M.A. Comprehensive Exam Guidelines
Adapted from Guidelines written by Professor Cora Granata

Comprehensive Exams ("Comps") are designed to give you the opportunity to read broadly in your specific chosen fields. The most valuable part of the comprehensive exams is not the exam itself, but the process of reading and synthesizing ideas. Comprehensive exams give you the chance to sharpen your sense of the major themes and patterns in your field of study. This awareness of "the big picture" can then help you in your future pursuits as a researcher and/or teacher.

In consultation with your professor, you will compile a list of 25-30 books that offers thematic and chronological breadth. If you have taken a Reading Seminar (HIST 551, 521, or 571) with your examiner, then you should consult with them and see the material from that class can make up the core of your comps reading list. You can then add books to that core list with your examiners approval. For example, you may draw from the recommended readings on the 521T syllabus or from books read in other classes to round out your list. Once you have drafted a complete list, be sure that it receives you instructors final approval before proceeding further in your comps preparation. No textbooks or novels are allowed on your reading list.

Each student will take TWO exams. Be advised that it is YOUR RESPONSIBILITY to consult with each examiner on the reading list and to arrange an appropriate date of the exam. You should also have each examiner sign a form indicating that they have agreed to serve in that particular capacity.

On-campus written exam
The goal for this exam is for you to retain and synthesize the information you have learned during your comps preparation. How the exam is structured varies with the person administering it. Some students, for example, write a four-hour exam on campus. They are allowed to bring in one page of notes into the exam. (You may fit as much information as you can onto the one page, front and back.) You will not be allowed to consult any other books, sources, or notes during the exam. Often times the test will consist of three questions, of which you will pick two to answer. Your answers should be articulate and contain a clear overall argument.

The exam is given on a pass/fail basis. Your examiner will notify the graduate adviser upon the successful completion of the test.

Prepared Syllabus or Lesson Plans
In addition to your written on-campus exam, you must prepare either a college-level syllabus or high school-level lesson plans, depending on your future career objectives. You will prepare the syllabus/lesson plans in advance at home and submit this assignment on the day of the on-campus written exam. You may consult any notes or sources you see fit for this assignment.

Important Advice on Reading and Preparing for Comprehensive Exams
You should not try to read every sentence of every book. Instead, keep your focus on big themes that will help you synthesize and unify the readings. To help you recognize these larger themes, consult book review essays in such journals as the American Historical Review. Be sure to take ample notes on each book, and that your notes connect each book to larger unifying themes. These notes, in addition to your own, will be invaluable in the weeks before the exam, and they can also help you later in your historical career.