

Faculty of History

Guidance for students about how the Tripos examination process operates.

Tripes exams explained

This is a guide to the Tripos exams. It is mainly about how the exam process works, but there are a few tips about revising and sitting the exams at the end. The guide broadly follows the annual cycle of appointing examiners, setting exam papers, marking and classing. The guide applies to Parts I and II. Prelim is similar but a 'slimmed down' version.

Parts I and II (and Prelims) are quite separate exams. No marks are carried over from Part I to Part II. The Prelim is a work-in-progress exam with no formal standing for achieving a degree.

What documents are available about the exam process?

Besides this one, other documents available on the [Faculty website](#) which provide guidance about the examinations are: (1) Marking criteria and classing conventions; (2) Faculty policy on retention of examinations data; (3) The annual examiners' reports; (4) Past years' exam papers.

Who are the examiners?

Each year Boards of Examiners are appointed. Each Board comprises about 20 people, drawn from among University and College lecturers. In addition, there are two External Examiners on each Tripos Board. The Externals' job is to ensure comparability of standards with other universities, to offer advice from their experience elsewhere, and to adjudicate tricky cases. The Boards also include a number of Assessors. These are not full examiners (they do not attend Board meetings) but they mark particular papers where the Board's own range of expertise does not stretch. In Part II, a Special Subject teacher will always examine their Special Subject unless they are on leave in Easter Term, as will (nearly always) the principal lecturer in the case of a Specified Subject; contrariwise, a Part II dissertation supervisor will never examine the dissertation.

How often do the exam boards meet?

The Exam Boards meet three times: late in Michaelmas Term to allocate papers for setting and marking; in January to discuss and amend the draft question papers; and in June to class candidates. Each Board has a Chair, who usually serves for two years. The Boards also have vital administrative support.

How are the question papers set?

Each paper has a setter and a reviser, who are members of the Exam Board or are Assessors. In December/January they consult with every staff member who has lectured on a particular paper, inviting them to say what topics they have lectured on and/or to suggest questions. Supervisors are also consulted by asking them to submit a list of the topics they supervise. The setter will also survey past papers and the Faculty reading list for the current year and the previous year. The reviser will review and comment on the setter's draft questions.

At other universities there is a closer relationship between teaching and exam setting, because there are smaller staffs and a less dispersed system of teaching. To compensate for this, the Faculty works hard to ensure increasing consultation by exam setters. The gap is

less of a problem in Part II, where the teachers and examiners are more likely to be the same people.

At its January meeting, the Board reviews all the draft question papers. Their aim is to ensure that the questions are readily understandable and unambiguous, of an appropriate level of scope and demand, and that the question paper provides a fair coverage of the Tripos paper as a whole. During Lent the examiners will check the printer's proof of the exam paper.

When do we know the exam timetable?

The timetable is published [online](#) by the beginning of Easter term. The exam period is almost exactly the same each year. Parts I and II begin in the last week of May.

The examiner in the exam room

The paper setter is obliged to attend the first 20 minutes of the examination, in case there are any problems or errors in the printed question paper. If you suspect a printing error, or some kind of mistake, for example with the rubric specifying how many questions must be answered, don't hesitate to raise your hand.

What are the general principles adopted in marking scripts?

All scripts are marked 'blind'. The examiner does not know the candidate's identity. Nor does the Exam Board when it meets to class candidates. Candidates' numbers are only decoded at the very end when an alphabetical list by class is printed for signing by the Examiners.

All scripts (for Parts I and II but not Prelim) are double marked. There is always an element of personal judgement in the humanities disciplines, so double marking helps ensure fairness. The second marker does not know, when marking, what mark was given by the first marker.

All scripts are marked on a scale of 1-100. Examiners are provided with a statement of marking criteria, and class boundaries. These marks may be finessed, for example to show short measure or 'exiguity'.

See the document on marking criteria:

<http://www.hist.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/pdfs/criteria-parts-1-and-2>.

An overall mark is given for each script, which is the arithmetical average of individual marks to each answer. Examiners will signal where a mark includes at least one question with a clear first class answer (using an asterisk); their marks will also take account of missing or very short answers, or breaches of rubric.

The two marks are 'unreconciled', each examiner's mark standing separately and in the final spreadsheet of marks. This is different from the practice in most universities, where the two markers get together to agree a single, 'reconciled' mark.

However, where there is a wide divergence (of 7 or more marks, and across a class boundary), the script is looked at again by the two markers, who may adjust their marks, but need not. If necessary, the script is read by a third examiner, who will provide a third mark. In such cases, the two marks of the three which are closest to each other will be recorded, and the outlying mark will be discarded. Where the three marks are equidistant from each other, the two marks most favourable to the candidate will stand.

All examiners write brief comments about each script, in case a script needs discussing with the other marker, or in case the candidate is discussed at the Exam Board meeting. These comments are destroyed at the end of the exam process.

Examiners do not have preset notions of what they want to find in answers. It is possible for the same question to be tackled in several plausible ways. There are no checklists of what information or points have to be included.

Are the examiners experts in what they are marking?

Yes and no. It is not always possible to find two experts to mark a paper, especially in the more specialized Part II papers, such as the Special Subjects, where the teacher (who will be first marker) may be the only real expert. This can also be the case with Dissertations, because the supervisor (who is often the most expert person on the topic) is never the examiner. This means that the candidate sometimes has a greater empirical grasp of the relevant material than the examiner. But the examiner is expert in a different sense. As professional and experienced historians they have an acquired judgement about what constitutes good historical argument and analysis. The Part II Historical Argument and Practice paper is another case where the examiner has expertise as a judge of an historical argument, but not necessarily expertise in the empirical evidence and examples being offered (though conversely they could be the world's leading expert in that field).

