

# Comprehensive Exam Strategies



Graduate Writing  
Workshop




# About Me

- I'm Emily Rose Cole, the Graduate Assistant to the Academic Writing Center ([coleer@mail.uc.edu](mailto:coleer@mail.uc.edu))
- I'm a PhD candidate in the English, and I got a high pass on my comprehensive exams two years ago.
- I'm here to develop presentations through AWC and to assist you in your needs as grad students.
- Don't hesitate to reach out!



# In this presentation we will...

- ▶ Go over the basic structure of comprehensive exams
  - ▶ Review the SQ3R technique
  - ▶ Discuss note-taking strategies including
    - ▶ The Outline Method
    - ▶ The Cornell Method
    - ▶ The Mind Mapping Method
  - ▶ Recommend strategies to prepare for exams the week before and the day of exams
- 


# What Are Comprehensive Exams?

- Comprehensive exams (or “comps”) are cumulative exams taken by PhD students to demonstrate acquired knowledge in their field
- Exams generally take place after a PhD student has completed their coursework
- After passing exams, PhD students attain “PhD candidacy,” which means they have completed all the work for their degree except for their dissertation (this means that a PhD candidate is also “ABD” or “all but dissertation”)
- Formats of these exams vary by school and by discipline

# Comps Exams Can Include:

- ▶ Submission of a long academic paper (or several papers)
- ▶ A formal oral exam
- ▶ Review of an academic portfolio or set of experiments
- ▶ A series of proctored exams
- ▶ All components of these exams are generally **timed** in some way



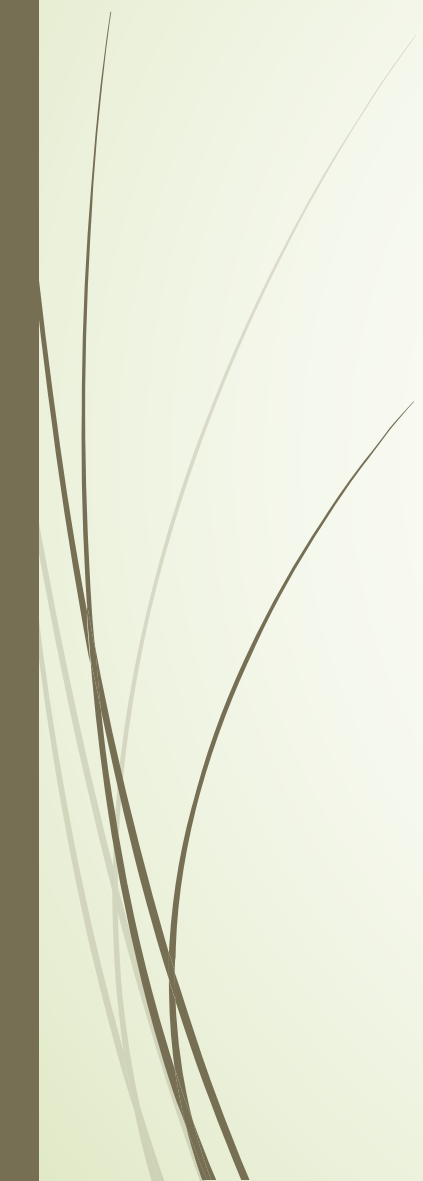



# The General Process: Choosing Your Committee

- ▶ Your committee is a series of advisors who will be administering your exams
- ▶ They'll help you put together reading lists, write your written exam questions, review your portfolio, and/or ask your questions during your oral exams
- ▶ Typically, your committee consists of professors who know you personally, which generally means you've taken a class from that professor
- ▶ Think carefully about which professors you've worked with would best suit your research
- ▶ Ask professors early to be on your committee
- ▶ Meet with your committee during your exam year



# The General Process: Scheduling

- ▶ You'll need to set up a date for your comps
  - ▶ Work with the Program Manager in your department to coordinate schedules with your committee to set dates to complete your comps (including your written component, oral component, etc.)
  - ▶ Submit any paperwork necessary ahead of time (check the Graduate Handbook and/or ask your department's Program Manager
- 



# Universal Skills Tested by Comprehensive Exams

- Regardless of discipline, passing comps exams will require you to:
  - Choose a particular area of focus
  - Memorize information
  - Read widely in your discipline
  - Demonstrate knowledge specific to your discipline
  - Connect ideas between readings
  - Converse with other scholars (i.e. your committee) about important topics in your field





# SQ3R Review

## **S—SURVEY**

*Survey the material—peruse the overall organization in 3-5 minutes.*

## **Q--QUESTIONS**

*Write questions regarding the reading BEFORE you read. What are you aiming to find out? Why are you reading this?*

