

OMG—HOW AM I GOING TO PASS MY ORALS!

Schedule Your Time

- After you compile your reading list for each professor, the studying process should take about 4 months (depending on what other commitments you have at the time) - approximately one month for each subject area and a month to review.
- Set a time line for yourself even if you don't tell anyone what it is at first. Most people need some sense of deadline to get work done, and it will remind you that this won't actually last forever.
- Make a large calendar for a 3- or 4-month period (tape it above your desk at home), where you specify which weeks you would spend reading on which subject. Include not only your class/work schedule, but also your other commitments and activities on the calendar, as well as a "day of rest." This will help you juggle the hundreds of balls all at once!
- You will get faster as you go, so don't panic if things seem to be going really slowly at the beginning.

Read, Read, and Read Some More

- Ask friends and colleagues who have already passed their orals for a copy of their reading lists to work from. There's no need to re-invent the wheel, but update each list for new books and tailor each list to your personal interests.
- Try to read the books in a logical order. It is helpful to read (as much as possible) similar books back-to-back. This helps you to distill the differences in argument/point of view.
- Make a notecard for each book. You will only have a minute or two to discuss any given book, so you should try to distill the information from each book or article into a few sentences that will fit on one notecard. These notecards are easy to organize and study from. Pay attention to the introduction and table of contents from each book and don't feel that you need to read each book cover-to-cover.
- Make sure you REALLY KNOW the books and articles on the syllabi of the professor's graduate and undergraduate courses. Those are the books they use regularly and are most familiar with.
- Try to have a section of one of your reading lists help to prepare you to write your prospectus/dissertation. While reading for orals, try to come up with dissertation ideas and begin to tailor your reading lists in order to help you start reading for your dissertation topic.

Work with your Committee

- Each professor likes to structure their pre-orals meetings in a different way - some professors only want to meet once to approve your reading list, and other professors like to meet monthly or every few weeks to check on your progress. Many professors ask the same types of questions to all of their students. Talk to students who have worked with each professor to find out how each professor likes to work and what questions they might ask.
- Have good communication with your committee members. Knowing in advance what is expected is the best way to alleviate anxiety.

- You need to be proactive, and not rely solely on your professors to make sure you're prepared for the big day. This means you should be aggressive about setting up meetings with them and asking them questions about content and format.

Keep it Together & Don't Go Insane

- Keep in touch with friends/family. This entire venture can be extremely nerve wracking. It's normal to get nervous, start panicking, and repeatedly ask yourself, "What if I fail?" It's the last big test before you jump head long into your dissertation. Your friends and family will help you hold it all together and ground your thoughts. They will help you realize that you are more prepared than you think and this exam is not the end of the world.
- Discuss some of the main themes and issues that you've been covering in your readings with your friends and colleagues. This will help boost your confidence and prepare you for the conversational style of the orals.
- Enjoy the process! This is really a time when you finally get to dive in to your field and become an expert in a few topics that are important to you. You will learn so much throughout this process - enjoy it!
- Be kind to yourself. There will be days when you just can't process any additional information. Go outside, play with your dog, call a friend, and come back to it in the morning.

Before the Exam

- While this is very easy to say, and almost impossible to do.... Stop reading the last week, and concentrate on digesting what you've read over the last few months. This is the time to make sure that you clearly understand the material. This is a good time to make charts and timelines, so that you can see on paper the connections between the various themes and arguments that you have read and that are floating somewhere in your brain. Doing so not only allows you to see the big picture, but also helps you to see the nuances of each topic.
- Don't cram the night before. Take the night off and get some rest, so you're not hyped on caffeine for the exam. You will be able to think more clearly and quickly if you're calm, collected, and well-rested.

On Exam Day

- At the actual exam, try to take a breath before you begin each answer. It will help you to speak more logically, though it's hard to fight the urge to just say something quick!
- While this is a test of your knowledge in specific areas, you are not expected to know everything. For the most part, your examiners want to see if you have grasped the more important elements of a particular subject, and if you can think on your feet when given an unknown.
- Lastly, be confident in yourself. You came into this process with a wealth of knowledge, you've increased your knowledge exponentially during the last few months, and you know the material cold—even if you don't think you do. Think of orals as an opportunity to really impress your committee (and yourself!) with all that you've accomplished.