

## **Advanced Pro Seminar Questions, Session 4: Comprehensive Exams**

### **Dr. Bachman:**

This is what I say to people when I'm on the committee. You have the experience you tell yourself you're going to have. You set yourself up for a learning, wonderful experience or for a miserable why do I have to do this experience. And so, the comp process is a gift that you are given, you are getting paid – not really well – but we've all been there, to learn. All you're getting paid to do is learn. Become an expert in your selective field. When I was a grad student, we had to take four in-house six hour exams. Two required stats and theory, and two that we selected. But my courses were so horrible, that that was some of the only ways I learned material. I learned so much that I never would've learned, so that was truly a gift. After almost 30 years of watching people take comps, I see students throw themselves into this process and take notes and are working together to learn, and they are usually successful. I see students who are resistant or angry about issues for whatever reason, and are not here to learn, and therefore almost set themselves up to be not successful. Or if they are successful, they made the process horrendous. It's a necessary process. We can't think of any other way where you can become experts in your selective fields. You have two areas that you select where you want to be masters in. What a great career, to be able to just learn and make connections that you don't otherwise have to make. Make it wonderful, because it can be.

### **Tricia Becker:**

I have some stuff for you guys. I'm going to pass out these – everyone can take a copy – it's how I set up my notes. We're telling you to take notes, but some of you might not know how to take

notes. This worked for me, and it may not work for you, but this is something to look at. Along with these notes, there is an outline format. This is for the exam, and for the exam you have to think about what the committee is asking for you. At least for the criminology exam, trend of theories and why they come in and out of popularity. This really helped me understand the trend of theories. Something we need to realize is that this is something that has to be done. We need this to graduate, so you just have to do it. One thing you can control is reading the reading list. I suggest reading the list because it's there for a reason. Depending on the committee, you might have to do a specialized list which varies by committee. Make sure you know what you're expected to realize when you go to your comp meetings. I read the reading list, and when I got to the most recent stuff, I saw where it was going and realized I knew this. Look at the conclusions and how the theories were being used. What it was doing, and why it's important. Just making sure you can control the factors you can control. Meet with the committees and ask them questions. Do practice questions – it wasn't until the practice questions until I realized how exactly how to write the questions. I sectioned off my answers, so that there was no way they couldn't see that I answered each part of each question. Definitely practice questions. I did a lot of free writing at the end to make sure my citations were good. Reading the reading list, making sure you're aware of what is expected, meeting with the committee, practice questions. I disagree with what Ronet said, I don't like working with groups. I felt overly anxious when I talked to other students – if they mentioned something that I didn't know I freaked out. If you work well in groups, try it out. But for myself, I knew this wasn't going to work for me. Ask people who have already taken the exams, and ask if you can read people's answers.

**Dr. Bell:**

I don't have too much to add to these comments. Maybe just a combination of these – the comp exam for me, which was structured very similar to how it is here, was the hardest thing that I did in grad school. The only time I ever broke down was over the comp exam. It was hard, and it was horrific, and it was a really difficult process. And although this may seem cliché, but it was the absolute best thing I did. For all the reasons that Ronet said, but also because I would not be able to teach health or gender, and I wouldn't be qualified, if I hadn't done the comp exams. It made me learn the material forwards and backwards. I got hired because my CV said what I got on my comp exam in gender, and that's what they were looking for. It's a really important thing. There's no way you learn the material like you do for a comp exam like you would in a course. I always use what I learned in my studies. It's really important, and because of that, you don't want to skimp out on the studying. If you do, you're just going to have to catch up later when you don't have the time. It's such a rewarding process at the same time, the only time you'll have to explore this breadth of literature on a topic that you're interested in. Studying strategies, Tricia totally hit them. Make summary sheets, flash cards are great tools. Working in groups – I'm not a group person myself, but studying for the comp in groups worked for me. And it definitely pushing anxiety because you're forced to learn things that other people studied. Give yourself time to study because it is a lot of material. Another advantage of it, the paper and the exam in terms of preparation will help you inform your future research and dissertation. It's going to spark questions and you'll be applying these theories and empirical work to your research to make it richer. It's a really cool process to study and use that for your research. And use the paper to launch your dissertation too.

