

QUALIFYING EXAM PREPARATION AND STUDY GUIDE
By Joy L. Rodgers, Ph.D.

Preparing for Qualifying Exams (The Process)

Qualifying exams mark the transition from taking coursework and being a Ph.D. student to dissertating and being a Ph.D. candidate. Here's a brief outline of the qualifying exam process to help in your preparation:

1. Write prospectus.

A prospectus is your initial, brief sketch of your dissertation topic. Generally, a prospectus entails a brief rationale and literature review, theoretical foundations, research questions, and methodology, as well as a bibliography and research timeline. The length will depend on your topic and your dissertation chair's expectations.

2. Meet with committee members as a group.

An initial meeting – before you write your proposal and schedule your qualifying exams – is a good way to get all of your committee members together for feedback on your prospectus and consensus on timing of your qualifying exams and proposal defense.

3. Schedule exams and oral defense.

After your initial meeting with your committee, you should go ahead and schedule your exams and defense.

4. Prepare reading lists.

You will have a reading list of current journals, journal articles, books, and book chapters for each of the four exams. Submit each reading list to the appropriate committee member who will be writing the exam question that corresponds to the list. The reading lists are intended to serve as a study guide so you and your committee agree on necessary preparation.

5. Meet with committee members individually.

The purpose of meeting with each committee member individually is to go over the reading list and to talk about possible exam questions. Some professors will give you a good idea of what your questions will be. Others will not be that generous. In any event, this individual meeting is a good time to try to get as many specifics about what to study and how to prepare for the question the individual committee member will write.

6. Write dissertation proposal.

The proposal entails the first three chapters of your dissertation: introduction, literature review, and methodology. Depending on your method, you also will be expected to submit supplemental material such as interview questions, IRB paperwork, and research instruments.

7. Study for qualifying exams.

Ideally, your proposal will be written and submitted to your committee for review before you begin studying for exams. However, most students multitask by writing their proposals and studying for their exams at the same time. In either case, you should manage your time well. Think about how much time you need to write and to study. Come up with a timeline, giving yourself some cushion in case one or the other task takes longer than you anticipate.

Studying for Qualifying Exams

While qualifying exams can be hugely intimidating, you can get through them without driving yourself insane. Here are some tips for effective studying:

1. Write every day. Write lots.

Writing every day:

- Allows you to make connections between ideas, texts, and concepts.
- Gives you materials to go back to and study from.
- Provides evidence of what you've done that day.
- Helps to keep you focused and on track with your reading and studying.

2. Write practice questions.

Writing practice questions, especially timed, can give you a sense of the things you do well, the things you still need to work on, and what the exam situation is going to be like. Knowing what you're up against can help prepare you mentally for the task ahead.

3. Take study breaks.

Breaks are hard to do when you are studying. But taking time for you is important.

Small breaks while studying will help allow the concepts you've learned to cohere and give your brain time to solidify connections. Good studying always includes small breaks—do the laundry, make a snack, go for a walk.

Big breaks are important, too. Take an entire day off to do something you enjoy and some guilt-free de-stressing. Spend time with your family. Go see a movie or a play. Go to a sports event and cheer on your favorite team. Go hiking. In short, take some time to do things that you enjoy, so you'll feel more refreshed and relaxed when you do hit those books again.

4. Set small, attainable goals (and rewards!).

Setting goals for the day or week is a good way to stay motivated and ensure that you are tackling all the material. Goals must be realistic and attainable. Know your limits, and work within them. Instead of saying "I will read 10 books by the end of the week," have a goal of 40 pages of reading per day, and 2 pages of writing. Daily goals give you something to work toward, and meeting them gives you a sense of accomplishment and momentum.

And make sure to reward yourself for reaching goals, even if it is something small. Read a book for pleasure when you've reached your weekly goals. Eat a piece of chocolate after finishing a text. Promise yourself a trip to a new restaurant when you finish a chunk of readings.

