

This was originally designed as a video script... but life happens. Hence the startling lack of formality.

Comps Pt. 1: Overview

So... I finished comprehensive exams. According to the Gods on high in my department, I now have enough fluidity when it comes to important ideas in my chosen field to begin contributing to it in some way. So how do I feel?

Various images of buildings collapsing

Yep. But it took a lot of effort to collapse so wonderfully, and here we are.

Anyway, I don't typically talk about my main "thing," which is being a graduate student, because really... people who make a big deal out of being a grad student are usually anthropomorphic stand-ins for sleeping pills, or the kind of people who take The Professor is In! Seriously.

I remain more interested in studying another language and learning how to weld. Go figure.

But with that said, comprehensive exams were something often discussed but little explored when I was actually interacting with people at school. So I wanted to put together a series of short videos about how I managed to get through this vicious fucking ritualized beating... I mean THIS WONDERFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCE, and how you can too.

Anyway, processes differ, so don't get too hung up on the particulars below, and if you want to skip ahead feel free to do so... but my home department – which I haven't seen for about a year and probably has to be nuked from space to make sure whatever is growing in my desk is dead – worked like this:

After you've assembled your committee... which ... whew... have fun... you're going to compile reading lists aimed to address three questions. Each question will be written along a specific line of inquiry... which, speaking broadly, is a sort of thought container by which to address your subject. Mine were concerned with rhetoric, geography, and my chosen subject's relevance to the greater field of communication.

You'll then provide a rationale which helps explain what you're reading, which again you'll use to answer the questions you get; again these questions are built to complement the line of inquiry. Bit of a fun circle there.

So basically you end up with three columns; for each of these your gig is to come up with a list of books, articles, or whatever other readings you'll use to answer the questions you'll be presented with, which again should be centered along the line of inquiry and should, hopefully, be in league with your rationale.

... and once you nail those lines of inquiry down, and then you get your rationale together, you need to assemble your lists. This is, alas, often easier said than done. You and your advisor will revise your lists a lot... mine basically just wanted my choices to make sense and be comprehensible, which turns out to be oddly important when you're trying to rationalize your existence and health insurance. But we also threw in some of their personal favorites, and that

happens; your advisor may be a specialist in Watts or Bachelard or Fanon and thus will suggest some of their writing. No biggiee.

Remember: Comprehensive exams exist so you can show mastery of the kind of material you'll need to be competitive on a doctoral level. If you'll allow me to talk about the built environment for the 9000000th time, it's about blocks, as opposed to the individual buildings on those blocks. With that in mind here's the thing: You're not going to pick your favorite pet Lacanian Marxist or early career post-structuralist or object-oriented ontologist and fill up your lists with their work. Your lists will mostly be comprised of bedrock, foundational texts which are bandied about endlessly by people who read them once and then proceeded to not pay attention to them.

Let's all just take a sip of tea here...

Since I work with the rhetoric, geography, and experience of space and place, in my case it was a ton of Kenneth Burke, Henri Lefebvre, Ann Laura Stoler, Manuel Castells, Doreen Massey – see the video I made on her because she rules – and some newer scholars like Katherine McKittrick and Gaston Gordillo, who are just brilliant. The big thing to remember though is that getting too far into the weeds of your particular topic may be counterproductive, because that person responding to the response to a response about a response of a piece on Heidegger? That may not be something your committee has read, but more importantly, it may not be something they view as fundamental to you becoming versed in the discussions you need to be aware of to build upon, challenge, and reconfigure those works in an academic context.

So you'll probably be pushed to read Spinoza's Ethics more than you will be encouraged to read somebody's recently-published commentary on Spinoza's Ethics. Prince of philosophers, y'all.

Anyway, before I move on to discuss the back and forth of working with your committee, let's address something slightly controversial. The big thing I heard with regard to comps was “don't read anything new.” It makes sense; it's easier to struggle through a second or third reading of Adorno's Negative Dialectics or Gadamer's Truth and Method than it is to say “Hey, I should take on Husserl's transcendental phenomenological work, which I've never read, or master the four volumes of Marx's Das Kapital!” when you haven't really worked with them before.

