

**Qualifying Examination Procedure**  
**The Program in Comparative Literature**  
**The University of Texas at Austin**

The Qualifying Examination is given once a year by a rotating Qualifying Exam Committee, established each Fall semester by the Chair of the Graduate Studies. Most students take the exam in January of their second year of the program, upon completion of C L 385 and C L 390. The date of the exam usually falls in the week before the beginning of the Spring Semester, so that the examination results will be available to guide students for their Spring Semester registration. Examinations will receive one of the following grades: fail, low pass, pass, high pass.

**Format of the examination**

1. The examination has two parts, each lasting 2 ½ hours, with an additional 1 ½ hour break between the two sections.
2. Part 1 of the QE involves a question on literary theory, based on the work done in the two-semester course sequence on theories of literary criticism (C L 385 & 390). Students choose one question to answer about literary theory.
3. Part 2 of the QE asks students to explicate a literary text: a poem, prose extract, or episode from a play in the students' first foreign (non-native language) literature. Students may choose to respond to one of two passages drawn from a list of approximately 20 texts (explained below) prepared in advance with an appropriate supervising professor and approved by the graduate adviser.
  - a. Students will be given a text whose language is not their native language. Foreign students whose native language is not English may be given a text in English to analyze, but only when an Anglophone literature is one of their two national literature concentrations. No one will be given a text in their native language.
  - b. The national literature/language on which the student chooses to be examined must be kept as one of their concentration areas up to the point of the Comprehensive Examination (although not necessarily as a first or primary national literature or area of concentration).
4. All portions of the Qualifying Examination must be written in English, no matter what literature is being tested in the analytical portion of the examination. Students may use dictionaries during the examination; they must provide these dictionaries themselves.

**Purpose of the Examination**

1. Test students' knowledge of, and ability to work with, literature, literary theory, and analytical and synthesizing abilities, especially as evidence in the construction of a cogent essay-argument.
2. Predict students' future success in the program (in particular, whether students should continue work in the Program, would be able to pass a Comprehensive Oral examination, and then write a doctoral dissertation based on original research) and later in their professions.

Part 1 (Theory) tests the ability to:

1. Grasp of theoretical issues and problems involved in the study of literature
2. Make comparisons between and establish differences among important theorists and schools of thought
3. Write about literary theory in a clear, informed, and thoughtful manner.

Part 2 (Explication):

1. Assumes that students have real fluency in their first foreign language
2. Assumes that students possess real knowledge of the literature written in that language
3. Tests a student's ability to analyze the literary and stylistic features of the passage given for explication and to deliver a well-judged interpretation.

**Prerequisites:**

1. Strong foreign language abilities.
2. NO incompletes on record; if inability to take the examination because of incompletes affects a student's status for jobs or fellowships, that is the student's responsibility.

Students experiencing a severe personal hardship that may warrant exceptions need to talk to the chair of the QE Committee. Students who are planning to stop or switch programs after the MA (which means they will not have to take the QE) must notify the C L office in writing.

**Before the examination**

1. Consult an area specialist among the faculty in Comparative Literature and establish a draft of the first area reading list during the spring semester of the first year of the program (or the semester when students are enrolled in CL 385).
2. Students may consult with other faculty to establish such a list if there is no area specialist in Comparative Literature.
3. Note that the faculty member may be called upon to pick a passage for the text interpretation sometime in November preceding the January examination date. After the student has taken the examination, the faculty member may be asked to evaluate the interpretation within 10 days of the examination date.
4. In cases where an advising faculty member may be gone from campus the year in which the student will take the examination, it is advisable that a copy of the draft list be placed in the student's file during the Spring Semester preceding the examination, together with a cover note from that faculty member indicating approval of the list

**The reading list**

1. Should name 20 works at the core of the national literature chosen, which will provide an adequate range of text choices for that section of the examination
2. Should represent a cross-section of genres (prose, poetry, drama, epic).
  - a. Some common sense should be used in counting the elements on this list: if, for example, an epic poem runs tens of thousands of lines, one episode of several hundred lines may be considered one entry.

