

Preparing for the Literature MA Exam

Students:

Starting to Prepare:

1. Make sure you have the document called “Literature MA Exam: Structure and Directions” as you begin to think about shaping your MA exam. You will have this document from your LITR 510 class and can always request it from the Literature Coordinator.
2. After you’ve reviewed this document, start to think about how you might want to shape your first and second question.
3. It will be on the basis of your thinking about how you want to construct your questions that you select your Mentor.
4. The MA exam is always offered the first Fridays in December, April, and August. Once you have a date in mind for taking the exam, it makes sense to start thinking about the exam and finding a Mentor the previous semester. That is, if you plan to take the exam in August, start thinking about your questions and approaching possible mentors during the Winter semester. Drafting the kinds of detailed and focused questions that will be most useful to you as an exam writer takes time and patience.
5. **FINAL VERSIONS OF YOUR QUESTIONS ARE DUE TO THE LITERATURE COORDINATOR BY THE 15TH OF THE MONTH IN WHICH YOU ARE PLANNING TO TAKE THE EXAM.** That is, if you plan to take the exam the first week in August, you **MUST** have submitted the final versions of your questions to the Literature Coordinator by July 15th. Your questions should be submitted to as an attachment via email, cc’ing your Mentor who will send a follow-up email signing off on the final draft of your questions.

Working with your Mentor:

Some students find approaching faculty members to request that they serve as Mentors to be a bit daunting. It should not be, and you do not need to have a close relationship with your Mentor prior to working with them on your exam. As you start to think about ideas for your two questions, ask current faculty and student peers about faculty specializations and consult faculty webpages. Once you have identified someone with expertise in areas you are interested in exploring, simple email requesting an appointment to talk about the MA exam. Faculty in the Literature Program very much enjoy working with and advising students. So no fear! This is a very ordinary part of our jobs – and one of the most enjoyable parts.

Once you and your Mentor have agreed to work together, you will focus on shaping and refining your two questions. Typically, you and your Mentor will meet for several hours at this stage. You might use these meetings to talk about primary, theoretical, or historical texts to work with in your questions. Your Mentor will likely ask you (likely more than once!) about what you most want to convey in specific phrases of your question. You might also be asked to rehearse either on paper or orally specific arguments you want to develop. Those rehearsals of your answer will likely be used to further refine the questions as you are developing them.

These meetings should ideally take place early in the process of developing your questions – that is, several months before you are planning to take the exam. This will give you and your Mentor plenty of time to work on refining and clarifying your questions so that what you see in front of you when you sit down to take the exam will be thought out and articulated in careful detail. Your Mentor might well suggest primary texts, books, or articles that you should review as you develop your question.

These meetings can be fun, but they are very important. In fact, this IS how you prepare for a successful MA exam in Literature. The work that goes into shaping very specific and detailed questions should be the main focus of preparing for the exam.

Have fun!