

FACULTY PERSPECTIVES

What is the one/biggest mistake that you have seen most doctoral students make when taking qualifying exams?

“Trying to anticipate what they think WE want to read rather than simply answering the question(s) asked based on what research and the literature suggests. BTW, that also happens to be what WE want to read! Good luck. Get plenty of sleep and think about each QUESTION BEFORE you sit down to type an answer to it (Dr. Baier).”

“Failure to read the question and as a result, a failure to answer it. It sounds simple, and perhaps it is. With the open-book, week-long format, I would give some considerable time to thinking about the question(s), and the ID/ gathering of resources to inform/support the position you wish to take, as opposed to just plunging in and beginning to write. When I read answers, I'm looking for how they are informed by theory and other contexts provided by classes and the program, as opposed to opinions that could be offered by the proverbial "man on the street." That guy has opinions on HE, just because he went to school. You have teeth; does that make you a dentist? Show me the difference between personal experience and your broader knowledge and perspective (Dr. Cutright).”

“I agree with both Drs. Baier and Cutright, and I would add one more. Given that the qualifying exam is now a open book exam, there is a tendency for people to throw all the citations in there without analyzing and synthesizing the information. Just because you have a long list of citations does not make your answer good. Here is what I suggest you do: 1. Read the question carefully, word by word, three times. Please understand what the question is about before answering it. 2. Quickly pull everything you have learned about this topic together in your mind or on a paper. 3. Organize the information, critically analyze and synthesize the literature, and write concisely. 4. Don't put information that is irrelevant to the question in your answer. Don't make your answer longer than what is needed. 5. Unless we ask you for your personal opinion/reflection, please base your answers on "research literature" instead of one's opinions or experiences. 6. If we ask you to pick a side and defend your position, please do so. If we ask you to reflect on your personal/professional experiences, please do so. Otherwise you are not answering the question. 7. Once you finish answering the questions, let it sit overnight and read/revise it again. Don't let typos bother your grading faculty (Dr. Chen).”

“Let me add my agreement with previous comments as well. I think you see a pattern here well worth noting. Focus on answering the question you are asked, not trying to dazzle us with the vastness of your understanding. That's called a brain dump and nobody likes getting dumped on (Dr. Bower).”

“All I can add to these great comments is this: Take a deep breath, exhale, and think of what you have gained from your classroom experience. Your answers will relate to the realm of ideas--mostly those you have developed through exposure to the research and practice of others. Reflect upon how you developed these ideas--the literature and research that ground your knowledge about how higher education functions. It's all there; just bring it together (Dr. Bush).”

Preparing for Qualifying Examinations: Successful Student Perspectives

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Overview:

This document is designed to provide you with some strategies, tips and helpful hints to maximize your performance on the rigorous qualifying exams. This worksheet has been authored by three Doctoral students who have passed their qualifying exams and are in the process of working towards their dissertations. During our own journeys through this process each of us in some way had hoped a document of this type might be available. While we in no way declare to be experts, it has been our experience that graduate students tend to not think about qualifying exams until they are upon them. It is also our belief that thinking about the expectations, challenges and requirements of the exam in advance will place you in a much stronger position when it is your time to be tested. From our own experiences and through conversations with faculty, these examinations are designed to give you a chance to demonstrate that you have a grasp of the body of knowledge the faculty have worked so hard to impart. This worksheet is not designed to do the work for you. Nor is this worksheet designed to provide you with an easy path through the exams. By their very nature, qualifying examinations are serious business and take focus, dedication and hard work to succeed. Finally, this worksheet is only as relevant as the curriculum and process remains stable. Should quals change, core courses get added, changed or amended some content outlined in this guide may need to be revisited by future students who successfully complete the process. Despite these eventualities much of the writings below on the core tenets of preparation, advanced planning and week-of scheduling should remain viable.

Section 1: Preparing From Day One

- Reading Strategies – Yes Every Book is Important.
- Note Taking Tips and Class Binder Organization.
- Viewing Assignments as a Dry Run.
- Chances for Faculty Insight - Class Lectures.

