

Tips for Negotiating the Comprehensive Exams

Krista Kennedy and Greg Schneider

Getting Set Up

It'll take some time to get set up, but don't dally at this stage.

- You will never, ever feel prepared. Not feeling prepared doesn't matter.
- Don't feel like you need to know everything before you first meet with your committee. It's their job to help you build lists and make questions. But don't go in blind, either.
- Make your lists and questions as pertinent to your research as possible. Exams = heuristic.
- Negotiate your lists. Resist the urge to put down every book you think you *should* know, and don't let them overload you. If it's on your list, they'll expect you to know it.
- Don't start reading until you've finalized questions.
- Make good use of Mary's master list of questions.
- If you write your own questions, write questions you can answer. Remember: Your exams aren't the time to go out on a limb—demonstrate your knowledge and get out.
- Set the freaking date. Set it as early in the process as possible. Set it in stone.

Group Strategies

Find a limited group of peers to work with. They'll hold you accountable and share their wine.

- Meet often.
- Read common texts and discuss responses to common questions.
- Give reports on your other texts and questions.
- Support each other and commiserate together.
- Celebrate when it's time to celebrate. Don't skimp on this point.

Personal Strategies

Here's what worked for us.

- Learn to read. You'll think you know how, but chances are you don't. See "Resources."
- Write answers to your questions: Try outlining, mind mapping, diagramming, fake-lecturing, or writing sprints. See "Resources."

- Feel free to branch away from your list, but beware the reading vortex. Remember: In the end, you're only responsible for the texts on your list.
- Create a searchable database—of citations, if nothing else. UThink blogs are any easy way to do this.
- You are going to amass a lot of articles. Organize them effectively so they're accessible. See "Resources."
- Exercise—the best way to forget about Aristotle for a while is to sweat the bastard out.

Taking the Exams

It's a gauntlet. Run it.

The Writtens

- Don't expect to change the world. Or even your sub-field.
- Answer the damn question.
- Space the exams to take advantage of your circadian rhythms.
- Two hours goes by faster than you think. The first hour will feel like an hour. The second hour will feel like ten minutes.
- Take five minutes to organize the 2-hour and five minutes to reread it.
- You'll be surprised what will come out when you're locked in the room to write.
- Twenty-four hours is a lot of time, but not enough time for scrambling. Have all the books and articles you'll need locked and loaded.
- You don't need to write for twenty-four hours straight. Sleep is good.
- Expect to write about 4-5 single-spaced pages in your 2-hour and 20-25 double-spaced pages in your 24-hour.

The Orals

- Meet with your committee before the oral. They may or may not choose to provide feedback on your writtens.
- Your committee does not hate you. They are not out to get you, and they are not there to trip you up. They are there to make you think.
- Think of it as an opportunity to pick the brains of the four smartest people you know.
- It's a conversation, not a performance and not a soapbox for your opinions. No one cares what you *really* think. They care about how much you understand. (This goes for the writtens, too.)

- Don't tenaciously defend an untenable position; but don't flip-flop, either. Demonstrate the flexibility of your intellectual backbone.
- You can't know everything, but you should be able to field questions you've never thought about before.
- If you're confused by a question, ask them to elaborate—sometimes they're not sure what they mean either.
- If you get around to discussing your dissertation, take notes. Or better yet, record the whole thing. This conversation is invaluable.
- Remember your audience.
- Don't lose your sense of humor.

Resources

- Other perspectives on exams
http://akma.disseminary.org/archives/2007/01/breathe_deeply.html
www.slimcoincidence.com/blog/2006/11/anything_is_beautiful_if_you_s_1.php
- Exams as heuristic
www.slimcoincidence.com/blog/2006/11/exams_as_heuristic.php
- Writing Sprints
www.slimcoincidence.com/blog/2006/12/exam_prep_writing_sprints.php
- How to Read
www.thepracticeofleadership.net/2005/02/23/how-to-read-and-digest-a-book
<http://ideamatt.blogspot.com/2006/02/how-to-read-lot-of-books-in-short-time.html>
http://weblogs.swarthmore.edu/burke/?page_id=84
http://wrt-howard.syr.edu/stepaside/archives/2006/09/how_to_read_a_b.html
- Resources for Getting Organized
 OmniOutliner (Mac): www.omnigroup.com
 DevonThink (Mac): www.devon-technologies.com
 Zotero (Firefox plug-in): www.zotero.org
 PC Organizers: <http://john.redmood.com/organizers.htm>
 Online Organizers: www.solutionwatch.com/368/fifty-ways-to-take-notes

