least two reasons. First, it prompts you see and articulate the connections and debates within and between readings, rather than treating them independently (as you likely did in step 1). Being able to systematically explore and describe the field is a requirement to pass the exam. This step helps you develop and demonstrate that ability. Second, from that survey you can start thinking about 'where you stand' or the arguments you, yourself, may make related to the areas you've mapped. Making a clear argument that addresses the question is also a requirement to pass the exam (and the focus of step 3, below).

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Working with others: Again, for this step you can productively work with others – presenting and sharing maps and building and extending connections and lists of topics based on your discussions. But keep focused on ensuring your work is your own and, again, I do not recommend using any AI tools. \

Step 3. Write practice essay responses.

3a. Make some skeleton plans: Before writing any practice essay responses as such, draw up some outlines of responses. For questions, see the examples provided in the study guide, review past exams, and devise your own based on step 2's mapping. Your plans for each question should be simple. You can use point form to write a basic thesis, outline your essay structure, and note the supporting arguments and authors you intend to rely upon. That simplicity allows you to prepare many of these. This is an important step to ensure you have thought through not just how to 'map' out and describe relevant literatures, but how you can use them to make an argument.

3b. Write some full essays: Once you have solid skeleton plans and are feeling confident, it's time to flush a few ideas out in full. I recommend you write a few practice exams without and then with a time constraint. Writing complete essays will help push you to engage in nuanced argument and give you a sense of how long it takes to write a sound essay response. Also think about how long it may take to edit your work to ensure its concise, clear, and cogent. Factor that time in. Completing a few timed practice questions is a good idea so you're comfortable on the day you write.

Why do this step? Having a sound idea not just of the relevant literature, but how you'll use them to answer a specific question is crucial. As the exam guide notes, your graders need to see both a sound knowledge of relevant literature and a sound argument directly addressing the question at hand on your exam. This step allows you to start preparing to do both. It also allows you to think about questions of time management.

Working with others: Again, it's useful to share your plans and go through essays with others. That may help refine ideas or bring in other relevant arguments. However, be sure that your work remains your own. Unintended and accidental similarities between exam submissions would be a problem. Your examiners don't want to wonder whose words or arguments we are reading. I will add that the same applies for AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT), the use of which in any way is not permitted for the exam. If you used any such tool to generate notes or collectively wrote notes or responses, that text must not find itself in your written response on the exam. Evidence of any degree of reliance on others or other such tools on the exam itself will lead to a failure. At this final stage, you may again wish to see the IR convener (or other IR examiners) is able and willing to review a practice exam or answer any emerging questions you may now have about the process and requirements.