**Dr. Kai Lin:**

I agree with most of what everyone said. It's definitely one of the most regarding experiences you'll have down the road. Even today, I still use some of the work I did on my comp exams to inform my research. I was given an opportunity to revise one of my questions, and the revision ended up being a 12-page paper, and I still use that work today. And Ronet was absolutely right, that if you don't study it now you're going to have to catch up later anyway. You'll need it for teaching too. I'm teaching now, and I use a lot of the material I learned during my coursework and readings in grad school.

**How early should students begin to prepare for comprehensive examinations? What are some helpful strategies in preparing for comprehensive exams?**

**Ann:** I think we already answered this – but does anyone else have any questions?

**Can you break the time down for month wise? When should you ideally start?**

**Dr. Bachman:**

Your class work is preparing you for your comps. Everything you read – everything you should be reading in your classes – is your opportunity to read in that area. You shouldn't be learning to pass, you should be studying to learn this material. Don't become paralyzed – do it through graduate school. You should be preparing everyday in your coursework.

**Dr. Bell:**

Theoretically that's true. But realistically, you'll have the understanding already. But you're asking someone who would give a really early start date – but I'd say at least three months.

**Dr. Kai Lin:**

I definitely agree. Three months is the intensive testing time frame for right before the exam. But idealistically speaking, you should be thinking about it while you're taking classes – not dread it – but making connections between different traditions and theories or critiques of empirical studies. And these are emphasized in the classes that you take – and pay extra attention to that. One of the things that was most overwhelming during the studying process is that you're reading so in-depth and you become kind of disoriented and you don't know how to piece things together. So at these points, if you can go back to your notes and read the connections you made while in class it'll help organize your thoughts. Also, reference books – which is not something you'd think about for grad school – but there are reference books that can help. This was really helpful for me – because authors sometimes get trapped in a style, and these reference books can do a good job making these connections very clear and obvious to you.

**Dr. Bell:**

Something that was on my outline which was really helpful were those connections and conversations between the readings. So, you can have for each piece who they're conversing with and who they're related to.

**Tricia Becker:**

And these connections are something you build as you read. It's not something you get right away. And as for timeline, those in their first and second year, you can start to get the reading list together. Getting all these articles together can take some time to find. Those interested in the methods exam there is an ongoing file that is shared.

**Dr. Bell:**

Is there no archive? (**Tricia:** No) That is something that you should all think of. Because I had years and years of other people's outlines to reference. And of course you should make your own, but this will help make those connections. That seems like a lot of extra time and effort. Use each other, and share with one another.

**Dr. Bachman:**

Hopefully we've developed this culture that is collaborative. I know people who have taken the comps share with one another, and that is so great to see. Take advantage of the atmosphere that you have – ask people for help. This is a great environment, and that's something I didn't have.

**Dr. Bell:**

I did – I was from a much bigger program so there were a lot of people taking the comps at once. There were a dozen just taking the gender comp. So, we met weekly and shared, and I couldn't imagine passing without it.

**Are the comprehensive exams assessments on how well students are able to critically analyze relevant literature on a specific topic or an assessment on our ability to memorize and provide the main arguments surrounding a particular area in the field?**

**Dr. Bachman:**

It's both. They're not mutually exclusive. You can't critically analyze it. That's the purpose – to get you to the point where you can be critical about the material.

**Tricia Becker:**

You shouldn't worry about memorization either. The only thing you memorize are the names. The material just comes to you. At the beginning it'll feel like you don't know anything – but if you do the work, it won't feel like memorization. You'll just know it. You'll be able to spit out authors and years and you'll know yourself. The only thing you should memorize are the years – the rest of the material will come naturally as you study. Give yourself time. You won't get it done in a month. I studied for six months. Three solid months not in classes is good though I think.

