



M. A. IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

PROGRAMS

COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

PREPARATION GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in fall semester 2006, the M.A. in English program at CSUDH will require, as a culminating experience, a Comprehensive Examination. The thesis will remain a possibility for qualifying students (see “The Basics,” below, as well as the link to the Graduate Student’s Handbook on the English Department webpage, and University Catalogue for details).

We have designed our examination to reflect the concerns of our program, and to allow students to demonstrate in a variety of ways the abilities specified in the California Education Code (Title 5), which governs CSU M.A. programs. Title 5 specifies the following about a comprehensive examination:

A comprehensive examination is an assessment of the student’s ability to integrate the knowledge of the area, show critical and independent thinking, and demonstrate mastery of the subject matter. The results of the examination provide evidence of independent thinking, appropriate organization, critical analysis, and accuracy of documentation.

This booklet provides information about the examination. The Graduate Coordinator can answer questions you may have after you have reviewed the material in this booklet. See below for contact information for the Graduate Coordinator.

CONTACT INFORMATION

M.A. Programs in English Graduate Coordinator:

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THE BASICS

When to Take the Examination	No earlier than the last semester of program coursework. You must first consult with the graduate coordinator and be advanced to candidacy.
How and When to Sign up	Sign up in the department office by the second week of the semester in which you will take the exam. You will need to sign a form when you sign up.
Continuous Enrollment	You must be enrolled in, at a minimum, the continuation course, English 600, during the semester you take the examination.
Structure of the Examination	<p>The examination consists of two parts:</p> <p>Part I: Literature: In-depth analysis of set text; theoretical applications</p> <p>Part I: Rhet/Comp: Rhet/Comp theory applications*</p> <p>*Students doing the emphasis in Rhetoric and Composition must take the Rhet/Comp exam for Part I.</p> <p>Part II: Literature and Rhet/Comp: Comprehensive historical knowledge of literature</p>
Exam Schedule	<p>The exams will take place in the first week of November in the fall semester, and in the second week after spring break in the spring semester.</p> <p>Each part will begin at 10 a.m. and will last for 3 hours.</p> <p>The exams will take place over two days, either MW or TuTh.</p>
What to Bring	You may bring your copy of the specified edition of your selected set text for Part I. You may also bring a non-electronic dictionary. Nothing else will be permitted besides your Blue Books. Blue Books and a dictionary are all that you may bring to Part II, which is not an open book exam. The Reading Lists will be supplied.
Reading the Examination	Members of the English Department will read the exam.
Grading Scale	Pass/Fail; see the rubric in the back of this manual. Results will be announced approximately 3 weeks after the completion of the examination.
Repeat of the Examination	The examination cannot be taken more than twice, and ordinarily re-takes must be done within one academic year. If you fail one part of the examination and pass the others, you need only re-take the part(s) you failed.

Reading Lists	<p>Set Texts for Part I change each semester.</p> <p>For Part I, you will need either the Literary Theory Modules list or the Rhet/Comp Theory list.</p> <p>For Part II, you will need the Comprehensive Exam Part II Reading List.</p> <p>The 2020 Reading Lists can be found in the back of this guide.</p> <p>Reading lists will be updated approximately every three years and be made available on the department website and in the office of the Graduate Coordinator.</p>
Accommodation	<p>Students with disabilities that have been certified by the Student disAbility Resource Center will be accommodated. You must notify the Graduate Coordinator and show appropriate documentation when you sign up for the exam. As of fall 2020, the SDRC office is located in Welch D-180, and their phone number is 310-243-3660.</p>
Thesis Option	<p>Students may elect to write a thesis instead of taking an exam if they have a GPA of 3.75 or higher and the permission of a thesis director and the Graduate Coordinator. Students with a GPA below a 3.75, may write a thesis if they have a solid project that has been approved by their thesis committee and the Graduate Coordinator. Please discuss this option with the Graduate Coordinator if you are interested, and consult the thesis guide available on the department website.</p>
Changing from One Option to Another	<p>You may change from the Thesis Option to the Examination Option up to one semester prior to taking the exam. Once you have attempted the examination, you may not change to the Thesis Option. If you take the exam and fail, you cannot revert to the Thesis; if you fail the exam a second time, you will not receive your degree.</p>

PREPARING FOR THE COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

Reading this guide is the first step in preparing for the Comprehensive Examination. Make sure you understand the nature of each of these parts, and if you have questions, contact the Graduate Coordinator. **The department also offers Exam Workshops run by our graduate faculty; we strongly recommend that you attend at least one of these before beginning to study for your exams.**

The exam questions posed on the entire exam—in both Parts I and II—will ask you to make connections among the ideas presented in all your coursework. As you work through your M.A. coursework—from the first semester onwards—think about the ways in which the concepts of one course relate to those of another, and of how the texts on the reading list help amplify those concepts. In the words of E.M. Forster, “only connect.” Pursuing your studies in this manner throughout your program—and not just in a final rush of intensive studying in the last semester—will prepare you to do well on the exam.

