

Whitman College English Department

Preparing for Senior Year: Information, Deadlines, and Advice 2012-13

Written Comprehensives

All graduating seniors must pass a written comprehensive examination and an oral examination. The procedure for writtens is as follows:

1. Seniors sign up for their written examinations. Each year, the English Department publishes a group of reading lists for these examinations. There are a total of **three written exams**: one genre exam and two period exams. The period exams are proctored, timed exams; students select which period exams they wish to take. Students must take at least one exam in British literature prior to the Victorian period. To select period exams, students fill out a selection form and return it to the Department Chair. ***Fall candidates must make their selections by Monday, May 14, 2012. Spring candidates must make their selections by Monday, September 3, 2012.*** The genre exam is a take-home exam. The assigned genre of the genre exam will change each year, and the genre for the upcoming year will be announced on Reading Day at the end of the Spring semester. The take-home genre exam must be 2000-2500 words in length.
2. Students must prepare well for their examinations; the faculty recommend that rising seniors begin reading and studying the works on the written comprehensive reading lists during the summer preceding their senior year. Students must **choose period examinations** corresponding to literary periods in which they have done course work. They should prepare for the exams by expanding and deepening their knowledge of the period through their reading of the primary and secondary works on the period lists. To **prepare for the genre exam**, students should read and study the primary and secondary works on the reading list for that exam and should review what they have learned about the genre in question through earlier course work in the major. Many students find it helpful to join with others to form study groups focusing on particular exams.
3. The members of the English Department will prepare examination questions and set dates for the exams. In-class written examinations for **December candidates** will be Wednesday and Thursday, ***September 19 and 20, 2012.*** The questions for the take-home genre exam will be distributed by email on **Friday, September 21, at 9:00 a.m. The take home genre exam will be due Sunday, September 23 by 4:00 p.m.** No extensions will be given.
4. **For May candidates**, in-class written examinations will be ***Wednesday and Thursday, January 9 and 10, 2013.*** You will need to make travel plans accordingly. The English department will notify seniors of the exact times and locations for each of the period examinations. Each written examination will be two hours long. Students may bring both

primary and secondary texts listed on the reading lists with them to the in-class exams. **The questions for the take-home genre exam** will be distributed via email at **9:00 a.m. on Friday, January 11, 2013**, and it will **be due in CLEo drop box no later than 4:00 p.m. on Sunday, January 13, 2013**. Should you encounter any technical problems posting the exam to CLEo, you may send it in as an attachment by email to Pat Sorenson at sorenson@whitman.edu. **No extensions will be given.**

5. The timed in-class examinations on the reading lists for particular periods will each consist of one or two essay prompts designed to test your familiarity with the period. The essays you write in response to the prompts, should demonstrate

- command of the dominant literary movements and trends of the period;
- understanding of key cultural concepts and issues relevant to the interpretation of works written during the period;
- familiarity with the writers you covered in course(s) dealing with the period and with the writers on the reading list for the exam (there will be some overlap, but the reading list may introduce writers you didn't study in the course);
- ability to present close readings of the works on the reading list within the context of the literary genres they inhabit or rework, with attention to the relation between form and content;
- knowledge of the secondary works on the reading list and consideration of how they cast light on the primary texts.

Every exam will allow you some choice in deciding which works to discuss in your essay(s). The exams are open-book, so you should annotate your copies of the texts and bring them with you to the exam. Notebooks, however, are not permitted.

6. The take-home genre examination will consist of a prompt designed by the English Department faculty to test your knowledge of a cross-period reading list on a particular literary genre. In your essay, you will need to

- demonstrate your understanding of the conventions of the genre in question;
- apply that understanding to close readings of particular works from the reading list;
- have a sense of each work's place in the history of the genre;
- have read the assigned secondary works and thought about how they cast light on the primary texts.

The prompt will allow for some choice in deciding which works you wish to discuss.

7. Each examination, including both the period exams and the genre exam, will be graded by at least two professors. The grades will be reported as "Pass with Distinction," "Pass," or "Fail." Students should be aware that the grade of "Pass with Distinction" will be awarded only for truly exceptional work.

Passing exam essays will achieve all or most of the goals noted in the bullet points listed in items 5 and 6 above; they will be written in clear and effective prose appropriate to the conventions of literary argumentation.

Exam essays receiving a grade of distinction will achieve all of the goals noted above and will demonstrate exemplary writing skills.