5. Enlist others.

A support network of friends, family, and colleagues can help get you that final mile. Find a study partner. Recruit family members or spouses to encourage you to reach your writing goal for the day. Ask friends to quiz you or read over practice exams. Talk to a colleague about your study process. Ask other students about their exam experiences. Studying alone can feel isolating. But including others in your study plan can help make studying easier.

6. Focus on what you do know.

Worrying about all the things you have yet to learn or the questions you can't yet answer will induce panic and undue stress. The reality is that you likely know more than you give yourself credit for.

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 paper from a year ago to remind yourself what you've read. If you focus on the things you already know, your mind will be more at ease.

Writing Qualifying Exams

Sitting down to write qualifying exams can be terrifying, especially since you won't be able to use your study notes. Here are a few tips to help make the exams less frightening:

1. Take a deep breath.

You'll be fine. You've got this. Take a moment before you start writing to remind yourself that you are awesome, you are prepared, and you can do this.

2. Jot down key terms, concepts, dates, and authors.

Before you look at the questions, take time to jot down things that you are trying to keep at the front of your mind, like dates and names. This can help free up your brain to think about other things. Also, taking 5 minutes to write down some of what you know can help boost your confidence, and remind you of all the things you know.

3. Read the whole exam carefully, and take notes

This step is especially important if you have a choice between questions, or if you have a number of prompts to write. As you read, make sure you underline key terms, and that you fully understand what the question is asking of you. Often, the key question will be in the last couple of lines in the prompt, so make sure you read the whole thing.

As you read, think about how you would answer each question. Make notes about the kinds of sources you would use, or what theories or concepts would be central to your response. This is important because it can help you find gaps, such as:

- Are you missing an important author somewhere?
- Do two of your answers sound too similar?

Having a sense of where you are going to go for *the whole exam*, instead of just one question at a time, can help you make sure you are covering all the ground you need. As well, it can help you allocate your time effectively. How long do you need to spend on each response?

4. Brainstorm and draft your answers

Before you start writing in earnest, take a few moments to walk through how you are going to answer the prompt. Jot down a thesis statement and arguments. Spend time sketching out where your answer is going to go (an outline). This will help you stay focused when it comes time to write your response.

5. Be as meta-cognitive as possible, and sign-post your responses

Start by writing an introductory paragraph that speaks *directly* to the prompt. Answer the question immediately. Then, sketch how where the rest of your answer is going to go. Be as meta-cognitive as possible, and use lots of sign-posting.

Talk about what each paragraph or section is going to do, and why. This will help your committee members know immediately *what* and *why* you are writing, and will help keep you on track. You can go back and edit this paragraph once you are done, if your thoughts have changed slightly, but use this as a road map. This will also help you if you run out of time, as it will let your readers know where you were going with your thoughts.

Then, write a beginning sentence to each paragraph that acts as a mini-introduction. Tie the paragraph back to your thesis, and outline what you are going to do in the paragraph. Again, this works as a road-map for you and your readers, and can help keep you on topic, and can act as a stand-in paragraph if you run out of time.

6. Proofread and edit

Make sure you build in time at the end to take a second pass over your responses. Catch typos, incorrect dates/authors, and make sure that your answers are as cohesive and comprehensive as possible.

7. A few general tips:

- **Keep in mind that everyone wants you to pass.**
 - You likely won't get trick questions, or prompts designed to trip you up.
 - People are rooting for you, and your exam will be full of things you can answer.
- **Move on from questions you can't answer.**
 - You may get a question you can't answer, or don't feel prepared to.
 - Leave challenging questions for last. Answer what you know you can, then return to that one and do your best. You may be able to answer part of what is being asked.
 - Just remember not to panic.
- **Pay attention to your time.**
 - You will have four hours for each exam.
 - Remember to cut yourself off as needed, to ensure you get everything done.
- **Take a break.**
 - Take a short break to recharge.
 - Go to the bathroom, or scoot your chair over and doodle a dinosaur to give your brain a rest.
- **Relax.**

You're awesome. You will do great!