

Hey, It's Your A: A Guide to the A-exam

The A-exam is taken after the completion of required course work and before the start of the seventh term in residence. Because it is a Graduate School requirement (unlike the Q-exam), students who do not take the A-exam before the seventh term are required to petition the Graduate School for a waiver of the deadline.

The A stands for “Advance to Candidacy,” a faintly musty wording meant to identify the transition between formal coursework and the writing of a dissertation, which makes one formally a candidate for the PhD. But the precise form and function of the exam grow out of collaboration between you and your committee--in keeping with our long-standing encouragement of autonomy and flexibility in a student’s course of study. The extremely general terms of the Procedural Guide, which students occasionally find frustrating, reflect this emphasis.

PURPOSE:

According to the Guide, the exam **serves the two functions of consolidating the student’s knowledge in major and minor fields and preparing her or him to write a dissertation.** The relative importance of these two functions may vary widely among different exams. Some committees may feel that they mesh rather easily; others may feel that preparation for writing a dissertation requires a narrower focus than emphasis on the mastery of fields. In either case, completion of the exam should not feel like an occasion to start anew after clearing a hurdle. Ideally it will feel like a springboard to newly energetic and focused engagement with a potential dissertation topic. At the same time, don’t forget that the exam also solidifies knowledge that will be essential to teaching, particularly period and genre courses that form a large portion of most undergraduate curricula. Too narrow a focus can undermine this value of the exam.

SCHEDULING:

Formal planning for the exam typically begins as soon as course work is completed. You should meet with your entire committee at this juncture, in order to discuss preliminary ideas for topics, as well as time lines and logistics of the exam. You should schedule the oral component well in advance; it can be difficult finding a time that works for everyone, particularly if you wish to take the exam outside of regular term time. You also need to know well in advance if a committee member will be on leave. Grad School regulations stipulate that the Chair must be physically present at the oral. Although one can petition for an exception to this rule, it’s easiest to try to plan around the Chair’s absence (assuming this will not unduly postpone the exam). If other members of the committee will be away, you have two options: an absent member may participate by phone, or you can arrange to have any faculty member of the graduate field of English attend as proxy in his or her place.

FORMAT:

The basic template of the exam is fairly straightforward. It consists of two stages, a written and an oral. The written portion consists of three separate papers, each shaped in discussion with a particular member of the committee. The word “papers” allows for

writing that does not follow the traditional essay form, such as an annotated bibliography of scholarship on a particular topic, or even the design of a course syllabus and reserve list covering a topic within the student's main interests. Each paper involves the construction of a substantial reading list.

The Procedural Guide stipulates that at least two of these writings “entail broad surveys of and engagements with issues in the major and minor fields,” but again this emphasis may be adjusted to fit the needs and interests of the student. Some faculty stress the value of a surveys as distillations of reading, even though the occasions may not lend themselves to stylistic panache; others stress that they “do not want a survey,” and emphasize instead the development of a critical and/or theoretical position and voice. You may hear different emphases from different committee members, and they may not always be explicit. In any case, remember that the planning of the exam should be a collaboration; be forthright about what you think would best serve your interests and preparation at this juncture of your career.

Whatever the balance, as a rule students should try to confine each of the essays to the range of 4,000 words, or about 15 pages. Some faculty encourage a student to write one paper of substantially longer length, which might represent an early draft of a dissertation chapter or simply a fuller engagement with, as one faculty member put it, “major texts, issues, articulations” in a student's primary field of interest. There is a strong consensus among faculty, however, that this should be an exception to the rule of relative brevity. Students who lapse into writing 30- and 40-page responses to each of the three questions not only take exorbitant amounts of time on the exam, but lose sight of its instrumental character. These papers are not expected to be works of art, or even seminar papers. They are brisk efforts at synthesis of a range of reading or preliminary rehearsals of a critical argument, and ideally both of these things. In the first case, brevity is an incitement to economy; in the second, it should encourage a productive open-endedness that stimulates further development. A firm sense of closure may actually be self-defeating. What comes after the QED? A question that can be adequately answered in 15 pages is too narrow in scope to be productive.

The amount of time to be expended on the actual writing of the essays should be specified in advance by the committee. Many faculty stipulate that a student devote to no more than a day or two to writing each paper; others may encourage longer writing periods.

TOPICS:

The greatest challenge for students and their committees naturally falls in defining the goals and questions of the individual papers, as well as the relations among them. There are a number of models. One, relatively traditional, mimics the familiar Venn diagram of set theory, in which three circles of interest overlap in a narrower space in which a dissertation topic might be located. A student might choose to focus, for example, on a particular historical period, a particular genre, and a particular critical problem. For example, a student might set one topic on Romantic literature, one on the novel, and one on shame—the convergence of which would include, for starters, novels

by Radcliffe, Edgeworth, and Austen, which in turn might form the point of departure for reflection on a dissertation. One might structure the exam in terms of a theoretical focus, a historical focus, and a close reading of a body of major work (informed by theoretical and historical interests): for example, psychoanalysis, modernism, the poetry of T.S. Eliot. One might cast the three papers in terms of a critical tradition (the Frankfurt school, deconstruction, etc.), the works of a particular theorist, and a particular body of literary or cultural forms central to the critical reflection that most interests the student. Or one might frame the exam in terms of a broad question about the thesis field, an early formulation of a thesis topic, and a theoretical topic (e.g. the intersections of Marxism and psychoanalysis). As noted earlier, one of these papers might take the form of an annotated bibliography or a course syllabus and reading list. Faculty frequently urge that you also think of yourself as writing three different *kinds* of paper: a close reading of one or two texts, a synthetic overview, an historical account of a career or intellectual development, an annotated bibliography, and so forth.