If you prepare carefully for your written comprehensive exams, you are unlikely to fail; however, it may be useful to know (and thus avoid) some typical characteristics of a failing exam essay:

- it reflects the student's not having read the works on the reading list or possessing only superficial knowledge of them;
- it does not adequately address the question or prompt, or it ignores the prompt;
- its organization is so weak that the argument completely lacks coherence and clarity;
- it is so short that it is insufficiently developed and does not present a fully-formed response to the prompt;
- it includes several extreme misreadings that reveal
 - the student's failure to grasp key conventions of the genre to which the works in question belong;
 - the student's insufficient grasp of the works' cultural and literary context; or
 - the student's lack of care in attending to the language of the text.

8. The Chair of the English Department will send the results of the exams via letters through campus mail as soon as all the exams are graded.

Those who fail one or more of the written comprehensive examinations will have an opportunity to re-take the exams that they have failed at a later date. In the fall, the retakes will usually take place during the week after Thanksgiving break. In the spring, they will usually take place on the Wednesday or Thursday after spring break. Re-take exams will involve new prompts.

Oral Comprehensives

Seniors must also pass an oral examination on a work selected by the English Department.

1. Each degree candidate is assigned a work in an area in which he or she has completed course work. December degree candidates will be assigned a work in early June; May candidates' works will be assigned in early November. The exams will take place in early to mid-October for December candidates and in mid-February to early March for May candidates. The exact date and time for each student's oral examination, as well as the names of the three faculty members who will serve as his or her orals committee, will be announced not less than one month before the date of the exam.

2. You will prepare a 20-minute presentation in which you focus on the assigned work, presenting a thesis based upon close reading of the text's form and content and demonstrating an appropriate knowledge of its genre and its place in literary and cultural history. You should acknowledge any secondary sources that you use, just as you would in a paper; but you should not rely on other critics' arguments about the work. Your examiners will be evaluating the originality of your presentation as well as the quality, complexity and clarity of your argument.

3. Your presentations should be no more than 20 minutes long. You may use note cards or an outline as a prompt, and you should have a copy of the assigned literary text to which you can refer; but you must not read a written-out paper or report from the cards. After the presentation, the three faculty members who are serving as the exam committee will, for the remaining 30 minutes of the exam period, use what you have said about the assigned work as the basis for further exploration and discussion. You might expect to be asked to further defend some aspect

of your thesis, to consider alternative views on the work, to comment on how the work relates to others of the same genre or in the same period, or to go into greater depth on a particular point than the limited time of the presentation has allowed.

4. Grades given on this examination are Pass with Distinction, Pass, and Fail. You will likely pass this examination if you

- Indicate that you understand the most significant aspects of the work;
- Make a clear argument or point about the work (the presentation should have a thesis, not just give a plot summary, offer a line by line reading, or provide information about the author's life);
- Give an informed interpretation about the work. Acknowledge critics found to be useful, but do not rely excessively on secondary sources;
- Successfully employ close reading practices, referring to details (lines, sentences, sections) from the work as evidence for a larger argument;
- Speak naturally and fluently, with confidence, using the note cards only as prompts and making good use of the 20 minutes allowed for the presentation;
- Address the difficult parts of the text, showing that you have looked up words when applicable, and demonstrate clear familiarity with the work in all its detail;
- Show a willingness to consider ideas not addressed in the presentation and an ability to think on your feet about the work. It's also legitimate to qualify or reconsider your thesis or argument; indeed, over the course of the question-and-answer period, the discussion will often lead to new insights and revisions.

In order to pass your oral examination with distinction, you must not only meet the expectations for a pass, but excel in doing so. Students should be aware that the grade of "Pass with Distinction" will be awarded only for truly exceptional work. Here are some of the qualities that prompt examiners to decide that a student's oral exam deserves to be awarded a grade of "Pass with Distinction":

- The presentation consists of a substantive, insightful analysis of the text at hand; it is provocative in raising and exploring some problem in the text; it places the text in context (perhaps in relation to other texts by the author or other authors, perhaps in relation to the era, or perhaps in relation to some critical issue appropriate to the text); it shows the student's familiarity with useful critical works and his or her ability to use that criticism well without relying too heavily upon it.
- The presentation is clear, coherent, illuminating, presented with confidence. It isn't rushed. It has a beginning, middle, and end.
- During the Q & A period, the student demonstrates agility, flexibility (without simply rolling over and agreeing with whatever is said), and the ability to think on his or her feet. He or she is able to respond to questions not directly occasioned by the initial presentation, but related to other elements of the text. The student can puzzle helpfully with the committee over difficult parts and demonstrate that he or she is an outstanding senior-level student of literature.
- Throughout the presentation and the Q & A, the student conveys an investment in the study of literature, speaking as an engaged and motivated reader and literary analyst.

