

Comprehensive Exam Essays: An Unofficial Guide for CNF-ers
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In consultation with our new DGS, I've come up with some guidelines to help you in your comps. We as CNF-ers tend to work slightly differently than others, so these guidelines are meant to help. If you don't find them helpful and prefer to work strictly according to what is laid out in the Graduate Handbook, you have my blessing to do so. Always refer back to the handbook for specifics and check with me if you have questions.

What should the essays do?

Comps essays should have between 3-4 parts. Your task is to do the following:

- 1) Show the connection between this bibliographical/critical work and the creative diss you're working toward.
- 2) Demonstrate a breadth of knowledge in your genre (by reading across 3 centuries) or across 3 genres if you decide to go that route.
- 3) Demonstrate an understanding of how scholarship works and how academic arguments are constructed. You need to demonstrate an ability to engage critically both with primary, secondary, and theoretical texts.

Here's how I recommend tackling this task:

1. Write a short intro, about the length of a 10-minute talk (3-4 pages double spaced) about how this critical work relates to your creative dissertation. You will use it as a micro-introduction to the essays and as a way to kick off your oral exam. (NB: I would write this intro last, once the body of my comps were done.) You should have no trouble doing this!

2. Question #1. This should be a broad question that should take the form of 2 parts or as a series of questions that look at a big idea, trend or movement in creative nonfiction. This text is often suitable to serve as a draft for the critical intro for the diss. It's a great way to think ahead and it means that this exercise isn't merely a hoop to jump through. Ideally, this should be a rigorous enough piece of writing that it could be published in a journal, either literary or scholarly. Also a bonus if you manage to do that before going out on the market.

3. Question #2. This is usually a narrower question that grows out of an engagement with primary texts. It should demonstrate your interpretive or close-reading prowess. This is often related to the first question; sometimes it takes a look at similar literary forms from a different perspective/ through a different critical lens.

(4. Question #3. Optional. You MAY decide to write 3 full separate essays, though in my experience, you'll find yourself going over the recommended word count. Because of the word count restraint, I recommend the 3-part option above which nonetheless satisfies the letter of the law that calls for: "Answers to three or four substantive questions about the fields.")

Final Caveat: You could, in theory, write a single essay in 3-4 parts that addresses 3-4 substantive questions but that's a really tall order. I've seen it done but never very well. This way – the exam in 2 parts + very short intro – has been working well for just about everyone.

A note on the orals:

Remember that your oral examination will not only circle around your essays. The discussion can touch on how you constructed your list a certain way; what connections you see between texts; it can involve a deeper discussion of theoretical frameworks and so on.

Wordcount: 25-50 pages total (as in for the WHOLE exam). It's not a lot!