

Qualifying Exam: Planning and Reading Strategies

HCC Seminar

11/6/18

Getting to Know Other HCC Students (5 min)

Directions: In your small group, go around and introduce yourself! Starting with the 2nd year, share your name and answer to the following question.

Question: If you were to spend the rest of your life in the company of a single type of animal, which would you choose?¹

Qualifying Exam: What is it and why does it matter? (5 min)

Take a deep breath. You've got this! Hard work and a good plan will get you through the quals process. Everyone knows their best level of stress for good work. Make sure to take care of yourself during the quals process!

The Exam

The qualifying exam is an important milestone in the PhD program. When you pass the exam, you become a qualified PhD student!! And you get a pay bump (provided you turn in your paperwork). Most of the PhD programs in the US require their students to take a qualifying exam of some sort. Basically, the idea of the qualifying exam is to...

- 1) Make sure that you know your stuff that is important for your research area (e.g., know about prior work in HCC community, your specialization, & your specific research area).
- 2) Ensure you are capable of completing independent research (e.g., you are in a good place to move forward with the program)

Quals is different for everyone. One way to think about quals is as a stress test that will help you improve as an independent researcher by highlighting your strengths and weaknesses. It is also a great opportunity to really dig into the literature of your area and see what work has been done and what the HCC program deems important to the field. Some good questions to think about are... What can you learn from the process of preparing for and taking quals? What can you do to take care of yourself and set yourself up for success?

Take a (fast) minute to go around and **share your answers** to the following prompts. **Try not to get into a discussion** or study-plans yet, we promise we'll cover that next:

- For Pre-Quals Students:
 - What are you expecting to get out of the quals process?
 - If you are nervous about something, what are you nervous about? Do you have a plan to tackle this problem head on?
- For Post-Quals Students:
 - What did you learn about yourself and your area from the quals process?
 - If you were nervous about something, what were you nervous about? What did you do to address this problem head on? If it worked, tell us why.

Written Quals Prep: How to organize, read, take notes, and practice?

¹ Credit for this question comes from the book *If²...* by McFarlane and Saywell, p. 10

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This is a great time to learn how the post-quals HCCers have prepared, what worked for them, what didn't, and to help figure what your quals prep strategy will be. P.S. These reading strategies are good for research life outside of quals prep too! Whether your pre- or post- quals.

Let's talk game-day. The written exam has two days of writing in it. Day 1 is eight hours long and requires four questions to be answered. Day 2 is four hours long and requires you to answer one question, your personal question. So, how do you prepare?

Below, we've split quals into bite-sized pieces for you to plan or reflect on your own strategies in small, manageable pieces. Use these smaller pieces as a springboard for discussing strategies and concerns. **The 2nd year should lead this discussion of these guiding questions.** There are more questions than there is time, so what questions do you want answered?

Organizing: Where to start? How to approach the reading list? How to keep track of what you've read?

- **Tackling the large number of readings:**
 - The amount of readings can be daunting. Planning how to systematically work through the reading lists is an important step for success.
 - How did/might you organize your readings?
 - Should you identify readings you've done before? Readings you've never seen?
 - Prioritizing.
 - How will you determine which readings are the most important to you and the exam and which can be skimmed?
- **What order should you read the papers in?**
 - Should you use a reading order? If you did, do you recommend this?
 - When should you decide what papers to read?
 - At the beginning of each week?
 - Maybe you picked readings each week, or maybe you set an order from the beginning?
 - Important readings first? What's the HCC3 schedule?
 - When are you planning to start reading?
 - How many readings should you do a day? A week?
 - Once you have a start date, you can figure out how many readings you need to do a week/day.
- **Keeping track of what you've read:**
 - What will you do to keep track of what you read?
 - Will you use a calendar? A spreadsheets? Sticky notes? etc.
 - How will you keep your study-prep is on track (reading & practice tests)?

Reading & Note-taking strategies: How to uncover themes, details, trends, & more.

- **What do you need to look for in a paper?**
 - What is the argument of the reading? How do you find it?

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- How does knowing the thesis/argument of a paper help your comprehension?
- Likewise, what are the themes, domains, and key-terms?
 - What other details should you look out for when reading?
- How does this strategy differ for a book, a monograph, a chapter?
- What happens with readings that you are familiar with? What about one's you've never heard of before?
- **Note-taking, when and what should you write down?**
 - What kind of information should you write down? How detailed should this be?
 - Do you have special note-taking strategies you'd like to share with the group?
 - Should you take handwritten notes or digital notes?
 - We recommend using some software that is searchable.
 - Likewise, are you going to print papers, or read them digitally?
 - What strategies will you use to make your notes helpful for the exam?
 - Are you planning to write summaries for each paper you read?
 - How will you remember the key ideas from each paper?
- **Document structure: How to get important meta-data out of a document.**
 - How can you leverage section headings, titles, references, abstracts, intros, and conclusions to help you understand and synthesize a reading?
- **Skim versus deep read.**
 - When and how do you decide to skim or close read?
- **Time Management:** Reading and note-taking are time consuming.
 - How much time will you spend on each?
 - Do you have ways to keep yourself within a particular time frame?
- **Reading Groups?**
 - Are you going to study alone or meet with a reading group?
 - What are the pros and cons to each?
 - Note: both paths have resulted in success before.
 - If you're planning on a reading group, how often will you meet? What will you cover in each meeting?

