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# Demystifying the Comps Process

This document is a compilation of tips, information and FAQs emerging from the April 2015 Comps Prep workshop with input from other PhD students and candidates in the department who have recently completed the process.

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## 1. Introduction

This document is a compilation of tips, advice, information and FAQs emerging from the April 2015 Comps Prep workshop. The workshop was held in response to a needs assessment and issues identification exercise conducted by the Graduate Geography and Planning Student Society (GGAPSS) in 2014, which identified a need for more formalized departmental support for PhD students as they prepared for the Comprehensive Exam. The workshop was designed to help demystify the comps process through step-by-step explanations and advice provided by PhD students and faculty. As such, each aspect of the comps process (as outlined in this document's Table of Contents) was thoroughly discussed at the workshop with panellists presenting general strategies and advice on each component from student and faculty perspectives.

Everyone's experience with comps differs based on their own specific goals and interests, program of study, study habits, and relationship with their supervisory committee. This document is only meant to act as a resource for students as they develop their own strategy and approach to comps prep. Comps can be stressful but it can also be enjoyable if you perceive it as an opportunity to have a dedicated period of time in which your primary responsibility is solely to read foundational texts and delve deeply into a body of literature of your choosing.

## 2. Nuts and Bolts

*Overview of overall process and timelines*

*From the Handbook:*

"Students will take a written and oral PhD Examination administered by the supervisory committee between June of year one and no later than December of year two. The examination requirements are slightly different for human geographers than they are for physical geographers reflecting the different needs of the discipline. The purpose of the exam is to ascertain whether a student has obtained an adequate knowledge base to continue in the PhD program; to ascertain any knowledge gaps and suggest remedial action; and to provide a student with the opportunity to get a broad perspective on their chosen field of study. The scope and three (human geography) or four (physical geography) areas of concentration of the examination are to be jointly determined by the supervisory committee and the student. They are to be laid out in the draft comprehensive reading list and are to be confirmed in the first progress meeting. It is the responsibility of the supervisory committee to review and approve the draft reading list by a deadline established jointly by the supervisor and student. The scope of the exam cannot be changed after this stage.

The student should seek the advice of all committee members in preparing for the comprehensive examination. In consultation with the supervisor, the student should compile an appropriate draft reading list for each area of concentration by June of year one. The draft reading list should be circulated to all committee members for their comments and should form the basis of the examination. Normally, the total number of readings is approximately 100, but may be shorter or longer depending on the number of books included in the list. Students may wish to consider subdividing each area of concentration into 2-4 themes and should include a summary of what they see as the major issues covered in each area. The supervisor is responsible for preparing the examination paper on the basis of input received from the committee members. The detailed instructions should be finalized in consultation with the student and committee members.

For human geographers, the exam will cover three areas of concentration and will have three questions in each area. For physical geographers, the exam will have four areas of concentration with two questions in each area. In both cases, the student must answer one question from each area of concentration. The questions will be based on the reading list and may not extend into material not covered by the reading list. The PhD examination is comprised of a written section and an oral section. The student may choose one of the three following formats for the written section:

- **One-Day Examination:** The student writes the exam over eight hours in a closed room on campus. The examination is open book and internet access is not permitted. Citations should be included from the comprehensive exam reading list, where relevant. These can be cited in text, i.e. (Harvey, 2008). The expected length of each of the three answers for human geographers is 2000-2500 words and the expected length of each of the four answers for physical geographers is 1500-2000 words.
- **Five-Day Examination:** The student writes the exam over a five day period (including weekend days if the exam period includes a weekend) either on or off-campus. The examination is due at the same time of day it is collected by the student (e.g. an exam that starts at 9am on a Thursday will be due at 9am on the following Tuesday). It is expected that students will cite their work, citations will be drawn exclusively or primarily from the reading list. There is no need to attach a list of references for books or articles included in the examination reading list. The few, if any, additional references to works cited that are not on the reading list can be attached to the end of each answer. Responses will be more in-depth than the one-day exam. The expected length of each response is 3500-4500 words for human geographers and 2500-3500 words for physical geographers (not including the list of references/bibliography).
- **Fifteen-Day Examination:** The student writes the exam over a fifteen day period either on or off-campus. Although the questions will be based on the reading list, it is expected that the student will also draw upon additional materials and supplementary research. For this format, it is expected that students will produce high-quality work with a full list of references. The expected length of each response is approximately 5000-6400 words (not including the list of references/bibliography).

