

# **Survive**

*(or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Comps)*

A Guide to Surviving the M.A. Literature Comps at Northern Illinois University

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for the English Graduate Student Association

**panic** (*pan•ic*)  
*noun* A sudden, overpowering fright

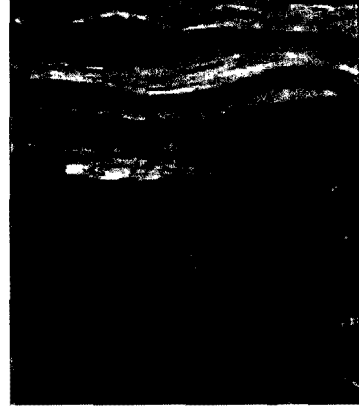
## Preface

Can any single word send a shiver down an M.A. candidate's spine faster than "comps?"

For me, it meant a reading list of six texts, only one of which I'd read before (long, long before). So it meant lots and lots of reading. It meant rumors, ranging from the plausible (do you have to memorize a passage from every text on the list?) to the totally absurd (and be able to cite from other texts published in the same era?).

Unfortunately, it also meant very little formal guidance, and very little to dispel the rumors. That's not to say that most of the department wasn't very helpful – it was – but only that there wasn't anything available in terms of a strategy for attacking this reading list.

My point in writing this is to create the guide that I wish had been available when I took the comps.



The author, after seeing  
His comps reading list.

The information here is the result of my own experiences, as well as questions and conversations I had with friends, other students, faculty, and administrators. Much of the advice contained here may seem obvious, but other parts may prove useful. And during times of high stress, even obvious information can sometimes prove comforting.

This guide is just one way to approach the comps, not *the only* way. Don't be afraid to discard some of the information. This is the technique that my study group and I followed, and with relative success. But there are certainly other ways.

And because I've taken and passed the exams, I'm providing this advice to you for the same reason Oscar Wilde always says that all good advice must be passed on: "It's the only thing to do with it. It is never any use to oneself."

Enjoy. And good luck.

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### **I      Your List and Books**

Your list of exam books should become available just before Christmas break. The secretary of the grad department will make it available. Get a copy of the list, then take a deep breath. It's time to go shopping.

Make an effort to find critical editions for each text on the list. Norton provides excellent critical editions for many major texts. The critical edition will give you a reliable copy of the text and, more importantly, a body of reviews and criticism of the author and work.

Remember that many bookstores (like Border's and Barnes & Noble) will allow you to order books that they do not have in stock. Make use of websites like amazon.com for more obscure titles.

If you cannot find a critical edition, be sure to find a copy of the text from a reputable publisher.

In the event that you have a text for which multiple editions were published (Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" for example), check with the head of the graduate program which edition you should study.

If you already have formed a study group, be sure that everyone purchases the *same* edition from the same publisher – this will make page number references in later discussions and handouts much simpler.

### **II     Read**

Over the holiday break, try to read all of the texts. If you can't get to all of them (and with the holidays, you probably won't), at least two or three would be a reasonable target.

You may want to consider starting with the longer texts, as those are the ones that are sometimes easier to put off for too long. Conversely, if you find yourself intimidated by a longer text, you may want to start with a shorter one that keeps you from feeling like you're jumping in on the deep end. Start reading with what you're comfortable with...but start reading!

Remember when you read that you are *studying* these texts, not reading for pleasure or entertainment. You'll want to familiarize yourself with the author, plot, major characters, and basic themes *before* reading. This will allow you to focus on the finer points of character, setting, narration, etc., instead of wasting your time on more general aspects and comprehension. To that end, read the editor's preface or introduction essay prior to reading the text. You should also consult a study guide (crazy as it sounds, Cliff's Notes or [www.sparknotes.com](http://www.sparknotes.com) are especially helpful) before reading.



It's never too early to start reading for comps.

Relax when you read...you'll already know the story, themes, and characters. You don't need to worry about memorizing passages or highlighting huge blocks of text, although you will want to note pages or scenes that seem especially important.

Don't panic if you don't get to all of the texts. As long as you have them read before you discuss them in your study group, you'll be okay. Reading – and all your comps studying – is not a sprint, but a marathon, in which a disciplined, steady pace will be rewarded.

### III Study Groups

Forming a study group is an incredibly useful and highly recommended tool – it will help keep you disciplined in your studying and provide academic as well as moral support.

The size of your study group should be approximately equivalent to the number of texts. This allows each of you to research and present one text to the group.

After forming the group, you'll need to do two things. First, pick someone who will be responsible for communicating meeting information to other group members – this can be done through group emails. Second, delegate specific texts to members of your group. Try to match texts to areas of knowledge within your group. If, for example, someone in your group has had a class on or written a paper on one of the texts, let him/her present it...lacking that, look for someone familiar with the author, literary movement, or era. Some of the rarer texts may not lend themselves to anyone's prior knowledge. Don't worry about it. You will all become experts.

The duration and frequency of your group meetings is up to you. You should meet at least once per week – and preferably twice – for at least two hours, starting about six or seven weeks before the date of your test.

