

Surviving Second Year

Time- and stress-management

These go hand in hand. It's easy to lose perspective when you're assigned to do more work than you can possibly finish in a given period. You might feel compelled to work all the time, or guilty about not working, or paralyzed by the enormity of the task before you. While entirely natural and deserving of compassion, these toxic feelings will make you both unhappy and unproductive, and if you submit to their power, you will soon become a loathsome burden to yourself, your advisors, and everyone around you. Here are a few coping strategies that may help you to avoid this sad fate:

- Budget your time, use it productively, and then move on. The best advice I ever got about field reading was from a newly-minted ABD who had passed her exams with distinction. (Distinction, by the way, is nothing more than a ceremonial pat on the back that has little correlation to intelligence, character, or future professional success, but still, I listened.) She said she had spent no more than 5 hours per day on field readings, and always took off at least one day per week. "They have to be 5 *good* hours," she explained, "no checking Facebook or anything—but 5 is all you need." It was liberating to hear that, and in my experience she was right.
- Have a life. Balance matters: if you want to think well, you need to eat well, relax, pursue hobbies, exercise (if you do that), spend time with friends and loved ones and pets (if you have them), and most important, SLEEP (!!!). Otherwise you **will** burn out. Respect your own needs and rituals. If practicing yoga or playing basketball or knitting a beer cozy twice a week keeps you from losing your mind, do it; if you can't work productively after 5pm, don't; if you need to watch TV or a movie before bed to fall asleep, don't skip it in favor of field reading. Be sure to take days off. If your work-related anxiety consistently prevents you from taking care of yourself, you may wish to enlist the free, top-notch mental health services of the JHU Counseling Center (410-516-8278). They are quite familiar with this problem there.
- Take advantage of your second-year status. Others in the department, faculty and grad students alike, know that you're under a special burden this year. This is a good time to say "no" to them—"no" to attending workshops every week, "no" to editing FYP drafts, "no" to whatever. Do it, do it often, and don't feel bad about it.
- Find productive spaces. Figure out what you need from your surroundings in order to work well, and go to places that fit the bill.
- Pause to organize and take stock. This is especially important in the weeks leading up to written exams, but it's good to do throughout the year. At the end of each week or month, take some time to go back over your notes from the previous week/month and organize them in a way that makes sense to you. It will make you feel in control of the material as you work through it, and that sense of mastery will pay off in your exams.

Note-taking

There is no "right" way to take notes. All that matters is that you develop habits that work for you. That means that your notes cover whatever content is relevant to you and your field advisor, that they make sense when you read back over them, and that they translate the takeaways of the reading into your own words (in general, extensive quoting is both time-consuming and unrewarding). Some people take many pages of notes on a single book or article; others wait

until they have finished a reading, then write a 1-2pp précis of its major problematic, arguments, methods, sources, weaknesses, and so on; still others take no notes, relying instead on the recall capacities of their steel-trap minds (NOT recommended). If you want to cultivate better note-taking habits, seek out someone who always seems to have her act together in seminar and ask her how she does it.

The rhythms of the year

Comps is really a two-year process. For your advisor, certainly, and often for your other field examiners, too, the exams are the culmination of two years of study. These people have followed your progress during that time in seminars and workshops and one-on-one meetings, and they judge your performance accordingly. What you write on the exams and say in orals does matter, but it isn't everything—far from it.

That said, things do intensify during second year, which has its own special rhythms. They tend to unfold as follows:

- September-October. You're struggling to stay on top of seminar reading, TA duties, and (in some cases) grant proposals, all of which make it hard to do more than a token amount of field reading. You feel like you're behind. (You aren't.)
- November-Winter break. You've got a good enough handle on the workload to carve out some time for field reading. This allows you to perceive just how much you have left to do, and you begin to notice your heart pounding whenever you lie still, especially at bedtime.
- Winter break. Without teaching or seminars in the way, you finally have time to do a lot of reading. You perfect the art of judicious skimming and stop spending entire days on a single book or two. Ideally, you end break with the sense that you might just get through your field lists—even the one you've been neglecting in favor of the other two. You can tell that you've learned stuff.
- February-March. With the return of teaching and seminar duties, you start to feel panicky. High blood pressure and that pounding heartbeat return in force, and you start to order take-out regularly while cheating on sleep and exercise. Field meetings begin to go better, though, because it turns out you really do know things—even more than you thought. Out of a mix of contentment and pity, some or all of your examiners cut down your readings. You devote no more than an hour or two to any one book.
- Sometime in April. You stop reading and start reviewing. It pains you to do so—you're not done yet—but you have enough sense to realize that mastering 75%-90% of your lists is better than having read everything and forgotten half of it. If you're a go-getter, you write some practice exam essays. At minimum, you take notes on your notes, grouping your readings thematically, identifying connections between them (even across fields), and laying out what the major problems, methodologies, and interpretive fault lines are within the various sub-fields you've covered.
- End of April or early May. Writtens.
- Early or mid-May. Orals.
- End of May or early June. Post-comps party!