The written examination should be submitted electronically by the student to all committee members and the graduate office by the due date and time. The student should ask the committee members whether they would also like to receive a paper copy and, if so, the student is responsible for making a copy and providing it to the faculty member as soon as possible.

The oral examination (with the full examination committee) should take place not later than one week following the submission of the written exam. It is the responsibility of the student to arrange for a date, time and room for the oral examination and to provide this information to the graduate office. The graduate office will prepare an examination file, which must be returned immediately following the exam”.

## **Tips, advice and Information**

**Timelines:** Ideally, you should start in January of 1<sup>st</sup> year to identify theme areas for your reading list. One good way to pick potential committee members is to bring topic areas or early draft lists to a first meeting, especially if they contain a short paragraph summarizing why you want to read this list. This can

give the faculty a good sense of what role they might play in your committee and determine whether you have shared interests.

*From the Handbook:*

Year 1 (January-April)	Assemble a supervisory committee
Year 1 (January-June)	Identify areas of concentration and prepare a draft reading list
Year 1 (no later than May-June)	Present a draft reading list to supervisory committee for the first progress meeting
At least 2 months prior to exam	Establish date for approval of the final reading list by the supervisory committee
At least 1 month prior to exam	Student schedules exam and informs the graduate office of the date
Within 3 months of the exam	If the outcome of exam is conditional pass, all conditions must be satisfied
Within 6 months of the exam	If the outcome of exam is a fail and this is the first failed exam, student must repeat the exam

## FAQs

Q – There is a bit of confusion around how many people have to be on your committee from the Department.

A – Aside from your supervisor or co-supervisors, you must have two additional committee members and may have more. Of the two additional required committee members, one must be from the Department and the other can be from within or outside the Department (but not outside the university). It is unusual, but if you really want somebody from outside the university on your committee, you should speak with your supervisor and he or she will submit that person’s name to the Graduate Chair to be considered for a graduate faculty appointment in the Department. The Graduate Chair seeks approval first from an appointments committee from within the Department and then seeks approval from the School of Graduate Studies.

Typically, students have 4 committee members in physical geography while 3 committee members are more common in human geography and planning.

## 3. Preparing the reading list

*Defining the three main areas and tips on how to structure the list*

### Tips, advice and Information

For planners and human geographers, there are three (3) areas of concentration, and for physical geographers, there are four (4) areas. Students should speak to their supervisors about the theme areas in terms of how they might relate to future research.

There are two perspectives on the PhD comprehensive exam: one is that the comps could help prepare you to do your research and the other sees it as preparing you for a future teaching career. So, the comps could be the foundation for future research or more broadly as a foundation of knowledge for future teaching. In either case, it is an opportunity to explore new territory. Students should think about what direction they want to go in re: broader areas for future teaching (e.g. political ecology, carbon sequestration, community-based planning, qualitative methods) and more specific areas for future research (e.g. political ecology of low-carbon policies).

Advice and information regarding the approach to developing the reading list:

- Spend time defining the key areas and ask committee to identify key references for each area. You can also use readings from other courses or research you've done and look at syllabi of certain courses for course readings. The library search engine or google scholar is also useful for doing keyword searches and results can be sorted based on the number of citations. Citations are one measure of an article's impact and may help in prioritizing your choices. Another good resource is the GGAPSS network (accessed through any computer in the Grad Lab), which contains a number of reading lists and comps answers. When you look at some important articles, you'll notice references to certain book or articles, which probably then should be on your list. But try not to have too many whole books on your list – typically you can grasp the central points in a couple of chapters so putting book chapters on your list rather than whole books might be a good strategy. Many books lay out their overall argument in the introduction and conclusion, so reading those first can help you determine what other chapters to read.
- Reading list creation is primarily the work of the student rather than that of the supervisor, although it is also a collaborative process with the committee – typically, students come up with at least half of the readings and then ask the committee to add or subtract readings. The end product contains around 100 readings.
- The list should capture key debates in your defined areas. Reading debates makes answering questions more straightforward as you can summarize the different perspectives and position your own thoughts in relationship to the debate.
- It might be helpful to do a reading course with the supervisor on one area of the comps list.
- Committee members are usually much more interested in adding rather than removing readings – you might want to think about how to manage that so that you're within the 100 readings range.
- It might be a challenge to get feedback from committee members on your reading list so you should plan ahead in order to arrange a meeting in person or via phone. Bringing list or sub-list summaries with you is a good way to solicit feedback (see FAQ below).
- There are several ways to organize lists and sub-lists. While simply reading a selection of influential articles on a topic is useful, for the purposes of trying to answer a specific question it can be helpful to structure your lists in certain ways. This could include following influential debates, reading key pieces and critiques, reading about several different approaches to common questions/theories/empirical problems, reading 'foundational' texts for a (sub)field and tracing their different uses through time, etc.

## FAQs

Q – How much attention is paid to the comps areas in hiring decisions?

A – Comps areas have very little to do in hiring decisions for tenure-stream positions – however it's something you can put on your CV. But what's more important is what you've published, what courses

you've taught in the subject area and how congruent your background is with the particular needs of the position. Comps areas are more important for teaching stream positions.

Q – If you have 3 areas in the reading list, how should it be organized regarding the number of subthemes? Is that arbitrary?

A – First, it's good to write descriptions for each area to help the committee understand where you want to go and want to focus on. A paragraph summarizing each area helps the committee understand why you are doing these readings and highlights the issues you want to explore and examine, which helps faculty design comps questions. Summaries will also help you take notes as you read.

Sub-themes are not required but are common, and could also help you organize your themes — 2 to 3 subthemes are common. Sub-themes may also help you break down broader theme areas especially if there are specific issues you want to explore.

For physical geography, there are 4 themes: 1 very broad (ie. how does your research relate to society?); 1 broader scientifically; 2 are more specific. Sometimes supervisors will suggest you have only 3 areas of interest in the reading list, because it may be easier for students to categorize the literatures. But no matter how many sections you have in the reading list, you are still required to answer 4 questions in the written exam.

Q – Has anyone ever done the 8-hour option?

A – Most physical geographers have taken that option but it is a tough option to do. You will have to remain in a closed room with no real time for any breaks. It is open book but no access to the internet. The Department will be introducing two 4-hour exams on consecutive days and this option may be more attractive than the 8-hour option. Human geographers and planners typically take the 5-day option. Note: the Department will be getting rid of the 15-day option since nobody has ever chosen it.

Q – Are reports permitted for inclusion on the reading list?

A – Yes, but you don't want to have a lot of them. For example, a climate change report from the UN would be fine but in general you should have scholarly articles on the list.

Q – Regarding timing, when should I go to the committee with a draft list?

A – You should talk to supervisor first before sending the draft list to committee and should do some legwork ahead of time to identify key articles, key chapters of book or see if whole book is required. You will have to send a draft list to your committee by the time of your first progress report meeting. There will be some back and forth with the committee after that. You and your supervisor will set a deadline for the committee after which no changes can be made to the comps list.

Q – What's happening on the committee side? Do they follow along and do the readings they don't know?

A – Yes, but usually primarily within their areas of research expertise.

## 4. When you're reading: Note-taking strategies

### Tips, advice and Information

When you're writing the comps the quality of the notes you took when you were reading directly impacts on the quality of your answers as it affects your reviewing process. One recommendation is to summarize each reading by identifying 2 key points from each and then weaving together a theme or storyline. One way to study is not to take notes from individual papers but to link them together to support a broader idea (and not think of it as individual papers). For example, how do they connect together? What story do they tell? Obtaining an understanding of the overall picture is good preparation because the comps questions usually ask you to synthesize a broad set of material.

