

Preparing for Comprehensive Exams

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You may have heard that taking comprehensive exams will be the most difficult challenge of your life. This may be true. When the time came for me to study for and take my exams, I felt overwhelmed. As a single mother of three, I was facing numerous personal struggles that did not allow rescheduling, yet I knew I had to be on my best game. Failing my exams or giving up would only make things worse. Focusing on efficiency and thinking pragmatically, I managed to stay on target and feel good about myself in the process. By planning ahead, pacing ourselves, and finding ways to reduce stress, we greatly improve our chances of success. While the process may be arduous, it can also be extremely gratifying.

Think Ahead

If you have entered graduate school and comprehensive exams are in your future, it is not too early to think about them and plan ahead for them. Although the majority of time in coursework should be spent focused on the immediate task at hand, it is not difficult to begin prepping for comprehensive exams at the same time.

Keep your notes, book summaries, classroom notes, reviews, etc.

Save time by keeping track of your work. When you are finished with notes, reviews, and handouts for each class or related lecture, place them in a centralized comps prep place if you think the book might show up on a reading list. Clip notes, peer reviews, and other items associated with the book together so studying for exams in a year or two will not require organizing all your paperwork when you need to be studying.

Remind your friends and family members you are in a kind of academic residency.

While peers and professors understand that most of your life is on hold during comps preparation, make sure your friends and family understand how critical this time is to your career and that you will be focused almost exclusively on preparation for exams. Find ways to help them understand that during this time you are not going to be as accessible as you have been, perhaps by using an automated e-mail response and creating a message for your voice mail to be used as a reminder. Assure them that the situation is temporary, but will last more than a week or two. In addition to making sure that your friends and family are aware of the ordeal you are going to go through, get as much help as possible from your support network during this time. Especially during the last week or two of studying, this will be invaluable.

Keep an Open Mind

There is no right way to study for comprehensive exams, but there are methods that have a reputation for working better than others. Talk to students in *your department, at your school* to get an idea of how they approached the exams and how that worked for them. Seek out students who have taken exams with the members on your committee. This is not cheating. Networking and collaborating are important and often neglected skills that will benefit your scholarship and career. That being said, find a way to integrate the advice you receive with what works for you.

Just because a classmate used a particular method and it worked for that person does not mean it will automatically work for you, but keep an open mind.

Communicate with your Committee

Find out what they want.

Some professors want an extensive list of books integrated into comprehensive exam discussions. In most cases, this means they want you to understand the main thesis of the book and the historiographical context. Other professors will prefer a shorter list, but they often expect a more in-depth understanding of each work. As soon as possible, get an idea of what the members of your committee will be expecting from you. Be assertive (while respectful) about this, making sure you are all on the same page.

Start working on your book list early.

If professors will allow you to construct the majority of the reading list on your own, keep a running list of books you feel will satisfy the requirements for the field. When given an opportunity in classes to read books of your choice, pick ones that will be good additions for your reading list. When deciding which books to buy and which to borrow, consider purchasing the ones that will be on your comps lists (or that speak to your dissertation topic). This will help you avoid gathering as many books when the time comes to begin the studying process.

Organize Reading Lists

You will have a reading list for each examination field.

Turn each list into an annotated bibliography. While this may seem time consuming, you will need to have the information, and it might as well be organized. (Some professors require this anyway.) Think about the ways that the books connect to each other. Making connections will help with retention and begin to prepare you for answering questions about the scholarship. Even if your professors only ask you to organize your lists by theme or chronology, do both. Try to think of other ways to organize them as well, such as by methodology or resources used. This process will help greatly with the next step of setting up a schedule, but it is also an excellent exercise that helps reinforce the big ideas and historiographical conversations that are likely to show up in your questions.

Set up a Schedule

Once you know when you will take your exams, create a realistic schedule that plans for in-depth reading, skimming, reviewing, studying with peers, meeting with your committee members, and also relaxing and focusing on other things. Note which books you will need to read or reread and which will need skimming, but not a thorough reading. When you make your study schedule, try to give yourself some variety. Stacking all the detailed reading at the beginning of your study schedule can be overwhelming. Variety will improve retention.

If you realize that your schedule is not working, change it.

Remember the importance of being realistic with yourself. Being flexible is essential. In addition, looking at a schedule over and over again that makes you feel like you are behind is

demoralizing. Following a realistic schedule will keep you feeling good about the progress you are making.

