

PREPARING FOR THE COMPS EXAM: AN INFORMAL GUIDE

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NOTE: There's a lot of information to take in here! This document has been organized so you can return to it more than once at different stages of your preparation for the exam, so there's no need to read it start to finish in one sitting.

What is the comps exam?*

Officially, the comprehensive exam in English at Fordham consists of two parts: a qualifying paper and an oral examination. Colloquially, when we talk about the comps exam, we are almost always referring to the latter event. This live, two-hour oral examination serves as a cumulative demonstration of the knowledge you have acquired in at least three fields of literary study: usually, one major field defined by historical period and/or region, and two minor fields, one a contiguous historical period/region, one a flexibly defined scholarly area relevant to your research. All the logistics you need to know about the comps exam can be found in Section V of the [Ph.D. Student Handbook](#). The present guide assumes familiarity with these details, so please be sure to review them carefully, and contact the DGS or GPA with any questions.

Generally speaking, the comps exam is intended to test your ability to:

- choose particular areas of scholarly focus
- organize and follow a rigorous, self-directed program of reading
- memorize information crucial to your scholarly fields
- read widely in and think independently about your discipline

* This guide has been compiled and expanded upon from a number of online sources, including [5 Strategies for Organizing Notes for Comprehensive Exams](#), [8 Ways to Prepare for Comprehensive Exams](#), [Acing Your Qualifying Examination](#), [Comprehensive Exam Strategies](#), [An Orals Survival Kit](#), [Some Informal \(but Informative\) Study Tips for Your Comps Exam](#), [Surviving Studying for Comprehensive Exams](#), [Surviving the Oral Comprehensive](#), and [Surviving your comprehensive exams](#). It is most directly indebted to [Organizing the Orals](#) by Emily Lauer and Balaka Basu of The Graduate Center, CUNY. Elizabeth Bolger conducted initial research to collect these and more materials; Carolyn Cargyle, Steve Fragano, and Ellis Light offered valuable feedback on a first draft. I am grateful for these contributions.

- demonstrate knowledge specific to your scholarly fields
- generate ideas that connect across multiple readings
- converse with other scholars (i.e. your committee) about important topics in your fields

You might view the comps exam as your first self-declaration as a literary scholar. Your choice of major and minor fields, your reading lists, and your examining committee all contribute to your developing scholarly identity. Approached with curiosity and a smart work plan, the comps exam offers a crucial opportunity to build your knowledge base, fill in gaps, pursue interests, and formulate questions that will guide your professional efforts for years to come. It marks a transition from accumulating knowledge through coursework to posing certain fundamental questions to yourself: What kinds of courses do I want to be able to teach? What dissertation project might I be interested in? What theoretical and methodological approaches attract me most? What does it mean to participate in the critical conversation? What kind of work do I want to do?

The comps exam serves two primary functions: it forces you to fill in gaps in your knowledge that your studies to date haven't covered, and it anticipates high-pressure future encounters, especially job talks and interviews. Where you won't have as much control over these future encounters, the comps exam gives you a measure of agency through your choice of examiners, definition of fields, construction of reading lists, and period of in-depth study. Your examiners are looking for you to take an active role in shaping the conversation and are eager to see you balancing their views with your own. The exam process strengthens your relationships with these examiners, some of whom will serve on your dissertation committee, write recommendations certifying your competence in the areas of examination, and ultimately become trusted advisors and advocates.

Let's also be honest, comps are scary. The exam might be anxiety-inducing for a number of reasons: the volume of material you're expected to prepare, doubts around the quality and depth of your preparation, not knowing what questions your examiners will ask, the novelty and unfamiliarity of an oral exam, stories you've heard from other students, anxieties about how you'll be evaluated. Structurally, the exam makes contradictory demands: try to read everything, even though it's impossible; anticipate your examiners' questions, but be prepared for anything; be able to explain what's on your reading list, and also what isn't. The power dynamics of the exam are also palpable: as much as you'll be encouraged to think of the comps exam as a friendly conversation, most students feel like they're in the hotseat getting grilled with questions for two hours. It is only natural that you will experience a certain amount of stress around your comps exam—it is a big undertaking, and you're asking (and will be asked) some big questions. Know that, to a person, no one ever feels totally prepared for comps, everyone stresses over them, and everyone survives them. Your committee will be investing a great deal of time in you—they genuinely want you to succeed! One of the best things you can do to help manage your stress is to be thoughtful and systematic about your preparation; by reading this guide, you're taking a step in that direction.

Broadly speaking, you should expect the coming months to proceed as follows. In the semester before you dive into studying for the exam, you will assemble your committee, define your fields, and build a reading list for each field. This process generally takes around 2-3 months. You will then follow a self-designed, sustained program of reading, notetaking, study, and practice. This period commonly lasts 1-2 semesters, depending on whether you entered the PhD with an MA or BA, and should end in a spring semester. Part way through that spring semester, you will work with the GSA to schedule an exam date with your committee. Finally, the exam occurs in early May; if more time is needed, the exam can be pushed to late August. If you determine in consultation with your committee and the DGS that even more time is needed to prepare, the exam can be further delayed until early December, though this is an exception to customary practice.

