

# A Good IR Field Exam Answer? Enterline's Perspective

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# 1 Caveats

This guide reflects solely the view of Prof. Andrew J. Enterline. As such, it does not reflect (nor is authorized to reflect) views of the faculty comprising the International Relations (IR) subfield in the Department of Political Science at the University of North Texas, i.e., the very faculty that evaluate the IR field exams. Furthermore, this guide does not contain any information about the IR field exams themselves, including form (e.g., the exam questions are weighted more towards an examinee's course work relative to sub-field divisions), content (e.g., the exam is more likely to contain questions about the debate between neo-realism and neo-liberal, rather than feminism), or insider "tips" (e.g., Enterline passes field exams containing at least one favorable reference to his own research.) If you're reading this guide with the interest of securing such information, read no further, as you won't find it herein. Indeed, the writer of this guide assumes that an examinee already knows the substance comprising research in the field of IR.

Furthermore, reading this guide carries with it no guarantee that an examinee will neither write excellent answers to field exam questions, nor for that matter, pass the field exam in its entirety. Finally, Enterline's views on these matters are most certainly one of many views on field exam answers in the Political Science Department, and therefore examinees are encouraged to consult with other faculty with regard to the issues treated herein. If you have any questions regarding the aforementioned caveats, then please email me for clarification at my UNT email address: [ajenter@unt.edu](mailto:ajenter@unt.edu).

# 2 Why Write This Guide?

I am writing this guide for three primary reasons. First, the related issues of performance and pedagogy. Taking field exams is a rare, perhaps a once-, or at most, twice-in-a-lifetime experience. Save for taking exams during seminar coursework, students rarely have the opportunity to practice the field exam format. The scope of the field exams is quite broad, something that exams in seminars fails to emulate. As such, performance on field exams is historically uneven, even tending toward poor. Examinees and faculty are left pondering the mystery of performing well on field exams, as well as the field exam's pedagogical and/or professional purpose (i.e., what skills, if any, do/should the field exams impart to the examinee?).

It is the view of this guide (again, Enterline's view) that said issues performance and pedagogy can be addressed, and one way to do so is to discuss the form of good field exam essay answers, as well a strategies for achieving this form. Form does not substance make, but achieving form might facilitate the opportunity for the development of substance that might contribute positively to an examinee's performance.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, form can help examinees develop valuable skills that can be employed subsequently in the crafting of theses, dissertations, conference publications, and so forth.

Second, the issue of fairness. A subset of the doctoral students in the program often query me about the field exams. These inquiries are nearly universally revolve around the following questions: *How should one go about studying for field exams? What makes for a good (i.e., passing) answer/exam?* In the past, I did my best to advise students about how study for field exams. However, my dispensing of wisdom (if you want to call it that) occurred only in my interactions with a subset of students, and the dispensing of my wisdom was very likely uneven. A colleague argued that to be fair, it is important to provide all students with such wisdoms, or cease providing wisdoms altogether. By writing this guide, I am explicitly endorsing the former perspective. In addition to achieving some measure of fairness, one might argue that writing a guide is more efficient, as I need not repeat myself, perhaps risking recounting my perspective on the field exams inconsistently to various students.

Last, by writing this guide, I hope to set this issue aside. That is, this guide (subject to revisions) comprises my final word on the subject of studying for the field exams. Other than clarifications of what is stated herein, I prefer not to discuss the subject further.

### 3 Writing a Good Field Exam Answer

There are two components that comprise the foundation of a good field exam answer: (1) *elements*; and (2) *balance*. Here, I treat these two components in turn.

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<sup>1</sup>This approach is in keeping with Enterline's approach to the crafting of graduate seminar papers. For more information, see *A Guide to Writing Research Projects in Graduate Political Science Courses*, available at the following URL: <http://www.psci.unt.edu/enterline/projectguidev4b.pdf>.

### 3.1 Elements

When stated, the elements of a good field exam answer appear obvious, but bear with me. I believe that a good field exam answer comprises four basic elements:

1. An *argument*;
2. Treatment of *literature* bearing on the argument;
3. Some *analysis/implications/ideas/innovations* flowing from the argument and literature; and
4. A *wrap-up* or conclusion.