#### Study Group Tips:

- Start holding meetings after Christmas break.
- Spend at least a week on any novel-length text.
- Save the week leading up to exams for review

Ideally, you should meet two days per week. Don't meet so often that you risk burning out or going over the same material excessively/obsessively, but be sure you give each text fair representation and coverage.

Remember that no study schedule will work perfectly for everyone in the group – teaching, class, and work schedules may all interfere. Do the best you can and don't ask any single person to miss too much time.

Above all, *don't be afraid to ask questions*. Ask your group members when you are studying together. Ask professors, administrators, other students who'd taken the test before...ask anyone who might know something. Of course, no one in the department owes you anything, but you might be surprised at how willing to help many people are. If one of your professors is teaching one of the texts that semester, don't be afraid to ask him/her for a little extra lecture on that work. We even had a professor interrupt class for about fifteen minutes once to talk about one of the texts that fell under her area of study. *You never know who will help you unless you ask.*

Once you agree on a meeting time, work out the specifics of the schedule – which texts will be discussed which weeks. Save the last week for review. Write it out on a calendar, if it helps, and be sure that everyone knows the schedule. Ideally, you should spend a week (two meetings) with each text (it's okay to combine shorter ones, like poems). Schedule which texts will be studied each week and inform all members of the group. Think of your group as an unofficial class; the schedule becomes your syllabus.

Work with the graduate or department secretary to see that your group can have an unused room to study in on your meeting days. Studying in one of the teacher offices can be distracting, especially on the week(s) when teachers are holding student conferences.

When you first meet about your text, work on the primary material – background contextual information on the author or relevant literary movement may be interesting, too, but focus primarily on the text itself. Discuss characters, story, and major themes. You may want to briefly include the major critical readings of the text and cite specific critics, but save most of that for the second meeting.

When you present your text, treat it as you would a presentation for a class. Have a worksheet or study guide prepared and copied for all members of your group (you may want to email it first or post it to a WebBoard).

Your handout may contain any of the following: a list of major characters (it can be hard to keep all the names straight when you are reviewing), major ideas or themes contained in the text, how that text or author fits into a certain historical period or literary movement...in short, anything that will be helpful to have at-a-glance for review. The length of your handout should be around 2-3 pages.

For the second meeting about your text, discuss major critical issues. What have the primary areas of focus been for critics? Provide a short annotated bibliography of two or three major articles, distilling them into a short paragraph or so.

One more thing – if you wish to take the test on a computer, it's your responsibility to notify the graduate student director. Don't forget – three hours of writing by hand can be really painful.

#### IV Review and Advanced Studying Techniques

Once your group has met and discussed the primary and major secondary readings for each text, it's time to review. Review takes two main forms.

First, beginning when your group finishes its third or fourth text and continuing with every text thereafter, save a block of time at the end of each meeting to discuss how the texts might be connected to each other. This, after all, is what your exam will ask you to do. Don't expect to make the *exact* connections that the test will ask for, but do start to examine the relationships of the texts and characters to each other.

The second form of review is actual review meetings. You should meet two to three times in the week leading up to the exam to review. Discuss with your group what the topics for each meeting will be.

You may want to go over unclear passages or especially challenging texts again.

Primarily, however, you should try to find commonalities between the texts. Look for similarities in characters, story, interpretation, criticism, and most importantly, themes. These connections need not be highly specific, just enough so that you are able to tie various texts together. For example, how do your texts treat women? Colonialism? Imagination? Authority? History? Knowledge? Family? You should be able to focus on similarities and also to explain key differences.

Figure out which *texts* will likely be grouped together, and *why*. Remember that test questions usually group texts together by their period of publication. It is unlikely, then, that you will have to compare Shakespeare to Ken Kesey or William Faulkner. Keep this in mind.

One useful exercise that our group did was to list all the texts across the top of a blackboard, and then simply start brainstorming the ideas above to find the things they had in common. We then listed each idea in a column beneath its text, circling the stronger connections, and crossing out the weaker ones. This helped us to better visualize connections between texts, making some seemingly unconnected works come together with relative ease.

Try to anticipate **general** questions that could arise naturally from your texts. It is important to remain *general* when doing this; if you spend a lot of time discussing

specific issues, you may find that time wasted when your specific question does not appear on the exam. General connections can usually be tailored to fit more specific questions.

The secretary of the department should be able to provide you with copies of the exam questions from the past few years. Go over them in group; try to think of ways that your texts – or their more general themes – could be inserted into those questions. Although it is almost impossible that any of your questions will be exact duplicates, you will have a better idea of the *types* of questions asked.

Try to find out who your test graders will be (this information *should* be available to you) – they should be a panel of three faculty members. By now, several members of your group should have had classes with them (possibly even a class in which one of the texts was taught). Discuss what the grader’s areas of interest are. Try to find books and articles that they have published. Remember, these people will not only be grading your exam, but also will have written it – the more you know about them, the better. This task may not be worth devoting a lot of time to (because, if you’re like we were, you won’t get much help from it), maybe a half hour or so of MLA searching.



