

Comprehensive BA Oral Exam in American Literature: Guidelines

For whom?

If you are an English major, you have the option to do the comprehensive exam as part of module 8.

Core Objectives

Students should demonstrate:

- Breadth: knowledge across major periods of American literature
- Depth: close reading of selected primary texts
- Comparative ability: connections across genres, authors, historical contexts
- Critical literacy: use of literary concepts
- Oral articulation: structured academic discussion

Corpus Requirements

You will build a self-selected reading list from the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (10th shorter edition) and primary texts of your own choosing (in consultation with the supervisor).

You must select 20 texts total, including:

- 2 full novels, 1 play, 7 shorter fictions, 5 non-fictional texts, and 5 poems
- At least 3 pre-1900 texts
- No more than 2 texts by the same author
- At least 3 texts by a historically underrepresented voice (e.g. Indigenous, Black, women author)

Procedure

Contact your primary examiner early for a first appointment. You should prepare a preliminary list of primary sources and an indication of the kind of topics you wish to explore ahead of this meeting. You will work with your primary examiner to compile the final list.

Submit your final list at least 3 weeks before the scheduled exam date. The list must include:

- Full bibliographic address of all sources (including original publication date)
- 2-3 key themes per text

Structure of the Oral Exam (60 minutes)

- Opening presentation (10 minutes)
- Guided discussion (15 minutes)
- Comparative/thematic question (15 minutes)
- Close reading prompt (20 minutes)

Evaluation Criteria

- Knowledge and coverage (15%)
 - Familiarity with texts and contexts
 - Accuracy of references
- Argumentation (20%)
 - Coherence, structure, responsiveness
 - Ability to defend claims
- Analytical depth (25%)
 - Quality of close reading
 - Ability to move beyond summary
- Comparison (25%)
 - Connections across periods and genres
 - Conceptual clarity
- Oral Communication (15%)
 - Academic register
 - Clarity, fluency