While it is true that there is no generic field exam questions, I think that virtually all field exam questions (or research questions in social science, for that matter) require one to identify and develop an argument (call it an “angle,” a “claim,” or what you will); martialling relevant literature to substantiate your argument; developing some analysis, implications, or ideas that flow from your argument and analysis of the literature; and winding-up your answer in a clear and decisive manner, something I call a wrap-up. Next, I elaborate each of these elements, in turn.

#### 3.1.1 Argument

It’s good to anchor your answer to an argument. What’s an argument? In simple form, an argument is your explication of the core position that you will take in answering a question. For example, if a question requires you to evaluate whether a particular research literature reflects social scientific cumulation, then your argument would be likely be (a) that cumulation is present, (b) that cumulation is mixed, or (c) that cumulation is absent. Where does one get an argument? Good question. The best source of arguments about issues in the literature comes in general form from reading—i.e., working with—the IR literature, and well, thinking about what you have read (mulling it over, as it were.) If you working with the IR literature on a regular basis, then you will have made observations about the various theoretical claims in the literature, strengths and weaknesses in a research program, as well areas that might be fruitful for future research.

It is important that you identify and develop an argument that you plan to explore in your answer. In short, explain the argument—i.e., its underlying reasoning, broader important, etc.—at the outset of your answer. The argument provides the foundation for your answer, the core theme that enables you to make decisions what information to include, exclude, and so forth. Also, the development of an argument demonstrates that you can think and analyze IR scholarship, rather than simply providing information about IR scholarship (e.g., that 1001 articles have been written on the democratic peace.) Thus, introducing an argument steers you away from the bane of field exam answers (at least from my perspective): the literature inventory (see the next sub-section.)

### 3.1.2 Literature

As I see it, the literature element is perhaps the most significant issue with field exam answer. I've been told that the "risk averse strategy" for examinees to pursue is to provide essentially an *inventory* of the literature and research corresponding to a particular research agenda. Frequently, said risk averse strategy is paired with a weak statement of an argument; indeed, the argument is often absent, or severely underdeveloped. Instead, the examinee proceeds with a strategy that's primary purpose appears to be that the examinee "knows," or has memorized, what's transpired in a given literature in the IR field.

As I see it, the major weakness of this approach is that it results in a literature section (perhaps the only discernable section in the essay) that is long, unwieldy, and serves no greater purpose than revelation. But, as professionals we develop literature reviews for a purpose, first and foremost of which is to explore a puzzle and inform an argument. Thus, rather than simply identifying a literature, it is important to mobilize the principle contributions to a literature as they *pertain to your argument*. Doing so will help you to identify the literature that is pertinent relative to other contributions that are not. Developing a review of the literature that is relevant to your aforementioned argument will provide enable you to maintain a clear line or reasoning in your answer, as opposed to choppy, unrelated components. Think of the review as more than just an inventory. Think of it as a gathering of evidence that aids you in making your argument.

### 3.1.3 Analysis/Implications/Ideas/Innovations

Beyond developing an argument and marshalling extant research to support this argument, field exam questions often provide you with the opportunity to demonstrate creativity, innovation, or ideas—i.e., to demonstrate that you can think about IR, rather than just report on what occurred (“Just the facts, Ma’am.”) For example, having presented an argument, a question might prompt you to develop a plan for future research, setting out an agenda for future scholars. Often, this is the very point in field exam answers where the anemia sets in. Specifically, having devoted enormous time and energy to, first, memorize a great deal of literature, and second, disgorge this information in a massive literature review, answers often demonstrate a striking lack of analytic depth, creativity, forethought, etc., the hallmark of which is a short paragraph noting that “There should be more research in this area. . .”

What should be done? Well, if you pursued the strategy that is being developed herein, you have already demonstrated some analytic powers by identifying and developing an argument, and marshalling prior research to elucidate this argument, so you are already in the right frame of mind to inject some analysis into your answer, because you have some perspective on the literature, rather than simply the contents of this literature (i.e., an inventory.)

