

## **HEGSA Panel Advice and Tips**

### **How did you prepare for qualifying/comprehensive exams?**

#### **Qualifying Exam**

##### **❖ Kendra**

- Take time off, even if it is just one or two days. It will help with time management.
- Don't stress about prepping or pre-writing. You truly won't know the topic until the exam opens. Just make sure you have access to all your class articles and PPTs, they can help with the brainstorming process once you know the topic.
- I approached the exam in phases:
  - Make a rough outline
  - Find as many articles as possible on the topic
  - Read the chosen articles and take thorough notes
    - I like to write my notes in full paragraphs that incorporate paraphrasing, thoughts, and quotes.
  - Develop a first draft by weaving together the notes taken during the reading phase. If you write notes in paragraphs, you can then just cut and paste those paragraphs into a paper.
  - Then edit as much as needed
- Make sure that your paper addresses ALL aspects of the exam prompt.

##### **❖ St. Rachel**

- I cried and complained for an hour or two because the topics were unfamiliar
- Then I started organizing keywords, searching databases, downloading articles, and saving them to Zotero
- I read the articles and developed an annotated bibliography with relevant information that helped me address the key components of the exam
- I highlighted history, organization and governance, and policy content/annotations with different highlighters
- I talked to my daughter about what I learned from the readings and used this to start my writing. It made it natural.
- Comprehensive Exam

##### **❖ MC**

- Before the exam opens:

- Look at your schedule and block chunks of time (see Kendra's point above!). Set expectations with family/friends that you will be busy; try to reduce/eliminate other activities.
- Do some preparation. Review the syllabi from the 4 core courses (Directed Research, Policy Analysis, Org and Governance, Data Analysis) to refresh yourself on the topics covered and the references used.
- Train on Zotero (the library can help here; there are also YouTube videos). This will help you with your references.
- Day of the exam:
  - Read both prompts thoroughly and choose the one you feel most interested in and comfortable with researching. Create an outline.
  - cursory review of the literature.
- During the exam:
  - Read through the relevant literature and take some notes. Don't try to make it sound too pretty initially. Make sure you note which article you got content from so you don't waste time trying to remind yourself later.
  - Expect to save the last day for editing, not for creating new content.
  - Get good sleep to keep your energy up!
  - Make sure you back up your work! Save it to the cloud and/or on other devices to know you won't lose anything.

### Comprehensive Exam

#### ❖ Kendra

- Comps is basically your chapter 2 of your dissertation; it is the literature review / background. This means that you can start writing pieces of it as soon as you solidify your topic! If you are taking comps in the Fall, I highly recommend using your summer to find and read articles and even get started on writing. If you are taking comps in the Spring, I highly recommend using your Fall semester or at least your winter break doing the same. Writing will come a lot easier if you already have your articles and some notes written.
- Ask your peers or mentor to read drafts of your literature review. People are allowed to look at it up until the exam date starts! Take advantage of getting feedback.
- Don't wait until the last minute to submit your exam. Trust your gut when you have a draft that you are proud of. You can always make edits and make it better, but if you keep doing that, it'll drive you insane.

- Work in chunks, spend a few hours here and there, but make sure to take breaks. Plan fun activities for you to look forward to. It can be tiring to look at the same paper time and time again, your brain will need the breaks.
- See my points above about taking notes when reading articles.
- ❖ St. Rachel
  - Start/finish your dissertation literature review in the summer or winter before you sit the comprehensive exam.
  - After the exam is posted, identify the key elements of that chapter that you want to submit for your comprehensive exam. Massage those elements so there is smooth transition from one section to the next.
  - Post your exam early—Anything can happen such as electrical or internet disruption.
- ❖ MC
  - Try to identify your topic early, so you don't end up cramming to solidify your topic and do the literature review at the same time (like me!).
  - Same advice as for the qualifying exam: create a solid outline, then block chunks of time for tackling each part.
  - Keep your files organized (tip: rename all articles by author so you can easily find it again).
  - Take advantage of the library for help in finding good sources.