Section 2: T-Minus Three Weeks Until The Test

- Building a Bibliography In Advance and Other APA 6th Edition Tips
 - Use Worldcat, Endnotes, or other bibliography software and have it done at least a week before.
 - Don't forget handouts that faculty spent time discussing in class.
 - Don't forget any books that faculty spent time stating were important in online courses (chat sessions).
 - Organize stacks of books by subject matter and have piles around your workstation.
- Developing a Game Plan & Schedule for the Week
 - Start with your best known area to have an immediate win.
 - Don't leave your toughest one for last – possibly do this next.
 - Determine how much time you will write in a chunk per day.
- Discussing Qualls with Family and Friends & Dealing with Family Obligations
 - Share questions with partner right away.
 - Discuss family obligations in advance, whatever you normally do for the family – will you keep doing that this week or do you need help?
 - If you have little ones, try to explain to them how important this is to you and that they won't see very much of you that week. Consider sending family away for the weekend with friends or relatives or take yourself to a hotel for the weekend. Expensive – but possibly worth it.
 - Think about building in a special treat for your family after you are done – celebrate together.
 - Try to get all bills paid, books returned to libraries, etc. BEFORE the week.
- To Work or Not? We Vote No!
 - Discuss the test with your employer.
 - File your time off/vacation request now.
 - Put on your out of office messenger and DO NOT CHECK YOUR EMAIL.
 - Give your boss a special code to put in the subject line which will alert you that it is serious and requires immediate attention.
 - If you do have to work, plan on very little sleep that week and a full-weekend of writing.
- Getting in the Right Mindset
 - Remember left-brain, right-brain balance.
 - De-Clutter your life of other obligations in advance.

- Tell yourself this is supposed to be a challenge and that you will do alright.
- Be prepared to feel a wide-range of emotions and that this process is normal.
- Remember we succeed more when we believe we can succeed – so believe!
- Place a new desktop background image on your computer – choose something soothing!
- Backup and Data Management Planning
 - Determine your data backup process in advance.
 - Have two jump-drives that you alternate in between.
 - Email yourself your progress at the end of each major writing block as a backup.
 - Ensure your computer is working well before writing – run a defrag, virus scan and consider cleaning up your desktop so that it visually feels different.

Section 3: Welcome to Quals – EEEEEEEK!

- One Simple Question, Many Important Answers: Faculty Respond
- Synthesis, Synthesis, Synthesis - Did We Mention Synthesis?
 - Your job is to pull from the literature and reflect on it – how does the literature support your claim and how does your claim answer their question.
- Executing Your Game Plan
 - Build out your schedule and use a calendar to chunk out your timing.
 - Monitor your plan, are you on track, over time or making good progress more quickly than you expected.
 - Are you remembering to eat, do health and safety breaks, etc.
 - Are you remembering your family conversations?
- Understanding the Sections (Part 1, 2, Research, Minor)
 - Look at old exams to see how the faculties have approached each of these areas.
 - Remember to ask yourself who are the heavy hitters in these areas from a literature perspective and what texts did you use in class to learn about it.
 - Have your EPSY texts ready to go from your stats classes (6010 and 6020 especially).
 - If you are a Ph.D. student understand in advance you will have extra work to do on the research section.
 - You know your minor professor well – so try to anticipate the questions they may ask.
 - Don't begin to write unless you absolutely understand the question.
 - Don't hesitate to write Dr. Whitson to ask her to ask the faculty for clarification on a question if you are confused – but don't ask for clarification on every question 😊.
 - Before moving on to another section/part – review your work and ask yourself – did I answer what they asked for?
- Building in Breaks & Preparing Yourself for Stress (Cross Stage Theory)
 - Remember Cross's Model of African American Development – comps are very similar emotionally:
 - Non-Completer of Comps to a Completer of Comps moving through unawareness of the rigors of the comps through embracing the rigors and ignoring everything else in life through embracing comps and starting to show a commitment to both comps and life and eventually harmonious synthesis between comps, success and family.
- Reflect and React as Opposed to Reacting and Reflecting
 - Take the time to breath, read and understand and then start all over before you start typing.
 - Organize an outline in your head (or on paper) before digging in.
- Finding and Working With a Partner Appropriately
 - It sometimes help to choose another student to discuss with during the week.
 - How are you interpreting this question? Is different than "How did you answer?"
- Remember Learning Principles and the Impact of Self-Efficacy and Self-Belief
- Eating, Sleeping and Typing Oh-My! How Much Time Does It Really Take?
 - We found it was typical to spend 10-12 hours writing a day.
 - Some of us typed up until the very last moment – others were done a day in advance.
 - Breaks were shorter at the beginning of the week but then got longer as the week went on and we became more comfortable with the process.
- A Final Element - Building in Time for Editing & Formatting