Choosing your committee

Comps exam preparation begins with the process of choosing your examining committee. You should work out the composition of your committee early in the semester **before** you plan to take your exam (i.e., if you were taking the exam in May 2023, you'd want to start assembling your committee in September 2022). PhD students who enter with an MA are expected to take their comps exam in the spring or summer of their second year, students who enter with a BA in spring or summer of their third year. Sometimes students need to postpone the exam until the fall, but in the majority of cases it's best to simply get them out of the way so that you can take the next steps in your studies. If you have any concerns, consult with the DGS on the timing of your exam.

Your committee should consist of at least three professors drawn from Fordham's English department. In rare occasions, it may make sense to include one examiner from outside the English department. This is exceptional, though, and must receive advance DGS approval. Each member of the committee will examine you on one collaboratively built reading list. Students often choose to approach professors they have gotten to know through coursework. However, you may have a teaching or research interest not normally covered in course offerings that faculty in the department may hold as secondary research interest. Take a look at the department's [faculty listing](#) (click into each faculty profile for a fuller list of interests) and ask around the department, especially your committee chair.

As an initial step in forming a committee, most students first determine the faculty member who will serve as their committee chair. Usually, the chair of your exam committee will go on to serve as the advisor for your dissertation, and will therefore be someone with whom you will have a long and close working relationship. You should consider your committee chair as your primary point person for the comps exam: they will be able to answer many of your questions and help you navigate the preparation process in most regards. The DGS is always there to answer any questions they can't.

When you approach professors to serve on your committee, you'll want to think about who will make the best possible fit with your research interests and habits of mind. Read over and dip into their bibliography: how strong is your overlap in interests, outlooks, critical orientations, etc.? If you've taken classes from them in the past, consider how they gave feedback in that setting. Ask the opinion of advanced graduate students who are writing their dissertations under the direction of professors you're considering. You may also be worried about personality clashes between your committee members. Your committee chair is best positioned to detect this and prevent it from happening, so consult with them actively as you gather your committee. The DGS can also advise you if you have any concerns.

After you have researched your committee members, verified they are suitable, and asked them to serve on your committee—you may make this request over email or in person—you should notify the DGS and GSA via email, and then schedule an initial meeting with each member. Different faculty have different approaches to interactions with students prior to the comps exam; some prefer to be hands off and allow you to explore your texts independently, some are very hands on and will regularly discuss texts and run practice exams with you; most fall somewhere in between.

Every interaction you have with your committee will make the exam itself more predictable and your preparation more focused. In many cases, you can steer your committee members toward your objectives, although you should not expect to fully determine what appears on your lists or perfectly predict what will be on the exam. It's a give and take that will evolve over time, as your relationships with your committee members grow.

Making your lists

Once you have assembled your committee, you are ready to begin compiling your reading lists. The first step is to define a focused topic/area for each list. At Fordham, your three fields usually cover one major field, defined by historical period and/or region, and two minor fields, one of which is commonly historically or regionally contiguous to your major field. Your other minor field often focuses on a genre, theoretical approach, methodology, author, interdiscipline, or other area of study relevant to your research interests. You should think of your three fields as a rough map of your teaching and research profile: these are the fields of study you wish to become expert in, and now is the chance for you to build up that expertise, so you can write syllabi, converse with colleagues, and interview effectively in years to come. You may wish to write a brief statement that delineates each field. Such a statement can help you create a focused reading list and may give your committee a better sense of the boundaries of your preparation.

In conversation with each of your examiners, you'll want to decide if the structure of each list should be narrow and deep or broad and exhaustive. The makeup and length of each list will depend on this decision. There is no single answer to how many texts should be on your list. One way to judge list length is to say that the list should, **at minimum**, cover all the reading necessary to teach the list topic as an upper level undergrad course. Each list will include substantially more readings than would appear on any one syllabus; rather, the list might provide three or four overlapping sets of books you could use to teach the same course with different emphases. Naturally, if you have a very dense list, say French critical theory, or a list with very long texts, say the epic, the number of texts on your list may be few in comparison to a list on sonnets and lyrics, for example.

The responsibility for building your list lies with you: most examiners will ask you to put together a draft list, which you will then pass back and forth a few times for comment and revision before the list is approved. Fordham does not maintain past reading lists for consultation, but these are widely available from English departments at other universities – a Google search for “English comps reading list” will help you get started. You can also talk with more advanced grad students in your field about their reading lists; many will be willing to share theirs with you. Your three lists should be approved by your examiners before the end of the semester preceding your comps exam.

Each list will likely include some combination of primary and secondary sources, though individual lists may skew in favor of either depending on topic and examiner preference. Most major field lists include primary and secondary texts to equip you to speak to central field questions and critical interventions. Minor fields are more flexible. Your committee members can help you determine this balance and direct you toward the most important scholarship, if you're unsure where to start. Many will ask you first to compile a bibliography of secondary texts and then help you fill in the gaps. As always, ask each examiner about their approach.

Expect your examiners to add/remove items to/from your lists before approving them, and for your lists to go through later adjustments during your preparation period. These faculty suggestions are often very helpful, but you may find that some of them don't work for you, for whatever reason. Keeping an open dialogue about the list itself can be very helpful in this regard. Be honest with your examiners if you feel the list is growing out of proportion: this can lead to productive conversations about the shape of your field, how to read and prepare for the exam, and what you each consider to be essential. Remember that you and your committee will often be reading (or at least re-reading) these texts at the same time, in order to prepare for the exam. Some faculty may be especially impressed with very long lists; others may not be pleased to have to read or re-read excessive quantities of material.