Learning & Retention Techniques

Absorb and Express Information in Varied Ways

We all learn in different ways. For most people, writing information in notes of some kind is crucial. Others really do better by listening or teaching. Try to find as many ways as possible, using as many of your senses as possible. Whenever you can, read aloud. When you do this, you: 1) see the information, 2) process it by reading, 3) say it, and then 4) hear yourself. This is much more thorough than just reading it, and retention is almost always improved. Be creative about this. If you are having trouble remembering book titles or authors or connecting them to the thesis, try flashcards, a PowerPoint slideshow, or other ways of experiencing and reinforcing the information. Many people have found that tactile stimulus is the best way to absorb information. By writing out names, dates, or other data to memorize, try tracing it in the air with your finger or even finger paint. Chat with peers and professors about books, historians, and themes. Explain things to people who don't know very much about it. Write short reviews or make songs from the titles. Don't be afraid to think outside the box. Even if it seems unorthodox, if it works, it is well worth it.

When it is just not working.

There may be a particular book, author, or theory that simply does not make sense to you. Do not let yourself expend too much energy being frustrated about this. Go to book reviews, peers, or professors for direction right away. This is not the right time to wrestle with doing it on your own.

Think About the Questions

When you know the questions.

Some professors will provide you with the questions, or a set of potential questions, ahead of time. Others will have you create questions you want to answer or that best reveal your knowledge of the fields. When designing the questions yourself or collaborating with professors, you should seriously consider what your strengths and interests are. After you have settled on the best options, you can feel confident in moving ahead with preparing your answers.

If the questions are available, there is no reason not to sketch out a draft or at least an outline ahead of time. Think about which examples allow you to discuss the largest number of books succinctly. Be strategic in your planning for this. Your committee will expect an answer that was well thought out since you were given potential questions in advance. Memorize the facts that you will need to support your claims. Have a clear idea of how detailed your essay will get and clearly state your argument.

When you do not know the questions.

Before you start speculating about potential questions, make sure you really do have as much information as possible about what you might be facing. Make sure you are clear on

chronological periods, geographic ranges, themes, and the level of detail your professor will consider as a possibility. Ask members of your committee other questions as well. Will the questions be historical, historiographical, or some combination? What amount of specific, factual data will be expected versus the level of theoretical argument? The more you converse with your professors, the more likely are you to get clues about the direction, if not the specifics of your exams.

Think about the kinds of questions your professor asks you in courses or conversation. How does he or she evaluate history? What kind of writing assignments did you do? What are the main historiographical conversations that are important to this professor? Try to image as many possible questions as you can. Sketch outlines or drafts for those you are least confident about, and go over the others in your head.

Ways to Relieve Stress

We cannot retain information very well when we are physically or emotionally drained. Take the time to be aware of your stress level and how it is affecting you. Take walks, work out, soak in hot baths, pray or meditate, spin pottery, dance the night away, or do whatever works for you. If you use drinking or smoking as stress relievers, be aware that these are temporary fixes and do not actually help with the physical consequences of stress. Remember to eat well and drink as much water as possible. It will really help!

Taking the Exams

When scheduling your exams, consider taking the one you are most concerned about first. This may seem counter-intuitive if you want to continue studying for that exam until that last possible moment, but most people feel much better after that exam is over. This will reduce your stress load and help you to do your best on the later exams.

Each institution has different procedures for written examinations. With each step in the process, make sure you understand the guidelines well ahead of the time. When you are thinking about the amount of time you have available, plan a strategy. Know how much time you will allow yourself for pre-writing, writing, and editing. This will ensure that you do not run out of time before you complete the essay. Be sure to include the significance of historical events or works whenever possible.

Regardless of how comfortable you feel with your committee, show them respect and acknowledge the significance of the event by presenting your most professional appearance during the oral examination. Dress as you would for a job interview. Exude as much confidence as you can. Do not express concern about your performance or knowledge in front of your committee. Smile, make good eye contact, breathe evenly (if possible), and thank them for being part of this important time in your scholarship and career.

When you are questioned, take your time to think before you speak. They will not mind you giving yourself some time to collect your thoughts. Many people find transition comments helpful. These are statements such as "I'm glad you asked that," "That's a good question," or even "Let me think about that." When you have gathered your thoughts, speak slowly and

clearly, but if all else fails, do not be afraid to tell them you cannot remember.

Do not try to fake your way through an answer. It is much better to be honest. Some professors keep probing a particular line of questioning until students reach the extent of their knowledge. Being comfortable with acknowledging your limits is a crucial part of being a professional scholar. Remember that this is an opportunity to show what you know, not cover for gaps in your knowledge.

Recovering

The process of studying for and taking comprehensive exams is grueling. It will likely leave you feeling physically and mentally exhausted. Despite this, if you have put off a lot of important things until after you take the exams, you may have a lot to handle when you are finally finished with the entire exam process. Try to plan ahead well enough that you can either ignore those pressing matters just one or two more weeks or try to take care of some of them before you are finished with your exams. Reward yourself after you have taken the tests. Depending on resources and other circumstances, you may not be able to take the ideal vacation, but be good to yourself anyway. Plan a party, visit friends, stay in bed and watch movies, call your friends and family (who are likely wondering what happened to you), read some fiction, or whatever you do to enjoy yourself. And revel in the glory!

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