

From: Yuki Kato
Re: Field Exam experience

Here is the list of what worked/didn't work for me:

1. Having others in the cohort to study with

We set several certain meeting dates to exchange our notes and opinions about the readings that we shared on the lists, and it helped me in several ways. For one thing, it clarified some of the issues that I did not get from the book/article. It was also encouraging to confirm that you got what you were supposed to out of it. We each had strength and weakness (in terms of our specialty in the fields and the way we take notes), so in the end we all gained from studying with each other. Most of all, however, it motivated me to get my readings done before the meeting dates!

2. Scheduling for reading

I broke down the reading into subgroups, and assigned myself roughly a book a day plus extra few days to finish each subgroup. I also left one complete week open toward the end of the summer, and I was glad that I could use the week to get back on the track when I fell behind (due to my procrastination and conference trip to Chicago in August). I also started reading the books on my list, rather than the general list, so that I would be interested in the readings and also could start thinking about my dissertation topic.

3. Reading books/articles

I decided to limit my notes to one-page only for each reading. I took notes without consideration for the length as I read the book, then once I was finished (or sometimes while I was still reading) I started cutting the parts that I realized were not most important. This was a very good exercise and made it easier for me to look up information about each reading later. However, I wish I have kept the longer version of the notes on a separate file, not necessarily for the exam but for my reference later on in the career.

4. Preparing for the exam

I began writing essays on subgroups of the reading earlier in the summer, but most of my writing were more concerned about synthesizing as many books/articles into one essay, rather than identifying several major concepts/theories and categorize the literature into based on these concepts/theories. We also went to the committee members (in September) and asked for the sample questions that they are thinking of asking us. Some of those were helpful, as they agreed to read our practice essays in advance and gave us some feedback. The downside of doing so may be that your committee may have a higher expectation on your essays. Nonetheless, I feel that it was still very helpful to walk into the exam, having some ideas of what's expected. The students should also use their colleagues and students from cohorts above to review their practice essays.

5. Taking the exam

Time management is the key. I forced myself to take 20 minutes lunch break, but was still very exhausted and not-very-concentrated by the end of the day. I took too long to write the first essay, and it turned out to be the weakest essay of mine once I got the result back. In contrast, the last essay that I wrote (or, rather squeezed out of my shrinking brain...) was reviewed as the strongest essay. After having the discussion with my committee on my exam results, I realized that I was not tested on how much I read. What I felt they wanted to test was how I can use what I read (very few of them would do) to tell someone a sociological accounts of some events. I believe that was the difference between my weakest and strongest essay. For the first one I spent so much time that I ended up putting too much literature and too many concepts into it. Thus it turned out to be what they called "time-less" essay that sounds almost like the one that came out of a sociology text book. For the last essay that I wrote, since I was so tired and was eager to "just finish," I could only write about what I strongly felt and surely knew about the topic given. That must have made much better sense to the reader, since it was a simple explanation with just a few necessary references. I also had no time to look up any of my notes, but it was nice to have them there, to know that I COULD go back and check them in case of panic.

Best of lucks to all of you who will be taking exams!