## **R--READ**

*Read the material looking for answers to the questions you posed. (Taking notes in the margins or in a notebook while you read is a great retention tool!)*

## **R--RECITE**

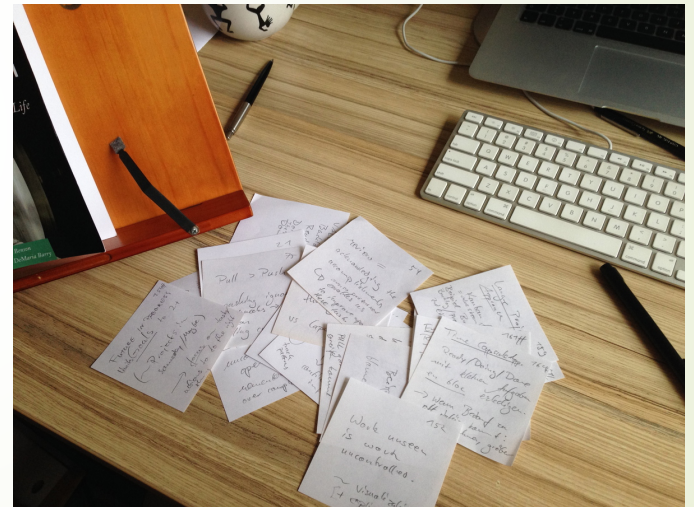
*Recite (or rephrase) what you learned IN YOUR OWN WORDS.*

## **R--REVIEW**

*Review how this book fits within the larger framework of material you are studying.*

# Note-Taking Methods: Three Strategies

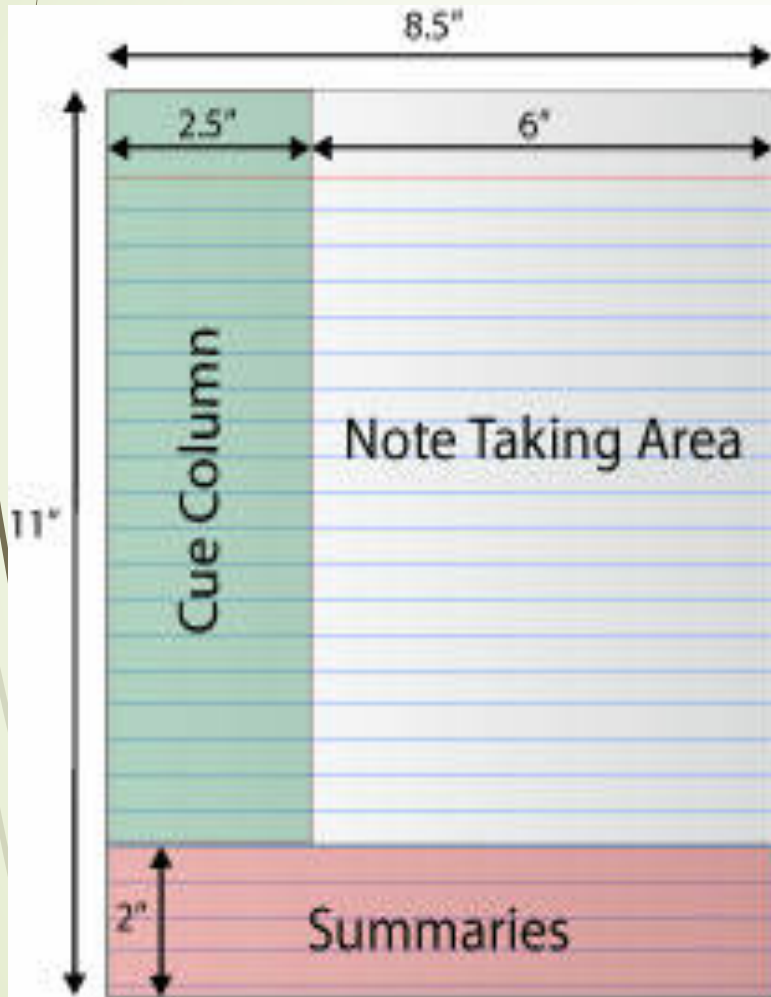
- Outline Method
- Cornell Method
- Mind-Mapping



There is no “right way” to take notes! Use the method(s) that work best for you!