Your new best friend.

One of your test questions *may* ask you to draw on an additional source not on the reading list. If you see an obvious connection to a major outside text or literary movement, use a study guide, like

sparknotes.com or Cliff’s Notes to re-acquaint yourself with the major characters and basic plot of the outside text.

It is not necessary to have passages from your texts memorized (but it doesn’t hurt!). However, if you find a phrase or two that seem important, and that you can apply to several aspects of the text (or connect to other texts), it will be helpful to memorize it.

What you *should* have memorized are:

- Author and title for each text.
- Names of most characters in the texts and their basic relationships to one another.
- Approximate year of publication(s).
- The name and main ideas of two or three “big” critics (total, not for each text) that you can use to “frame” your essays.

## V Pre-Test (24 hours)

Relax, it will all be over soon. If you’ve read the books and followed a disciplined study regimen (like this one), you don’t need to do anything extraordinary in the last 24 hours. Eat healthy meals and get a full night’s rest to maintain a steady energy level.

Review study guides, notes, and your group’s handouts for each of the texts. Re-read (or skim) specific passages, especially those that (a) you don’t feel as confident with or (b)

you see as potentially connecting to other texts. Quiz yourself on character names and critic names.

You can find quizzes on [sparknotes.com](http://sparknotes.com) that you may find useful in reviewing your basic knowledge of the texts.

Review general information about the authors and the literary movements with which they were involved.

Again, consider how the texts might be tied together by common elements and themes.

If you want to test yourself on your knowledge of the texts, sit down at a computer and type out as detailed a synopsis as you can remember.

Try to pull in critics and major themes. Give yourself thirty minutes to an hour with each text. When you're done, compare it to your notes. Did you miss anything important?

Dress comfortably for the test. Layers are best – in a room full of stressed, typing students, the temperature is likely to fluctuate.



If you've followed  
this guide, you  
won't need to hit it.

## VI Test Strategy

What to bring:

- A dictionary.
- A pen or pencil to scribble notes on the exam.
- Headphones and music, if you want to and it's allowed (be sure to check well ahead of time with the department and then that day with the person next to you to make sure your volume is not too loud).
- Earplugs, if you think the sounds of everyone typing/coughing/sneezing/whatever might bother you.
- Bottled water.
- Granola bars or some other light snack, if you want.

Get to the building at least a half hour before your test. You may want to do light review, or you may just want to relax and catch your breath.

Before you get into the testing room, take a few minutes and – odd as this may sound – stretch. Stretch your legs, arms, back and neck. It will help with the mental stress and also help keep you physically comfortable, since you will be sitting in a chair for the better part of the next four hours.

Get comfortable. Check the height of your chair, angle of your computer screen, position of your keyboard, etc.

When the proctor tells you to begin, open your packet and read through the directions and *all* the questions. You will have your choice of questions (from either three sets of two or two sets of three). If any immediately strike you as must-dos (or must-not-dos), mark them.

If you have any information crammed into your short-term memory that you are afraid of forgetting (such as a critic or character name), write it down. That's one less thing that you'll have to remember as you begin to tackle the test questions.

Before starting to actually write each of your essays, take a moment to do two things:

1. Write a thesis. Your thesis may change/develop somewhat as you get into your essay, but ***be sure that you are presenting a clear argument to the grading committee, and not just reciting information about the texts.***
2. Sketch out a phrasal or sentence outline. When you know where you are going and what characters and scenes you want to discuss, it will show in your writing in the form of improved clarity and better transitions. That doesn't mean you have to stick religiously to your outline, but it's a good general guide for you.

Be disciplined in your allocation of time. In a three-question exam, use one hour per question, saving an hour at the end for review and proofreading (you may think that this sounds like too much time and that you won't need it, but you will). In a two-question exam, use one and a half hours per question, saving an hour at the end for review and proofreading. Force yourself to follow these guidelines, even if you have a lot to say about one of the essays. *Remember, no one ever failed the test for not being able to write everything that he knew about one of the questions, but people have failed for trying to write one long one essay at the cost of not developing another sufficiently.*

Don't be afraid to get up if you need to get a drink, go to the bathroom, stretch, or just take your eyes off the computer screen. Five minutes to get comfortable can go a long way.

When you proofread, double-check that you are arguing a clear thesis. Double-check character, critic, and author names. Look hard for word omissions...but remember, no matter how many times you proofread, some mistakes will slip through. The committee will understand that the stress and time constraints you are under may cause a minor mistake, but you want to present as error-free an essay as possible.

Most importantly, write and relax. Don't worry about what other people seem to be doing. If you've studied the books, you'll have plenty to say about the questions. The comprehensive exams, according to one former graduate student director, are your time to shine, to show off the knowledge that you've accumulated. They are intended to allow

you to demonstrate your knowledge and abilities. If you've studied the texts independently and with your group, and worked hard over the past few months, you'll know your stuff. Show 'em what you've got.

And when it's over, don't forget that a key element to any disciplined study regimen is to reward yourself when the mission is accomplished.