Here are some factors and tips to consider while compiling your reading list:

- Define and build lists that will be helpful to your teaching, your viability on the job market, and your dissertation, in that order of priority. Talk with your committee about each of these interests and how best to meet them.
- Be judicious about copy-pasting texts onto your list, especially when building a first draft to share with examiners. Don't assume that, because you read the text in a course two years ago, it's by default in your repertoire and worthy of inclusion.
- You will continue to read and expand your knowledge base after the exam, especially regarding your dissertation. By defining your fields clearly and engaging in active exchange with your examiners, you can construct a list that is comprehensive without being impractically exhaustive.
- As you build your list, keep in mind that you may be asked during the exam why your lists look the way they do, why certain texts are included and others not. Also consider how your lists talk to each other. While there shouldn't be overlap between the lists, you can make helpful connections by thinking about your list subjects in conjunction. Examiners will sometimes pose questions that ask you to think across fields.
- Thematize within each list by sub-grouping its texts by genre, thematic concerns, etc. This will help get you thinking about connections between texts inside each of your fields.
- Strike a balance between primary and secondary, new and familiar. Try to avoid piling on a load of texts you've never seen or heard of. If an examiner wants to add a text you don't know, you can respond that you'll check it out and see how it's helpful. If you find it's unhelpful to your preparation, be prepared to explain why to your examiner.
- Some examiners may ask you to include recently published secondary sources on your lists. Talk with them about how to effectively balance the longer critical conversation with cutting edge research and current scholarly debates.
- The reading list is not an aesthetic or perfectible object. Don't spend months writing and revising your lists—this is anxiety-driven procrastination rearing its head! After you've settled on a topic for your list, spend a week or two going through relevant old syllabi, seminar papers, online sample comps lists, and bibliographies from your favorite books/articles to compile potential titles. Spend a few more days whittling, organizing, and focusing the list, then send a draft off to your examiner for initial comment.
- You will not be examined on everything on your lists—it's impossible, there's just too much material and a limited amount of time for asking questions. Prepare for the likelihood now that some of the texts you really want to talk about will go unmentioned.
- Your lists may undergo small revisions as you prepare, prompted either by you or your examiners. Be sure to keep your examiner in the loop if you'd like to make any changes.
- You don't have to read texts you're uninterested in and unexcited about. You can negotiate with your committee so that most of the texts you read interest you.

Reading strategically

It is impossible to read every single text on each of your lists meticulously—this would take up far too much time, and risks missing the forest for the trees. You should seek to cultivate reading habits and study strategies that allow you to 1) keep up the reading momentum and 2) retain what you've read. This means knowing what styles of reading to employ with what kinds of texts, so that you're making the best use of the limited time you have to prepare before your exam. (At Fordham, students who enter with a BA usually finish with coursework after two years and have the full third year to prepare for comps; students entering with an MA usually complete their coursework after three semesters and prepare for comps during the spring semester of their second year.) Talk with your professors, committee members, and fellow grad students about how they read and keep track of their reading, and ask for advice on how to read your lists efficiently and effectively. Though there are no universal rules, you may find the following approaches to reading helpful:

- For primary texts, start by skimming introductions or text companions for summaries. Know the text's structure, plot, and major characters before you dive in, so that while you read you're reinforcing that basic knowledge and allowing your intellectual curiosity and interest to lead the way. **Always read for themes and to develop your own thoughts about what you read, not to memorize dates and facts and plot points *per se*.** Parcel your reading of longer texts into chunks that make thematic or structural sense, rather than splitting into arbitrary equal chunks by page number.
- For secondary texts, skim first for structure. Read the jacket description/article abstract; consult the book's Table of Contents or the article's section headings; scan the Index for lengthy entries to familiarize yourself with keywords and conceptual nodes to track while reading. Then read introductory and concluding chapters/paragraphs—this is usually where the major contributions of the text are declared and contextualized—and fill in the middle as your interest leads you. Since they usually summarize a book's main arguments and describe it chapter by chapter, you may also want to consult published book reviews in your field's leading scholarly journal.
- For theory texts, read first to develop a mental map of the text's major conceptual moves; keep a written record of these as you go. Resist the urge to halt and parse out a patch of language or argumentative turn that's got you stumped: keep reading! These passages often come into clarity if you read a few sentences further, or once you've got the text's overall argument in hand. Then return to those sections of the text where the major theoretical contribution lies, and re-read to ensure you have a firm grasp of the main take-aways. Rephrase them in your own words, in writing.

There are many different ways to organize the time you'll spend reading. Some students find it helpful to print out a blank calendar of the months during which you'll prepare for your exam, map out the readings week by week on that calendar, and treat each week as a mini-contract. Others prefer to create a study syllabus that realistically charts out a schedule of readings. Others rely on project management platforms like [Asana](#) to organize and keep accountable to a calendar. Build into your calendar some wiggle room for inevitable slowdowns, plus regular episodes of time off for your rest and well-being. Read in a planned and directed way: choose the order you'll read your fields, or what categories you'll use to read across them; group texts into related clusters to encourage cross-text connections; break down your lists into smaller digestible chunks. If there are books/articles on your lists not in Fordham's holdings, compile those titles and set aside a day early on to submit your ILL requests all at once, so you don't have to worry about hunting them down later.