### **What resources, strategies, or habits were most helpful?**

#### Kendra

- ❖ For the comprehensive exam, I created several folders within an overarching folder in my OneDrive. Each folder was a specific topic (i.e. study abroad, student affairs, residence life, etc.). Within each folder there were associated articles that I found and then a Word document that had my notes from my read through of those respective articles.
- ❖ I created an overarching to-do list for myself that had major deadlines that were broken down into weekly/monthly deadlines. This was something that I did for comps, proposal, IRB, data collection, and manuscript writing.
- ❖ Zotero was extremely helpful for collecting and organizing articles. The system allows you to code articles, that way when you start writing you can easily pick a code and pull up all the articles that mention it.
- ❖ ATLAS.ti was my saving grace during my dissertation phase. It is so helpful to keep all my interview transcripts and organize my codes.

- ❖ I always always always have other people read my work. I prefer professors, but sometimes my peers have been helpful. It helps to have another set of eyes.

#### St. Rachel

- ❖ Planning and organizing
- ❖ Deprioritize other tasks and make writing a key priority
- ❖ Finish course assignments well in advance of the exams
- ❖ Relax a week ahead of the exam
- ❖ Write or read during lunch breaks at work
- ❖ Record myself talking about what I will write in different sections while I was driving to or from work
- ❖ Burn the midnight oil

#### MC

- ❖ Pick a topic you're passionate about and search the literature to get a sense for what is out there. Become very versed in what has been done and what still needs to be done in your topic.
- ❖ Meet with the library staff for help/training on Zotero or doing research.
- ❖ Create an outline.
- ❖ Read completed dissertations from the SHU library (<https://scholarship.shu.edu/etds/>) or from your lit review.
- ❖ Use the Writing Center if needed to make your writing more academic if needed.
- ❖ Save your work on the cloud and/or on another device to be safe!

#### **What challenges did you face and how did you overcome them?**

#### Kendra

- ❖ I personally didn't face too many challenges when it came to qualifying and comps. My challenges were more so when I started collecting data and was struggling to find participants due to gatekeepers and different institutions. I think being honest with my contacts at my research sites helped. When I made them aware of my timeline and goals, they were more willing to help get me what I needed. I also kept in close contact with my mentor who provided me advice and encouraged me to keep moving forward while I waited on responses.
- ❖ For comps and my dissertation phase, I struggled to find a routine that works for me. I expected to be able to get so much done after work but quickly realized I needed to spend my weekends writing. I was just too tired after work. So I adjusted my schedule and created a routine that worked for me.

### St. Rachel

- ❖ Juggling work-life-academic balance
- ❖ My LOVE of my topic
- ❖ My LOVE of my methodology and design
- ❖ Being persistent
- ❖ Setting small and big milestones
- ❖ Challenging myself to achieve reach goals
- ❖ I do my best work when I am sleeping. When I have a vision about my writing while I am sleeping, I get up and write what I saw and I continue working to sunrise

### MC

- ❖ I'm a slow writer, so I knew I would need the full week to finish my qualifying exam. I also had a class the night before it was due (till 9:30pm) so I knew I wouldn't be able to get anything done the night before the exam. That night was just used for a final readthrough.
- ❖ After I (finally) drafted a few opening paragraphs, my laptop blacked out and I was saving to the hard drive instead of the cloud.... Thankfully I made that rookie mistake very early on.

### **How do you manage writing, research, and life balance during the dissertation stage?**

#### Kendra

- ❖ It's hard! But make sure to carve time out for yourself, whatever that may look like. I made sure to carve out time for the gym or take time to watch a tv show in the evenings. Sometimes I would go to a coffee shop for a change of scenery and to treat myself to a treat.
- ❖ If possible, find a concrete support system. I fortunately live with my boyfriend, and we got into a good routine of writing vs. spending time together. He honestly kept me accountable for the to-do list / goals I wrote down each week.

#### St. Rachel

- ❖ I write when everyone else is sleeping
- ❖ I take occasional time-off from work
- ❖ I plan and organize
- ❖ I eat out in Manhattan on Friday nights
- ❖ I edit while I am on lunch break at work
- ❖ I maintain a tightly organized schedule

MC- I'll let you know once I'm there!

