

Whitman College

English Department

Preparing for Senior Year Information, Deadlines, and Advice 2019-2020

All graduating seniors must pass a written comprehensive examination and an oral examination. Preparing for and taking these exams can be intellectually engaging capstone experiences; they offer an opportunity for students to demonstrate the breadth, depth, and interconnectedness of the knowledge they have acquired in the major.

Written Comprehensives

The procedure for written exams is as follows:

1. All seniors must pass a written comprehensive exam. The assigned genre or theme of this exam will change each year, and the genre or theme for the upcoming year will be announced on Reading Day at the end of the spring semester each year. The take-home comprehensive exam will be written over a 48-hour period and 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 list during the summer preceding their senior year. Students should prepare for **the comprehensive exam** by reading and studying the primary and secondary works on the reading list. Many students find it helpful to join with others to form study groups to help them prepare for this exam.
3. The questions for the take-home comprehensive exam for December candidates will be distributed by email on ***Friday, September 20, 2019, at 9:00 a.m.*** The take

home comprehensive exam will be due *Sunday, September 22, 2019, by 4:00 p.m.* Should you encounter any technical problems posting the exam to CLEo, you may send it in as an attachment by email to Scott Elliott at elliots@whitman.edu. **No extensions will be given.**

4. The questions for the take-home comprehensive exam for May candidates will be distributed via email at ***9:00 a.m. on Friday, January 10, 2020***, and it will be **due in CLEo drop box no later than *4:00 p.m. on Sunday, January 12, 2020***. Should you encounter any technical problems posting the exam to CLEo, you may send it in as an attachment by email to Scott Elliott at elliots@whitman.edu. **No extensions will be given.**
5. The take-home comprehensive examination will consist of a prompt or prompts designed by the English Department faculty to test your knowledge of a cross-period reading list on a particular literary genre or of a particular theme. In your essay, you will need to
 - demonstrate your understanding of the formal properties of the works on the list;
 - apply that understanding to close readings of particular works from the reading list;
 - have a sense of each work's place in the list as a whole;
 - have read the assigned secondary works and thought about how they cast light on the primary texts.

The prompt will ask you to address specific primary works on the list, so ensure you know each work thoroughly.

6. Each exam will be graded by at least two professors. The grades will be reported as "Pass with Distinction," "Pass," or "Fail." Exam essays will pass if they achieve all or most of the goals noted in the bullet points listed in items 5 above and if they are written in clear and effective prose appropriate to the conventions of literary argumentation. Exam essays that achieve all of the goals noted above and that demonstrate exemplary writing skills will achieve the grade of "Pass with Distinction." Students should be aware that the grade of "Pass with Distinction" will be awarded only for truly exceptional work.

If you prepare carefully for your written comprehensive exam, 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.

7. 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 the written comprehensive examination will have an opportunity to re-take the exam 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 weekend after spring break. Re-take exams will cover the same reading lists as the original exams but 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 August; May candidates' works will be assigned in early December.
Having received your oral assignment, you are responsible for finding a scholarly copy of the work and giving it to the professor who works in that literary period by the second week of the spring term. If you are in doubt about who this expert might be, you can check with the Department Chair.
Once the professor has approved that copy, s/he will distribute it to other faculty members on your committee. 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 two weeks 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 do the following:
 - prepare and demonstrate 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 merely provide information about the author’s life);
 - give an informed interpretation of 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;
 - indicate in the presentation and/or the question and answer session the ways in which allusions, formal components, and contextual references relate to your argument and contribute to the meaning(s) of the work;
 - demonstrate an understanding of even those important elements in the work not directly related to your thesis;
 - 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.

The English Department faculty encourages 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.

5. 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.
- Do not read your presentation from a prepared script and please do not memorize a prepared presentation.

6. Students who fail this oral examination will be given a new topic and will take another 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 do the following:

- pass both of your senior assessment examinations—the written comprehensive exam and the oral—on the initial try;
 - earn a grade of “Passed with Distinction” on at least one of the two senior assessment examinations;
 - 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

Honors in Major Study are awarded to graduating seniors who show unusual ability in the field of their major studies and who write a thesis worthy of honors. If you are considering the pursuit of honors in major study, you should ask yourself what significant topic or author(s) or text(s) you sincerely wish to explore in depth. You should consult with a member of the department whom you would like to act as the supervising professor and reader of your thesis. If the proposed thesis adviser agrees to direct the thesis, and the thesis proposal is approved by the English Department, you will also be assigned a second reader. You will consult with the second reader as you work on your project. The final grade for your thesis will be determined by your supervisor in consultation with the second reader.

The sooner you consult with a faculty member qualified to direct your thesis project, 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.

In order to qualify for the pursuit of Honors in English, a candidate must have

- accumulated at least eighty-seven credits;
- completed two semesters of residence at Whitman College;
- a cumulative grade-point average of at least 3.100 on all credit earned at Whitman;

- considered carefully the questions listed in the English Majors' Handbook under the heading "What thesis options are available?"
- prepared a detailed written proposal describing the thesis project and submitted it to the professor you hope to work with no later than the beginning of the fourth week of the semester preceding the one in which you will write the thesis (Monday, September 16, 2019, for thesis to be completed in the spring of 2020; Monday, February 3, 2020, for theses to be completed in the Fall of 2020). Note that this deadline is earlier than the deadline for the formal submission of the thesis proposal to the English Department.
- submitted the detailed written proposal to the English Department for consideration no later than the beginning of the seventh Monday of the semester preceding the one in which you will write the thesis (Monday, October 7, 2019, for theses to be completed in the spring of 2020; Monday, March 23, 2020, for theses to be completed in the fall of 2020).

In order to achieve Honors in English, a candidate must

- Begin work on the thesis as soon as your proposal is approved, writing it on a schedule that allows your supervisor sufficient time to read it and to suggest any necessary revisions.
- Establish with your supervisor such things as number of drafts, deadlines, etc.
- 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 major.
- Meet the English Department's deadline for initial submission of the completed thesis to your thesis adviser: Friday, April 10, 2020, for May graduation candidates.
- Meet the English Department's deadline for final submission of the completed and revised thesis to your adviser: Friday, April 24, 2020, for May graduation candidates.
- Successfully complete an oral defense of the thesis to be scheduled with your thesis adviser and second reader.
- File the final digitized copy of the thesis in the Library. The deadline designated by the Registrar is Wednesday, May 13, 2020, for May graduation candidates.
- Earn a grade of at least A- on the honors thesis or project;
- Pass with Distinction on the comprehensive examination in his or her major study. For English Majors, this means that in order to earn Honors, candidates must
 - Pass both of the senior assessment examinations—the comprehensive written exam and the oral—on the initial try;
 - Earn "Pass with Distinction" on at least one of the two senior assessment examinations.

If you achieve each of these goals, the Chair of the English Department will notify the Registrar, who will officially change your registration from "English 497: Thesis" to "English 498: Honors Thesis." For more details on preparing a thesis or honors thesis proposal, please see the *English Majors' Handbook*.