An excellent way to prepare, in addition to your own private study, is through collaborative study groups. Talking with others about the ideas of the various areas covered in our program (see catalogue areas B, C, D, and E), about the set texts and the texts on the reading list, is an excellent way to heighten understanding and to gain facility with the discourses and concepts of the discipline generally. Your responses on the exams must, however, be completed independently.

EXAM PARTS AND SAMPLE QUESTIONS

What follows are the actual directions to, and sample questions for, each part of the exams.

PART I

Exam Directions:

PART I: (In-depth analysis; theoretical applications) Select **one** of the following questions to address in a carefully developed, focused, and organized analytical essay. **(three hours)**

FOR LITERATURE STUDENTS:

In close reading and analyzing the set text, you must also demonstrate theoretical comprehension and application by shaping your argument through at least two works from the assigned theory module(s) for your set text. If the question you have selected to answer specifies the use of one module, you must use works from that module list in your response. If the question allows you a choice of modules, you may choose works from either module list but may not select across modules.

Be sure to explain and utilize the theory adequately and appropriately, using it to support your overarching reading.

FOR RHETORIC/COMPOSITION STUDENTS:

In your response, you must explain fully your argument and make sure you address all parts of the question. For example, if the question you are answering involves a classroom scenario, be sure to address that scenario in your response. You must demonstrate theoretical comprehension and application by shaping your argument through at least three works from the assigned theory modules for this term.

Sample Exam Questions

**These questions are for demonstration purposes only and do not necessarily reflect accurately what the comprehensive examination you take will look like, which will offer two questions per set text, paired with either one or two theoretical modules assigned for that semester.

FOR LITERATURE STUDENTS:

Set Text: Shakespeare, *King Lear*

Modules: Psychoanalysis; Structuralism/Deconstruction/Poststructuralism

King Lear is notable among Shakespeare's tragedies for its horrific scene of the blinding of Gloucester. This scene and its aftermath have been seen both as utterly embodying the idea of the "tragic" in dramatic literature and as being so traumatic that they disrupt the dramatic presentation with their shocking effects on audiences, disabling cathartic release. Though he is a secondary character in the play, Gloucester and his painful experience have thus been at the heart of much discussion of the tragedy's generic structure and dramatic effectiveness. Using at least two texts from *either* the **Psychoanalysis module** *or* the **Structuralism/Deconstruction/Poststructuralism module**, analyze how Gloucester's blinding contributes to the play's tragic conceptualization and/or effect. How does this scene participate in the play's theorization and/or representation of what it means to suffer, a seemingly essential quality of tragedy? How might the theatrical depiction of this suffering contribute to and/or detract from the overall effects—philosophical, emotional, literary—of the play?

Set Text: Shakespeare, *King Lear*

Modules: Marxist/Materialist Criticism; Feminist and Gender Studies/Queer Theory

The conflict between Lear and his daughters that suffuses Shakespeare's *King Lear* dramatizes the decline of feudalism as told from the early modern perspective of 17th-century England. Lear's stated intention to retire from his royal position is complicated by several factors, in particular his desire to retain the social and economic prerogatives of kingship without the political responsibility, as well as his lack of sons, inhibiting the customary practice of male primogeniture and requiring him to divide his kingdom for distribution among his three daughters. The dialectic of the play, which could be said to set the tragedy in motion, is developed through the tension between the opposing forces, on the one hand, of material and masculinist conditions and traditions and, on the other, of a burgeoning generation of younger, female ambition for power. Using at least two texts from *either* the **Marxist/Materialist Criticism module** *or* the **Feminist and Gender Studies/Queer Theory module**, analyze the play's articulation of the conflict at

the heart of this tragedy. How might conflicting and competing worldviews structure the action of the play and the development of its characters?