However, in my case, I was using comps more so than allowing them to use me; I wanted to be sure I wanted to press forward with reading for a quasi-living, and to see if I actually cared about the sort of work people were doing; and yeah, I'm yet to find a journal dedicated to surprisingly optimistic readings of liminal spaces and dead media, so that's a big concern. So yes, I did break some people's cardinal rule and chose to include new stuff, but I chose new stuff that a. I knew I would use and b. would reinforce my understanding of fundamental, key works and ideas and connect those readings with them. I also made sure it was READABLE. Being a shitty writer doesn't make your complex cultural theory or political economy analysis better.

It did add some time, but... honestly... I wasn't spending 16 hours a day on campus anymore and taking three classes and working at the same time so that was fine by me. The only problems are if texts add MORE TIME and if you don't end up using them.

From here you're going to go back-and-forth with your advisor a bit, and you'll iron out your rationale, add/subtract some choices, and maybe even argue a bit. Ok you will argue, but eh... figure out the difference between and argument and a fight early on and you'll be better off. It takes some time to get

your lists together, but it takes even longer if you are not active and diligent about it. So don't slink away from your advisor; ask questions, and ask them from the standpoint of somebody who is collaborating with you rather than hamstringing you. Here's the best, most relevant advice I can offer here though: Be open to being pushed but also to pushing back; defend your ideas if you feel strongly about them and if you want to use whatever article or book. And if your advisor has a good reason to NOT include something or to substitute something else? Hear them out.

And keep Zotero or another citation software solution handy, because you'll be referencing shit constantly.

Also: Nothing weirder than sitting there quoting the people you're reading back to them, but that happened to me and I appreciated the absurdity of it. I also appreciated the absurdity of the one guy attacking the life's work of two other people there, like I was going to turn to them and say "yeah y'all suck; screw this set of methods and ideas you've taught me right in the face. And thank you for your careful and considerate readings."

Now just read for six months non-stop and you're set! Then you'll get three questions which you'll respond to in a timed format. And by that I mean, you might get six questions, all of them mind-bending, and some of them impossible to answer. Again: Good luck. Join us for part two: Tips on Reading.

Drinking image

Pt 2: Tips on Reading For Comprehensive Exams

Being real: I actually liked comps. Going to class, working, and teaching meant I often had to split my attention to the point where I wasn't really proud of whatever I was turning in, so most of my academic efforts always felt like the beginning of some ideas I was interested in exploring more than a finished project. I actually had some input on my comprehensive exams, and I enjoyed the reading process a lot.

But since I work in two disciplines, my reading list was out here looking batty, and since I'm a neurological live-wire I figured the best way to get in front of this stuff was to make a plan...

These were my steps:

1. Before finishing and finalizing my lists, I started reading the stuff I **KNEW** was going to stay on them. I would also often use the "auto read" feature on my computer and just listen to the text, which allowed me to reset my eyes but also just absorb the information as it came to me. If I heard something I needed or liked, I paused and highlighted or made a note, then just hit it again.
2. I work better off paper, so I grabbed everything I wanted to read in paper form by way of interlibrary loan, used sales, borrowing from friends, or however else. If I couldn't, I got digital copies.
3. I also looked up book reviews in some cases, especially if the texts were dense. I found myself skipping full re-readings of certain works I had already delved into if the book reviews were solid, but in general I did read everything on my lists because it mattered to me... but I also didn't murder myself doing it. Every reader is different.
4. I organized my work space and my work protocol so I could eat the elephant one bite at a time. I had those paper tabs I needed, notepads, pens, and pencils, and plenty of light.

