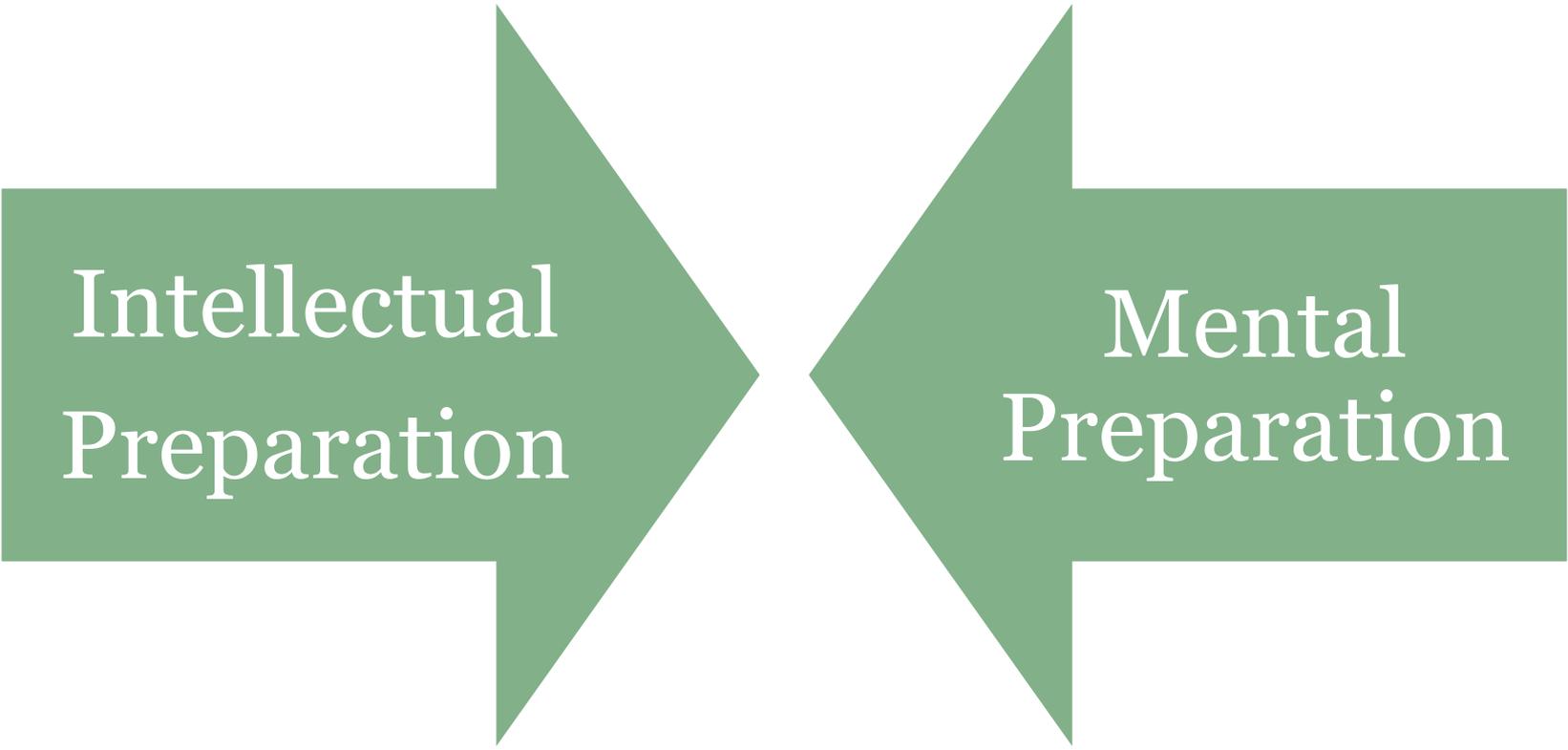


Preparing for Comprehensive Exams

Lisa Borello, M.S., M.A.
Ph.D. Candidate
School of History, Technology and Society
E-mail: lisa.borello@coa.gatech.edu

February 21, 2011

COMPS



Intellectual
Preparation

Mental
Preparation

THE Exams: Logistics

- Three areas of study
 - Mine were: Sociology of Science and Medicine; Gender, the Body and Science; Social Theory
 - *What do you want to be an expert in?*
- Committee members individually send questions to LaDonna; she sends them to you via e-mail at 9 a.m. Monday morning
 - May get one question from each field, or several from each (with choice of which to answer)
- You return completed essays to LaDonna by noon Friday via e-mail
- Oral defense is the following week (presuming successful completion of the written portion)

Some General Advice

- Comps fields should emphasize breadth over depth.
 - Students who aim for a top-level knowledge that will allow them to connect a number of different works into a broad framework, especially a cross-disciplinary one that spans across the fields, are likely to do better than those whose readings are so narrow that they cannot speak to the field at large.
- “Talk the talk, walk the walk.”
 - Think about comps as being dropped in the middle of an academic conference: Could you hold your own in a conversation with prominent scholars? Do you know the major players in the field? Do you have an understanding of the major questions and scholarly debates?
 - Professors want to see that you can speak the language of academia.