It's also useful to pick out key concepts, key themes, key debates and how they relate to each other to help get you thinking, which is really helpful during writing. One tip regarding technology is to take notes in a giant word file (ie. use headers and collapse them). Having your notes all on one file is very helpful when writing because it's easy to find things. You can do a keyword search to easily find key concepts/issues.

Suggestion: review papers are extremely helpful for comprehension about an issue and weaving the overall narrative.

Additional tips:

- There are many different strategies for note taking. A strategy used by the student below was to write a concise summary of everything directly after reading (each article or book chapter, with a full book summary as well).
  - "I am the kind of person that has to write stuff down to remember it and to pick out the structure of an argument as I read, so I kept doing that for the majority of the material, especially anything I found new or difficult. These notes were helpful when creating a summary, and the summaries were very useful for prepping for the exam and for refreshing my memory on arguments while writing the exam. I also collected key quotations, which were sort of useful, but a lot of work relative to their value. I found that reading and trying to take notes later did not work for me at all - I have to take them while I read. I also found that since I am a visual learner, visually mapping out arguments and concepts was very useful. I used PowerPoint and a chalkboard to do this and ended up including some of my figures in my comps answers, though my committee said they were useless to them! Shows that sometimes the value of these things is recall and organizing thoughts more than anything else. This concept mapping is also a useful way to review in preparation for writing to think about how pieces relate to one another".
- It is a good idea to create a reading schedule and set a defense date in advance so you can hold yourself accountable to making progress. Here is one student's story of his comps reading timeline:
  - "My list had 29 books and 130 articles/book chapters/book selections. I went out with a projected pace of 3 days to read a book and 2.5 articles a day. That would take 139 days to read everything again and 108 days to just read whatever was new to me. I ended up a little bit quicker than that average and did almost all of my reading 9-5 on weekdays, including almost 5 days off for a break in August and doing a reading course that had some overlap. It took me 154 days (110 weekdays) to do all my reading, with only a small



amount of the stuff I was familiar with going unread. I read between June 1 and Nov 1. I originally scheduled my defense for late September, but postponed it to early November. I spent 627 hours on comps, the vast majority reading and taking notes and about 8 hours prepping my notes before the exam and about 3 hours prepping before my oral”.

## FAQs

Q – Should you do your readings digitally or in print?

A – Some do their readings in print and then do their notes digitally. Having physical copies is helpful because you can spread them out and they are also good on your eyes. But think about what works for you re printing out articles or reading them digitally. Endnote is very helpful – you can highlight and annotate and do searches in articles and annotation.

## 5. Final Preparations: Just before you write the comps

*Making connections; identifying key themes; re-reading summaries and notes*

### Tips, advice and Information

So what should you do a week or two before writing the comps?

- Think about what might be asked on the exam. Think about who your committee is and what their interests are, as they would probably ask questions related to what they’re very familiar with or interested in.
- Biggest point about the last two weeks: take care of yourself! Take some time off just before the start date, so you can go into the process well rested. Be sure to take a day or two off just before because you will be writing 5 days straight. Exercise, sleep and eat well because there is a lot of stress around comps and it’s counterproductive to become ill while you’re writing the exam.
- Pay attention to the articles or books highlighted by committee members.
- Prepare your space where you will do your writing (ie. make sure you have enough food to sustain you throughout the five days). You won’t have much time to do anything else other than writing. If you have a roommate or a partner, talk to them ahead of time about meal preparations or allowing you space to focus on writing.

## FAQs

Q – During prep do you go back and re-read the articles or books?

A – Not really – most focus on reviewing the notes and writing notes on the notes

Q – Can you bring in additional readings in answering your questions?

A – You can but just a handful. The committee might think it odd if there are a lot of additional readings that you did not include on your list. Remember, the committee is not allowed to ask questions beyond the readings on the list.

Q – Did you read one list and then another list, chronologically, subsection by subsection, so you’re reading everything under one topic? One by one?

A – Yes, in general one list at a time.

Q – Are there any recommendations for the choosing the order of readings on each list?

A – Here are two suggestions:

“Start with the readings recommended by the committee members and read the most challenging readings at the beginning. But go with the order you think is most logical or would work for you. For example, reading the theory first in order to establish a foundation for future readings”.

