

From: Danielle S. Rudes
Re: Field Exam Experience

Here is a list of the things that did and did not work for me...

1. Having others in the cohort to study with

I agree wholeheartedly with Yuki's assessment (see Yuki Kato's Field Exam Experience).

2. Scheduling Reading

I created a table in Excel listing all my readings in one column and then I looked at the calendar and divided the number of days I had to read by the number of books/articles on my list. (It came out to about 3 per day because I took a month off to relax and travel before I began reading). I also wanted to leave myself 2 weeks before the exam to write practice essays after I'd completed my reading. I broke up the readings so that each day had at least one article (which are considerably shorter than books) OR so that each day without an article had a book I'd read previously or at least had some knowledge of. Then I held myself to my plan. I read all day and night some days and others I breezed through the reading and had the afternoon all to myself. I tried *not* to read on the weekends so I could spend time with my family (but if I was behind I certainly used the weekends to catch up).

3. Notetaking

I took notes (limited to 1-2 pages) on every reading as soon as I was finished with the book or article. That way I wouldn't forget the important stuff. It also gave me a break from reading and a great sense of accomplishment. When I was finished with all the reading on my list, I reorganized my notes into a large 3 ring binder, which I broke down by area (i.e. Race, Class, Gender, General, etc.). Then, the best part, I created an Excel spreadsheet with 6 columns titled author, date, title, main argument, some key points, major criticisms; where it diverges from others' work; method/data. I filled out the spreadsheet noting only the most critical points from each work because I knew I'd need to be able to find my notes in a hurry during the 7-hour exam. I called these "thumbnail sketches". This was extremely helpful during the exam, as I predicted, AND it helped to go over the notes I'd taken on each reading a second time as well. I found where things linked together and I started planning possible essays in my mind.

4. Preparing for the exam

I went to see each of the three people on my committee and asked them for their advice or input about field exams. I asked them to give me possible questions so that I may begin writing practice essays. I then started writing practice essays in the evening (which became difficult as school had started and I had lots of reading to do). When I finished one essay, my advisor said he'd read it and provide feedback. This worked well as we not only discussed my practice essay but I also got more help from him regarding the exam more generally. As another cohort member and I share an advisor we did this process jointly, reading each other's essays and taking them to our advisor together for "de-briefing". That way I got to hear what she did well and not-so-well and vice versa.

5. Taking the Exam

I concur with Yuki's assessment with a few additional comments. First, make sure that in the room your taking the exam that the first thing you do is unplug the telephone. This really distracted me for an hour or so until I bucked up and just unplugged the darn thing. Second, I brought a lot of water and chewing gum. I also brought snacks but found myself too crazed to actually eat. Third, I had lunch with another cohort member who was also taking the exam (though in another topic area) and we really calmed each other down. That was wonderful.