5. The English Department faculty urge all students to practice their presentations out loud in front of their peers or in front of anybody who will listen. Serious problems occur when students do not know what they are going to say, do not know how long it will take, and expect to improvise from notes they have thrown together at the last minute.

6. Here are a few technical details that you may find helpful to know in advance.

- The orals are held in seminar rooms, and faculty sit around the table; you may choose either to sit or stand for your presentation and for the Q&A period. Do whatever makes you most comfortable.
- The presentation should be around 20 minutes in length; the Q&A will last for around 30 minutes. At that point, you'll be asked to step outside the room for a few minutes while the faculty members discuss your performance; please don't leave the vicinity, as we will emerge shortly.
- Please remember not to read your presentation from a prepared script and please do not memorize a prepared presentation.

7. Students who fail this oral examination will be given a new topic and will take another oral examination no sooner than four weeks after the original exam (later for December candidates.) The members of the examining committee normally will be different from those on the original committee.

Distinction in Major Study

In order to achieve Distinction in Major Study, you must

- pass all four of your senior assessment examinations—the three written examinations and the oral—on the initial try
 - earn a grade of “Passed with Distinction” on at least two of the four senior assessment examinations; and
 - attain by the time of graduation a cumulative grade point average of at least 3.300 and a grade point average of at least 3.500 in the English major.
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Theses and Honors Theses

For information on how to submit a thesis or honors thesis proposal, please see the *English Majors' Handbook*, available in a link on the English Department webpage

Honors in Major Study

The College Catalog lists the grade point requirements and deadlines for those seeking “Honors in Major Study.” To achieve “Honors in Major Study” a student must have at least a 3.3 on all credits earned at Whitman and at least 3.5 in the major. The primary task is the preparation of a

thesis—conceived, researched, and written at a level worthy of honor (at least A- level) and prepared exclusively for the satisfaction of this program—on a topic of genuine interest to the student. Students considering honors in major study should ask themselves what significant topic, author(s), or text(s) they sincerely want to explore in depth. They should consult with a member of the Department whom they would like to act as their supervising professor and reader of the thesis. The topic must be approved by the English department, which will then assign a second reader, although the final grade will be determined by the supervisor. The sooner students consult, the better; initial discussions during the second semester of the junior year can lead to profitable summer reading and to a smoother beginning in the busy fall semester of the senior year.

Candidates for “Honors in Major Study” must pass all four of the senior assessment examinations (three written exams and one oral exam), earning distinction on at least two of these examinations. If these hurdles are not passed, then students who are significantly along in the writing of their thesis may choose to complete it, earning credit for Thesis (English 497), or they may decide to abandon the thesis (if they otherwise have sufficient credits for graduation). Either option requires filing a form with the Registrar’s office.

The application process and deadlines established by the College follow:

- Discuss your ideas for an honors thesis with an English department professor who agrees to act as your supervisor. In most cases, this conversation should take place in the spring semester of your Junior year.
- Prepare a written application (form available from the Registrar’s web site) describing the thesis project. Include a title, a description of the project, and a bibliography of primary and secondary works. This application must be approved by your supervising professor and by the English Department, so you should begin to prepare the description well before the deadline and submit it to your supervising professor **no later than Monday, September 17, 2012, for those graduating in May**. *Note that this deadline is earlier than the College deadline*. After receiving these approvals, submit the application to the Registrar’s office.
- Write your thesis so as to allow your faculty member sufficient time to read it and to suggest any necessary revisions. Establish with your supervisor such things as number of drafts, deadlines, etc.
- Meet the English department's deadline for submission of the thesis to the adviser by **Friday, April 12, 2013**.
- Submit the final copy of the thesis to the **adviser** by **Friday, April 26, 2013**.
- Submit the final copy of the thesis to **Penrose Library** by Reading Day, **Wednesday, May 8, 2013**.