

Tips for Comprehensive Exams

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When do I do my comprehensive exam?

The comprehensive exam takes place sometime after the successful completion of coursework required for the PhD program. Normally, a student spends a minimum of six weeks in intensive full-time study in order to prepare for the exam experience.

What is required?

Students are required to write a paper answering one question (from a choice of two) in each of the areas listed above. Students have exactly one week to complete the exam (the time and day of the week you start is up to you and your committee to determine). Papers are typically 12-15 pages each in length (double-spaced, 12 point font). To prepare for the exam, students review readings that are compiled into a reading list. This reading list is typically drafted by the student. It is then shared with the primary supervisor, and then the supervisory committee. The committee then adds and deletes readings in order to ensure that the depth and breadth of knowledge required is covered.

How should I prepare for the comprehensive exam?

The best way to prepare for your exam is to review knowledge you've obtained in coursework and through independent reading in a disciplined and strategic manner. Remember, you have the first opportunity to prepare your reading list, so you have an opportunity to shape the parameters of your exam questions.

Tips for preparing for the exam:

1. **Read widely:** You are becoming an expert in a particular scholarly area, and your knowledge should reflect a nuanced understanding of that body of literature.
2. **Engage in ACTIVE reading:** Take notes, make connections between the articles, and constantly consider how this article relates to other work you're read, considering the similarities and differences between this piece of work and other work in the area.
3. **Talk to others:** Talk to other students, to your supervisor, and to experienced faculty members to get ideas for questions, as well as tips for how to prepare and write the exam.
4. **Organize information you read:** Because you're reading comprehensively in several different areas it is helpful to organize your readings. To this end, create literature charts that summarize key aspects of the article such as the location of the study, theory utilized, methods used, key findings, poignant points, and how you think it relates to your topic. Also, create reference lists ahead of time so you can quickly import your references into your papers. In addition, physically organize your readings. Have a pile for each subject area, and further organize these piles of articles in ways that make sense for you.
5. **Anticipate questions:** Based on knowledge you've gleaned from your reading, your coursework, and ideas you've discussed with your supervisory committee, anticipate what you think might be asked. Review other students' questions and responses (available on-line; ask Graduate Program Administrator about how to access the data based). In particular, think about the intersections between the various areas of expertise. For example, how is your content area human ecological? How could particular theories be utilized to develop your content area?
6. **Practice questions:** After anticipating questions, actually write out answers! You may be able to use pieces of these answers in your exam, and disciplining yourself with this practice will help you to do the exam more easily.

Tips for writing the comprehensive exam:

1. Be strategic: As soon as you get your questions, read them all over carefully and jot down notes to brainstorm possible approaches to the answers. In doing so, it may become immediately apparent to you which question to choose for each category.
2. Create outlines first: For questions you know for certain you're going to answer, create immediate outlines. This will give you some ideas for how to approach the questions and organize your paper before you get bogged down in details. It will also give you confidence later on when you're fatigued, because you've already produced an outline to start with when you return to the questions (you may want to spend a half day on developing your strategy and creating your outlines).
3. Manage your time carefully: You have approximately 1.5 days for each question. Plan your time accordingly. You may need to stop working on one paper before it's finished to start on another. Some students like to start with the most difficult question. I recommend starting with the easiest question, and doing the most difficult question second.
4. Choose your location carefully: if you can, find a place to work where you will not experience interruptions while you write. You will want to be able to focus on your during this week. This will reduce your stress considerably.
5. Take breaks: Choose times daily for one or two breaks. Breaks may include activities like exercising or watching TV, but arrange some short periods of downtime to refresh yourself.
6. Get adequate rest.

Typical problems with comprehensive exams:

1. The question was not answered, or the student answered the wrong question. Sometimes students prepare a beautiful answer to the wrong question. When developing your paper, ensure that you answer the question that was asked.
2. Answers are superficial.
In some cases, the answers provided do not reflect an acceptable amount of depth or breadth. In your answer, you want to ensure that you demonstrate that you have a solid and comprehensive command of the literature in this area. You should be able to elaborate on the key understandings, debates, issues, and gaps in the body of literature you are utilizing for this particular question. In addition, you want to ensure that your level of analysis is in-depth, scholarly, and reflective of a high- level of understanding of the subject matter.
3. Answers are disorganized and the key points are unclear.
In some cases, students have difficulty in organizing their paper in a clear and intelligible way. You can avoid this problem through having the literature you anticipate using well organized, identifying key points in the literature, creating literature charts and summaries, having your references organized and easily accessible for quick entry into your papers, and writing practice answers that you may be able to cut and paste from for your review. Remember that the answers do not have to be eloquent, but you do want them to be as clear and well-organized as possible.