General Advice

- The exam is your chance to show just how much you know. THAT is pretty cool.
- That said, you cannot possibly include every detail you know in a few essays. Some committee members will want you to focus on key authors or scholarly debates, not everyone who has written in the field.
- Each professor is different, so know their expectations in advance.

Intellectual Prep

Intellectual Prep

- It's **never too early to start**.
 - From Day 1, take good notes and organize yourself.
 - Pay attention to the types of questions and interests of your professors – this will give you an indication of how they frame debates, the questions that are important to them/field, and their ways of thinking.
- Create a schedule for yourself. Commit to reading and/or writing every day.
 - **“Comps is your job.”**
 - A note on reading: take good notes, and create a summary of each text which highlights the major points, central arguments, etc.

Timeline

- Give yourself **at least two semesters** to prepare.

SAMPLE TIMELINE

- **Summer 2009:**
 - Confirm committee members
 - Begin creating lists (if not provided for you)
- **Fall 2010:**
 - Read, read and read some more [TAKE NOTES! Endnotes is fantastic]
 - Collect sample questions and begin working on practice essays
 - Meet with study buddy to discuss questions, readings and other issues [if you can, set up a regular schedule to meet and stick to it!]
 - Audit a class if you can to re-familiarize yourself with the material
- **Spring 2010:**
 - Confirm reading lists*
 - Stop reading at least one or two months before exams, if not longer, and focus on synthesizing what you've read.
 - Practice essays
 - Meet with advisor to determine readiness
 - Gather dates from committee and confirm availability for written and oral (including room) far in advance; use a Doodle poll to make things easier

Timeline, cont.

- **Week Before the Exam:**

- Take care of any 'life' business you can so you will be distraction free during the exams.
- Stock up on everything you think you might need (school supplies and comfort foods).
- Do any 'advance' work you can; this includes getting your bibliography ready.

- **Week of the Exam:**

- Back up and back up again.
- Give yourself a schedule of writing – and make sure to fit sleeping, eating and exercising/brain break too!
- Give yourself at least the morning you turn in the exam to proof your essays.

THE Lists

- Some faculty members will give you a reading list, others will ask you to create one in consultation with them.
 - Your list serves as a type of contract with your committee members.
- *Be strategic:* If you are building a list, choose texts that are relevant to your interests and dissertation project – this will serve you well as you write your prospectus and literature review.
- *Be realistic:* Don't be an academic hero and create a list that's twice the requirements (your committee can always have you add more).
- *Be relevant:* Stick to major canonical works in your chosen fields. You need to be aware of the scholarly debates within your discipline and the major camps.

THE Lists, cont.

- The point of comprehensive exams is to establish broad proficiency in one's chosen fields, essentially meaning that a successful candidate could organize and teach a course on that subject.
 - Look at syllabi and be able to create your own.
 - Lists should reflect the major works and prominent scholars in the field. Committee will be looking at how well you can put all the parties in conversation with one another, that you know the relevant actors/authors and which clusters belong together.

History Track

- So much emphasis tends to be placed on historiography in comprehensive exams that many students frequently neglect a good working knowledge of the basic history of their chosen fields.
 - Reading some solid textbooks, especially for the modern U.S./Europe/Asia field, can rectify this problem.
- Read historiographical essays: These can be found in journals such as *American Historical Review*, *Journal of American History*, *Technology & Culture*. There are also book-length historiographical treatments worth consulting (Gerald Grob and George A. Billias, eds. *Interpretations of American History: Patterns and Perspectives*, for example).
 - *Kindly from Nathan Moon, Ph.D.*

