

RHETORIC & MEDIA STUDIES DEPARTMENT WILLAMETTE UNIVERSITY

About The Written Comprehensive Examinations

Once each year, at the beginning of the spring semester, designated faculty members will offer a set of comprehensive written examinations testing students in three foundational areas of our discipline: ethics, rhetorical criticism, and rhetorical theory.

These exams reflect material covered in courses offered in the Department of Rhetoric & Media Studies, supplemented by additional readings. The exams provide an opportunity for students to 1) demonstrate their understanding and mastery of key areas of their study, 2) make substantial claims that reveal the student's ability to synthesize multiple theoretical and critical approaches to the study of public discourse, and; 3) express their ability to consider the ethical dimensions of rhetoric.

A student must pass all three areas satisfactorily in order to successfully complete the requirements for the Bachelors of Arts degree in Rhetoric & Media Studies. A student who fails one or more of the exams may retake these exams within a period stipulated by the examining committee of the Department of Rhetoric & Media Studies faculty. Upon passing all necessary make-up exams, the student will be considered to have satisfied the comprehensive examination requirements. A student may take each component of the comprehensive examinations only twice after the original attempt. A third failure in any area will lead to removal from the program.

What follows is a careful explanation of the questions most commonly asked about the comprehensive examinations. The examination seeks to assess your ability to synthesize concepts, to wield factual foundational information, and to demonstrate your understanding of the ethical implications of your knowledge.

What is the purpose of the exam?

The purpose of comprehensive examinations is to allow each student to demonstrate the ability to integrate major issues and portions of content across the range of courses that constitute their degree program. The purpose of the exam is not to fail you, or make you "suffer." Rather, the comprehensive exam serves as a culminating academic experience that adds value and distinction to your study and degree.

Who can I ask for help with the comprehensive questions?

Sample questions and answers are posted on at the Department's website: <http://www.willamette.edu/cla/rhetoric/info/comps/index.html>. Comprehensive examination questions might not vary all that much from other comprehensive examinations you might have taken in your classes. Hence, the best sources of

information for the examinations are your class notes, textbooks, and papers. You should keep all notes and class materials to facilitate your study for the comprehensive examinations. If you have other questions, you should seek assistance from your advisor.

Ask your advisor about the Department's requirements for taking the test. Also ask how long the test lasts and where it will be administered. You might do well to inquire about testing procedures, and special measures or accommodations you might require. Finally, remember to ask fellow students if they are planning on taking the test at the same time.

Who writes the questions?

Ideally, the faculty member under whom you completed the relevant area of study or class will write each of the questions for your comprehensive exams. However, in cases where that faculty member is unavailable, the examining committee will make every effort to provide a comparable question.

How will the exams be graded?

Two professors grade each examination. Each of the three questions are graded independently so it is possible that a student might pass some questions and not pass others. Each professor is asked to rate the answer "pass," "high pass," or "not passing." When both professors agree that an answer is passing or not passing, then their judgment is considered final. When the two professors disagree whether or not the answer is satisfactory, then the answer is submitted to a third professor who will make the final judgment.

What if I fail a comprehensive exam question?

The first thing to consider here is that if you have passed all your courses with a grade of "B" or better, and if you have taken the examination preparation process seriously, you should have no problem passing the comprehensive examinations. Our Department's comprehensive "passing rate" is outstanding. Moreover, if you don't pass on your first attempt you will be provided another opportunity to pass after a brief period of review and substantial feedback regarding the reasons for not passing. Take this opportunity to meet with your advisor, carefully strengthen the areas in need of work, and outline potential answers.

How should I prepare for the examinations?

The first thing you should do is separate a set amount of time each day or week to study for the comprehensive examinations. Remember that controlling and minimizing distractions (television, radio, friends) is a good idea. If you have not done so already, obtain a copy of the sample questions and answers available at the Department's web site. Review the areas of study for the comps and the kinds of factual knowledge you will likely be asked to wield. Since the comprehensive examinations are foundational, the questions will seek answers that demonstrate your knowledge of core areas of the discipline. Meet with your advisor and inquire as to what general sources and areas of knowledge you should review. Prepare answer outlines for at least one possible question you might be asked in each of the three exam areas. Meeting with a study group is also a good idea. Remember that study groups work best when they are not too large and when

all group members are committed to serious preparation for each study session. A good technique is for each group member to review the material for a specific class and generate a set of comprehensive questions for all to answer. You can also collect questions asked in final exams and review your answers. Above all, study group members should commit to outlining potential answers to each question. As the date of the examination approaches you should practice writing answers by emulating examination conditions. Plan to write quietly for approximately one hour for each question.

Perhaps the best advice about how to prepare is to start studying at least a semester ahead of the time scheduled for the examinations. You should also note that comprehensive exams require that you go beyond mere description and explanation and make claims that integrate your understanding and knowledge of the subject matter.

How do I go about writing a good answer to an exam question?

After careful study, you should get a good night's sleep and show up to the examining area well ahead of time to obtain a comfortable location and mentally prepare. Remember that after the examination has begun, you will not be allowed to leave the examining area unless you have finished and turned in your answer. Bring a bottle of water and an energy bar so that you can stay hydrated and alert.

You need to write the question on the top of the page so the reader will understand which question you are answering. Failure to include the question for the reader may mean that the reader does not have appropriate context for evaluating your answer.

When you have received the question, pause and consider carefully everything the question asks. List exactly what the question requires you to answer and proceed to construct a general outline of how you would structure an answer to the question. Outlining is not a waste of time; it serves as a pre-writing warm-up, and allows you to plan a writing strategy. Write with focus and clarity but write in your own words. Don't write to impress, write to clearly communicate your ideas. Don't feel you have to start writing at the beginning. Once you have a good outline you can start writing any part of the answer that you desire. Since you are writing an essay examination you should observe slavish adherence to your thesis. Examination questions often require consideration of various specific tasks. Be careful not to lose sight of the goal of the question in your desire to answer everything, or as you get engrossed in your writing.

Remember that you should not rush through a question, and that you should allow for conclusion, "wrap-up" and revision of your answer. The most common complaint by students is that of not having "enough time" to say everything they wanted to say. Consider that you don't have to say everything you know about a subject. You do have to provide specific enough answers to satisfy the question's requirements. Make sure you can first satisfy those requirements before you start embellishing a response. During the examination stay calm, pace yourself, and remember to think about who will be grading your answers. Who your audience is should be a basic consideration for a Rhetoric & Media Studies major. As such, be explicit in linking parts of your answer to

the specifics asked in the question. If you are running out of time, consider outlining the rest of the question. Above all, don't panic.

If you do not understand a question, take a few minutes to consult with the examination proctor. If the proctor cannot provide a suitable explanation, write a note to the grader that explains how you understand the question and under what assumptions you will provide a response.