- b. If an author established his or her shorter lyric poems in definite collections, cite the collection and identify three or four of the short poems in it to count as one item.
  - c. In choosing the items (aside from looking to a distribution of genres), students may either focus on the "masterworks" of a literary tradition across time, or begin to narrow their choices to a single literary epoch (which may include those texts from earlier periods upon which the chosen epoch relies heavily).
3. All texts on the list do not have to be literary or canonical, but secondary literature is excluded.
  4. If popular literature is represented on a list, appropriate parallel literary and/or canonical texts should be included. This requirement is imposed with an eye towards the students' eventual employability in national literature departments.
  5. Students should indicate which faculty member(s) were consulted in establishing the list (this information will facilitate its approval).
  6. In the event that a list contains a literature not represented on a particular year's QE Committee, the QE Committee will draw on an outside faculty member to aid in the evaluation of this portion of the examination only.  
NOTE: The outside evaluator's judgment will not override the decision of the QE Committee. His or her judgment will be taken very seriously however, especially with regard to the accepted professional standards for text interpretation within that particular national tradition of literary studies.

The final list will be approved formally by the QE committee in October, when a memo will be circulated asking for confirmation of who is taking the QE the following January.

### **What to expect**

#### **For the theory section:**

1. Students are responsible for knowing the historical outlines of the development of literary studies: that is, demonstrating a familiarity and facility with concepts and issues that have concerned theorists and philosophers about literary texts (e.g. representation, aesthetic criteria, genre definitions, definitions of text, society, reading, and the like).
2. Students must be able to compare and contrast theorists' uses of terms and concepts, outline historical changes, and to explain the significance and impact of theories.
3. Examination questions for the first section will be set so that comparisons/contrasts of theories from different time periods will very likely be required.
4. Students are expected to be able to distinguish pre-modern and modern usages of terminology, and to compare "schools" or approaches within various general approaches to the problems of literature.
5. Students are NOT expected to have an exhaustive command of the issues of literary studies from all periods.

Several sample student essays from previous years are available for your perusal in the C L office. These samples will provide you with an idea of the minimum preparation in theory required to pass the first section of the exam.

### **For the text interpretation:**

Students are expected to know the following about the authors and texts chosen on the list:

1. Implications and formal aspects of the genre within the national literary tradition.
2. The aesthetic or philosophical implications and concepts which inform the text.
3. The questions of language modality or register, style, and audience which determine possible readings of a text.
4. Authorial intent and aesthetic (or that of the author's group or movement) as reflected in the text.
5. The historical conditions for the writing, transmission, and reading (or reception) of the text.

### **How to have a successful examination:**

In general terms, a "successful" examination is one that offers two well-informed and well-constructed essays, not random sets of observations on theories or particular texts.

### **Theory essay:**

1. Must have the form of a developed essay:
  - a. A thesis about the grounds for comparison or contrast for the schools or approaches to be discussed
  - b. A strategy for the comparison which the essay will follow
  - c. Facts about the schools (who, what, where, when, and definitions of concepts)
  - d. Conclusion about the relative importance, influence, or diffusion of the schools addressed, or about the manner in which a concept or model developed, and how that development was significant for literary studies.
2. Essays must present not only a set of facts about the material, but also a specific stance vis-à-vis that material.
3. Argue a consistent point of view and muster enough evidence to support that point of view.
  - a. "Argue a consistent point of view" – introduce a consistent strategy to present materials and to argue a point of view.
  - b. "Muster evidence," – must refer to specific authors and texts that define terminology (each word gains its meaning only in a particular context, usage, text, and authorial voice).
4. Cite particular authors and back up assertions when defining how usage changes over time.
5. Give examples from specific literary movements as evidence when making claims about readers and reading; historical circumstances must be taken into consideration.
6. The essay will primarily be evaluated as an essay that sets and fulfills its own norms of argumentation and evidence, and secondarily as evidence of students' command of a body of historical facts and critical materials.
7. The theory essay thus should articulate the ability to be flexible in bringing theoretical positions into dialogue with each other and drawing conclusions about relative values, failing, or intellectual fertility.
8. Faculty will expect well-defined and articulated tacks on answers, and will expect that answers are solidly argued and generally comprehensible (that is, not facile or characterized by undefined jargon from a single insider point of view).
9. Faculty will NOT expect one particular theoretical or other agenda to direct the student's

answer.

**What not to do:**

1. Offer encyclopedia-like recapitulations about schools of thought or particular theoretical or terminological questions.
2. Fall into clichés or loose uses of terminology when discussing issues broadly.
3. Not develop an argument.
4. Try to pass off a set of "plot summaries" of critical theories as an essay.