### **What advice would you give to students just starting out?**

- ❖ Utilize your class assignment wisely. I was fortunate enough to know what I wanted to do after taking my first class in the program (Directed Research). From there, I was able to focus my class assignments and research papers on that particular topic. When it came to writing comps, IRB, and my proposal, I was able to cut and paste from a lot of past papers. It truly set me up for success. – Kendra
- ❖ But on the other hand, know it is okay if you don't know your topic right away. The classes you take and the assignments you do will provide you with opportunities to explore different topics. – Kendra
- ❖ Decide how long you want to be in the program. Know the schedule and order of things in the program. Sit courses to match your timeline and the flow of the program. Do not procrastinate. Have a general idea about the subject of research interest. Write your papers about different aspects of the subject to broaden your knowledge about and find the area that excites you. Know which methodology aligns with your time to completion goal and which you have skills to do effectively. Maintain a momentum—St. Rachel.
- ❖ Having a passion early on about a topic is helpful, but I was interested in everything. That could be a good thing, but it can also be tough to narrow down where you ultimately want to go. Use your classes as an opportunity to explore different interests and spend time getting to know your classmates! You can be great resources for each other throughout the program.- MC

### **Tips on Academic Writing**

- ❖ Don't be afraid to ask your professors/peers/mentor to read your drafts! Different perspectives will help you with content, flow, transitions, grammar and APA. – Kendra
- ❖ Make sure that when writing academic papers, you weave authors and researchers together. You don't want to use one paragraph to talk about one article / author and then spend the next paragraph about another author. Weave them together, that is what your professors and graders are looking for! You need to learn to do this early on in the PhD program. - Kendra
- ❖ Read a lot of articles and become familiar with what is and is not academic.- MC

### **“One piece of advice I wish I knew earlier”**

Kendra

- ❖ A great dissertation is a done dissertation: No dissertation is perfect, so it's okay to have gaps or feel like you could have done more on sections. Your mentor will be a

great support system for you in helping you evaluate your work and ensure that you are doing what you need to do to pass. I am defending on Monday, and I still feel like there are parts I could have flushed out more. Be proud of the work you have done and trust that when your mentor says it's good, it is. You can always continue working after your defend, but it could look like applying to a conference or publishing a paper. There is more to just your dissertation.

- ❖ CELEBRATE THE LITTLE MILESTONES! This was shared with me as I was writing my personal statement to get into the program by a mentor at the time. She had recently completed the program and shared that I absolutely must celebrate the milestones. This is such a long process and it can feel overwhelming at times. It is important to acknowledge your hard work. Some milestones to consider celebrating:

- Getting accepted into the program
- Finishing your first year of classes
- Finishing classes overall
- Surviving qualifying
- Surviving comps
- Successfully defending your proposal
- Getting IRB approval
- Submitting a draft of your dissertation
- DEFENDING!

- ❖ Lean on your peers who have done the steps you are currently working on. There is no one person who is going to keep you on track or make sure you meet certain deadlines. You have to keep yourself accountable but lean on your peers who are a bit further ahead of you. They can inform you of important deadlines or steps you haven't even considered.
- ❖ Talk with your advisor frequently! Make sure that you are taking your classes in the correct order and at the right time or they might not be offering classes in the semester you need them to stay on track.

### **Campus/online resources**

- ❖ Get to know the SHU library website—St. Rachel.
- ❖ Data Services (Library) is great for help with Stata and Atlas. Also, meet with a librarian to learn good methods for literature searches.- MC
- ❖ Kendra
  - [Zotero](#)
  - [Research Data Services](#)
    - You can find ATLAS.ti here

- Meet with [Michael Murphy](#) when you are ready to start using ATLAS.ti, he was amazing in reviewing it with me. I met with him right before I started interviewing my participants and then I met with him when I started coding.
- Writing Support
  - [Online Writing Lab](#)
  - [SHU Writing Center](#)