So, knowing the strengths and weaknesses of prior work, where progress and regress occurred, those elements (theoretical and empirical) that received too much or too little attention, and those important areas that heretofore are overlooked, you can pursue these ideas in your essay. In particular, it is important that you demonstrate not only an ability to identify areas of weakness, for example, in prior research, but also to elaborate your ideas sufficiently. For example, if you argue that previous research fails to acknowledge non-material forms of state power, then don’t simply state this fact. Rather, elaborate what these non-material forms of power are, why they are important theoretically, perhaps why previous research overlooked them, and so forth.

The key to this section is of your answer is to demonstrate that you can think creatively, scientifically, and critically. Furthermore, it is wise that you be able to demonstrate weakness in research (i.e, criticism), while at the same time demonstrating a capacity to develop solutions to acknowledged or unacknowledged issues, puzzles, and problems in the sub-field of IR. It’s not

necessary for you to demonstrate you can solve each and every puzzle; rather, that you can identify puzzles and think of potential avenues for solutions to be derived.

### **3.1.4 Wrap-up**

It is debatable whether field exam essays require a conclusion or wrap-up. But, a conclusion of sorts might flow quite naturally from the previous section. If so, then the wrap-up should reiterate the argument, noting its strengths and weaknesses given prior research, and reiterate the main points from your analysis. A short paragraph will do, one that is succinct.

### **3.1.5 In Sum**

The previous section outlined the basic components of an answer to a generic field exam essay question. It is important to underscore that the field exam questions vary quite a bit in their form and the demands that they place on the examinee. As such, the emphasis on argument, literature, analysis, and wrap-up must be adjusted to accommodate various nuances in a given question. That said, it is difficult to believe that these basic elements will be irrelevant to most questions.

## **3.2 Balance**

The previous sub-section outlines the basic elements of a generic IR field exam answer. Here, I take up the second important elements in an exam answer: *balance*. There are two components to balance in a field exam answer, *treatment* and *development*. I discuss these next.

### **3.2.1 Treatment**

An answer that reflects balance in the form of treatment is equally strong across the aforementioned answer elements—i.e., argument, literature, analysis, and wrap-up. As far as I can discern, what has been explained to me as the risk-averse test-taking strategy often generates essay answers that are imbalanced, with the 90% of the emphasis devoted to displaying a literature inventory, rather than developing an argument, martialling appropriate literature, providing analysis, concluding the essay appropriately. Stated differently, and perhaps more succinctly, in most essay answers there's not much

“essay”—i.e., a coherent argument developed, substantiated, and elaborated—in the answer.

Perhaps a somewhat useful barometer, a starting point for self-assessment, of balance (or the presence of imbalance) is page-space devoted to the various elements in your essay answer. If the page-space distribution in a given answer consists of 95% review of the literature, then an imbalance in treatment of the aforementioned elements is likely. That said, it is also likely incorrect to think that of the four basic elements, each element should necessarily consume 25% of the page-space in an essay.

Rather, the best barometer of balance is your, as well as an average reader’s, sense of whether your treatment of an essay element is *sufficient*. What is meant by sufficient? Sufficient is the point at which the average reader is satisfied with your treatment of an element, such as your introduction of an argument. Think back to your readings in your seminars, or even readings in preparation for the field exam. Think about those instances in which you, as a social scientist, found yourself dissatisfied with an author’s explication of some aspect of their study, be it research question, literature, theory, hypothesis testing, or whatever. That moment when insufficiency is realized is the same yardstick that graders are of field exams are likely to employ in assessing the degree to which your answer is sufficient.

Thus, you need to learn to know when your thinking and writing meets this threshold of sufficiency. Judging sufficiency is a skill that is important to learn, particularly in your own social scientific writing. So, there is a long-term goal in learning sufficient social science writing, and a skill that can be sharpened when studying for your field exams.

