LITERARY STUDIES COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS

Lit Studies approved a three-part primary exam. The new primary exam will consist of 1) a 2 ½ hour on-site written exam (identifications); 2) a 72-hour take-home written exam with a limit of 25 pages (double-spaced, 12 point type, 1-inch margins); and 3) a 90-minute oral examination.

For the on-site part of the exam, students will report to the department on the regularly scheduled Saturday morning (end of October for fall exams and end of March for spring exams) and write in response to a set of prompts on terminology and identifications. For example, the student could be given a list of 40 terms or phrases or quotations important to the field of study (i.e., stuff that a putative expert in the field should be able to identify and define off the top of the head) and asked to write developed paragraphs on 20 or 25 of the terms (the number of terms to be defined would depend upon the extensiveness of the paragraphs desired by the director). Or there may be ten terms from which to choose and you will be asked to write short essay type answers for five of them. The on-site exam could also contain essay questions; please discuss this possibility with your exam writer.

The take-home portion of the exam will be conducted over a 72-hour period during the week following the on-site exam. The student will receive the questions on a given day, and return the completed exam 72 hours later. For example, an exam delivered to a student on Friday at noon must be returned by noon the following Monday. The take-home questions will be similar to the types of essay questions posed in the current model, but the responses must do more than demonstrate knowledge of the field; rather, the responses should demonstrate the ability to write critically, analytically, reflectively, and creatively within the context of the questions raised. The student will of course be free to consult texts.

Students will have to pass both parts of the written exam to receive a “pass” but will not have to re-take both parts if only one is failed. Primary exams can receive ratings of high pass, pass, provisional pass, and fail. Exams earning a provisional pass will either pass or fail, depending on the outcome of the oral exam.

THE ORAL COMPONENT

The oral exam should be scheduled as soon as possible after the student passes the written exams but must be completed by the end of the semester.
The oral exam will be scheduled only if the student passes both portions of the written exam.

The oral exam will last for no less than 45 and no more than 90 minutes.

All three members of the examination committee and the Director or Associate Director of Graduate Studies will be present at the oral exam.

The student will have had access to the exam committee’s commentary on the written exam prior to the oral exam.

The oral exam is intended as a follow-up to the on-site and off-site segments of the written exam; therefore, the reading list that was devised and agreed upon for the written portions of the exam must be the basis for the oral as well. Any questions from the committee concerning texts not on the reading list must be framed as casual or peripheral and should come, if at all, only in the later stages of the oral.

Suggestions for questioning procedures

- The committee should begin by allowing the student to respond to the committee’s commentary, particularly addressing any errors or weaknesses in the written exam that the committee members might have pointed out.

- The committee might then invite the student to engage in self-criticism and to say how she or he might have responded differently to the questions. What weaknesses or errors did the student notice in her/his own responses? What points might have been more developed or finely nuanced, etc.?

- The student might be asked why she or he selected specific questions to which to respond. The student might be asked what unselected question was the closest runner-up and how she/he might have responded to that question.

- The student might be asked to give a brief definition of one or more of the ID terms not selected.

- If the committee has any suspicions about whether any portions of the off-site exam are not actually the student’s own writing, the committee may frame questions that would allow the student to lay such suspicions to rest.

Since oral exams can take a variety of forms; please discuss the format and expectations with your committee so that you know what to expect and how to prepare. Written confirmation of the outcome of the oral exam should be sent to the DGS to be included in the student’s file.