5. I set a schedule. I didn't want to spend all my time staring at the sky waiting for “reading inspirato” to fall from the sky and drench me; I'd get up, stretch, eat, and read until I was antsy, then I'd take a break, take some breaths, and go back to it. I know I had to read about 80-110 pages every day, but sometimes I'd just give up early; some books are easier than others to read. But I'd generally be done by a certain point in the day, and then I would...
6. DO ACTUAL LIFE STUFF like exercise, eat food with nutrients, interact with others, and do things I needed to maintain a balance. I've worked 18 hour shifts, I've slept at school and stayed on campus for days, and I've “protestant work ethic'd” my way through tough situations. Guess what that did? BURNED ME OUT. At this point you should know this is a marathon where you're also herding cats, so keeping some balance in the mix is key... and yes, I threw in another damn running reference. Sue me.
7. Use a note-taking system with cross-referencing capability. A ton of folks dig Endnote, but I suggest Bear, which calls itself a Markdown app for some reason... good luck with that SEO approach. It was super-helpful to be able to compare and contrast ideas from almost 90 texts, and this made it easier. Mostly because you gotta...
8. Keep relationships in mind – YOU WILL HAVE TO SLAM THESE IDEAS UP AGAINST ONE ANOTHER AND SEE HOW THEY WORK IN A BIG WORD GUMBO. If you're looking at them as discrete sets of ideas, then you're probably messing up, because the point of comps is to see what kind of lineage of thought you're interfacing with and ultimately looking to contribute to.
9. **THE BIG ONE: FINALIZE YOUR LISTS ASAP.** I know I mentioned this before, but seriously... between this, switching up my summer teaching assignment, and some health issues, I was about three to four months slower in putting this all together than I should have been, and it was pretty damned annoying.

You want to get to reading land ASAP. You want to frolic in the fields of “15 articles a week or three books a week!” as quickly as you can. Don't be afraid to get in touch with your advisor if it's going slowly. And LAST BUT NOT LEAST: SET A REALISTIC DATE before you start on part three, which is actually doing your comps... start decelerating before you receive your questions... because now it's time to actually do your comps. See you in part three.

Part Three: Actually Comping

Alright welcome back to this crash course on comprehensive exams. This time we're going to get to the nitty gritty, which is actually getting your comps written. I'm not going to front; it was tough, but if you plan, discipline yourself, and also use your energy wisely it's less stressful than you might think.

And again, this is a solitary process, and it's one where your mileage may vary. All I'm doing here is offering some ideas as to how to conceptualize an approach you may find useful; I'm sure there's some “I DIDN'T NEED TO DO THAT!” folks out there, which is great; have a Coke and a smile, but it helps to have some ideas to kick around so you're not completely overwhelmed when it's time to prove you've MASTERED THE BEAST.

-So the first thing I can say is “taper off.” Don't read up until the night before your comps. I took four days off and did as little as I could in the last week before comps, and I was burnt, and honestly? It saved my bacon when it came time to write.

-The next step is to confirm your time. I received an email with my exams at a certain time, and I had a 7 day period in which to write an 18-26 page response. Making sure you have that time frame down is important so you can plan accordingly.

-Then - Collect what you need: Have your papers accessible, your books around, your stuff together, so all you need to do is to walk into your work space and do your thing.

- Moving into the actual writing phase: First off, when you receive the question → Sit with it for a bit; read it, grasp what you're being asked. Really try to identify what is going on there. It's not uncommon to get a complex question, so formulating a plan is gonna be important if you think like I do... which is something like an Itano circus as envisioned by Deleuze and Guattari.

-From here: Plan and outline.

I'm stealing this next bit directly from an email I was sent by Samantha Shorey, a prof at the University of Texas. Despite my family being Okies and thus Sam and I being eternal sworn enemies, they were kind enough to offer the following advice: "Take at-least an hour after you read the question to outline your response. It's okay to be formulaic here ("There are 3 primary contributions of cultural production research ..."). This is an exam, so rely on those GRE skills of sign-posting and try not to worry if you can't bring all the artfulness that you usually do. Just deliver a clear, well structured response that makes it easy for your readers to see how you've answered"

If you're teaching and you're thinking about how you wish your students would answer... now is the time to show and prove on that front.

As far as planning and timing goes, it can vary; My colleague Andrew Davis, who teaches at Appalachian State (which has a lovely campus), said to take a day* to do so. The big thing is to COLLECT YOUR THOUGHTS SO YOU CAN WRITE A CLEAR ANSWER. You are, ultimately, answering a question; getting too artful in your response is only going to create problems. This leads me to my bigger point as it regards composition:

Write DIRECT. You're not in it for the art.

I tried to write my comps like I try to write everything else; I aim to communicate like a particularly bright high school junior in an English lit class, and I go for clarity and try to be elegant without coming across as forced or overly abstruse. At this level, the complexity of the topics themselves are already intimidating enough; if I add anything else to the mix I'll probably just ruin the soup. It took a lot of work to sound as simple as I could, but I got glowing reviews on my exams, and I'm really happy about that. One of my committee members said I'd found my voice during my defense, which was incredibly flattering, and made me feel like a million bucks.

