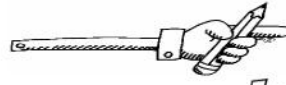


Comprehensive Exams



Dr. T's
Professional Pointers

No. 47

The dreaded comprehensive exams. They come too soon, last too long and create more than their fair share of anxiety. Indeed, these exams generally rate only behind tenure reviews and job searches for the amount of stress they create.* While these exams should create stress (the “good kind” that helps you improve your performance), students may often put too much stress on themselves. The following are some helpful tidbits of advice regarding the exam. It should be noted that this is the advice that I generally give my students. Professors vary wildly on how they approach the exam process for their students. The best advice I can give you is to consult with the professor who will administer the exam well before the exam date. Ask them what they expect of you and how they think you should best prepare.

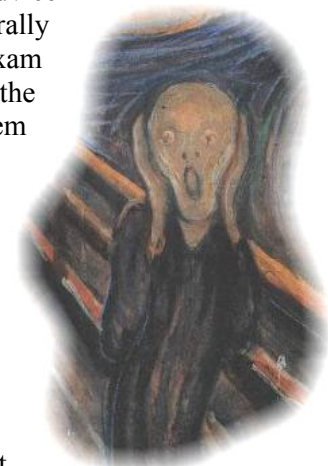
Consult Your Examiner. I just said this. Enough said.

Your Ultimate Goal. Remember, you are here to write a dissertation. The “comps” are just one set of hurdles. They are not the be all and end all of graduate school (unless you fail, of course). Don’t get so stressed out that you can’t perform to your best intellectually.

Purpose of the Exams. The purpose for the exams is to demonstrate that you have breadth of knowledge in the subfields you have chosen to specialize in. Writing the dissertation will be an incredibly narrowing exercise (you will probably become an expert on an incredibly arcane problem). In order for you to function well in the discipline as a whole, you need to be able to have something to talk to your colleagues about. This is what the exams are about (according to Dr. T).

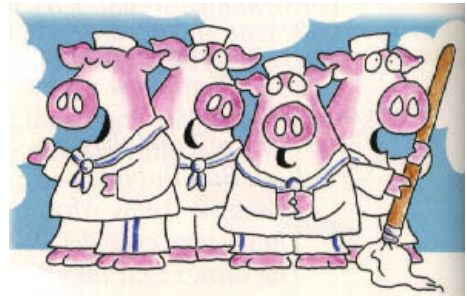
An Imaginary Strategy. To help you formulate a strategy for taking the exams, imagine yourself at an academic conference. Someone approaches you and asks, “so what do you think about the ‘democratic peace’ thesis?” (Insert any general theoretical or empirical question that dominates your subfield for “democratic peace.”) So as not to embarrass yourself (or your alma mater), you should be able to respond somewhat intelligibly. You might say, “Well, Joanne Gowa says ‘this’ and Thomas Schwartz says ‘that’ but what I really think is ‘blah blah.’” This is what you want to do on your exam. Cite the relevant literature/authors that have addressed the question being asked, discuss what exactly they said (and the evidence used) and then state your opinion. (Many students forget to do the latter on their exam. Your examiner will want to know where you stand.) Imagine yourself discussing the relevant question with a friend for an hour or so. Try to cover all the major points of the debate. If you can do this, you are in good shape.

* Having been through all three, I can honestly rank them in that order – tenure review, job search, comprehensive exams. Since tenure basically “guarantees” one job security, most other hoops that one must jump through are comparatively minor. Note that this rank order varies directly with the amount of time you invested in your professional career. Not getting tenure means you wasted about 12-13 years of your life. Not getting a job means you wasted 6-7 years (but you get to keep the nifty Ph.D.). Not passing your “comps” only wastes about 2-3 years. And you get another shot at the comps; that is not necessarily true with the other two.



Start Preparing Now. Get a copy of the subfield's reading list (on file in the graduate program office) as soon as possible. Familiarize yourself with this list. As you read various works in classes, check them off. If some works don't come up in your first year, put them on your summer reading list. Every time you read one of the works on the list, take reasonably good notes and file them away. Write down the main question the author is trying to answer, the thesis statement (main theory/hypothesis), the logic of the argument being made, and some of the evidence being used. You might also want to write down a list of contending hypotheses the author deals with and/or any other works that address the same question. Having this on file will help you review as the exams approach.

Study Buddies. Gather a group of three or four friends who are in your subfield. Decide to meet every month in your first year, and every week or so as exams approach. Exchange notes. You may want to assign different people to be principally responsible for taking notes on one particular book/article and then discussing it. This group should be a social group as well. You will need stress relief and camaraderie as the exam date approaches, and some folks to celebrate with when all is said and done. You also may need emotional support after the exam. Embrace Toonces the Driving Cat.



Practice Exams. Why anybody would ever want to take more exams than is physically necessary in one's lifetime may seem a bit odd. However, taking a practice exam is the best way to build confidence. Here is what me and my study buddies did as exams approached. We each wrote what we thought would be an exam question (based on our knowledge of previous exams) before meeting on a Saturday morning. We then exchanged questions and gave ourselves three hours to write a response. Afterwards, we printed copies of our answers and exchanged them. After lunch, we read each other's answers and critiqued them. This gave us the ability to know how fast we could write and think, as well as revealed our intellectual limits. In the evening we would go out for pizza and beer and rent some stupid movies. I actually cherish and miss those old days.

Remember to Write Your Opinion. Most professors just don't want you to spew what everyone else has said on the question at hand, but they want to know what you think too.

Rest and Relaxation. Cramming the night before these exams won't accomplish much. Get a good night's sleep before the exam. You might want to hang out with your study buddies just to relieve stress. I recommend against drinking in excess. On the exam day, wake up and tell yourself (out loud) that you are ready. Believe in yourself. After all, your professors probably believed in you enough to get you to the point of the exams.

"Professional Pointers" are a service of Professor Gill. They are meant to help socialize graduate students into the often strange and unfamiliar world of academia. Not all the advice given in these handouts is universally accepted. Successful results are not guaranteed. Use at your own risk.