“I also found it helpful to switch back and forth between dense theoretical texts and more empirical papers. Some might prefer to segregate these and read them all separately, but I found the empirical papers provided a bit of a break and made me come back down to reality in a way that was helpful”.

## 6. Writing the comps and oral defense

*What makes a successful comps answer and oral defense? This section includes a clarification of expectations and general approach and strategies to answering the questions.*

### Tips, advice and Information

Your supervisor will e-mail your questions to you at an agreed-up time. Typical start times are 9am or 5pm but you can discuss specific timing with your supervisor. Your exam is due at the same time you received the questions on the agreed-upon final day. (So, if you get your questions at 9 a.m. on Sunday, the answers are due 9 a.m. Friday.) You will receive 3-4 questions in each of your three areas if you are in human geography or planning and 4 if you are in physical geography. You will be asked to respond to one question in each of the areas.

You should aim to write the minimum amount mentioned in the handbook – you could write a bit more but shouldn’t be writing less. Also, you can ask for clarification regarding a comps question from your supervisor when you receive your answers.

A quality answer is one that is: well-argued, well-supported, coherent, contains some depth, indicates an understanding of the issues, and has no logical contradictions. In contrast, an unsuccessful answer is one that: does not answer the question and tries to write around it, contains a bunch of quotes and very little synthesis, and does not include a sufficient number of references relevant to answering the question. The written answers are a synthesis on the readings but your thoughts and opinions on that topic should be included as well. Additionally, proper referencing (APA style) is required, though a reference list is not required. You only need to attach the reading list and list any additional readings.

*The following evaluation criteria is from the Handbook:*

“Your exam will be evaluated according to the following:

- The quality of the written responses: mastery, coverage, and communicative clarity for all questions on the examination;

- The quality of the oral defence of written responses and to questions not answered in writing: in terms of capturing the essence of the questions posed; ability to address the concerns raised and to deliver reasoned answers to legitimate criticisms;
- Oral responses to any questions related to the scope of the exam”.

### **Strategies and general approach to writing the comps:**

- You might want to tackle the easiest question first because you know you can quickly finish that question. Also, it’s good to get the easy one out of the way first because then you can build on success. Completing the first question quickly gives you confidence to continue on with the other questions.
- For students who took the 5 day exam, some completed the easy question in 1 day and then took 2 days each for the other questions and edited as they went. Others allocated 1 day to complete each question (allowing perhaps an extra day for a difficult question) and then left 1 day at the end for editing.
- I made general outlines for all three of my answers on the first day so that I would know which literature I would be discussing in which answer and to make sure I didn’t repeat myself unnecessarily. I also left almost a full day at the end to edit.

The oral defense covers your written comps answers and the questions you didn’t answer. The oral exam is an opportunity for the Committee to probe your written answers to the questions – for example, if they didn’t think you showed enough understanding in one answer they will probe you on that area. To prepare for the oral defense, be sure to re-read your answers and identify any vague areas that will invite some probing or questions from the committee. Also be prepared to answer the questions you didn’t cover in your written exam. You can bring in your notes into the oral exam, but try not to refer to your notes more than a minimal amount because the committee may take that as an indication of lack of knowledge. Also, be sure to bring in a pad of paper to write down the questions that are asked, as they usually contain multiple components.

## **FAQs**

Q – To clarify, the comps is a review of other people’s work, we’re not expected to come up with any new ideas or concepts? We’re discussing our understanding of other people’s work?

A – Yes. You’re not expected to come up with new ideas, but discussion in oral exam does lead to new ideas. Your thoughts on the synthesis should come out.

Q – How many questions does the committee send at once and how many do you choose?

A – You get all your questions at once and you choose 1 from each area. With the proposed new 4-hour, 2-day exam, half of the questions may be received on the first day and half on the second.

Q – Are questions sent in advance?

A – No. Students won’t know the questions ahead of time. You won’t even know who asked which question. You may want to think ahead of time what questions might be asked based on what you’ve read. Writing out whole answers in advance for hypothetical questions is not recommended.