Now, as you move into doing the work, choose your main texts – USE THEM WISELY – Remember the employment of quotes, citations, etc. should be judicious in the sense that you want them working FOR you, not against you. I tried to use them as points of transition, where I could finalize one set of thoughts before introducing another, or compare and contrast the two. It's also not a bad time to challenge the texts; think of this in terms of "they say, I say!"

And since you're choosing texts, I also suggest prepping your bibliography and your footnotes as you go; I used a more complicated format that took awhile to do, and you may take awhile to get rolling, so you don't want to lose precious time later in the mix correcting 60 or 70 footnotes like I did.

Yep. 70 footnotes. OCD is a helluva drug.

But this should also serve as a warning to gauge your energy properly and apply it in the most responsible manner – Look here's Samantha Shorey again, noting "Use your best energy on the hardest work. For me, the hardest work is generation (first draft ideas, writing) so I need to do that in the morning when I'm energetic and fresh. The editing and formatting I can do when I'm brain dead in the

evening after writing. These will be long days! But don't waste your best creative energy -- whenever that comes -- on something you can do in a daze."

To that end, please, please, please: Take breaks. It's that simple. 10 or 20 minutes here and there do WONDERS.

So, as you turn the corner to getting something ready to submit, first do a read-through to see if everything makes sense and works. Then take a break, then do another, and then take a big one. Make sure your answer is clear. I wrote intros and summaries as well as "here's what I'm going to do" in my papers, because, really, I am not in a field that loves curve balls... but it doesn't mean I can't throw a dramatic fast one down the center and wow the audience.

"SPORTS."

And before you send everything in: Take another big break, then check your draft. One of my few regrets about comps is I had two big weird errors in mine that seemed like the results of transforming/transferring formats, one of which I was really bothered by because it was just "here's a sentence fragment!" at the beginning of one of my sub-answers. To that end you can also say "if you see something irregular in the formatting please let me know," because electronic weirdness can happen.

And of course, be sure and rest accordingly. HAVE COMFORT FOOD READY. Snacks and good meals are always nice to have. Avoid drinking too much alcohol or caffeine, too, and keep water in the mix as well.

Last but not least: If you have a short, timed response answer to write with no access to notes, I suggest putting together some sheets of main ideas and concepts and committing those to memory so you can readily access them. Shorey was on about this when we spoke, and even though she's a longhorn it's a really good idea... yeah I'm just gonna run with that fake rivarly bit... but it helps to have some pre-written definitions and breakdowns of key concepts with regard to methods or ideas, just so you show the communicative fluency you'll need to say "Yeah, I know from Ranciere's Dissensus and how Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of phenomenology dealt with embodiment in a specific manner, and so when I discuss invention according to Cicero I do so with a mind toward materiality and space, place, and politics..."; that's the kind of stuff that sets the stage for you to offer YOUR thoughts and ideas while also acknowledging the thoughts which influenced and informed them. Having citations for those is also really helpful; sometimes something may be a bit "in the weeds" so you'll need to be sure you're not cherry-picking or ignoring a contextual conceit that informs the work... this is why when one prof said "I think you're a bit facile with Heidegger" I could respond that I was more concerned with his acknowledgment of the fourfold gathering rather than it being some kind of instrumental process one could employ, and that seemed to smooth things over.

I uh... kinda have given up on Heidegger for the moment, by the way.

So that's it for the toughest part. Or is it?! Stay tuned for suggestions on the defense... or as I call "Collecting bruised ribs and compliments at the same time!" Later.

Part Four: Defense

Welcome to the last part of this series on comprehensive exams. Like, subscribe, and I promise I'll get back to talking about whatever weird hobbies I have soon. Those ethnographies of weird cemeteries I keep finding in the woods aren't gonna write themselves!!

Before we begin, here's the best advice I can give you: Take three days before your defense to be PLEASANTLY USELESS. Get relaxed and stay relaxed. Do some fuckin' yoga, do some box

breathing, don't drink a shit ton of caffeine, and possibly take some CBD or a sip of wine an hour before you get into this thing. Then re-read your papers.

