

MA Exam in Literature

Tips for Success and Practice Questions

The MA Exam is offered twice a year—early December and early August, in time for graduation in those months. If you wish to graduate in April, you will need to take the exam in the previous December. Please be aware that rationale for the “third question” (see details below) are due 6 weeks before the exam date (i.e. June 15 for the August exam and October 15 for the December exam). Once the rationale is approved by your advisor, you “register” for the exam by turning it in to the Lit Programs Coordinator.

Exam Writing Tips

There are a few key things to keep in mind when working on essays in the MA exam setting.

- Over the course of the exam, you should demonstrate familiarity with poetry, drama, and fiction, as well as with literature from a variety of literary periods.
- You should discuss works from different literary periods in each question (except your third question, as dictated by the list you chose).
- It is important to make an argument in each essay answer.
- Keep in mind that your readers are familiar with the reading list. Extensive plot summary is unnecessary. Instead, *analyze* the details from the texts you discuss in order to support your argument.
- You will write a stronger essay if you can demonstrate some clear connections (or important points of contrast) between the literary texts you discuss, rather than simply writing a few paragraphs on each without comparing them to each other.

Exam Format

You will have four hours in which to write three essays. The first two essays will be in response to questions written by the exam committee. You will have two pairs of questions, and you will answer one question from each pair. The third question is based on a student-designed topic described below. Beginning with the December 2006 exam, there will be some minor changes to the format of questions themselves, as described below.

Question One: You will have a pair of questions each of which focus on a thematic issue or structural element in literature. Choose one to answer. You are free to employ theoretical framework(s) as you see fit in shaping your answer. Sample questions:

- Position of women: It is easy to assume that women now are less oppressed than in the past, and that there has historically been a clear progression from oppression to relative freedom. Discuss three from three different periods that trouble that progress narrative in some way.
- Tragedy: Choose three texts from different literary periods that might reasonably be considered tragedies. How do the historical contexts in which these texts were created inform their tragic outcomes?
- Gender and authorship: Compare and contrast works by three authors from different periods whose work engages in significant ways with some of the problems of western patriarchies. Your answer should take into account not just the work itself but also the cultural position of the authors.

Question Two: You will have a pair of questions, each of which takes an idea from the theoretical texts on the reading list and asks you to discuss this concept in terms of literary texts. Choose one question to answer. You should demonstrate understanding of the theoretical concept(s) by applying the theory to produce readings of the literature.

Sample questions:

- Using Foucault's "What is an author?" OR Scott's "Experience," write an essay that explores how one or the other complicates the idea of a single authoritative reading of a text. In order to make your case, apply the theory you choose to reading two literary texts from different periods.
- Using Raymond William OR Henry Louis Gates OR Eve Sedgwick, write an essay that examines the role of literature in consolidating power. Defend your argument through a discussion of how this theory may be applied to reading three texts from different literary periods.

Question Three: This question is individual for each student. In consultation with a faculty advisor, each student develops a reading list of ten texts that are not on the MA reading list and that hold together as a useful group to examine a particular issue of interest to the student. The list should be primarily literature, although there may be 2-3 theoretical texts as part of the reading list. Your "rationale" for the list should take 1-2 pages to explain, and should be a discussion of your particular area of interest, the questions/issues you hope to address through consideration of the texts you've chosen, and some sense of what holds these texts together. You might think of this as akin to writing a paper proposal. It is not expected that you will have a "thesis" or argument formed at the time you write the rationale. Rather, you should outline the issues you'll examine and why they are interesting. One way to think about this is to define a clear research question. The advising professor will read drafts of the rationale and help you refine it as well as your reading list. This professor will also write the exam question for you, based on the topic you have formulated. The question will necessarily ask you to focus on some aspect of the topic, as you will have outlined a topic sufficient for a long research paper, and you will only have time to write an exam essay in response.