Not knowing what will be asked is a source of anxiety, but if you define your areas well, the questions will most likely be based on the summary paragraphs in your reading list. See the FAQs in Section 3: “A

paragraph summarizing each area helps the committee understand why you are doing these readings and highlights the issues you want to explore and examine, which helps faculty design comps questions.”

Q – How do you know if you’ve done ok?

A – One indicator is: if you've done a good job, your committee will spend more time talking to each other during the oral defense.

Q – Is there any feedback from the committee in between the submission of the comps answers and the oral defense?

A – No.

Q – What is the process for the oral defense?

A – You leave at the beginning of the defense (to allow the committee time to organize how they want to structure the oral exam) and then once more at the end (when the committee makes their decision regarding the outcome). Typically, the oral defense lasts 2 hours for human geography and planning, and sometimes 3 hours for physical geography.

Q – How long after the written exam does the oral defense take place?

A - Within a max of 7 calendar days after you’ve submitted your comps answers.

Q – When should I schedule the exam?

A – Schedule the oral defense at least 1 month ahead of time and then work backwards to figure out the timing for the written component. Be sure to allow plenty of time for scheduling the exam (at least six weeks is recommended) because it may be difficult to find a time when all committee members are available.

Q – How long does it take to do the readings?

A – It varies and depends on other responsibilities you might have and how many readings on your list are new. Typically, it takes about 4-6 months of dedicated reading and note-taking.

Q – What is the readings schedule like?

A – Typically, it’s a full-time endeavor – Monday to Friday (9am to 5pm), and sometimes on weekends if weekly goals aren’t met. For example, you might want to set a goal of reading 3 articles a day and perhaps allocate 3 days to complete a book.

Q – How did you cover the books on your list?

A – It is better not to have too many books on your list. Sometimes the author also wrote a journal article so it might be better to read the journal article instead of the book.

Q – How much time should you allocate for final prep? i.e. time between finishing reading and the start of the exam?

A – Some allocated at least 2 weeks and some 1 week.

Q – If I don’t finish all the readings or I am worried about finishing the list, what should I do?

A – First, consult with your supervisor and maybe reschedule the comps date.

Q – Do you just give a digital copy of answers to your committee?

A – It depends. You email the answers to your committee on the due date. Some or all of your committee members may have asked for hard copies as well, which you would typically leave in their mail boxes. You should also hand in a physical copy to Jessica a few days after the written exam.

## 7. Post-comps

*From the Handbook:*

“The outcome of the comprehensive exam is one of the following:

- Pass
- Conditional Pass. Student must satisfy conditions specified by the exam committee within three months, subject to final approval of the committee or a subset of the committee, which must include the supervisor(s). Failure to satisfy conditions by this date shall result in a failure of the exam.
- Fail. If this is the first failure, the student can repeat the exam within six months. The department will recommend termination of a student’s graduate program if the student fails the repeat exam.

Conditions typically imposed for a conditional pass can include re-writing one or more questions or clarifying all or part of an oral answer in writing”.

### Tips, advice and Information

At the end of the oral defense, you are asked to leave the room and the committee decides on one of three possible outcomes: Pass, Conditional Pass, or Fail. The conditional pass is the most common outcome where the committee may ask for more work that should be completed within a 3 month period. So, you shouldn’t worry if you receive a conditional pass. This just means that the committee wants you to fill a gap they’ve identified or they want to see if you deserve to go on. For example, they might feel that your answer to question 1 didn’t really capture everything, so they want to write it again. Or they might feel that a particular part of question 1 was not answered very well so they want you to elaborate further. Then if the additional work is deemed satisfactory, the committee will give you a pass. If you fail you have 6 months to do it again. It’ll be the same reading list, but you will get a new set of questions to answer.

### FAQs

Q – What weight is given to the oral and the written components?

A – Both are important. If you don’t do well in one, it might be a conditional pass. If you do poorly in both then it probably will be a fail.

Q – What is the incidence of a conditional pass?

A – Fails are very rare. The conditional pass is much more common, about 50% or plus. It just means the committee wants you to do a bit more work. No need to worry. This is not reflected on your record.