Writtens

Plan to take them in a comfortable space where you have access to all you need (tea, coffee, quiet, food, security blanket, etc). Most people take them at home, or in an advisor's library office. Usually you will have some say in when you take which exams, so be strategic. My exams were M-W-F, and I knew that I would be worn down by exam 3, so I scheduled my fields in descending order of angst.

Everyone has different exam guidelines. Here are my advisor's, along with his advice:

Some things to remember for the exams. They are open-book, open-note. However, I do not expect you to consult these very much, as you will need to spend most of the time actually writing. I expect you to make cogent, well-reasoned arguments, and to write well. However, you also need to demonstrate the breadth and depth of your knowledge. Ten pages per question, double-spaced, is not at all unusual. I expect to see a command both of the historiography, and of the evidentiary basis on which the historiographical arguments are being made. I don't expect formal footnotes. If you happen to have a reference handy, great. But it is not essential, and don't let that stop you from including a few apposite quotations. Wit and humor are welcome, uncontrolled silliness and excessive colloquialisms are not. Do leave a few minutes for reading over each essay before sending it to me.

Do pay attention to the time. I have always been amazed at the number of students who end up spending six hours on the first question. Again, it is less important to turn in a perfectly crafted essay than it is to turn in something that gives me a sense of what you have learned, and how you think about the material. So if you reach the halfway mark and are still struggling with the first essay, just finish it quickly and move on to the second, even if it is not in perfect shape.

Also: Please do not stress out. This is not the *agrégation*. You are not competing with each other for a limited number of *postes*. It is important to work hard, and steadily, but it is also important to take some time off, particularly just before the exam. Cramming that last article in is never worth it. A full night's sleep is much better preparation. I know you have all been working hard, and expect you all to pass!

Some advisors will allow you to design your own exam questions; others won't. Regardless, in most cases you'll be able to choose from a list of possible questions, some of which will be tailored to your particular interests. To give you a sense of what this might look like, here is a copy of the field exam my advisor gave me:

General Exam for Will Brown
Major Field: Old Regime and Revolutionary France
April 25, 2011

You have eight hours to complete this exam. You are free to consult whatever books or notes you wish. The essays should be carefully written enough to make a clear and cogent argument, but they should also be extensive enough to address the questions fully, with substantive and specific references to the historiography and the historical evidence. I do not expect perfectly polished writing, exact quotations, or full citations of your evidence. If you think there is more than one way of interpreting or approaching a given question, don't worry about trying to guess the one I had in mind; choose the one that will allow you best to display your

command of the material. Please e-mail me back your responses by 5:00 p.m.

In each of the two sections below, please answer one of the two questions. *Please make sure to devote your time equally to your two essays.*

Section I. Answer one of the two following questions:

1. Compare the practice of “absolutism” (define this however you like) in the periods 1630-1648, 1680-1715, and 1748-1789. Do you see the practice as having remained essentially the same in these three periods, as Tocqueville’s work might suggest? Or were there clear and essential differences?
2. Assess the significance of the Franco-British rivalry for eighteenth-century French politics and culture.

Section II. Answer one of the two following questions:

1. In what ways is it meaningful to describe the French Revolution as a social and economic revolution? Discuss in relationship to the work of the so-called “revisionists” and “post-revisionists.”
2. During the period of the Terror (defined as you wish), was counter-revolution primarily caused, and driven forward by France’s political radicalization? Or was radicalization primarily caused and driven forward by the effects of counter-revolution?

One thing to consider: it looks good to be able to link a broader thematic or methodological question to your own research. So, if you have time at the end of an essay, you might tie in your FYP experience or some other relevant work you’ve done that has helped you to think through the issue at hand.

Orals

The oral exams are intimidating: for two hours you sit in a room before three venerable inquisitors, including your beloved (?) advisor, who ask you increasingly severe questions in front of each other and God above in order to assess your scholarly aptitude. But really, everyone wants you to do well, and typically the atmosphere is serious but friendly. Your examiners will push you because they want to identify the limits of your knowledge, which will benefit you in the long run. Their questions will probably cover the written prompts you chose not to answer, the brilliant/muddled/hilariously wrong things you wrote in your essays, and whatever else their wily imaginations can conjure. Everything is fair game. Some examiners avoid factual questions, others will ask you to list every meaningful date in the history of Jansenism from 1690 to the French Revolution (with an explanation of why each one was important). By the time orals roll around—usually a week or two after writtens—the only real preparation you can do is to review your essays and think about how you would have tackled the prompts you didn’t answer. Otherwise, just be sure to get plenty of rest in the days beforehand, and try to come with the mindset that you’re ready to show off all you’ve learned. You **will** pass.