### **3.2.2 Development**

The second component of balance is development. Development concerns the degree to which your essay probes the depths of a particular element (e.g., the argument, the nuances in the extant literature as they bear on the argument), or whether your development is superficial, avoiding identifying and wrestling with issues, puzzles, questions, in the literature. Thus, development reflects the degree to which your essay answer “pushes” the boundaries in a question. Pushing indicates a willingness to handle outstanding issues, and second, demonstrates a capacity to think through various issues by providing solutions.

Two examples might help to illustrate development. First, consider the

literature review. As noted above, the risk averse approach to writing field exam answers involves simply providing an inventory of the extant literature. A literature review that displays strong development would bring the literature to bear on the argument, exploring the literature's nuances, puzzles left unexplored, and so forth.

Consider a second example related to the literature review and innovation elements. Graduate school (and perhaps normal science) trains students to critique extant research. Often, field exam answers provide a great deal of criticism, but display little in the way of solutions, or strategies for solutions, for issues identified via critiques. Thus, answers easily find fault with previous research, but furnish little in the way of development of innovations that future research might employ to address various weaknesses.

Much like treatment, there is no definitive barometer that can be consulted to determine whether the development in your essay is sufficient. But, again much like treatment, it is an important to develop the skill necessary to judge the development of social science analysis, and doing so with respect to your own writing is critical.

### 3.2.3 General Purpose

One issue that surfaces among examiners frequently concerns the long-term, or extra-exam, purpose of writing field exams. Here's one: *Learn balance in your social science writing.* More important, learn how to detect whether you are achieving balance in your *own writing.* That is, develop a sense of whether, for example, your treatment of an argument is inadequate and must be revised, whether your review of the literature is being martialled in a manner that enables the reader to evaluate your argument, and whether you have elaborated sufficiently in your analysis or innovation.

Certainly, it's not easy to learn this skill, due in part to the fact during most of our academic careers, from grade school onward, evaluation is left to some other party, such as your teacher or professor. Now, you have to learn to balance your treatment and development of the elements of an essay answer, so that your field exam answers are strong throughout. Learning how to evaluate and revise your own writing is one such purpose.

## 4 Strategy

In this section, I briefly discuss some strategies for implementing the aforementioned catechism. However, keep in mind that student preferences and strengths with regard to learning abound, so the student will, if she sees benefits in what I recommend, meld her learning preferences with my recommendations regarding learning.

### 4.1 Prior to the Exam

Since field exams are rarely taken (once or twice during an academic's career), executing the aforementioned catechism requires implementing a regiment none to surprising: *practice prior to the field exam*. As with any exam and any strategy for taking said exam, it is helpful to routinize your strategy, so that you eliminate the costs of, say, deciding whether or not to present an argument, and instead deciding *which* argument to present. A further example might be as follows. The strategy laid out above benefits from planning how to answer a field question, rather than writing spontaneously. As such, it might prove helpful to routinize the planning process, or simply put, your method of outlining your answer to a question before embarking on the writing itself.

One general piece of advice regarding studying strategy during the six months prior to taking the field exams is to gradually shift your emphasis from covering material in IR (i.e., reading the extant literature), to practicing taking the exam and using said material. To do so, you might try several things, and do so incrementally (e.g., spending three weeks practicing your skill at developing arguments, a subsequent three week practicing your identification of literature pertinent to your arguments):

1. Instead of hunting around for old field exam questions, try writing your own questions. Doing so will force you to consider the major debates in the field, an important acknowledgement on your part, and said debates are likely to be the focus of questions that do appear on the exam;
2. With a question in hand, briefly identify a set of prospective arguments that you might develop in answering this question, writing perhaps a paragraph explaining the reasoning for each prospective argument.

In turn, identify the argument that you think is strongest, both in terms of your abilities, as well as providing a platform for meeting the question's demands. Sometimes, field exam questions require you to contrast arguments, so identifying alternative arguments is not wasteful work;

3. Armed with a set of arguments related to a question, identify the primary contributions to the literature that would enable you to make your argument. What are the ten or 15 primary contributions to the extant literature that bear on the selected argument? How should they be arranged such that the argument is supported or investigated?
4. If the question requires it (and since you are developing your own questions, make it so), identify and elaborate several innovations that you might introduce in your answer. Perhaps these have to do with addressing various theoretical or analytical weaknesses in the extant literature; and
5. Sounds silly, but identify how you plan to conclude your essay answer. What's the best stem-winder, given your argument, the evidence from the literature that you marshal, and so forth. For example, while you might squarely answer the questions with one argument, your wrap-up might consider alternative arguments. In any event, a little planning might help you avoid writing that anemic, two-sentence paragraph that is often tacked on to field exam essays, achieves little, and removes the punch from an essay answer.