# Cornell Method



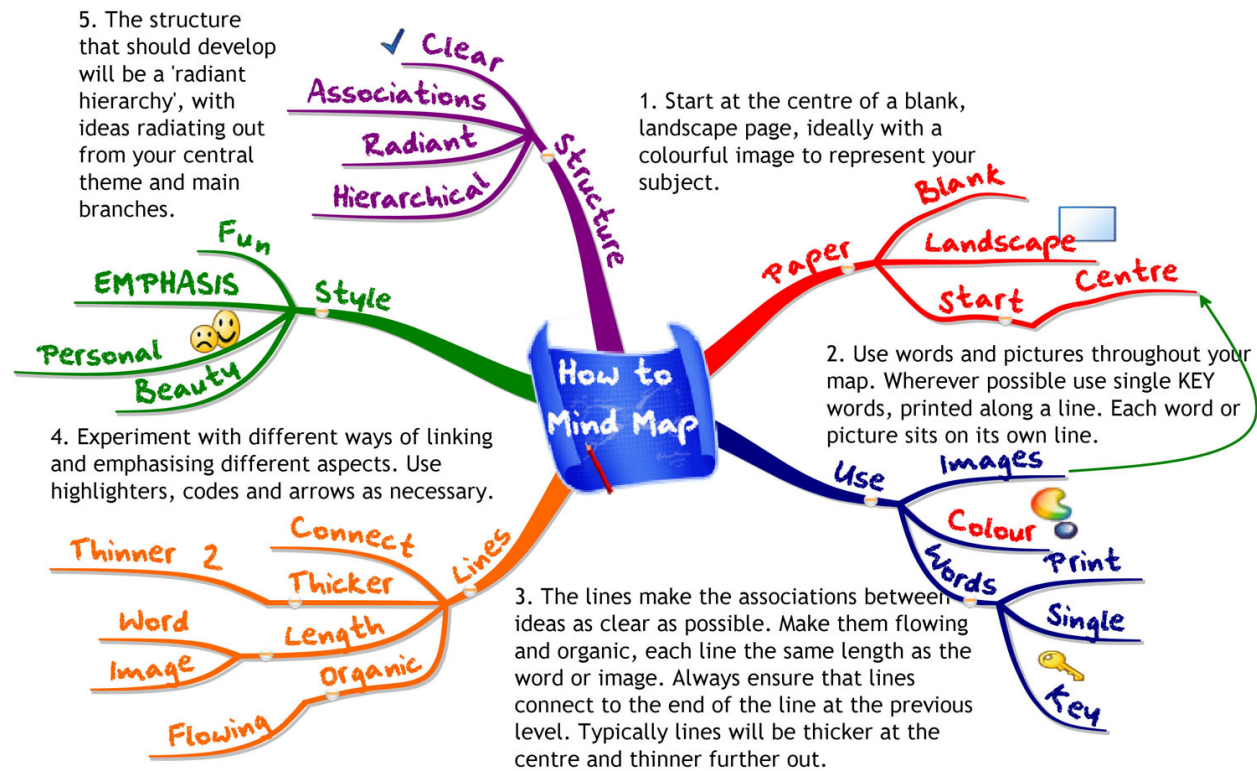
- ▶ Divide your paper (or note taking app) into three sections
- ▶ **Notes**
  - ▶ Regular notes (just like you would in outline style)
- ▶ **Cues**
  - ▶ Questions that connect this text to others
  - ▶ Main ideas in the text
  - ▶ Main themes that connect the texts on your list
- ▶ **Summary**
  - ▶ Review first two sections of notes
  - ▶ Write a 1-2 sentence summary of the most important ideas that you covered

# Mind Mapping Method

- Diagrams that represent connections between concepts visually
  - Nonlinear notetaking style that's great for visual learners
  - Write the main concept in the middle of the page
  - Branch out from that main concept with topic branches and then fill in important details
  - This style involves some amount of hierarchy (like outlining notes do) as you separate topics, big ideas, and keywords
- Free software tools to create mind maps:
    - Bubble.us
    - Coggle
    - Freemind
    - MindMeister




# Mind Map Example





# Asking for Accommodations


- ▶ If you need them, don't be afraid to ask for accommodations!
- ▶ Especially in 2020, when many people are facing extra stressors like childcare, elder care, illness, etc., you are well within your rights to ask for accommodations to complete your exams.
- ▶ If you plan on asking for accommodations, talk to your committee several weeks in advance.
- ▶ Don't be afraid to ask [Accessibility Resources](#) to help you.
  - ▶ Phone: 513-792-8625
  - ▶ Email: [ucba.accessibilityresources@uc.edu](mailto:ucba.accessibilityresources@uc.edu)