**Text interpretation**

1. Must demonstrate the ability to work closely with texts, within the disciplinary expectations set by students' specialty areas.
2. Must be an essay that elucidates how a particular text works for a reader: as a representative of a historically recoverable repertoire of language and stylistic registers, genre traditions, sociopolitical needs, philosophies, and the like.
3. Must demonstrate an understanding of a national literary tradition and its history.
4. Must clearly demonstrate linguistic competence by the ability to "close read" a text correctly and then place it in a larger literary context (a particular genre, problem, or other program).
5. Must introduce the essay with an explicit statement of the strategy or method to be used to approach the text. Provide (usually as part of both introduction and conclusion) a justification or explanation why that method particularly suits the text under discussion.
6. Interpretations do NOT have to represent a particular school's procedures or agenda in approaching a text.
7. Approach the interpretation systematically – tell the reader (and evaluator) of the examination what norms and standards the essay represents.
8. Will be graded primarily according to how consistently and lucidly it presents and follows the norms it sets within existing professional discussions, and secondarily by specific items of content and by how well the content is unfolded into an interpretation.

**Sundry Technical Matters**

1. The Comparative Literature Qualifying Examination will take place on one of the two days preceding the start of the Spring Semester, generally from 9-11:30 and 1:00- 3:30. The morning sitting will be the theory portion of the exam; the afternoon sitting will be the student's individualized text interpretation.
2. Sample theory questions, answers, text interpretations, and reading lists are available in the Comparative Literature office for students; copying and costs must be covered by the students.
3. The passages for the text interpretation are generally reasonably short excerpts so that they may be commented on in detail, but are long enough to show central issues of style and content from the text: one to two pages from a novel or other prose work, an entire short poem, a section (canto, etc.) from a longer poem, or a scene (soliloquy, etc.) from a play.
4. The questions for the theory part will be very carefully written so as to allow flexible approaches to answers, and also to suggest what strategies might be used to answer them. Questions which focus mainly on the earlier periods may well ask for discussion of modern correlates to the issue; those dealing with contemporary critical issues may require a

- discussion of antecedents.
5. The entire examination committee will read and evaluate all parts of the examination, with outside consultants contributing to the evaluation as described previously. To give an idea of student profiles, the examination committee will have copies of students' reading lists at hand, which will assist them in assessing the written work.
  6. Dictionaries will not be provided, but students may bring dictionaries in any language.
  7. Examinations must be typed in English. The QE will be held in a computer lab on campus. It is recommended that the students use the first half-hour of each examination period to make an extensive outline to be submitted with the computerized examination—the students' ultimate backup in case of computer failure. The examination room will be proctored by someone who can help with minor computer glitches.
  8. The examination proctor will bring pre-formatted storage devices for the computer lab with blank files on them which students will just need to open and start typing. Students should begin each question by typing their name and the number of the question they are answering, or the title of the text they are interpreting. Since the computers will be Macintosh, students should only use the return between paragraphs, and should either tab in or skip an additional line between paragraphs. The main commands needed to operate the word-processing program (MS Word) at a minimum level of competency will be provided. The storage device will be collected and printouts made in the C L office (for the morning session, between sittings). Students should not leave in the afternoon until they are sure their exams print out.
  9. In extremely rare cases, the Examination Committee Chair may allow someone to handwrite an examination, if this exception is arranged IN ADVANCE. The handwritten examination will then be accepted with the following restrictions:
    - a. Students may not use either pencil or standard fine-line ballpoint pen since they don't copy well. Bring either a **black** felt tip or a nylon point pen (blue does not copy well).
    - b. Students must use the provided lined 8-1/2 x 11 paper; write on only every other line, and on one side of each sheet only.
    - c. Leave at least 1-inch (2.5 cm) margins totally blank on each side of the paper.
    - d. Students must write their names on every top corner and number all pages.
    - e. Block printing is highly encouraged.
  10. The ultimate warning on handwritten examination is that the committee WILL NOT even attempt to read illegible examinations, or examinations in formats that will not photocopy. If the committee has to struggle to read a particular examination, or if special handling is required to copy the examination (e.g., stingy margins, light marks, or see-through), students will receive an automatic fail on that section of the examination. Grading is done under time pressure, and students owe their examiners the courtesy of basic legibility.
  11. Students will be notified in writing about the results of the examination, usually within ten days of the examination date.