

Preparing for Qualifying Exams: Writing Under Pressure

Know What You're Up Against

- ⇒ Get as much information about test mechanics as possible to minimize surprise and uncertainty and be able to make strategic plans.
 - Committee formation procedures, dates, exam structure (time, place, allowances during test, etc), resources available, paperwork, ABD requirements, and more.
- ⇒ Discuss expectations and questions with your chair and committee.
 - Do not fall into the trap of thinking that this is a completely solitary endeavor.
 - A lot of fear of failing can be mitigated through direct communication with your assessors about their role and expectations.
 - A role of qualifying exam committees is to be available to support you by answering questions and providing clarification through the process.
 - Developing relationships with the committee helps you know your audience for both the written and oral portions of the exams.
- ⇒ Utilize Resources.
 - You do not need to act like you are the first person to take qualifying exams.
 - Meet and talk to previous test takers about their experiences.
 - Form a study group and visit the Center for Writing & Rhetoric.

Prepare Strategically

- ⇒ Before you begin to read, take notes, and study, consider your end goal. Are you being tested on how much material you can retain or how well you engage with texts and argue for positions on certain topics? Read, take notes, and practice with the final exams in mind.
 - Just because you are given a long reading list does not mean that the point of the exams is retention. During the timed writing and oral portions of the exams, you will be asked to make arguments related to your readings and defend them.
 - Read with this fact in mind. No matter how you are given (or decide) your readings, consider the best organization for the actual reading process. Try different organizations.
 - At the beginning and throughout your preparation, be thinking about the main argumentative threads that run through the exam topics. Organize reading process, notetaking, note review, and practice sessions around these threads.
 - Every word does not have to be read with the same attention to detail. To make a strong argument, you need attention to detail, diverse standpoints, textual support, and logical structure. You don't get them from reading everything in the same way. Some texts and sections should require more of your attention than others.
 - Consider your audience and the exam situations (written and oral). Who are your committee members? How do expectations change for source use in timed exams? Etc.

- ⇒ Determine a system to use to organize your notes from the start, and update it to help you review, develop arguments, and practice your timed writing.
 - Taking notes in order to use information in arguments is different than taking notes to retain as much information as possible. Use critical analysis to determine what to pull from sources, and organize this by narrow theme, variable, or argument.
 - Consider consolidating notes upon revision to help with retention and to streamline key information. The Feynman technique of simplifying complex ideas can help with this.
 - Pull important quotations out in some way and memorize some for use in exams.
 - Spreadsheet Matrix: allows you to organize and reorganize sources easily, obtain a snapshot view of many sources, consolidate notes, and review in various ways. The CWR has a Microsoft Excel template for your use.
 - Zotero: Free (through the library) reference management software that also organizes notes. Library has workshops on this every semester.
 - Evernote: Free or inexpensive document and note storing/organizing app.
- ⇒ Limit mistakes and improve ability by practicing timed writing.
 - If you know your questions, develop arguments and outlines, and practice writing the test. The full amount of time, the full process. The more often you do this, the more familiar it becomes, and the less working memory it will take.
 - If you do not know the questions, draft lists of relevant questions, and practice taking tests. Again, the more practice, the better you get at it.

Taking the Test

- ⇒ Just because you are taking a timed written exam does not mean you skip having a thesis, clear & logical structure, cohesive paragraphs, and revised writing. Manage your time and use pre-writing techniques to help you during a test.
 - Some people sit down during a timed exam and ideas flow. Revision and some planning are still necessary but writing comes easily. For those who don't have that experience, time management, pre-writing, and revision are your best friends.
 - Utilize your practice exams as reflective exercises. Mark how long it took you to do various tasks. Use that information to plan for the actual exams.
 - Plan time for pre-writing and revision. Usually 10-15% for each. Depending on the exam time, know exactly how much time you have for each.
 - Begin pre-writing by breaking down the prompts. Then, create a rough outline, argument map, or mind map, and decide on a thesis (for one or more of the questions). Finish by leaving time for revision for everything.
- ⇒ Prompts
 - Consider reading the prompt a few times, pulling out the key topics, and noting its many required steps.
 - Review what common action verbs are asking for before the exam (what the difference between describe vs. compare vs. contrast vs. analyze).
- ⇒ Outlining/Mapping
 - The goal for an outline or map during timed testing is to do a lot of the generative thinking quickly.

- List main points and their supporting points. Work out a thesis from thesis. Organize the points in a logical order of some sort (discipline-specific, argument, complexity, compare & contrast, etc).
- Use this to keep paragraphs and sections coherent (on-topic within themselves) & structured as premises in support of your main thesis.
- Argument & mind maps work great, too!

⇒ Essay Elements

- Still need an introduction that states a thesis and support for that thesis grounded in previous literature. You also need to clarify the significance of the thesis.
- As just mentioned, paragraph/section coherence and overall structural organization in some sort of logical relationship are also required.

⇒ Revision

- Revise for sentence-level changes as much as possible, while prioritizing revisions of coherence, argument, and structure when required to choose.

⇒ Another Important Point

- Through practice exams, learn what works for you and what is hardest to do. Follow this where it leads. Learn how you respond to pressure and practice the parts that are hardest to become more familiar with them. Go through these challenges instead of avoiding them. Try the techniques above for support. Manage the time and exam as much as possible instead of letting it overwhelm you.