

Sample Questions for BA Capstone Experience Oral Exams in Literature (Early Modern English Literature, Modern English Literature, American Literature)
May 2026

The following questions are sample questions of the kind likely to be asked during the Capstone Experience BA Oral Exam in English or American Literature. They are representative of the range of knowledge we want you to show during the exam: thorough understanding of the chosen primary works, with awareness of genre and socio-cultural context.

You are not obliged to include the literary works on which the sample questions are based in your list of titles chosen for the exam. Please consult the Reading Lists for further information. English literature: <https://www.unifr.ch/english/en/studies/timetables/>

American Literature (Prof. Boyden)

The reading list in American literature is organized by genre first and by chronology second. Representative questions will address key American topics, such as race, identity, war, exploration, freedom, self-determination, gender, and their manifestations in the different literary genres. Here are some examples:

1. Novel: Give two examples of gothic elements in Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*. How do such gothic elements impinge on Brown's interest in questions of publicity, republicanism, and virtue?
2. Drama: In *Trifles*, Susan Glaspell uses several expressionist literary techniques. Can you name one of them and discuss how this device contributes to the play's feminist themes?
3. Poetry: Can you identify two Imagist elements in Ezra Pound's *Cantos* as well as two elements that do not conform to this aesthetic doctrine. Discuss in relation to the development of Pound's style and artistic project.
4. Comparison: Both formally and thematically, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* is strongly indebted to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. But there are also marked differences between both poems. Discuss.

Early Modern English Literature (Prof. Schindler)

The Sixteenth and the Early Seventeenth Century

1. John Donne's "The Flea" is often considered a typical example of metaphysical poetry. What is metaphysical poetry about, and can you show examples of typical metaphysical traits in "The Flea"?
2. William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* is not least a play about perception and misperception. What role does misperception play in the plot? Is misperception simply a sensory problem, or is there also a psychological dimension to it?
3. Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is a play deeply embedded in the culture of the Reformation period. Explain how the play's main themes relate to that period.

4. Is Shakespeare's sonnet 20 addressed to a man or to a woman? What exactly does the poem say about the addressee's gender?

The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century

1. In what verse form is John Milton's *Paradise Lost* written? Why was this a controversial choice?
2. Would you consider Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko: The Royal Slave* a text that advocates for the abolition of slavery? Explain why (or why not, respectively).
3. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is a text with a strong allegorical dimension. Can you name two examples of Swift's allegorical representation of contemporary events, persons, or institutions?
4. Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* is usually considered a very light-hearted play. However, can you also think of darker, ethically and socially more problematic aspects of the play?

Modern English Literature (Prof. Straub)

The Romantic Period

1. Please provide a first formal assessment of John Keats' poem "The Eve of St. Agnes". What kind of poem is it? Why does its setting matter?
2. William Wordsworth's "The Simplicon Pass" is just one of several Romantic works dealing with the Alps. Why were the Alps so attractive for Romantic writers? How can we relate Wordsworth's poem to broader Romantic interests and themes?
3. Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* develops a particular stance towards human procreation. Explain why.
4. In which regard does *Frankenstein* tie in with broader Romantic inclinations (choice of themes and conflicts, aesthetic/stylistic aspects)?

The Victorian Age

1. Can you give some examples of how Browning uses genre and poetic techniques to create the character of the speaker in *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria's Lover*? Are there identifiable techniques of voice, tone, imagery, and structure?
2. In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, science plays into various strands of the plot. Please give an example of a character or a conflict, where this is the case, and explain how Eliot situates scientific endeavour in her novel.
3. In Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market", transgression is writ large. Explain why.
4. What are the forces that affect human lives in Thomas Hardy's novels (e.g., *Jude the Obscure*)? Explain by providing an example from the novel.
5. Explain the concept of literary realism as it shaped many Victorian novels.

Late Victorian Age & Edwardian Literature

1. How does Stevenson explore the theme of duality in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and how does this reflect the social, scientific, and moral concerns of Stevenson's day?
2. How do the women in *An Ideal Husband* challenge or reinforce societal expectations?
3. Please comment on the role of time in Hardy's poem "A Wife in London".

Modernism

1. How does Woolf's use of stream-of-consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway* reflect the novel's themes? (could offer prompts on time, memory, identity, isolation of modern life, etc)
2. How does *The Garden Party* explore the theme of social class and the gap between privilege and poverty?
3. What features of these texts strike you as particularly modernist?

The Twentieth Century and After

1. How is technology implemented in the depiction of surveillance in George Orwell's *1984*?
2. Please relate the title of W. H. Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" to the poem's key concern.
3. In Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, what is the impact of space on character development?
4. In discussions of Alice Munro's short stories, the notion of the "Ontario Gothic" is sometimes brought up. Do you have an idea of what could be seen as "Gothic" in these stories?