In addition to choosing what order you'll read your texts in, there are many personal factors that will determine how you structure the time you'll spend reading. You'll discover what time of the day you read best, when in the week you'll have the most uninterrupted time, and what notetaking system(s) work best for you. The time of day when your brain is at its sharpest is probably the best time to read theory, criticism, and dense texts. Save more pleasurable reading for other times of the day. Treat your reading like a job: put it into your schedule, and clock in *and* out at the times you've established. Reading for the comps exam is immersive and intense, and rest is key to avoiding burnout. Make sure to pace yourself and schedule in plenty of downtime.

The space you study in can be as important as the hour of the day you study. Many find they work best away from the distractions of home, at a local coffeeshop or library, or in a campus study space. If you do work from home, try to set up a dedicated, quiet space for your reading, furnish that space comfortably, and establish a ritual for yourself that can mark your entry into reading mode (brew a tall thermos of coffee, turn on the white noise machine, have your favorite pencil and notebook ready at hand, neatly arrange your books and papers, etc.).

If you live in or frequently spend time in Manhattan, consider registering to read in the [study rooms](#) on the second floor of the New York Public Library (the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building at 42nd and Fifth). To become a user of these dedicated study spaces, fill out the [application online](#). It can take up to ten days to process your application. You will then get a key card from the General Research division, which is in room 217, on the third floor. From then on, books you request will go straight to the Study, and you'll have your own shelf where the requested books can be kept for up to a month. These study spaces offer long, well-lit tables, comfortable chairs, big windows, and the company of other quiet scholars; they are open whenever the library is.

It's also worth pointing out that, while you should plan to read everything, it sometimes happens that you run out of time and don't get to read everything on your list as thoroughly as you'd anticipated. If you've built a frank and trusting relationship with your examiner, you may wish to share with them as the exam date draws near what texts you're strongest on and what texts you won't be able to speak to as strongly. You should still be ready to answer a question on texts you haven't fully prepared with a productive "I don't know" response (see below, in the [Studying for the exam](#) and [The day of the exam](#) sections).

Here are some additional reading tips:

- Employ the SQ3R approach to reading:
 - **S: Survey** your text, perusing its overall organization in 3-5 minutes.
 - **Q:** Write out **questions** on the reading *before* you read. What do you want to find out? Why are you reading this text?
 - **R: Read** the material looking for answers to the questions you posed. Always read actively, writing notes in the margins or in a notebook while you read.
 - **R:** After you've read, **restate** what you learned in your own words.
 - **R: Review** how this text fits within the larger framework of your materials.
- Prioritize major/canonical works that you haven't yet read. When you get down to the final month, you'll be crunching time to finish your lists, so if there are major novels, plays, collections of poems, or foundational works of criticism or theory in your major and minor fields that you have yet to read, get to them early. Major works will come up in your exam, and having only read excerpts from them can get you into sticky situations.

- Build into your reading schedule regular pauses for stepping back from the trees to describe the forest. Find connections between primary sources, secondary sources, and different lists. As you read, track key concepts as they appear across multiple texts, and record these in your notes. The more connections you have at the ready by the time your exam day comes, the better. Having these connections ready to go will help you to steer the conversation the way you want during the exam.
- Plan to finish your reading 2-3 weeks before the scheduled exam. Use this time to review your notes and build up this kind of connective thinking with and across your texts.
- Have faith in yourself as a reader: yes, you will remember this concept/scene/idea, even if you don't transcribe it at this very moment.
- If a secondary text is unpromising after you've read the introduction, let it go—it's okay to stop. Most of the good theoretical stuff is usually presented up front, so if it's not there, it's not there.
- If your primary text has been recorded as an audiobook (check YouTube), read while you listen to the playback; pause when needed to make marginal notes. This will keep your reading at a steady pace and help reduce distraction and unnecessary lingering.
- To get a bird's eye view of your major and minor historical fields, key authors/genres/etc., and the longer history of scholarly conversation, consult the [Cambridge Histories](#)/[Oxford Histories](#). These sources shouldn't appear on your reading lists, but they can help you place the texts that are on your lists into a disciplinary context.

Approaches to notetaking

There is no one best way to study for your comps exam. Over your years of study, you will have developed methods of notetaking that serve you well. You should rely on these methods while you read. However, you may also wish to explore new styles of notetaking that may better serve your study goals for this specific exam. (You'll find a variety of approaches to notetaking described below.) Do your best to keep detailed, well-organized notes: the archive you create will be useful not just for the comps exam, but for your research and teaching for decades to come.

You'll want to develop a notetaking method that balances three factors: gathering direct information from the texts you read, recording your critical thinking about those texts, and the amount of time spent on writing and organizing your notes. Keep track of your ideas and insights about your texts, as well as specific textual moments you can call on to illustrate your answers during the exam, where reference to concrete, tangible textual exempla is important. Some students find the physical experience of handwritten notes helps them remember more effectively. Others find typing up notes while they read more efficient and flexible, with the benefit of search and tagging functionalities. Anecdotally, students who set out to handwrite notes, then type them up as a means of review usually discover that this process is more time-consuming than they can afford. Whatever approach you take, check in with yourself periodically that your study method goes beyond the passive recording of data and involves you in consistent practices of active, reflective thought.