Again, practicing this strategy or technique does not necessarily entail spending months literally mimicking the field exam format (e.g., fully writing out four field exam answers during an eight hour period.) Rather, practicing might mean spending a few weeks simply honing your ability to identify and develop arguments. In turn, you might do the same with identifying literatures relevant to different arguments. Following such a procedure might enable you to build momentum while practicing the general strategy. In turn, as the field exam approaches, one might turn to mimicking exam conditions, such that, for example, you try to implement the strategy over a two-hour period (simulating writing one question.) Doing so will give you the benefit of learning from your practice of said exam conditions, but spare you the exasperation of trying to take on eight hours of writing all at once. But, see the following sub-section for related comments.

## 4.2 During the Exam

Given the suggestions regarding pre-exam practice, it won't come as much surprise to learn that it is important to execute this very same strategy *during* the field exam. That is, consider the set of questions before, taking a few minutes think about whether and how each questions presents you with opportunities for developing a strong answer, and more importantly, which set of questions will enable you to develop your best exam. Once you have identified the sub-set of answers that you believe will achieve this goal, take each question in turn and do the following:

1. Identify the set of prospective arguments, selecting the strongest such argument. Then briefly outline your plan for developing your argument;
2. Identify the literature that you plan to introduce that bears on your argument, and then outline how this literature should be discussed, avoiding any tendencies toward inventory and emphasizing integration with the argument;
3. If demanded by a question, identify prospective innovations, and plan how they might be discussed, and outline this discussion so that it is well integrated with the previous elements of the answer; and
4. Outline how you plan to conclude your answer.

Clearly, the within-exam strategy underscores that time spent planning answer will enable you to write better answers in less time. Rather than spending two hours meandering through an answer in an exercise in free-writing, spending 20 minutes at the start an answer planning your answer will translate into a much more effective subsequent hour and 40 minutes of writing your essay answer.

Furthermore, it might be worthwhile to spend an hour at the start of your exam pre-planning your answers for *all* of your questions. Doing so will relieve you of the demands of planning out a question in the afternoon, when you are likely to be weary from writing superior questions. An alternative would entail planning out your answers to the set of questions you plan to answer during the morning, followed by planning out your answers to the second set of questions after you've had some lunch and cleared your brain a bit. These sort of plans are best left to the student, but there seem to be some viable, and rewarding, alternatives to free-writing for eight hours straight.

That said, deciding which such planning procedure is to be employed is best decided in the weeks *prior to the exam*, not during the exam. And, such procedures should be practiced prior to the exam, so that one's ability to relax and plan while other examinees are free-writing, pecking feverishly at their keyboards, is unaffected.

## 5 Concluding Comments

In the world of field exams, there are, as they say, no silver bullets. However, there are strategies that can improve your field exam experience, such that you (a) write better answers, and (b) learn skills (e.g., developing arguments) that will pay dividends during your academic career. The perspective put forth herein, one that emphasizes *elements* and *balance* (in addition to practicing these components) is but one perspective on field exams. This perspective is grounded in my personal belief that what has been described to me as the “risk averse approach to field exam preparation and execution” generally results in poor answers and limited learning from the experience.

The perspective contained herein provides the students with a framework through which a field exam question can be answered well, rather than merely adequately. Perhaps even more important, the perspective outlined herein provides a basis for facilitating flexibility on the spot and the writing of solid answers even when conditions are difficult (e.g., the student confronts a section on the field exam containing no preferred topics.) Ultimately, this perspective on field exams places greater stock on the development of strong arguments, rather than inventories of memorized literature, as the foundation for superior answers.

Finis!