English MA Comprehensive Examination

Purpose
In 1999-2000, the English faculty approved a written comprehensive examination as the graduate program’s “exit requirement.” The purpose of the exam is:

• To help cultivate and nurture a “graduate culture.”
• To add coherence and rigor to the program’s curriculum.
• To further actualize the rhetoric/composition emphasis of the program.
• To provide students the opportunity to deepen and broaden their studies.
• To foster collaborative learning communities through the formation of study groups.

For all incoming students in the fall of 2007, the examination will be divided in four areas of specialty.

Rhetoric and Composition, 2) American Literature, 3) British Literature, and 4) Borderland Studies

General Policies
• As a requirement of the Master’s degree in English, all students (thesis and non-thesis track) must successfully pass comprehensive written examinations at the end of their time in the program.
• Comprehensive examinations will be offered twice a year: once in the fall semester and once in the spring.
• Candidates will take two examinations. Students will be given the reading lists at the beginning of their first semester in the program.
• All candidates will take an examination in their area of emphasis (Literary History [British or American], Rhetoric/Composition, or Borderland Studies).
• Candidates may then choose to be examined over one of the other four reading lists.
• These two examinations will be taken together over a four-day period (Thursday noon to Monday noon) on a take-home basis. A page limit will be set by the Comprehensive Examinations Committee.
• Students will take the examinations no earlier than the semester they expect to graduate, with the exception of August graduates, who will take the examinations in the spring.
• Students must be registered for a minimum of 3 credit hours in the semester during which they take the examinations.
• To apply to take the comprehensive examinations, students must see their advisor at least 30 days before the examinations are scheduled.
• All examination answers must be computer-generated and in MLA format.

Revised 9/2007
Grading Process

- The Comprehensive Examinations Committee consists of four members of the English faculty, one of whom acts as Chair. The members, who rotate on a two-year basis, represent respectively Rhetoric/Composition; American Literature; British Literature, and Borderlands Studies.
- The questions in each category are drafted by the member representing his/her own area but are then refined and agreed upon by the entire committee.
- The essays are graded through a blind review process.
- The examinations are graded Pass with Distinction, Pass, or No Pass.
- The Chair notifies the candidates of their results.
- If a student fails to pass one or both of the comprehensive examinations, he/she may retake the failed exam(s) once. Further retakes are permitted only through written application to the English Graduate Committee.

Appeal Process

A student who believes that he or she has not been held to appropriate academic standards, has not been granted equitable evaluation procedures, or has been failed unreasonably may appeal the exam outcome. In such situations, the burden of proof is upon the student to demonstrate the appropriateness of the appeal. The decision process in any appeal taken beyond the level of the Examination Committee may extend into the subsequent semester. The timetable and steps for the appeal process are described below.

Steps in the Exam Appeal Process:

Because disputes of this nature are often the result of misunderstanding, the student is encouraged first to discuss the matter with the chair of the Comprehensive Examinations Committee. In those instances in which the student’s questions are not resolved at this level, the formal appeal process may be implemented by presenting a written grievance to the Examination Committee within fifteen calendar days of notification of the exam outcome. Within ten calendar days after receiving the written grievance, the Comprehensive Examinations Committee will either sustain the original decision or make a change and notify the student in writing or by e-mail regarding this action. If the Comprehensive Examinations Committee does not act within this period or if the student is not satisfied by the Comprehensive Examination Committee’s action, the student has ten calendar days to appeal in writing to the next level. Subsequent steps in the appeal process will be first to the English Graduate Committee and then to the Chair of the Department, each of which will have ten calendar days to act. Any further appeals will be made in accordance with the procedures for student grade appeals.
Resources
In 2001-2002 the English Graduate Committee and Bell Library specialists established a reserve list of books, held by the Library, comprised of most of the titles included on our reading lists (see section in this handbook). To check out a book (for up to one week):
1. Access PORTAL
2. Click on Reserve materials
3. By course, type in ENGL 5396 or
4. By instructor, type in Kirklighter, C.

The complete reserve list and call number for each book is available. During the week of examinations, we arrange with the library that no materials can leave the building. This is to ensure that students taking the exam will be able to access what they need.

Advice
- Plan ahead!! Although some of the required texts will be included in your course readings, the bulk will not. Start reading during your first semester—this material cannot be digested in one semester!
- Work with other students in informal study groups to talk about ideas. Remember that the faculty carefully selected these readings for a purpose: they represent important approaches to issues in the profession and should help you assess and articulate your own position. We have also written the sample exam prompts very carefully. Make sure you have a good sense of the scope and intent of these samples.
- Those taking an examination in British or American literature should consult related secondary sources as well as the primary sources on the reading list.
- When you take the exam, read each question very carefully, noting any separate parts. The MA Exam Committee expects your essay to address all elements of the question.
- You are not being tested on how much you have read but on how judiciously you apply relevant sources to your argument. If the question asks you to use four sources, don’t think you have to use many more than that. It can injure an essay to pepper it with references that aren’t germane to your answer. Just because you have read twenty-five authors on your subject doesn’t mean that your reader must as well. Be selective.
- The Committee is primarily looking for a well-argued, well-constructed essay that answers the question(s) you chose. Don’t, in the heat of the moment, confuse quantity of facts with quality of essay. Never lose sight of the fact that a successful essay will have a clear thesis that is then supported and illustrated throughout the body of the work.
- Do not over-quote or use an abundance of long quotes. Try to ensure that your own authorial voice is clearly heard and that you don’t allow your sources to write too much of the essay for you.
- Do not run over the number of pages assigned by more than half a page. (For example, if the instructions say 8 pages, do not turn in more than 8 1/2 pages.)