

Comprehensives Tip Sheet

This informal guide on how to navigate the comprehensives process is updated from time to time. Though enumerated separately, a number of the steps should be conducted concurrently. Remember to consult the comp timetable regularly and share the deadlines with your committee to ensure that each committee member is informed about the timelines.

Forming a Committee and Choosing a Comp Area

1. In order to ensure timely completion, students should begin organizing their first comprehensive committee and reading lists two months prior to the end of their last course. Consult with your supervisor about the composition of the committee. Continuity among committee members (on both the comps and the dissertation committee) is advisable. While it may make sense to bring in an expert for a particular comp field, it is good practice to have an overlap of at least two members.
2. Decide on comprehensive fields in consultation with your supervisor – this should be a sensible balance of interest in a field and your career development goals.
3. Consult existing comprehensive reading lists in the program office and those of other students working on similar topics.

Developing a Reading List

4. Develop some framing questions or areas to delimit the lists.
5. In consultation with your supervisor/committee, decide on the option you will use for the comprehensive: take-home exam, paper or course outline with final lecture.
6. Prepare an initial reading list -- divide into "Required" and "Recommended" texts to aid the process. Conduct research through relevant book and journal searches. The initial list can be fairly long and then titles can be eliminated.
7. Also divide the readings in terms of the framing questions they address – here there might be overlap of readings that simultaneously address multiple questions.
8. Circulate the preliminary list to your supervisor for input. Arrange a meeting with your supervisor to conduct eliminations and additions.
9. After including these updates and after consultation with your supervisor, circulate to all committee members for input.
10. Comprehensive lists should reflect a healthy combination of the "canon" and recent scholarship on the topic.

Working Through the Material

11. Meanwhile, as things are being finalized, begin reading some of the definite "required" texts.
12. As you read, be sure to produce something like an annotated bibliography. Cultivating systematic note-taking practices will be invaluable to your academic career. It's also a good idea to keep a running log of the kinds of connections, questions, issues, etc. the readings might provoke for you. It's amazing how one forgets even the best ideas; it's safest to write them down.

At a minimum, the annotation/abstract of each reading should include:

- (a) A *faithful* outline of the argument of the text (here, please read *with* the grain, rather than *against* it. It is imperative that you are able to faithfully rehearse the major arguments of a text).

- (b) An indication of how it relates to other texts/arguments in the field – does it reiterate, supplement, extend, or challenge other arguments.
- (c) An outline of what you think are the main contributions and oversights/ weaknesses of a text.
- (d) In terms of reading “critically,” avoid focusing on minor “flaws” in the argument; instead, work through the assumptions or *premises* as well as the *implications* of the arguments – what happens to the arguments when taken to their logical/theoretical and empirical/historical conclusions?

To produce the best critical readings and position yourself to offer substantive insights *read generously*, rather than looking for petty and superficial shortcomings. If you keep good notes, completing the comprehensive should be relatively easy.