

Approaches to Preparing for the MA Comprehensive Exam

1. Construct a coherent, organized reading list

- You must choose six texts—four primary and two secondary—from each of the three required areas (American literature, British literature, and either World literature or critical theory).
- Make sure that the texts you choose in each area are organized according to some common principle or unifying element: themes, political or social concerns, theoretical framework, historical context, ethnicity, sexual identity, etc.
- Read all the texts on your list as you are studying for the exam and sketch out both the commonalities and the differences among them.

2. Be sure that you answer each essay question accurately and completely

- Begin by taking five minutes or so to outline your answer before you start writing.
- Read each question a few times to ensure that you understand its scope. To what outside contexts does it refer? What historical period will your answer cover?
- Define any terms or concepts that are stated in the question at the beginning of your essay, so that you have a basis for your answer.

3. Construct your argument carefully

- Consider how your primary texts both do and don't fit together. What common elements do they possess? How do they diverge from one another?
- Sometimes the most interesting and productive aspect of an essay exists in its discussions of difference rather than similarity. You don't want to force all of your texts to fit into the same box; rather, give some serious thought to the ways in which their themes, plots, forms, characters, social messages, or other elements work together or differ from one another in significant ways.
- Also take the time to think about what your argument can gain from your secondary texts. Do they illuminate your primary texts? Support or contrast with your larger argument?

4. Discuss all the texts on your list

- This is one way you can make your note cards work for you: make sure that you list the authors and titles of all 18 texts, and incorporate them into the essays.
- As noted above, not every text will fit under the same critical lens; incorporate discussions of the ways in which texts challenge or diverge from your argument as well.

5. Time yourself when taking the exam

- The exam is four hours long; that translates to 1 hour and 20 minutes per question.
- Take a few minutes at the beginning of each question to outline your answer so you always have a sense of where you are going and how you want to conclude.
- Decide which question you feel most comfortable answering—which question you know the most about—and answer that one last.