Practicing: Learning how to take the test?

- What are some of the most important things you learned from taking practices questions?
- **Strategy?**
 - How much time will/did you give each question?
 - Did you use the copy-paste strategy?
 - People have passed quals with and without this strategy.
 - Did you outline?
 - Do you have a special outlining process?
- **Logistics: When and how often to practice.**
 - When should/did you start taking practices questions?
 - How many practices questions did you do?

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- When should/did you start timing yourself?
 - Some people use a timer the whole time, some build up to timed exams.
- **Graded Exam Feedback**
 - How many questions did you have graded?
 - What did you learn from having your questions graded?
 - Looking back, would you have done more or less practice exams?

Oral Qualls & Portfolio Info: How to prepare for the rest of the exam.

Qualifying exam is testing both about your writing skills and your presentation skills as an independent researcher. The big question is: can you share your research with other people through oral communication? In this case, can you present your research in a professional setting with your committee members.

How is your oral committee decided?

- As of 2016 changes, your committee is assigned to you. Your advisor may or may not include in you in committee decision process, in our experience they normally do.
- What can you do?
 - Talk with your advisors about who you want on your committee?
 - There should be three HCC professors (not including your advisor) on your committee -- your advisor should still be there, but he/she won't vote for your performance.
 - How did/do you decide who to have on your committee and why?

What goes into your portfolio?

- What to cover in your portfolio?
 - Best to defer to the official handout for your year of qualifying exams. Recently this includes...
 - 1) A cover letter 2) your CV 3) All your written exam answers 4) A writing sample that is of publishable quality (typically 1-3, 2 is the sweet spot—typically a submitted paper. It does NOT need to have been published).
 - Prior examples in the quals pack can help you determine what to do.
- **Attention:** DO NOT email your portfolio to your committee until you are told to.
 - This is important because your portfolio has both your name and your written answers—it de-anonymizes grading.

How to prepare for your oral presentation?

- Oral exam prep shouldn't start until after the written exam.
- When should you schedule your Oral Exam?
 - Before the written exam! The earlier the better, but not too early.
 - If you've taken the exam, when did you start scheduling your exam?
 - How did you schedule the exam?
 - Room reservations and availability polls are your friend.
- Practice, practice, practice: How to practice?
 - After the written exam, it's important to schedule practice presentations.
 - How many practice talks should you do?

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- How will you ensure you cover all your points without sounding too rehearsed or reading from a script?

What should your oral presentation cover?

- Your background (education and personal motivation).
- Your past and current research: proving that you are on a good progress of becoming an independent researcher.
 - Remember to include your published or in-progress paper titles on your slides!
- Your future research, but just a little taste of what's to come.
 - Anything more than a little bit turns into a proposal. This can be a successful way to pass quals, but it isn't necessary.

Bonus: Your personal reading list?

- First, set a meeting with your advisor! You need to discuss it with them.
- How to pick personal list readings? There should be 15-20 readings.
 - Considerations: How long should they be? Did you have readings you hadn't read before? How many readings were you already very familiar with?
 - Remember not to make your life more difficult than it needs to be.

A final word: Everybody is different, so are everybody's exam preparation strategies! The goal is to pass the exam and learn things that you want to learn — with your own methods and styles.

HCC Qualls Resources:

- Timeline: https://www.cc.gatech.edu/sites/default/files/documents/hcc_qual_process.pdf
- Reading List: <https://www.ic.gatech.edu/content/phd-hcc-qualifier-information>
- HCC Qual Pack: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B3jSKiSe6N6SY2hXd3N4RXg4ajQ>
 - The Qualls Pack is located in seminar handouts folder.
- Qualls paperwork to bring to oral:
 - <https://www.cc.gatech.edu/sites/default/files/images/ic-hcc-qualifier.pdf>
- Paperwork for after exam for registration purposes, IC-9000 form:
 - <https://www.cc.gatech.edu/sites/default/files/images/ic-9000.pdf>
- How to read an academic paper: <http://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2016/03/how-seriously-read-scientific-paper>
- All your HCC peers! Always feel free to send an email and ask questions.

Qualls Info from Rosa Arriaga and Thomas Ploetz, 2017-18 Organizers

Rosa and Thomas are joining us at 1 pm to go over quals and answer any of your questions for this year. Basically, they want to put some friendly faces to the exam process. They are here for any and all of your quals questions.

Take care of yourself!

You all have the time and skill to pass quals!

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