Alright so this is the last substantive part of this... which is the comprehensive exam defense. In my case, I had a two hour meeting set up with my committee. A few days before this meeting, my advisor and I did a quick consultation on what to expect, etc. I mentioned I was going to re-read the essays I submitted and look over my reading lists. My advisor said this was fine, and so that's what I did.

I failed to ask this, but here's one thing you may want to put to your committee; see if you can bring some notes, just in case you need to access them while you're doing your thing. Sometimes it's nice to do so, and since I wrote six questions instead of the standard three... one of them was a four-parter... it would have been helpful to help parse the 60 some-odd pages I tossed to my committee.

I was really looking forward to the actual defense, because it had been described to me as kind of a friendly informed chat, and I was pretty proud of my essays. Turns out it wasn't, and I hate the people who had happy fun time, because the first 25 minutes of mine were a beating.

And to be fair, having the world's LONGEST semester with no breaks, a day job, and teaching duties didn't exactly prime me to give the best responses at any given time, so let that be a warning to you: DON'T SCHEDULE YOUR DEFENSE TOO EARLY. Give yourself at least 3 days to do NOTHING and just be a person again if at all possible before you dig back in and get ready for your defense.

Anyway, one person on my committee wasn't into a particular discipline, one which I use in a pretty limited way, and they got really into the "why use it?" question, to the point where I confirmed they didn't really want an answer as much as they wanted to put me on the spot for it. I did challenge them, but I wasn't exceedingly aggressive about it... because to be honest I felt like it was akin to me taking engineering classes and then getting yelled at for not studying theater arts. Yes, that thing I do is not that other thing; and this Buffalo isn't a can of peaches. As I mentally collected a more appropriate response I watched them kind of gas out, saying "maybe you don't have to answer this now," and so I realized, "oh, this is a sort of ritualized hazing thing. OK." I kept waiting for a definitive argument AGAINST the approach.

So in essence, I thought we were strictly talking about the exams, not frameworks of the ideas of the exams. That may be a good question to ask your advisor or committee before you get down to your discussion. But to be fair, yeah, I was having a difficult time connecting the ESSAY response to the METHOD response they were inquiring about... so there's a big piece of advice: Figure out your WHY.

Also, to that same extent... take a breath. I viewed the assault on a method more as an opportunity to wrestle with the idea and tease out questions about why there were issues about it than a fight about the idea. That's not to say you shouldn't have some "fight" in you; yeah, you should totally be prepared to pounce on an argument or argue for issues of scope and how differences in type and kind may be inapplicable to what you're talking about.

After removing a few of my teeth we moved on to the second question, wherein I was... praised? I was sort of in shock because I thought my first essay was pretty good, but then somebody had an issue with the method behind it, so to hear somebody not crack my skull against the pavement was a shocker. In fact, they were effusive in their praise. It was awesome. They then asked about my third essay, the short

timed one with no access to notes, and that was fine too, although I was pressed to provide a more substantive answer than the one I gave, but the question itself said “this is too hard to answer in four hours.”

Before I left they asked me about my idea for my dissertation prospectus, which terrifies me to think about, but they seemed open to my idea... stay tuned for about 800 videos on that over the course of the next three years.

Then they sent me away for a few minutes... that turned into 10 minutes... and during that time period I became certain I had failed and that the department I've never felt a part of or connected to in any way, shape, or form had extracted enough value from me as an instructor and that they were prepared to return me to the kind of manual labor / death slog jobs I've had for most of my life. As I waived goodbye to health care and begin drafting my “I'm selling everything” Craigslist posts the committee called me back to Zoom, and then promptly congratulated me and told me I did a great job.

Yeah... I don't get it either. But seriously I knew it was a ritual beating to a certain extent but I did sit there and go... DIDN'T YOU JUST KICK THE CRAP OUT OF ME? But I also did answer their essay questions too, and so... yeah, I passed. And my committee was congratulatory and they had good suggestions and ideas, so... well... there you are.

Awhile later I talked with my advisor again about some next steps and he reiterated people were happy with how I did, despite the weird beginning, and now I have to figure out what my prospectus is going to be like... be right back, googling prospectus.

So, that's it. I hope this series has been useful for you. The standard “like and subscribe” stuff is always appreciated, as are unmarked, small, non-consecutive bills. I will now get back to talking about movies nobody else in my social circle watches and to catching up on sleep. Take care, wash your hands, stay frosty.