How are candidates classed?

All marks are computer processed before the Exam Board classing meeting. The spreadsheet shows which candidates' classes are clear cut, and which candidates are on class borderlines, or are otherwise problematic. The Examiners follow a set of classing criteria: <http://www.hist.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/pdfs/criteria-parts-1-and-2>.

The guiding principle of the classing criteria is that the balance of numbers of marks in each class is what weighs most, rather than the aggregate or mean mark. The Exam Board will spend most of its time discussing the borderline and problematic cases. Although the classing criteria are precise, there remains an element of judgement at the finely balanced margins. In some cases, examiners' comments on individual scripts are read out and considered; or the External Examiner reviews all the scripts of a borderline candidate the night before the meeting. In a handful of cases, the decision will be made by a vote of the Board. A 'problematic' case might be one where marks are very erratic; or missing because one or two papers were not sat. However, most candidates 'class themselves' and are not discussed.

In classing, all marks have equal weight. However, the computer provides markers' profiles, which might show that some examiners are more 'severe' or 'generous' than the norm. Sometimes this can be taken into account, though with caution, since it is possible, for example, that one exam paper attracted an especially good group of candidates.

The aftermath

At the end of the classing meeting, results are transferred electronically to Student Registry, where they are checked before being published to students' individual CamSIS accounts. Normally, they are available by early afternoon the day after the Board meeting. Customarily, a class list is also posted by the Student Registry at Senate House by 4.30pm on the same day. It may take a few days for marks for individual papers to be uploaded to students' records but, on the day that classes are announced, the Faculty office will supply Directors of Studies with markbooks showing a breakdown of marks by paper for students at their Colleges.

Examiners write a paragraph long report on each exam paper; these examiners' reports become publicly available, via the Faculty website, normally by the end of the following Michaelmas Term.

What if a candidate has been ill or injured?

The Exam Board has no knowledge of the identity of candidates, and no knowledge of any personal difficulties. They form a judgement solely on the evidence of the scripts. In certain cases, however, an independent University committee can vary the decision of the Exam Board in the light of individual circumstances, on appeal from a candidate's College Tutor. It is vital that, in the weeks and months before the examinations, candidates report to their Tutors any serious difficulties. There is no possibility of a resit of an exam. This practice differs from most universities, where resits are available and where exam boards will hear medical or other evidence of difficulties, and this may affect judgements about classing.

Things to keep in mind on the exam day

Sleep well the night before; better to be in good form than to grab extra hours of cramming. Turn up at the exam room in good time. Know your candidate identity number so that you can find your seat. Consider using a rollerball or fountain pen because it may be less strain on the wrist than a biro.

Read the exam paper several times. Don't decide too hurriedly which questions to answer. Questions that look impossible may turn out to be answerable on second thoughts. Conversely, questions that look easy may produce dull answers, or you may have missed something they are getting at. Taking time to choose a question matters most of all in the HAP paper in Part II, where you only answer one question.

Keep to time; distribute your time equally between the questions. Short measure or 'exiguity' is the easiest way to do extreme damage to your marks.

Do all exams have the same format?

The normal rubric is a requirement to answer three questions in three hours. Sometimes there is a requirement to answer one or more questions from a particular part of the exam paper: familiarise yourself with the rubrics from past exam papers. The deviations from the normal rubric are as follows. In Part I, Themes and Sources is examined by a Long Essay. In Part II, an optional Dissertation replaces one three-hour exam. The HAP paper requires one answer in three hours. The Special Subject, Paper 1 ('Gobbets' paper) requires one essay, and comments on six gobbets, in three hours; it may be wise to answer the essay question first.

What are the rules about overlap?

Students worry about the extent to which it is allowed to repeat material within or between exam papers. The only rules are (1) that some exam papers specifically forbid candidates from answering starred questions if they are also candidates for certain other papers; and (2) that in choosing a Part II dissertation topic, there may not be overlap with the choice of other Part II papers, and may not have significant overlap with the Themes and Sources Long Essay. Beyond this, the overlap issue is a matter of common sense. It is unwise to repeat material within a paper, because it will give a marker a sense that a candidate's knowledge is narrow; or between papers, because if the candidate is discussed at the Exam Board it will again give an impression of limitation. However, this need not rule out judicious use of an occasional example in different argumentative contexts. This is especially so in the case of the Part II HAP paper, where you may use material from other Part II papers (including a dissertation) to illustrate a broad theme; though the point of a general paper is to go beyond the scope of one particular field of history.

What are the most frequent complaints in examiners' reports?

Not answering the question set. Offering pre-packaged and unimaginative answers, 'off the peg'. Conservatism in the choice of questions, and hence 'bunching' of candidates around a narrow range of questions: '14 virgin questions out of 28', as one examiner put it. Insufficient use of documentary, primary evidence. Short measure; not doing justice to the third answer. Not achieving a fair balance of argument and example.

What are the best ways to revise?

Much a matter of individual style, and a matter to take advice from Directors of Studies and supervisors. But some of the essentials are as follows. Pace yourself, distributing time among the different papers. Arrange revision supervisions as soon as Easter Term starts; if past supervisors are on leave, seek alternatives through your DoS. Study past exam papers and examiners' reports. Read new material not just old notes and essays. Try reading book reviews. Allow yourself to relax and recuperate, otherwise you will be stale by the time of the exams. Put the accent on organising ideas and arguments rather than cramming facts, though know which facts most tellingly support those ideas and arguments. Above all, write timed one-hour exam-style essays; this is especially important if you have got used to writing your essays on a computer. Think about the structure of an exam essay: short paragraphs usually help; brisk and concrete openings; economic prose.

Further guidance is available here: <http://skills.caret.cam.ac.uk/Historyrevision/index.html>

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