Take a little time to experiment, but then choose one approach to notetaking and stick with it. Consistency is key. Here are some possible notetaking approaches:

- Outline method: For each text, head a page with the MLA-style bibliographical entry for the text, then keep running notes while you read. Record details in tiered bulleted lists. Use highlighting, bold, color-coding, etc. to make important information stand out. You then can sort the notes by list, chronologically by publication date, by theme, etc.
- Cornell method: Divide each page of your notebook into [three zones](#): a margin at the bottom for summaries, a margin to the left for cues, and a main area for note-taking. Take notes as you would in the main area, then identify questions, connective threads, themes, and main ideas in the cue margin. Write a 1-2 sentence summary of the most important ideas in the bottom margin.
- Mind mapping: Use a platform like [Coggle](#), [Freemind](#), or [MindMeister](#) to visually diagram connections between concepts in a non-linear fashion. Start by writing the main concept in the middle of the page. Then branch out with topic branches and fill in important details. This approach works best with keywords, not with long discursive notes.
- Second day brain dumps: While you read your text, make annotations and marginal comments, dogear pages, write note in the back of the book. Once you've finished the text, let it rest for a day or two. Then start a new page in your notebook and do a brain dump—write out everything significant you can remember about the text, then go back to your dogeared pages and back cover notes to see what else you can add. If you can't remember something two days after reading a book, it's unlikely you'll remember it during the exam.
- Build a wiki: A wiki can help you organize your notes and make them easy to navigate. This strategy is also excellent for synthesizing notes, because it enables you to quickly build connections between separate entries. You can use popular tools such as [MediaWiki](#) or [bitweaver](#). For a comprehensive comparison of platforms and software, check out [WikiMatrix](#).
- Blog your comps: Use a platform like [Tumblr](#) or [WordPress](#) and add one entry per book. Your notes are easy to tag and search. Adjust your privacy settings so your notes are visible to the public or only visible to you. You can set goals in order to stay on track: add four entries per week, insert tags and crosslinks on days when you're not writing an entry.
- Write notecards: Basic flashcards can force you to distill the most important takeaways for each book or article. This can be especially useful if you have a habit of taking too many notes. Prepare one notecard for each source, punch a hole in the corner, attach them to a key ring, and flip through them for speedy review. Decide what key information you want to include on each card: for primary sources, title, major characters, structure/form, major themes, key quotes, and points of intellectual interest; for secondary sources, title, main argument, methodology, texts/topics addressed, and a critique/reflection or two. To make your notes more portable, try a flashcard app such as [Brainscape](#) or [iStudious](#).

Studying for the exam

Write. Every day. Write lots.

Writing is the cornerstone of learning and cognitive development, and is an invaluable tool when studying for exams. Writing consistently can help 1) make connections between ideas, texts, and concepts 2) give you materials to go back and study as the exam nears 3) keep you motivated by providing tangible evidence of the progress you make each day 4) maintain focus and keep you on

track with daily writing goals 5) create spaces where you can vent about, acknowledge, reflect upon, and write through the feelings this process evokes in you, so you can move towards a more positive outlook. There are lots of tools to help you keep writing: GradHacker has compiled a list of useful tools [here](#) and [here](#). The site [750words](#) gamifies your writing process with badges, metrics, and daily reminder emails.

Talk. Talk lots. To yourself and others.

Talk through your ideas in the shower. Talk about readings with colleagues and friends. Imagine questions you might get asked and work out a tentative answer. Schedule meetings early on with as many advanced graduate students as you can who “comped” in fields related to yours, who can ask “compy” questions and help get you thinking about strategies for answering. Organize a study group (meet weekly if you can) with peers studying related fields, and practice asking each other questions. In particular, ask questions that you haven’t the foggiest idea how to answer and share ideas generously. Constructively discuss each other’s answers in terms of both content and delivery.

Stage a mock exam with advanced grad students.

It is crucial that, in addition to reading efficiently and taking effective notes, you practice thinking on your feet and communicating the knowledge you’re building. The best way to do this is to organize a mock exam about three weeks before your exam date, recruiting three advanced grad students who have already taken the comps exam and know what the experience is like. Most students find the mock exam to be their most important study aid. Ask your colleagues to impersonate your three examiners (their interests, their style of thinking, the way they speak and ask questions, etc.) and to write up a couple questions from your lists. Set aside a two hour block and have your mock examiners run you through the exam from start to finish, like it’s the real thing. Take a break, have some cookies, and then reflect on and talk through your performance: what went well, and what could be improved? How does your anxiety manifest, and how can you manage it more effectively? You will be significantly more prepared (and less nervous) if you’ve experienced a version of the exam before you walk into the room on the actual day.

Take study breaks, short and long.

Connections happen best when one is rested. Fresh ideas often emerge spontaneously in off hours. Taking small breaks while studying will help allow the concepts you’ve learned to cohere and give your brain time to solidify connections. You might feel guilty stepping away from your studies for some fun, particularly as your exam date draws closer, but taking time for yourself is important. Good studying always includes small breaks—do the laundry, take a shower, have a dance break, make a snack, go for a walk. Big breaks are important too. Take a couple days off to reconnect with something you enjoy. Try to de-stress, guilt free. Take time for yourself—rest is fundamental, not just for effective studying, but more importantly for your holistic well-being.