Set Text: J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*

Modules: Structuralism/Deconstruction/Poststructuralism; Feminism and Gender Studies/Queer Theory

1. *Foe* is a novel about storytelling and the process of writing. There is the story told by Susan Barton, the story that Susan wants Foe to write about Crusoe, and the story that Foe wants to write about Susan. There is also Friday's story, which is unable to be told, and yet nevertheless becomes a focal point for both Susan and Foe. An additional layer is added by the book's relation to Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe*. Drawing on specific passages from the novel as well as at least two sources from the **Structuralism/Deconstruction/Poststructuralism module**, write an essay that examines storytelling as a practice between truth and invention. How does the novel's interest in different forms of stories (oral, written, bodily) align with theories of linguistic signs, signification, *différance*, or bodily signifiers?

2. Alongside Susan Barton's experience as a castaway on Crusoe's island is the story of the search for her lost daughter. She details her experience in Bahia as a "freewoman," believes her daughter to be lost forever, and later when she is confronted by a girl claiming to be her daughter she is unable to recognize or accept her. Drawing on specific passages from the novel as well as at least two sources from the **Feminism and Gender Studies/Queer Theory module**, write an essay that explores how the novel's interest in adventure, parenthood, and authorial opportunity are told along gendered lines. How does Susan understand her own position as a woman both on the island and in British society? Why does she wish to "father" a story? How are her relationships to Foe, Crusoe, and Friday sexualized or not? How do the relationships in this novel challenge traditional heteronormative binaries?

Set Text: H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines*

Modules: Critical Race Studies; Global Studies/Postcolonialism

1. The fiction of the Victorian fin-de-siècle was characterized by both implicit and explicit attention to nineteenth-century discourses about race. These discourses were frequently informed by the evolutionary theories and scientific developments of the earlier nineteenth century, and continued to flourish as the late-century interest in racial definition and classification dovetailed with imperialist ideologies. Using at least two selections from either the **Critical Race Studies module** or the **Global Studies/Postcolonialism module**, write an essay that explores how *King Solomon's Mines* theorizes the relationship between the white, heteronormative body of the English subject and the racialized, often Orientalized foreign Other. How does the definition of Englishness both construct itself in racialized terms and against racialized bodies? How is the projected relationship between the imperial "center" and colonized "periphery" construed, complicated and possibly, challenged in the text?

2. Haggard's novel is frequently called an "imperial romance," a genre which adopts the traditions of the romance novel to interrogate the Victorians' fraught relationship to the

empire and its subjects. Using at least two selections from the **Global Studies/Postcolonialism module**, write an essay that explores Haggard's use of the imperial milieu to repurpose the romance for a Victorian audience and context. In what ways does *King Solomon's Mines* use the conventions of the adventure-romance novel to paint a distinctly nineteenth-century vision of English masculinity and honor? How does the use of an African backdrop tie the imperialist project to English identity and history? Does the romance genre uphold or undermine British imperial power, in what ways, and for what purposes or results?

FOR RHETORIC/COMPOSITION STUDENTS:

1. According to many journalists and political scientists, we now exist in a "post-truth" world. What texts from the rhet/comp tradition best prepare us to live in and communicate in such a world, or even possibly help recover a "truth" world? Please use at least one classical and two contemporary (20th or 21st Century) texts in your response.
2. A composition student comes to you after class and explains that she has "writer's block." Which texts might illuminate the problems this student experiences? How might you work with her to move through these challenges? Please refer to at least two texts in 20th or 21st Century composition theory and pedagogy to contextualize your approach.

PART II

To prepare, print out a copy of the reading list for Part II. You are not expected to know everything on this lengthy reading list. Rather, the list should be large enough for you to work with texts that you already know, particularly from your coursework. Then supplement that knowledge by reading texts in areas in which you may have a deficiency. Your goal is to cover enough texts that you will be able to answer a variety of thematic questions that will ask you to compare them.

Begin by identifying texts that you already know. Review plots and themes. Look at your class notes. You also might look at the in-depth analyses found in critical editions such as those put out by Bedford or Norton. One approach might be to prepare these texts as if you are going to teach them. Look for similar themes that connect them.

Also, review your class notes and the introductions found in critical editions and anthologies that explain different periods. Work to explain the themes that you find (and their differing treatments) in terms of those different cultural and historical factors.

When writing the exam, remember to answer the question and explain why in your answer. You will also need to provide specifics from the text. To avoid the trap of unexplained plot summary, get in the habit of explaining all textual details that you provide.

