

Comprehensive Exams in IR

Will H. Moore

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My view of the role of comprehensive exams in the PhD curriculum is that they establish that someone is competent to structure graduate and undergraduate courses in a field. As such, they are evaluations of [1] a student's familiarity with the literature that defines the field, [2] the student's ability to integrate the literature, and [3] the student's ability to communicate her/his ideas.

The comprehensive exam asks you to write critical literature reviews. A critical literature review is not a summary of the reading. Rather, it is an essay that develops an argument about how different parts of the literature fit together. It juxtaposes different works by identifying common and distinct themes.

What makes a critical literature review useful? Let me begin with the negative case. It is definitely *not* structured as one paragraph per book or article that summarizes each author's main point. I did a search for "writing a literature review" using google and found some 2,000 entries. Scanning the first 40 leads me to infer that there is some lousy advice out there. This seemed common: "A review of the literature is a summary of previous research on the issue." No! Those essays are deadly awful to read and will earn a Fail.¹

Rather, critical literature reviews make reference to the literature to provide specific examples of general points or claims, not to elaborate the main points or claims of specific authors. As such, critical literature reviews engage in typology: they distinguish among different groups of work. And the types (or categories) are analytic. These sorts of reviews are the ones that establish the conventional wisdoms about the content of various schools, paradigms, theoretical approaches, etc. Note that not all critical literature reviews do this; but all essays that do this are critical literature reviews.

¹These sorts of essays are often useful to *write*, but the utility is consumed by the author, not the reader. When I was in graduate school I gave Ted Gurr a 60+ page summary of the literature for my dissertation and asked for his comments. On the front page he wrote: 'Great. Now start your dissertation.' It reminded me of a succinct comment a friend had written a few years earlier on an essay of mine I had asked him to read: 'You needed to write this, but nobody needs to read it.'

Writing a critical literature review that simply parrots a conventional wisdom is not useful. You must develop your own take, not repeat someone else's. That is, these essays make it possible for us to see a literature in a new light: they have novel content. They illuminate cleavages across, and commonalities within, groups of theories, analytic solutions, empirical work, research designs, etc.

Though it discusses a literature review in the context of a larger research paper, you may find the following handout from Ashley Leeds useful: <http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~leeds/litrev.pdf>.

There are numerous examples of the sort of essay I have in mind. The essays found in *Annual Review of Political Science*, *The State of the Discipline* edited volumes, or the older *Handbook of Political Science* edited volumes tend to be this sort of paper. Below are some specific examples that you might find useful to review *not for their content*, but as examples of this type of essay (which is not to disparage their content—you may want to read the essays for that as well!).

Caporaso, James A. 1997. "Across the Great Divide: Integrating Comparative and International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly*, 41(4):563-591.

Chernoff, Fred. 2004. "The Study of Democratic Peace and Progress in International Relations," *International Studies Review*, 6(1): 49-77.

Easton, David. 1969. "The New Revolution in Political Science," *American Political Science Review*, 63:1051-61.

Keohane, Robert O. 1983. "Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond," in A. Finifter (ed.) *The State of the Discipline*, Washington: American Political Science Association, pp. 503-40.

Lake, David A. 2003. "The New Sovereignty in International Relations," *International Studies Review*, 5(3):303-23.

Landman, Todd. 2005. *Protecting Human Rights*, Washington: Georgetown University Press, pp. 11-20.

Lapid, Yosef. 1989. "The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era," *International Studies Quarterly*, 33:235-54.

Lichbach, Mark Irving. 1989. "An Evaluation of 'Does Economic Inequality Breed Political Conflict?' Studies," *World Politics*, 41(4):431-470.

Ray, James Lee. 1998. "Does Democracy Cause Peace?" *Annual Review of Political Science*.

Reiter, Dan. 2003. "Exploring the Bargaining Model of War," *Perspectives on Politics*, 1(March): 27-43.

Valenzuela, J. Samuel & Arturo Valenzuela. 1978. "Modernization and Dependency: Alternative Perspectives in the Study of Latin American Underdevelopment," *Comparative Politics*, 10(4):535-52.

Wendt, Alexander. 1997. "The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory," *International Organization*, 41(3):335-370.