Don’t neglect yourself or your relationships.

Scholarly research and writing have a reputation for being isolating and lonely. During intense periods of work, it can be easy to slip into tunnel vision, overlong work hours, and unintentional neglect of ourselves and those who surround us. Periodically step back and reconnect with yourself and your relationships. If you start to feel you’re drowning or at a loss, schedule a meeting with one of your committee members or the DGS. Use that meeting to reassess your study practices, refocus, reenergize, and regain confidence to pick up your studying again. You might also use this meeting to revisit and revise your reading lists with your examiners to make your workload more manageable.

Set attainable goals and rewards.

Setting goals for the day or week is an important part of keeping yourself motivated, and making sure that you are tackling all the material. But it is important that these goals are realistic and attainable. Know your limits, and work within them. Daily goals and reward systems give you something to work towards, and meeting them gives you a sense of accomplishment and momentum that can help you stay motivated.

Enlist others to support you.

A network of people who are encouraging and supportive can help stay accountable, on track, and balanced. Find a study partner. Enlist family members or spouses to encourage you to reach your writing goal for the day—and to remind you to take a break, relax, and reconnect with your relationships. Ask friends to quiz you or read over practice exams. Talk with colleagues about your study process. Ask other students about their exam experiences. Meet once a week with others studying for their comps exam, especially if you can fold some recreation or social occasion into the weekly check-in. It is easy to feel isolated and alone when studying, but including others in your study plan can help make studying easier.

Focus on what you do know, not what you don't.

It is all too easy to think about all the things that you haven't learned yet, all the books you haven't read, all the questions you can't answer yet. It's easy to panic and focus on the negative. But there are lots of things that you know already, and focusing on that can help ease your mind. Write a practice question that you know you can answer. Get a friend to ask you trivia questions about a text you know well. Read back over your notes to see how far you have come. Read a seminar paper from a year ago to remind yourself what you've read. Celebrate what you know, rather than what you don't.

Practice, practice, practice.

Practice answering aloud, speaking slowly and deliberately. If you're nervous during your exam, you'll naturally speed up a bit. Come up with different ways to ask your committee clarifying questions. When you get a question you don't understand, or you draw a blank, asking for clarification can help you change your perspective on the question and give you more time to develop your answer. Get in the habit of rephrasing the question you've been asked before answering. This buys you a little time to keep thinking and will help you make sure you fully understand the question you've been asked so you can answer it fully.

Play to your strengths.

During the exam, you'll want to spend a little more time on questions you know a lot about. Get into the habit of going beyond one word answers. Don't just dig in; draw some connections. Expand to demonstrate not just what you know about the center of the question, but how it branches out for you into related areas. If there's a through-line, recall and expand on a point of conversation that's already occurred. Practice connecting more distant examiner questions to texts or topics that you're confident in. When you see opportunities in a question or answer to get to a related text or topic that you're confident in, take it. By "hijacking" the question (after answering the one posed, of course!), you're taking some control over how time in the exam is spent. By getting into discussion of something you find really interesting and engaging, you'll raise your own confidence level and demonstrate enthusiasm to the committee. They want to see you excited and passionate about your interests.

Practice talking through “claim sandwiches”

As you practice answering questions, develop the habit of first verbally articulating your stance, then getting into the details, then restating your stance. This helps you present your own ideas clearly (you get two chances to state them) and show off the depth of your reading. In practice, this “claim sandwich” sounds something like this: Here’s where I’d like to go to attend to your question... Here are some [ideas, readings, critical discourses, etc.] that support the direction I’m taking... Now, I’m returning to my opening point (perhaps adjusting it, or simply restating it) to close my answer.

Learn how to say “I don’t know.”

It’s okay to say “I don’t know” during your exam. The exam is meant to find out what you know... and what you don’t. It is very likely you will be asked a question you don’t know the answer to. You’ll want to practice responding to these kinds of questions: one common reason students don’t perform as well as they want is because they lose confidence and spiral after an early question they don’t know the answer to. Try out different styles of answering questions beyond your area of knowledge. You can say something like, “I haven’t thought about that. If I were to broaden my research to include that, I’d expect to see...” or “What interest me about that question is... To figure out how I’d answer it, I’d first want to turn to...” Approaches like these acknowledge the question, reconnect you with your areas of expertise, and display your active mind at work. (More advice on productive “I don’t know” answers can be found below in [The day of the exam.](#))

Know the shape of your lists and your fields.

You are being evaluated during the exam on your general expertise, so give yourself latitude to think broadly during your studying. Build an overall picture of your fields as you go, for both primary texts and important critical discourses/hot topics in your field. Make a point to know the major historic breakthroughs and scholarly shifts in your fields and the literatures they encompass. Be able to explain the limits of your fields as you’ve defined them, whether those limits are defined by dates, geographies, languages, genres, etc.

Lean into your interests.

There is nothing wrong with answering a question in a historical field by first establishing your general knowledge of a topic/text and then supplementing your answer by going to your own interests (usually represented by your third field). Doing this is always a good thing – it lets your committee know that you are 1) capable of teaching an undergraduate course on the topic and 2) capable of forming your own opinions, ideas, and interests. It also shows your skill at making connections and demonstrates confidence when thinking creatively about all the topics on the table.

