

The New vs. Old English MA Exams

As we make the transition to the new exam for the MA in English, we know you will have questions about what is changing and what will stay the same, so this is intended to help you understand the new exam and to consider your options if you are eligible to choose to take the old exam or the new exam (if you began coursework in the program before 1 January 2014, you may choose to take the old exam or the new exam).

1. What will stay the same?

- **The length of the exam:** It will still be four hours long.
- **The number of questions:** You will still answer four questions, and you will still have some choice of questions.
- **The type of questions:** Many questions on the exam will be similar to those asked about the works on the more limited reading lists of the old exam, with the exception that you may have more choices of texts to use to answer a question or that you may be asked to situate works in their cultural and historical time periods. The other exceptions will be questions in the new area in rhetoric and composition, language and linguistics, and writing, which will ask students to show their knowledge of these theoretical readings through discussion or application.
- **The procedure if a question is failed:** If one or more parts of the exam are not passed, the examinee will need to retake only parts that were not passed, as always.

2. What is new?

- **New content areas:** Instead of being organized by genres, the reading lists are now organized by time periods within American or British literature (or both, in the case of twentieth-century literature), and there is a new area focused on Composition and Rhetoric, Language and Linguistics, and Writing. In the past, the exam has been entirely over literature.
- **Student choices:** Students will now choose three areas for their exams, selecting three lists from the options given. Students will also identify a primary area of interest, and two of the exam questions will be written in this area, with one being written in each of the other two areas.
- **Continuity:** The reading lists will not change each year, as in the past. The intention is that these reading lists will remain the same, with only minor changes when deemed necessary, with review every three years. The reading lists should be seen as a foundation and supplement to coursework taken in the MA program, and students can read and prepare this material throughout their programs to enrich their understanding, rather than waiting to read the list just before taking the exam.

3. Why would I choose the new exam if I am eligible to take the old one?

Good question! Granted that the old reading lists are shorter, what might be the advantages of the new exam, even if you are eligible for the older exam?

- **The new exam might better represent your interests:** If your interest is in writing, linguistics, or rhetoric, the new exam will allow you to draw on that knowledge for up to half of your exam questions.

- **The reading lists will not change:** With the older format exam, if you don't pass a question the first time around and happen to have taken the exam in the fall, the reading list changes for the next calendar year's exams, so you would have to prepare new texts for the area(s) that have to be retaken. With the new exam, you will be given different questions for your retake, but they will be based on the same reading list(s), even if you retake the exam in the next calendar year.
- **The new reading lists may be familiar to you already:** The new reading lists were chosen by faculty who teach in each area and are based on the premise that there are certain writers or texts that students in the program should be familiar with, so you may read some texts in your classes or may have already read some. In addition, you might prefer to prepare for your exam by reading the unfamiliar texts on a list that will serve to fill out your knowledge of a certain literature over a certain time period, or expand your knowledge of linguistics, rhetoric, or writing theories that you haven't had a chance to read in a class.