# The Week of Exams: How to Prepare I


- ▶ Make sure your exams are your **main focus**
  - ▶ Cancel work hours or appointments that aren't **absolutely necessary**
  - ▶ If teaching, ask someone to cover your classes, or move them online and write lesson plans in advance
- ▶ Set up a quiet, dedicated workspace
  - ▶ Minimize distractions
  - ▶ Make sure books, notes, and snacks are readily accessible







# The Week of Exams: How to Prepare II

- ▶ Think through basic necessities in advance so you have plans in place
  - ▶ Batch cook meals that are easy to reheat
  - ▶ Arrange child and/or pet care in advance
  - ▶ Stock up on your favorite beverages and snacks
  - ▶ Have friends on call (preferably folks who have completed their exams already) whom you can vent to if necessary



# The Week of Exams: How to Prepare III

- ▶ Think about what questions you think your committee might ask based on conversations you've had with them
  - ▶ Review your notes
  - ▶ Explain concepts to a friend
  - ▶ Create an outline or mind map of important material
  - ▶ Create a quotes document with quotes that might be useful to you so you can copy/paste them easily
- 



# The Week of Exams: How To Prepare IV

- ▶ For written exams, consider writing your Works Cited page in advance!
  - ▶ This will save you valuable writing time
  - ▶ It'll give you a good chance to remember and review important concepts from each source
  - ▶ Before alphabetizing your works cited can group the sources together by concept

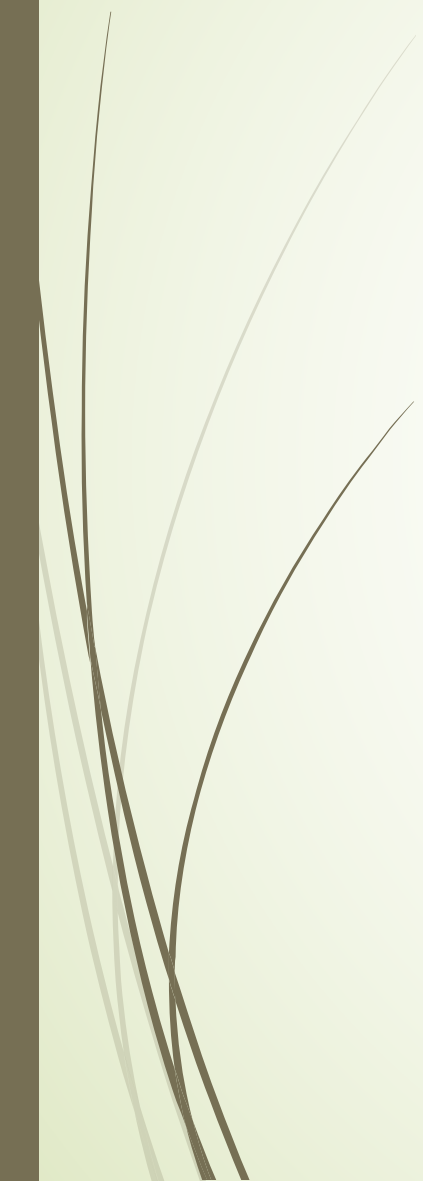


# Written Exams: What To Do

- ▶ Breathe. You've got this.
- ▶ Read questions thoroughly.
- ▶ Complete the questions in any order your want.
- ▶ Outline your response and gather appropriate quotations.
- ▶ Know what works best for your brain. Do you write well in the morning but not in the evening? Focus your energy on the times you work best and **take breaks**.
- ▶ Proofread, but don't stress too much about small mistakes – your committee knows you're writing fast.
- ▶ Give yourself a little time off every day so you can recharge.