It’s about attitude as much as knowledge.

The attitude you embody as you answer questions has a big role to play. Confidence is what you are aiming for. Arrogance is a rare problem; timid and unconfident are much more common. Your examiners want to see you comfortable putting your knowledge out there and standing up for your opinions. During mock exams, ask for feedback on how you present; learn your nervous/anxious tics and practice alternatives that express greater confidence. It is usually obvious to your committee when you’re losing your nerve versus when you’re digging in and plowing ahead, even if you’re momentarily uncertain. You will have moments of both, but try to have more of the latter.

Know your endgame.

Two weeks before the exam, start scaling back on your reading. Your mind needs time to rest and prepare. Stop reading new books, and shift your focus toward synthesis of your readings, clear

articulation of your ideas, and understanding the broader context of your chosen fields. Take notes on your notes: distill them down into key concepts and memorable talking points, with examples you can bring up. Rather than anticipate exam questions, use this exercise to construct several intelligent, well thought out directions you could go in if asked to discuss the major texts on your lists. If you know any questions you'll be asked in advance, take time to write out preliminary answers. One week before the exam, stop taking notes on your notes and start reviewing them, paying attention to recurrent themes or ideas within and among your lists. Just before the exam, give your brain a break. Do something fun to help you relax, and keep your day before/day of review light and brief. Keep in mind that it's normal to feel stressed and nervous before the exam!

Keeping in touch with your committee

It is important that you stay in contact with your committee throughout the reading process. At minimum, you should meet with your committee members individually at least once in the semester before your exam to discuss your reading list, and once in the semester of your exam to review the exam format. Meeting more frequently than this is highly advisable: doing so will help you get to know your examiners better, and will help them see that you are actively reading and thinking on an ongoing basis (which you won't then have to prove from scratch when you walk into the exam room). Your ongoing interaction with your committee creates a conversation that will continue during the exam, and sets the tone for the day of the exam itself.

Depending on the wishes of your committee members and your availability, you can keep in touch over email or have a series of in-person or virtual meetings to discuss what you've read so far. You can also use these meetings to set internal deadlines for yourself, for instance, by telling a committee member what you plan to read next and when you'll be in touch about it. You should come to meetings with questions in hand, which might include:

- What is your philosophy towards the examination?
- Are there particular topics, areas, or text(s) you want me to demonstrate knowledge of?
- What types of questions do you usually ask?
- What are you looking for in my performance during the exam?

You want to establish expectations clearly with your committee to avoid surprises and help make your studying efficient. Overcommunicate. This information will help put you at ease with your examiners, and can help you anticipate possible questions they may ask.

Contact with your committee members should be a give and take. You'll want to determine and respect your committee members' preferences regarding the degree of contact prior to the exam. At times a committee member may be unresponsive; do not take this as lack of interest. Instead, follow up politely 4-5 days after your initial email, and once more another 4-5 days later if you still haven't heard back. Contact the DGS if you still receive no reply. You should come to each meeting with an examiner knowing what texts and topics you'd like to discuss and let them know these in advance. During meetings, volunteer some of your own ideas about what you've read and correlations between different texts. These conversations will help you become familiar with your examiner's stance on texts and topics on your list. You can also ask your committee members which texts they consider the core of the list, and which texts are more peripheral. Some committee members may be willing to give you some sample questions before the exam itself, or even sit a mock exam with you.

If committee members prefer to be more hands off, discuss with them the best way to stay in

conversation while you prepare. Perhaps they'd be willing to receive periodic 'reading reports' where you made observations about the texts you're currently reading, identify themes and parallels, and ask questions. You can then review these email exchanges as part of your final study push before the exam.

Staying in touch will also mean that your committee knows what books you read when. It will be helpful to all concerned to know which books you are saving for last and will thus be freshest in your mind during the exam itself. A final meeting with each examiner in the two weeks before your exam can allow your examiners to know what your primary interests are in each list, what thematic and theoretical narratives you've managed to thread through the texts, and how to prepare generative exam questions.

Lastly, you should speak with your committee chair if you need accommodations during the exam. Don't be afraid to ask if you need them! You are well within your rights to ask for accommodations to complete your exam. You'll want to make this request several weeks in advance of your exam date. If you need assistance determining whether you're in need of accommodations and what kinds to request, you can reach out to Fordham's [Office of Disability Services](#).

The day of the exam

You are ready. Your hard work is about to pay off. Focus on the immense amount you have learned, not on the details that may have slipped through the cracks. The people on your committee want you to succeed—even if they might make you sweat in the process.

You will normally be examined on your major field for an hour, and your minor fields for thirty minutes each (your committee chair is usually the one to keep an eye on the clock and make sure that each list gets due time). Each examiner will examine you on their list alone, though it sometimes happens that questions later in the exam will recall questions asked earlier by another examiner. You are allowed to have copies of your lists handy for reference during the exam.