SAMPLE EXAMS:

A Question 1 *Gossip and Lyric Poetry: How useful is the category of “gossip” in discussing poetry? Answer with reference to Frank O’Hara.*

Question 2 *Modernist Poetry and the Archive: The archive--both as a concept and as embodied in modernist archival institutions and processes--inflects the subject matter, form, rhetoric, and imagery of a number of the most significant poems of the first half of the twentieth century. What is the relationship between this poetry and the archive? Why does an archival emphasis emerge during the modernist period, and what can a focus on it tell us about modern poetry?*

Question 3 *American Poetry, 1945-1975: Devise a reading list for an undergraduate survey course in American poetry of the postwar period. What narrative does this reading list convey, and why?*

B Question 1: *How does the gender of the “speaking body” rhetorically influence authority in The Spectator (1711-1714) and The Female Spectator (1744-1746)?*

Question 2: *With its self-conscious exploration of language, how does A Sentimental Journey complicate the standard mid- to late-eighteenth-century sentimental “novel of gesture”? How can we read the readings of excess, affected or “natural”? Why is it important – or wholly unimportant – to reconcile the tension between sensibility and the comic?*

Question 3: *How does “camp” apply to eighteenth-century British literature, and why might the paradigm of a camp affect, camp reception, and camp sensibility be valuable to eighteenth-century studies? How does it stretch and/or enhance standard literary readings of eighteenth-century genres?*

C Question 1 *Touching Woolf Touching Me: What can art tell us about intimacy, or vice versa?*

Question 2 *Risking the Self, Redescribing the Social: How can Freud and Foucault help theorize resistance?*

Question 3 *Allegories of the Sublime: What does modernism tell us about the relationship between aesthetics and politics?*

D. **Question 1** *How does miscegenation matter in eighteenth-century British literature? How in particular is it connected to representations of money and figurations of the body?*

Question 2 *How do nineteenth-century American gothic narratives by women treat bodies of mixed race?*

Question 3 *How do constructions of race and class inform Victorian representations of slavery and the American Civil War?*

E. **Question 1** *D.H. Lawrence's misogyny, homophobia, and homoerotic worship of phallic power are well documented. Since many theorists have argued that this same cluster is in some sense constitutive of the fascist unconscious, how might theories of fascism and its erotics help one interrogate Lawrence's own peculiar religion of masculinity as it is demonstrated in his essays and "leadership novels" such as Aaron's Rod?*

Question 2 *Did something really change on or about December 1910? Or was it December 1st 1899? Orr 1906? 1914? 1857? 1890? No doubt we'll get a different modernism depending on the date we choose for the "radical break: with the past that inaugurates the modernist period. Choose 3 to 5 literary breaks and discuss the narratives of modernism they produce.*

Question 3 *How do theories of encyclopedic narrative help in reading Ulysses, The Man Without Qualities, and Gravity's Rainbow? Do such genre classifications as Modern Epic (Morretti) or menippean satire (Bakhtin) contribute to this project? In what ways do all these categories enable or disable emphasis on the paranoia and other quasi-psychotic symptoms that these novels seem to display?*

F. **Question 1:** *How do we read Paradise Lost within the epic tradition?*

Question 2: *How does allusion work?*

Question 3: *To what literary and conceptual ends are representations of evil/Satan put in Renaissance literature?*

These are offered merely as a range of possibilities. As you can see, the particular questions may vary a great deal in scope, and the ensemble may bring together widely different bodies of material. Note that the relations among the papers may be adjusted to very different levels of confidence and focus when it comes to prospective dissertation topics. A student who knows she wants to write a dissertation on sovereignty in Shakespeare can orchestrate her papers accordingly, with an eye mainly to developing a thicker descriptive and analytic frame for the topic, with (say) one paper reviewing contemporary theories of sovereignty, another on the role of the structure in other Renaissance writers, and a third on a particular set of Shakespeare's plays. A student less assuredly focused might use the A-exam as an occasion to particularize his interests. Someone who wants to write about modernist fiction, say, but isn't confident beyond that, might be encouraged to try out two or three broad thematics or critical problems in relation to a particular cluster of writers, and then approach the oral portion of the exam as an occasion to consider which lines of argument seem most productive.

Whatever the structure, you should be mindful of interrelations among the three paper topics, from the first formulation of questions through the actual writing. The exam will be most productive if the papers are mutually illuminating. This is most likely if the committee meets in advance of the exam proper to finalize the three paper topics. In any case it's important to stay in communication with your entire committee throughout the planning of the exam. Be sure that all of your committee members have all three of your questions in advance.

THE ORAL:

The oral exam should take place within two weeks of submitting the three papers to the committee. It typically runs from 90 minutes to two hours in length. The conversation should be an occasion to clarify and develop particulars of the three papers and to anticipate potential dissertation topics. In the most successful exams this will feel like a fairly seamless transition. “Why did you focus on novelists A and B to think about representations of social class? Why not novelists C and D? Would similar dynamics characterize the work of C and D? What does that tell us more generally about class and the novel as a form?” And so on. Remember, you’re not obliged to come away from the exam with a firm dissertation idea. But a central goal of the whole process is to develop a sharper and more confident focus to your interests, which will be anchored in a clearer understanding of the various fields from which they draw their significance.

PAPERWORK:

Two crucial forms (both available on the Graduate School web page): one to schedule the exam, the second to confirm that you have passed it. Don’t forget to have your committee sign these and forward them to the DGS. The completion form earns you an MA degree.