Department of Comparative & World Literature

Procedures of MA and Ph.D. Exams

Approved October 2026

MA Exams

The MA exams consist of three written parts: theory (4 hours), major literature (4 hours), and minor literature (4 hours). Each of the three examiners evaluates every part of the exam—i.e. we need to have 9 grades by the end of the process. The Graduate Services Office in the School of Literatures, Cultures, and Linguistics will handle all logistics, from sending the three committee members a request for the exam questions to administering the exams, distributing the answers and evaluation sheets to the examiners, collecting the completed evaluation sheets, and communicating with the committee chair.

The theory exam (4 hours) is based on topics covered in CWL 501 and CWL 502. The reading list consists of at least twenty books; a number of articles or chapters from a particularly dense book can count as one entry. The books are divided equally among four categories or major critical approaches of the student's choice, with the approval of the DGS and the theory examiner (e.g. Marxism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, feminism and gender, postcolonialism, ecocriticism, translation, methods of Comparative Literature, etc.)

The major and minor literature exams consist of two parts each. In the first part, the examiner writes 2-3 questions from which the student selects one, answering it in an essay of at least five pages. The second part consists of a close reading of a passage from a primary text on the reading list, quoted in the original language (2 hours). The examiner provides two unidentified passages, each consisting of about 200-250 words of prose or its equivalent in density in poetry. The student selects only one passage to identify and to explicate in an essay of at least 5 pages. Sample prompt:

> Please explicate the following passage in a coherent essay of no less than five double-spaced pages. In the introductory paragraph, briefly situate the passage in the context of the work and state the main idea of the passage. After that, analyze the passage in as much detail as you can, paying attention to relevant aspects such as style, tone, imagery, characterization, and so forth. Your essay should have a concluding paragraph that connects your analysis to larger themes in the text.

Given the range of languages and literatures in which our students work, it is extremely rare to have a committee in which every member has expertise in the subject matter of each of the exams. Therefore, the opinion of the examiner in each field carries more weight, but the two

other members' evaluations are also important and should be based on the coherence, cogency, clarity, and quality of the answer.

Each examiner will receive three result sheets. The examiner selects a grade (high pass, pass, low pass, fail) and provides confidential comments for the exam committee and the faulty only. The examiner may also choose to provide other comments for the student in the designated space.

Please return the result sheets only to Graduate Services, without copying the rest of the committee. The idea is that each committee member should reach an independent decision while evaluating each of the three exams, without influence from the others.

Neither the result sheets nor the confidential comments will be made available to the student, but the committee chair may convey their substance to the student. There is a separate space on the result sheet for comments that can be shared with the student.

The exam committee decides whether the student passes or fails. However, the ultimate decision on admission to the Ph.D. program is made by the CWL faculty in its meeting in late April.

Preliminary Exams

The prelims in CWL consist of a Second Minor Literature exam, or whichever literature that was not tested at the MA level (4 hours); a Dissertation Field exam (4 hours); and an oral exam (2 hours).

The Second Minor Literature exam consists of a close reading of a passage from a primary text on the student's list, quoted in the original language. The examiner provides two unidentified passages, each consisting of about 200-250 words of prose or its equivalent in density in poetry. The student selects only one passage to identify and to explicate in an essay of at least five pages. Sample prompt:

> Please explicate the following passage in a coherent essay of no less than five double-spaced pages. In the introductory paragraph, briefly situate the passage in the context of the work and state the main idea of the passage. After that, analyze the passage in as much detail as you can, paying attention to relevant aspects such as style, tone, imagery, characterization, and so forth. Your essay should have a concluding paragraph that connects your analysis to larger themes in the text.

Given the range of languages and literatures in which our students work, it is extremely rare to have a committee in which every member has expertise in the subject matter of each of the exams. Therefore, the opinion of the examiner in each field carries more weight, but the other

three members' evaluations are also important and should be based on the coherence, cogency, clarity, and quality of the answer.

The Dissertation Field exam is based on a dissertation proposal and a reading list (primary texts, scholarship in the field, and relevant theoretical works). These should be presented to each member of the committee at the start of the spring semester of the student's fourth year in the program.

The Committee chair assembles the exam, which consists of four essay questions, each written by a different member of the committee. The chair submits the exam to the Graduate Services Office in the School of Literatures, Cultures, and Linguistics, which handles the logistics: administering the exam to the student, distributing the written answers and evaluation sheets to the examiners, collecting the completed sheets, and communicating with the committee chair.

Each of the four examiners evaluates both written exams—i.e. we need to have 8 grades by the end of the process. Each examiner will receive two result sheets. The examiner selects a grade (high pass, pass, low pass, fail) and provides confidential comments for the exam committee and the faulty only. The examiner may also choose to provide other comments for the student in the designated space.

Result sheets should be returned only to Graduate Services, without copying the rest of the committee. The idea is that each committee member should reach an independent decision while evaluating each of the written exams, without influence from the others. The result sheets have a space for confidential comments to be seen only by the committee chair, the DGS, and the Head; and another field where the examiner may write comments that the chair shares with the student.

Neither the result sheets nor the confidential comments will be made available to the student, but the committee chair may convey their substance to the student. There is a separate space on the result sheet for comments that can be shared with the student.

The oral exam should take place no more than two weeks after the written exams. Committee members may question the student about the written answers and/or the questions not selected, but most of the time should be spent discussing the dissertation proposal.

The exam committee decides whether the student passes or fails. Passing means that the student moves to the dissertation stage. One failed exam can be retaken; two failed exams result in dismissal from the program.