**Dr. Kai Lin:**

One thing I want to add as well is that you should always be thinking about the comp literature in relation to your own interests or problems that you want to explore. Even in the exam formats, it will come up. One of the questions will probably be connecting the literature to your own work. And the more you prepare, it becomes more organic. It's not memorization, you're learning how

this literature can help you. And even for the paper, you need to reflect a breadth of information. It won't just be a paper that you write that is precise – in the paper, you want to reflect that you can connect this very specific and niche topic to broader literature. And those connections are there, even if they don't seem like they are yet. And I want to emphasize how important this will become as you begin to teach.

**Dr. Bell:**

This is reflective of the different attitudes toward taking these exams. If you go in thinking I have to memorize this and that's terrible. But like Tricia said, it's not memorization, it's comprehension. And you do want to know this stuff in terms of teaching and advising students. You should be able to cite literature to help students – this seems like reflective of understanding of what the comp exam is.

**Should students aim to complete both the exam and the paper within the same semester? Is it possible to do an examination in two areas, rather than complete a paper?**

**Dr. Bell:**

We used to have two exams. We changed it based on student feedback. Most of you know that I am a big advocate for doing them in the same semester. But grad school is different for each person, so when you do them should be dependent on that. Now that we've changed it so that there's one comp in each semester and you choose the due date of your paper, it's more feasible to do them in the same semester. But this will be impacted by where you are in course work and in your own life.



**Dr. Kai Lin:**

From my own personal experience, which may be totally different from you guys, in my experience I could not have done it in one semester. The product wouldn't have come out as good as I hoped. And this would've created more stress because the committee would've critiqued it more. I say take your time, as much as it is allowed, to more fully develop your paper. You can try to use your comp paper as a critical literature work that you can submit and use in other ways. Take the time to make it a better paper rather than trying to jump through the hoops as fast as possible. But this varies depending on your situation.

**Dr. Bell:**

You do comps after your coursework, and you can't do your dissertation before your comps are done. So that's important to keep in mind.

**What are the possible outcomes after taking a comp in regard to passing or failing?**

**Dr. Bell:**

It's all in the handbook. The outcomes are high pass, pass, conditional outcome, or fail. Conditional outcome are different for the paper and the exam, but you basically need to redo a portion of the exam. And for the paper, it would be that a portion of the paper needs to be redone. And you have a certain amount of time to do it, and it's open book. If you fail, you'll take it the following term. Same with the paper, it'll be on the same topic, but different paper. And I want to say too, it's more common not to pass initially than it is to pass. And I think

you're all in graduate school because you're good students and you're used to succeeding academically. But welcome this as a welcome feedback and a way to analyze your own writing and know it doesn't indicate anything about you as a student or person.

**Dr. Kai Lin:**

I had two conditional outcomes for my paper and my exam. And I think it was a pretty positive experience because the letters were phrased in a positive way to develop my ideas further. And it was about connecting this theory to my own research – and I literally couldn't have written more during the exam because I ran out of time. But after the rewrite, I was able to really write something that came out great that I still use today and may even get a book contract off of. It's not expected to be perfect, but at the same time, don't think of the conditional outcome as a failure. It is absolutely not. You can turn it into something that is great. And for my paper rewrite, I ended up using that in my dissertation, and I was able to apply for a doctoral fellowship which opened a lot of doors. It's not an indication of inadequacy if you don't pass immediately.

**Dr. Bachman:**

And a failure is not a failure. Every failure we've had, you know that student knows the material, they just weren't able to do it in that time. We never think of someone as a failure, we just say you need to calm down and redo it. I have had so many failures in my life, and I would never be so resilient without them. When I send out a paper, 95% of the time it comes back rejected, and that's just how it is. It's just about seeing it as a way to improve and how to be more successful. Your comfort zone is a nice place to be, but nothing grows there. Nothing is more uncomfortable than failing, but you won't grow unless you bring yourself back up.