The kinds of questions you get during the exam can range widely in scope and style. Here are a few common types of questions:

- About the canon: what texts are central to your field and why?
- About an author: what characterizes an author's style and what impact did it have?
- About a genre: what are the features that define a literary genre and what are some limit cases?
- About form: of a particular text, about a literary history of a form, about creative uses of form
- About a theme: in what texts is a theme prominent and what does the author do with it?
- About literary periods: what are the start and end dates of your field; why these dates?
- About your lists: why did you choose to include these texts, why exclude others? Why label your fields this way?
- About critical theory: explain the central idea of a theorist/text, put theorists/texts into conversation, identify critiques of a theorist/text and where you position yourself
- Sight reading: if your field involves manuscripts/material book history, you may be given a manuscript/book image and asked to read the text, identify the text, and discuss its importance
- Close reading: you may be presented with a text that's not on your list but within your field, given a few minutes to read and take notes, and then perform a close reading on the spot

Consult with your committee chair ahead of time to determine the order of fields you'd prefer. This is one area you can exercise some agency over the exam. Some committee chairs begin the exam by asking the examinee to give a brief (no more than five minute) opening statement, addressing a question like, "Why did you choose these three lists?" or "How do you see these three lists fitting together?" If you would like to start the exam this way, let your committee chair know. There is no expectation that you will begin the exam with such an opening statement. It can have some benefits, though: it lets your voice out into the room first and allows you to articulate your main areas of interest, around which your examiners can frame their questions.

BEFORE THE EXAM

- **Schedule the examination during your mental "peak" of the day:** Work with the GSA to schedule your exam for the part of the day when you are most alert and focused. If you're a morning person, schedule early; if you are at your best in the afternoon, schedule your exam for that time.
- **Prepare all logistics in advance:** Ensure you have reliable transportation to the exam location. Visit the exam room in advance and sit in the chairs around the table, so the environment will feel familiar. Set an alarm for when you need to leave home so you can arrive the exam room well before your exam starts, with time built in for unforeseen delays. Prepare a go-bag the night before with a bottle of water (you'll be doing lots of talking!), printouts of your three lists, blank paper, and a writing tool.
- **Get enough sleep the night before:** Do not stay up late to cram. What you're about to do is too large to prepare for in one evening, so chill out. If you've studied consistently beforehand, you'll be familiar enough with the material that you don't need to turn the last day into a cram session. Instead of cramming, review the notes you've taken on your notes from the past months. A couple of brief last-minute reviews during the day before and early morning hours leading up to the exam can help keep you fresh.
- **Start the day right:** Plan for the two hour exam as though you were planning for a job interview. Dress nicely and comfortably; prepare to be animated. Talking for two hours takes a lot of energy, so make sure you've eaten beforehand, and don't overdo the caffeine.

DURING THE EXAM

- **Speak slowly and remember to breathe:** If you find that you're getting stressed during the examination, take a moment for a deep breath or two to center yourself. These examinations take a certain degree of stamina, so make the effort to remain relaxed so you can maintain your energy through the whole event.
- **Take notes while you listen:** As your examiner asks their questions, jot the question down, along with any nascent responses or relevant texts that come to mind. Keep these jottings brief—don't delay too long after the question has been asked before launching into your reply. You always want to be sure you're answering the examiner's question, and your notes will help you stay on track.
- **Don't be afraid to ask for clarification:** If an examiner asks you something that you don't understand, there are two ways to deal with this. You can ask the examiner for further clarification, or you can attempt to restate the question to your examiner to make sure you understand the major point. In either case, you should be able to get a better idea of what's being asked.

- **Don't forget the words "I don't know":** There is always the chance that even after clarification you still can't answer the question. When this happens, it is perfectly acceptable to say you don't know. The comps exam is built in part to test the limits of your knowledge; rather than try to lead your committee on, admit when you don't know and use it as an opportunity to explain how you'd go about finding the answer, or where your intuition suggests would be a useful starting place to answer from. Either way, your committee should respect your candidness on the subject.
- **Help keep the conversation going:** At the end of the day, the comps exam is an extended question-and-answer session that adopts the attitude of a professional conversation about shared areas of scholarly interest. As much as possible, try to stay inside the flow of attentive exchange that marks a conversation. The more you lean into this attitude, the more your examiners will be inclined to respond to you in kind. Pay attention to your interlocutors: maintain eye contact and direct your response at the question-asker, but don't forget there are at least two other people in the room.

AFTER THE EXAM

- **Relax while your committee deliberates.** At the end of the examination, you'll be asked to step out of the room while the committee determines your result, which will be told to you when they invite you back in. Take a few deep breaths, stretch, move your body, and think back to your strongest moments during the exam.
- **Take your results in stride.** In addition to telling you results of your exam, your committee may also offer you some on-the-spot feedback about your performance. If you passed, congratulations, you're ready to advance to candidacy! Don't look at a "no pass" as a "vote of no confidence"—your committee will continue to work with you so you're ready next time. Be sure to thank all of your examiners politely for their time, consideration, and effort at the exam's conclusion.
- **Feel your feelings.** The comps exam is an intense experience, and you will experience some intense and sometimes surprising feelings afterwards: relief, exhaustion, triumph, letdown, frustration... These are all valid. Take time to rest, process, and talk about these feelings with your friends and mentors.
- **Celebrate and take time off!** Invite your friends out for a post-exam celebration, and take a well-deserved hiatus so you are ready to return to your work. All of the effort that goes into successfully completing comprehensive exams can be extremely draining. Do what works for you—you've put in the hard work, you deserve it.