

The Undergraduate Oral Examination in Comparative Literature

At the end of the senior year, an oral examination will be given to test your proficiency in the field of Comparative Literature and, especially, in your particular fields of interest and expertise. The oral exam, which will last for 90 minutes, is meant to provide an opportunity for graduating seniors to engage in a formal conversation with informed interlocutors about texts and topics of your choosing. It is also, importantly, a moment for you to look back on your work and your intellectual development during your time in Comparative Literature. While, like any examination, it requires thoughtful and careful preparation, it is also a unique occasion for meaningful reflection, exchange, and demonstration of your scholarly achievements.

THE COMPOSITION AND STRUCTURE OF THE EXAM:

Composition: There are **4 distinct elements** that comprise the material of the oral examination:

- The **senior thesis** (or capstone project, if relevant)
- An **oral intellectual autobiography**
- An **orals list, which includes 4 topics and 4-6 relevant works** or clusters of texts under each topic
- A **3-5 page critical essay** that outlines your topics and texts, and provides the framework of your intellectual autobiography

Structure: The oral exam will last for **90 minutes** and consists of **3 sections**. The exam will take place during the first two days of reading period.

- 1) **Thesis Defense:** The first section of the examination is **15 minutes** long and is devoted to a **senior thesis defense**. This is an opportunity for you to present your thesis project briefly and then respond to questions from the committee about your work. One member of the exam committee will be one of the readers of your senior thesis and will take the lead in the questioning; but all members of the committee will participate.
- 2) **Intellectual Autobiography and Orals list:** The remaining **75 minutes** of the examination will be devoted to a brief (no more than 5 minutes) presentation of your **intellectual autobiography** in which you tell the story of your intellectual journey through Comparative Literature and present your orals topics in brief. The remaining time is devoted to a question-and-answer period drawing on an **Orals Examination list**. This list is comprised of **4 larger conceptual topics**, each of which includes **4-6 specific works or clusters of texts** that have been important to your intellectual formation.
 - Each topic must include a short (150-200 words) description of each your 4 topics, and an additional 1-2 lines explaining how each individual work applies to the particular topic. This will allow you to articulate clearly the scope of the topic at hand; it will also give your examiners a sense of how the individual works map onto the larger area of interest.
 - The works you consider can include verbal texts, images, music, films, video, as relevant.
 - Shorter works (lyric poems, images, short videos, film clips) should be clustered together.

- The central works examined in the thesis should **not** be included.
 - You should work with your tutor to develop an appropriate list and submit a draft to your tutor for preliminary approval 2 weeks prior to the exam. The final list, officially approved by your tutor, must be submitted to the Comp Lit undergraduate office one week prior to the exam. It will be distributed in advance to the exam committee.
- 3) **The Orals Essay:** As part of the oral examination material, you must submit a **3-5 page essay**.
- The essay should explain why you chose the works, and how they relate to your intellectual formation in Comp Lit.
 - You might think of this essay as being the more critical and analytical portion of your intellectual autobiography, while the oral presentation is more personal.
 - This essay will be distributed to the committee in advance of the exam itself.

PREPARING FOR THE EXAM

Ideally, the exam will give you the opportunity to reflect on your life in Comparative Literature over the past three years. This means that you should take the time to conceptualize in broad intellectual terms the work that you have done in Comp Lit.

- Review the courses that have been central to your work.
- Re-consider your spring field of focus and your junior essay.
- Re-figure your senior thesis in relation to the preceding work.
- What larger trends can you articulate? What interests have been abiding? What works (literary, visual, musical, historical, cultural) have been most important? Develop your list of significant works around these kinds of questions.

The weeks following the thesis submission should be devoted to preparing for the orals with the senior tutor.

- Your senior tutor will help you formulate the orals list and must approve the final list.
- Your senior tutor will work with you to frame the required essay appropriately.
- Your senior tutor, in conjunction with another member of the Tutorial Board, will conduct at least one mock oral exam with you.

HOW THE EXAM WORKS

There are 3 members of the exam committee:

- The committee will be chaired by someone able to provide an objective evaluation of your performance. In an ideal world, this will be your junior tutor.
- One of the committee members will be a faculty member.
- One or more of the committee members will have read and evaluated the senior thesis.

HOW THE EXAM IS GRADED

- The oral exam is graded on the **same scale** used to grade the senior thesis: Cum, Magna, Summa, No Honors.

A set of **sample essays and orals lists** accompany these guidelines; but you should not hesitate to contact your senior tutor/thesis advisor, or the Director of Undergraduate Studies with any questions or concerns.

Please consult the [Senior Timetable](#) for all deadlines relevant to the Orals Examination.