"How to Take the Comps Standing Up"

By Caleb John Clark (www.plocktau.com), April, 1999

"At 20 words a minute you can write 2400 words in two hours. That's a first draft of a Comps question. The problem is, do you have the ideas waiting to burst out of your head? It's not about time, it's getting the ideas that make you want to write."

- Chris Haddock after turning in his Comps, March, 1999 (he passed).

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Why you should read this

I had an unusual Comps experience. I sat down less then 1.5 hours during the Spring, 1999 Comps weekend, and that included eating and driving. I did this because my back was very screwed up with a damaged L4/L5 disk, which made it too painful to sit. To get around this incredibly badly timed event in my life, I put my laptop on a milk crate and stood up while I typed. When the painkillers failed and my heals got tired I lay down on my bed and thought, or I walked outside (Now, even though my back is better, I still work standing up. I've found standing

up to be a much more active way of confronting technology.)

While it may sound like having a bad back would hurt my ability to pass the Comps, it actually helped me! I not only passed, but I got plenty of sleep, ate well, rarely stressed, and even took half of Sunday off. I retrospect my Comps weekend was a positive experience that left me feeling more competent and prepared for what lay ahead in my life.

I also had an excellent study group that not only helped prepare me, but helped reduce the stress that surrounds the Comps experience.

I'm writing this in the hopes that my positive Comps weekend can help you craft your own positive experience from this right of passage.

Why it helped to have back problems for the Comps

My back condition gave me **focus** and straightened out my **priorities**.

The focus kept me from second guessing things and it kept me writing when I was at the computer. If I was not writing I stepped away from the mouse, and lay down, or walked. This helped me get ideas, the backbone of writing. At 20 words a minute you can write 2400 words in two hours. That's a first draft of a Comps question. The problem is the ideas and the material, your state of mind, and state of health, not the time. This focus also kept my objective reality in line with the expectations of the professors. I believe that the professors do not expect perfect, polished papers in one weekend and I never forgot this while I wrote, thereby avoiding the traps of obsessive perfection that some folks I know slipped into.

My priorities were on my health and well being. More important then the Comps was my back. I began each day with a long walk. I stretched every day, and I made sure to get as much sleep as I needed every night. This helped my writing. The sleep made me energetic and fast when I wrote, the walking and stretching in the morning got me out in the world where the ideas are and kept my body vital and able to endure the long hours writing. The healthy food helped me think. All this time I spent *not* writing helped me write better and faster.

The main psychology behind the Comps

I kept telling myself that the professors are not expecting a polished, deeply researched piece of work. There's simply not enough time in one weekend to do this. What they want is evidence that you can answer a question by writing an APA style paper. Their looking for a paper with research from current journals incorporated, some key concepts from your classes, interesting ideas, creative ways of solving a problem, and a presentation of both sides of an issue.

Give them what they want and you will pass.

My main advice

- Form a study group of people you like being around. Meet every week with the express purpose of de-stressing the Comps.
- Go through your class notes for ideas, theories and papers that you remember really digging.
- Gather 10 to 20 printouts of recent journal articles that interest you and read them to get in the mood for APA style writing.
- Research Friday after picking up your questions and get hardcopies of articles.
- Pick a question, outline it directly from the question and never look back.
- Pick questions that really interest you, not ones that are easy. **Easy questions you are not interested in will become hard later on.**
- Always work on your least favorite question first, and save your favorite question as a reward.
- Get away from the computer and think a lot. A lot! Take many breaks, get lots of sleep and eat well.
- You can't talk about the Comps, but that doesn't mean have to be hermit and not talk to your friends about other things.

Avoiding the most dangerous pitfalls

Everybody in my Comps study group passed. For some it was painful, others not. I've also talked to many other folks and been to 4 Comps panels. Here's what I learned about avoiding pain, depression, the loony bin, and breakdowns.

- Don't do many drafts of different answers to one question. You don't have time. Outline one and run with it.
- Beware of surfing for more information and getting caught in a loop of research death.
- Answer the question, all of parts of the question, and only the question.
- Beware of the Net. If you're reading, researching and writing all on your computer your eyes will explode by Sunday night. Use as much hard copy as you can and avoid surfing too much. Save your screen time for writing.
- Fear of running out of time will actually make less time for you. If you find yourself sitting like a puddle of pudding in your chair blankly staring at your computer, GET UP AND GO OUTSIDE FOR A FUC!&% WALK!
- Don't isolate yourself from people. You may not be able to talk about you Comps with anyone, but you can still talk to people about everything else in the world, and it's a big world.
- Don't forget that a human being will be reading your stuff. Be kind to them and make it as positive and pleasurable an experience as you can for the reader.
- Be prepared for a technical "Titanic" at any point. Back-up every major draft of your papers on multiple different hard drives, Zips or other external media. Bring *two* discs with identical copies of your papers if you have to print your papers away from your house.

A successful study group protocol

I was lucky enough to find several people that made me laugh a lot who were also taking the Comps.

We had eight people in our group and met each week on Sunday for three hours. Our mission was to reduce stress. We did not want the group to create any homework during the week that would add to stress. We did almost all of our work during the meetings.

The first two meetings were rough, but then we appointed able moderators and started bringing wine and cheese and things got really fun and productive.

Each meeting started with people gathering at a quite and well-lit house and spreading out food, wine, and good bread.