Sociology Track

- Unlike history, focus is usually on journal articles, rather than book-length texts. Look at *American Sociological Review*, *Social Studies of Science*, and *Science, Technology & Human Values* for a sense of a major themes and debates – and for the references, which give you a sense of canonical authors.
- I also recommend looking at books that give an overview of the central issues in the field, different academic camps, etc.; for example *Science Studies: An Advanced Introduction* by David Hess (1997) was invaluable for me.
- For social theory, there is a little less give: you need to know the classics and the contemporary theorists (major areas of change, power, voluntarism/determinism, order, micro-macro, knowledge, structure/culture, inequality)

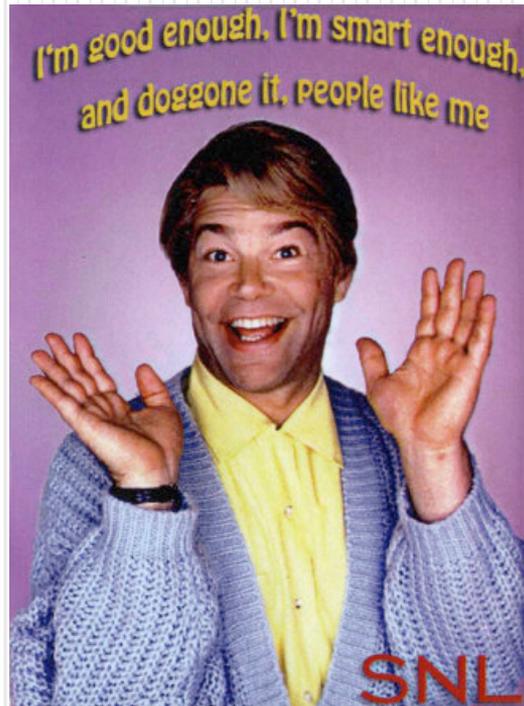
Practice, Practice, Practice

- Ask for sample questions from your committee (and former students).
- Practice writing essays – especially under deadline.
- Get feedback from your committee on your practice essays. They will help guide you and assess whether you are ‘ready’ .
 - It’s up to you to be in close consultation with your committee members; respect their time but don’t be afraid to reach out to them.
- Read review essays – this will give you a sense of the major debates and camps in the field.

Oral Exam

- Don't forget to prepare for the orals too!
- Usually about 2 hours, including committee discussion
 - Ask you to clarify portions of your written exam
 - Questions may focus on areas that you were weak on in the written portion
 - Questions may also be on your dissertation project, i.e. how you link your proposed project to the major works
 - You may also get asked to answer a question you elected to *not answer*
 - Practice answering questions with your study buddy or trusted friend if you can

Mental Preparation



Mental Preparation

- Go into the exam knowing you are going to succeed. Do not focus on the ‘what ifs’, urban legends or other people’s experiences. Repeat: You **WILL** pass **IF** you are prepared.
- Remember: Your committee wants you to pass! You are a reflection of them.
- Consider this as just another part of the grad school process. It **IS** important, but it’s not the end-all, be-all. Look beyond comps.

Mental Preparation

- Anxiety comes from not knowing what to expect; mitigate that by keeping in touch with your committee, writing and writing some more, and being organized far in advance.
 - If you keep in contact with your committee, you will have a sense of what they will ask (i.e., they're not going to throw you any curveballs).
- Anxiety also comes from focusing too much on the exams. Look at it as another project, another part of your job as a student.

Some Basic Advice

- Talk to fellow students, especially those who have been through it. Ask for former reading lists, practice essays and general advice – they will be happy to share.
- If you can, find a study buddy. A support system is key! It also helps you stay on-track with your reading and writing.
- Ask for advice, but remember that everyone studies differently. Know what works for you and what doesn't





Survival Strategies

Survival Strategies

- The weekend before the exam: Take a mental break (no cramming!), sleep and eat well.
 - “Do something brainless.”
- During the exam, if you can, go into ‘lock-down.’ If you work, take the time off; if you teach, find a guest lecturer or speaker that week. If you’re someone who is easily distracted, take a break from social media, turn your phone off, etc. Your friends and family will understand. The world also won’t come to an end if you go MIA for a week.

Surviving Written-to-Oral

- After you turn in the written exam, breathe and sleep.
- When you're ready, review what you've written. DO NOT beat yourself up over the 'could haves' and 'should haves'. You may miss something, or you may have made errors. That's OK. Recognize it and move on; see where there are holes and anticipate them. Orals are your chance to amend that.
- Orals are, thankfully, not tape-recorded.
- Don't forget to celebrate. Seriously, blow it out! 😊

Questions and Answers

Thank you!

Feel free to e-mail me if you have any questions: lisa.borello@coa.gatech.edu.