Exam Directions:

PART II: Comprehensive historical knowledge. Select one of the following questions to address in a carefully focused, organized, and developed essay, using three works from the

reading list: at least one text from before 1800, at least one text after 1800, and at least one American text. For Literature students: you may NOT use the set text on which you wrote in Part I. (4 hours)

Sample Exam Questions:

1. From its earliest beginnings narrative fiction has reflected an inherent tension between its non-realistic manipulations of reality and the desire to capture the actual world in fiction. Select THREE writers from the list – at least one from before 1800 and at least one from after 1800 –and discuss the attitude toward “realism” demonstrated in their writing. You may choose to focus on treatment of character, place, or structure, voice, narrative strategies, or on a more general discussion of the works.
2. The desire for power appears in a number of works on the reading list. Analyze how characters seek mastery and control, or perhaps fail to achieve mastery and control, in any THREE of the texts. Select at least one from the list that is pre-1800 and at least one that is post-1800. Explain the different treatment of this theme in terms of genre and/or historical social factors.
3. How does the literary representation of “the hero” change as we move from the pre-1800s into the modern era? How are these representations altered by the cultural forces affecting the texts you choose to discuss? You might, for example, consider such influences on a text’s imagining of the hero or the heroic as the influx of Christianity in medieval England, Puritan sensibilities in Colonial America, the Renaissance focus on the individual and rediscovery of the classics, or the skepticism of the modern age. Using at least three works, including at least one British and one American, one written pre-1800, and one post-1800, discuss the distinct representations of the hero as a literary figure in your selected texts, while connecting these representations to the social, political, cultural, historical and/or literary contexts which inform each.
4. A number of the texts on the reading list can be viewed as studies in power relationships: king-subject; parent-child; rich-poor, and many others. How do the kinds of power relationships discussed vary over time as we move from literature of the Medieval and Renaissance periods into the 20th and 21st centuries? Using at least three texts, including at least one British and one American, one written pre-1800, and one post-1800, write an essay that analyzes how each constructs power in ways that are particular to the contexts in which these works are produced.

**HOLISTIC GRADING SCALE FOR ESSAYS
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH COMPREHENSIVE
EXAM**

6 Superior

This essay synthesizes material learned and skills developed during the Master's program. It demonstrates an accurate understanding of themes and principles covered in the readings and lectures and shows an honest grappling with issues, exploring them thoughtfully and in depth throughout. Responses are well developed and well organized, and they are thoroughly and persuasively argued. The essay displays a superior control of language and is written with no errors in English. Many references to relevant sources are included, and standard essay format is used.

5 Strong

This essay synthesizes material learned during the Master's program; however, in some cases this may not be even throughout the essay. It demonstrates an accurate understanding of themes and principles covered in the readings and lectures, and it conducts some in-depth exploration of significant issues. It is generally well organized and well developed with quite a few references to relevant sources included, and displays considerable syntactic variety and facility and displays few errors.

4 Adequate

This essay minimally synthesizes materials learned during the Master's program. It generally demonstrates an accurate understanding of themes and issues covered in the readings and lectures, it provides an adequate analysis of the problem(s) posed, and there is a minimal attempt to grapple with significant issues. Responses are complete with all questions answered with adequate support, using several references to relevant sources. The wording is precise and accurate, and it displays competence in mechanics, usage and sentence structure.

3 Marginal (no pass)

This essay reflects a barely complete understanding of themes and issues covered in the readings and lectures. Discussion often appears simplistic because there is little or no attempt to grapple with significant issues or to provide adequate support for ideas. It demonstrates some understanding of the problem, but is flawed in some significant way. Its analysis is weak, it displays some confusions about the meaning and/or technique of the text(s) in question, it is poorly organized or developed, it fails to provide adequate or appropriate details to support the argument, it avoids syntactic variety and displays errors in mechanics, usage and sentence structure. Any of all of these weaknesses will flaw this essay.

2 Inadequate (no pass)

This essay reflects an inadequate understanding of themes and principles covered in the readings and lectures. One or more serious gaps in knowledge are apparent. Discussion is inadequate and superficial because of avoidance of certain questions or lack of adequate support or elaboration. It is seriously flawed and reveals one or more of the following weaknesses: it displays significant confusion about the issues involved, it neglects important elements in the argument, it is poorly organized and developed, and it displays numerous errors.

1 Incompetent (no pass)

This essay reflects a weak understanding of themes and principles covered in the readings and lectures. Many serious gaps in knowledge are apparent. Discussion is weak because of deviations from the stated topic or lack of support or elaboration. It reveals one or more of the following weaknesses: it suggests an inability to comprehend the text(s) in question or to respond meaningfully to the required tasks, it is unfocused, illogical, incoherent, or disorganized, it is undeveloped and has serious and persistent errors in writing.