After eating and talking we sat in circle and did a round robin wherein each person had a chance to speak about about any issues, ideas or thoughts that had come to them during the week as well as how they were doing in general.

We then passed out and read hardcopies of two of the most recent Comps questions picked at random that day. We then took turns speaking about how we might answer the question at hand. There was always one person who immediately grabbed onto the question and they would lead off. What ended up happening was that we would all would change our initial ideas of our answer after hearing everyone else's ideas. It was very productive.

The second to last meeting we met in the library and ran around searching through journals and making copies of articles that we liked. Then we met in a reserved room and each person presented brief summaries of what they'd copied and asked if anyone wanted copies.

The last meeting we had a lot of food, and all brought our copies of the papers for everyone who had said they wanted them. We each ended up with 10 to 20 good current articles on a wide scope of subjects. We finished the meeting by going for a walk in the park.

I read all of the articles and wrote notes on their covers during the 10 days before the comps. I think this helped me get in the mood for writing in the APA style and showed me good, and bad, examples of the writing I was about to do.

Chronology of my Comps weekend

Friday:
I got the questions and went immediately to a café with a print out. I read the questions twice and picked two within half an hour. I picked questions I was interested in, even if they were hard. I then trashed the other four questions so as not to be distracted. I researched from 11 AM Friday 'till 4 PM in the library, printing out about 8 additional articles that were directly related to my questions.

That night from 5 PM 'till 1 AM, I finished a very rough, but complete, draft of the harder of the two questions.

Saturday:
No alarm, slept late and had a good breakfast. Went for a walk and thought about things, then started a draft of my favorite question by 11 AM and finished a dirty draft by 4 PM. Having a rough draft of both questions, I backed up my files on two Zips.

After a break and some good thinking food (rice and fish, miso soup, vitamins) I started rewriting my hard question. This was the hardest night and I got a little loopy.

My whole apartment seemed to be shadowed and jungle-like as if I was in the Vietnam from the movie "Apocalypse Now". Paper strewn about on the floor, empty tea cups (I drank a lot of decaffeinated black tea!) everywhere, food containers on my bed. I felt like a commando behind enemy lines. **For some reason I slicked back my hair with about a 1/4 cup of gel at midnight**. I looked pretty scary! But I was in battle mode and felt it necessary to look the part. I returned to the typewriter and went to war! I had a rough draft of my hard question by 2 AM and crawled into my fox hole for some shut eye.

Sunday:

Walked to a café for breakfast. Read mainstream magazines and talked with a friend about the weather, life, everything but the Comps. I hit the computer at 11 AM. By 3 PM I had a rewrite of my 2nd question. I now had 2 drafts of both my questions.

I spell checked both of them for the first time and compiled a bibliography using EndNotes and then backed them up. I then took a break, ate dinner with a friend, and came home full of ideas from the world and did a 3rd draft of both pieces from 8 PM 'till midnight. I backed up again and crashed with double alarms set for 8 AM. I was beat.

Monday:

I had a good breakfast and grabbed two Zips with identical files on them and made school by 9 AM. I printed out my drafts and looked them over in the campus café, marking little things I wanted to change like formatting and bibliography problems. I avoided the urge to do any major rewrites. I returned to the Lab and polished both pieces 'till 11 AM. I then printed them out and handed them in by 11:30 AM.

Closure:

After such a big experience, closure was needed. I had made up stickers the week before that said "I survived the Comps!" and asked the department secretary to give them out to each person when they passed in their Comps. This was great closure and people loved them.

Afterwards, my group had planned on meeting on the lawn outside the North Education building. It was great to hang around and talk about our experiences and laugh. We then went to Monties for food and beer. That afternoon I went to the gym, stretched and took a sauna. I then pulled a 4 PM to 10 PM shift in the IML computer lab. I was dazed for three days after the Comps, but it passed.

Reverse engineering the Comps

I like to reverse engineer things I need to understand. For the Comps, here's what I came up with.

The Comps come from a long academic tradition of final exams that are meant to insure a minimum quality of graduates and bond them at the hands of a shared and intense experience. This is why most folks pass, it's a minimum standard that is really meant to do a whole slew of other things. This is good news for you. But what are these other things the Comps are meant to do?

Our particular Comps are also meant to prepare us for leaving school. Notice the premium put on using current journals. This is a way the professors are making us become familiar with our field before we leave. Notice the focus on going through your past classes. This is a way of making us look over our notes from all our classes before we leave and organize them into some semblance of sense. Notice the study groups. These are a way of bringing us together into a community of practice and encouraging us to form them after school. And finally, notice the panic and difficulty of the task, but with a very high pass rate. This is away of putting us through an intense experience that we are successful at, thereby giving us confidence in our skills as we go out in the world and bonding us as alumni.

When I was done reverse engineering the Comps I was left one single overriding image of what they really are meant to do.

What they want is for us to be professionals with a professional office. Imagine this office with me: Notebooks from your classes are labeled and on one shelf for easy access. There's several journals on another shelf, including some current ones with articles you really liked. Next to them several mainstream magazines with educational related stories are shelved. Several text books and other books line another shelf, including some new ones and some very old ones. The address book on your computer has the names of several professionals in your field you are close to. Your computer is well backed up and you are prepared for technical disasters.

In short you are one bad ass edtecher!

Make the image come alive and have fun with your Comps weekend. I'm almost jealous...almost.

THE END

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