**Tricia Becker:**

And if you've never read someone's answers before, you might just be writing it wrong. You might not just be writing it the way that you are supposed to for comp exams. A lot of students have asked me for mine, and I'll always send it. Just ask, just send the email. I'm sure Kai will send his stuff as well (Kai: Yeah I would happy to share my exams). And one of the best advices is to do practice questions. Two hours of writing. I reserved rooms and just did it. And it makes you feel better if you do really well during these practices. And this is something you can control, so why not do it.

**How is a comprehensive examination evaluated by a committee and are those expectations conveyed to students prior to taking the examination across all comp areas?**

**Dr. Bell:**

I would hope that they are conveyed. I hope that they are similar across areas. I've had this conversation with faculty multiple times. There are 8 or 9 areas in the department, all composed of different people. And I don't sit in on all of them, so I don't know if it is.

**Dr. Bachman:**

It's conveyed on the ones I'm on. Answer the question. That's the biggest problem – answer the question. If you give an amazing answer, but it doesn't answer the question, you'll fail.

**Tricia Becker:**

Advocate for yourself. Show up with questions, think about it first and be your own advocate and make sure they really answer it.

**Are we moving toward more consistency regarding grading in the comprehensive exams and papers? Is there a reason that a rubric is not followed for the exam/paper across all topics?**

**Dr. Bell:**

This is completely impossible. Even in the same area, to have a rubric each time wouldn't be possible.

**Dr. Bachman:**

Oftentimes, there would be the same question and two students answering, and they answer completely differently. And even if it's not what I would've done, if they convince me then they convince me.

**Dr. Bell:**

It's not a comforting idea, but the committee is made of experts in that area. So you just have to be confident that these people are going to be able to decide whether you're answering it correctly or not. I think this is rooted in the idea of standardization. We have a lot more specificity now than we have in past years – and in the paper, we have guidelines that all the students should be receiving across all committees – but beyond that, it's really impossible to have a standard rubric.

**Dr. Kai Lin:**

I agree – some very basic standardization like what Ann just mentioned is possible. But this process mirrors journal submission. When you submit to a journal, your work is reviewed by a panel, and you can get completely different feedback from each reviewer. And that is because we all come from different fields, so this is a good preparation for getting used to this kind of practice. So, I don't think it's unfair, because the goal of this is to be trained as a scholar, and this is helping you prepare.

**Dr. Bachman:**

And unlike panels for journals, we all want you to succeed. We all want you to do well.

**What factors should we consider in determining which field to test in as opposed to writing the paper in? Is one process considered stronger than the other? What is the decision process here?**

**Dr. Kai Lin:**

There is no easy answer. The two formats are preparing you for slightly different things. If you're more interested in a broad understanding of the field, the exam probably better prepares you for that. If you want to develop a relatively narrow topic, and want to be able to ground it very firmly in the literature, then the paper option makes more sense. It depends on how many areas of interest you have in terms of publishing and doing research in these areas.

**Tricia Becker:**

I chose the crim exam because we have all the theory classes in crim. Because we had more classes, I was better aligned to test in it. I also had a general idea of what I wanted to do for the gender paper, and I just knew I wanted to get into this area more in-depth which I could do better in the paper rather than the exam. Just get feedback from people, from your committee and advisor. Don't go off people's horror stories – gender has some terrible horror stories – but my gender experience was great for that. I had a rewrite, and both those rewrite sections are chapters in my dissertation.

**Dr. Bachman:**

And that has to do with attitude. Tricia wasn't mad when she needed a rewrite, she saw it as a way to learn.

**Tricia Becker:**

Getting mad about your experiences doesn't help. If you want your degree, you have to do it. You're going to get upset in the moment, but know how to respond that will push you forward. And this is easier said than done. I'm so grateful though, I learned a lot, and it's stressful. Just cry and continue.