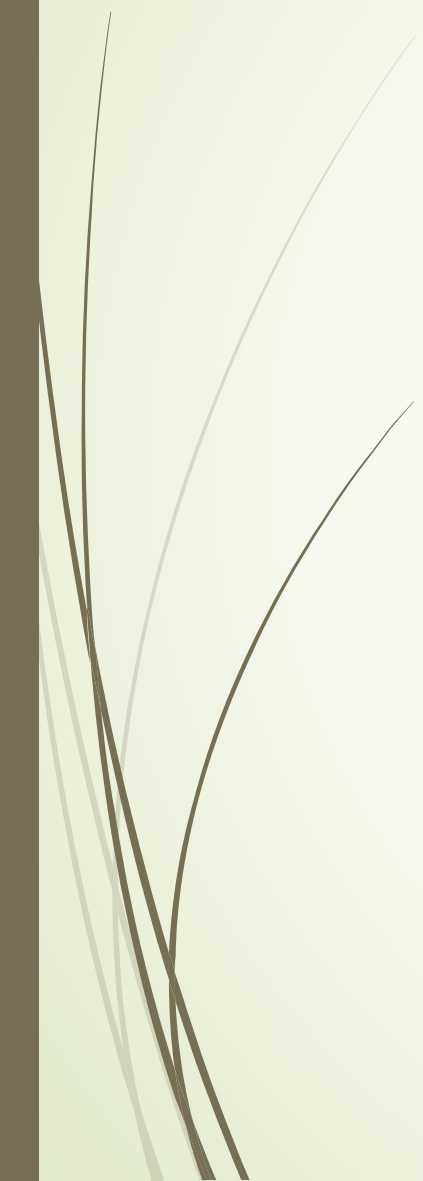


# Oral Exams: What to Do

- Reread your written answers.
  - Think about places you could expand or texts you didn't cover.
  - Go over your notes.
  - Practice talking through your ideas (preferably with a friend!
  - Slow down during exam time. Take your time with your answers. Ask for clarification if you need it.
- 



# Remember:

- ▶ You are ready!!!
  - ▶ **Nobody** feels totally prepared for exams.  
Some anxiety is normal
  - ▶ Your committee wants you to pass
  - ▶ You have learned so much – now is the time to show off that knowledge
  - ▶ Once you pass, give yourself a rest.  
Celebrate!
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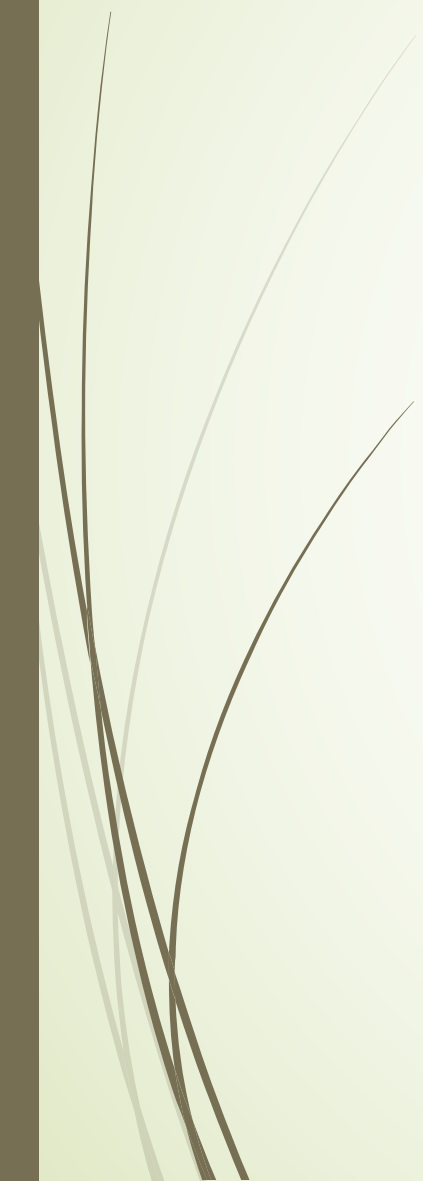


# Academic Writing Center

- ▶ The Academic Writing Center is here to help you! We have tutors available, helpful handouts, other resources available from our website, Visit our website at [uc.edu/awc](http://uc.edu/awc). All our resources are online this year.
- ▶ Individual tutoring isn't just for undergrads! There are graduate tutors who are excited to help you work through any of your writing assignments. Sign up using the "schedule an appointment" tab on the website.
- ▶ Handouts and slide decks from previous workshops, including "Graduate Reading Strategies," which features the SQ3R method and speed reading strategies, are available on our website.
- ▶ We thank you for attending this AWC Graduate Workshop. The schedule for the other workshops this semester is posted [www.uc.edu/learningcommons/writingcenter/grad.html](http://www.uc.edu/learningcommons/writingcenter/grad.html)



# Questions?

- ▶ Are there any questions that you have that weren't covered by this presentation so far? Ask now!
  - ▶ Please unmute to ask your questions aloud, since chat can be hard to follow 😊
- 





# Works Consulted



- ▶ *Inside Higher Ed* "Surviving Writing Comprehensive Exams"
  - ▶ "Surviving the Oral Comprehensive"
- ▶ McDaniel, Mark A., Daniel C. Howard, and Gilles O. Einstein. "The Read-Recite-Review"
  - ▶ *University of Nebraska-Lincoln*
- ▶ "8 Ways to Prepare for Comprehensive Exams"
  - ▶ *Crash Course: Study Skills*