Students should contact the field coordinator sometime during their last semester of course work (typically 4-6 months prior to taking the comprehensive exam).

Students prepare a reading list that is organized by topic area (their own choosing). This list is presented to the field coordinator who critiques it with the students, asks questions and makes recommendations. This process often requires several iterations, and there is an opportunity for the student to ask questions about relative emphasis of topic areas. The list should include articles, books, treaties, reports and other sources that may or may not have been assigned for specific courses. The study period is seen as not only a review of material, but an opportunity to read books, authors or key articles that have not been read by the student. Relative emphasis of topic areas may vary among the student reading lists depending upon major source of interest, but students are expected to cover all important aspects of the field.

The exam consists of a set of 5-6 questions of which the student answers four. One question is required and the others may be selected from additional categories of questions. The questions address larger conceptual issues, and students are asked to provide specific examples to demonstrate that they understand how general principles apply to specific cases.

A single exam is given for all students taking the exam during a specific exam period. This is a comprehensive field exam, and while students may choose very different specific examples, it is expected that all students understand the fundamental concepts, and how to use analytical tools, principles and theoretical concepts from multiple disciplines in answering the exam questions. The exam may be taken using a computer, but students should not access the internet for information.

The oral exam will primarily cover questions that were on the exam, and is normally used for clarification of answers on the written exam. However, additional questions may be asked, and the student may be asked to make connections with other fields.