**Dr. Bell:**

In terms of paper versus exam – you have to get pieces of advice from people. I always think about the exam as taken in an area you don't know as well, because the paper you focus more narrowly in a field. And the exam forces you know a breadth of information on the entire area. If

you are toying with dissertation ideas, think of how the paper can help you get there efficiently, and which area is your topic best suited for in that area. I'm assuming your dissertation can fit in both areas, but try to think how your paper can be used within your dissertation. And also, with teaching, the exam is going to prepare you better for that than the paper will. That's also why I say to challenge yourself and take the exam in something you don't know that well.

**Dr. Bachman:**

When you go on the market, they're going to see what you do your research in and what you can teach.

**From Audience:**

**What if you're beginning to wonder if you should comp in a field that is not offered here?**

**Dr. Bell:**

In the handbook, it outlines how to do this. You write to the GPC outlining the justification for it and what you're proposing.

**Dr. Bachman:**

You have to have a committee together and come up with a reading list. What we offer is what we have faculty specializing in. So, it's hard to give comps for topics who aren't specialists.

**Dr. Bell:**

Realize too, that both the paper and the exam – you have a supplemental list. One of the questions will be on an area that you choose, so try to choose material on the topic that you're interested in.

**Who creates the reading list if you wanted to test outside of the department?**

**Dr. Bachman:**

You along with the committee. So, it's a lot of work for the committee. Another problem is that you can't be too specific. The committees are there for a reason, because we can socialize people in those topics.

**In prepping, how in-depth do we have to read the books?**

**Tricia Becker:**

When I used that for books, if you flip over the handout – I just did outlines for each chapter. But it depends, read the entire reading list. But also know – especially if your committee wants you to focus on the last 5 years – you can't read it all. So maybe read the full book for some – but you'll run out of time. At the beginning, I read the whole book, but as time went on I would skim the book and then I started reading reviews.

**Dr. Kai Lin:**

I would place more emphasis on books and articles offered in your courses because the committee chose them for a reason and they will expect you to know those the best. Those you



should spend more time on, and the other reading list it just depends on how much time you have and where your research interests are. If you are interested in something that you did not get offered in courses but are on the reading list, you should look into that.

**Dr. Bachman:**

The crim does not have a question to relate to your own research. But there is one about applying two different theories. The difference between labeling theory and social control theory. So you would just need to know the basics of at least both, and more in-depth about at least one. It's not just about your own research, they are not super specific – they are broad questions.

**Tricia Becker:**

They aren't going to ask you "in this article..."

**Dr. Bell:**

The reading lists are constructed – well, if the book is on there you probably should read the whole book. If they want you to read a whole book, it's probably because it's important in that area.

**Dr. Bachman:**

The crim reading list is huge, and there are a lot of books. We do have a new list now though, we trimmed it down a bit. But those older books are great.

**Dr. Bell:**

These will be the foundational pieces that you'll use throughout your career.

**Tricia Becker:**

Sometimes reading books can be a lot more helpful too, and give you more information and citations you wouldn't get in a journal article.

**Dr. Kai Lin:**

You can also try to youtube an author and see if they can explain their research in their own perspective. And you'll be surprised, a lot of people have videos on their research and you can see their trajectories and thoughts. I think this helps a little with the process.

**For the gender reading list, it is broken down into areas. If my paper won't cover one of those topics, do I have to read those as well?**

**Dr. Bell:**

The paper is much more specialized. But it is still a comp exam, so you'll be reviewing – let's say immigration and gender for example – you still need to bring in the foundational gender theories to inform that discussion. The entire reading list you should know for the exam, but it's not the same for the paper. You should still know the foundational pieces, and your reading list for the paper should include a great deal from the reading list. And the committee will help you with this reading list as well.

**Closing Thought:**

**Dr. Bell:**

People always leave these so overwhelmed. But the biggest thing is to communicate. Go to your committee members and ask. With the paper, you can ask questions. “Am I making this connection correctly?” “Am I thinking about this the right way?” – the only thing we can’t do is read drafts. But you can get clarification on things and communicate with them if you feel like they’re not communicating enough with you. Communicate! Faculty really want you to succeed, both inside the university and also when you leave here. You’ll do great.