

**Sample Questions for BA Capstone Experience Oral Exams in Literature (Early Modern English Literature, Modern English Literature, American Literature)
February 2025**

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. Austenfeld)

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. “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every single one of its members” (Ralph Waldo Emerson). How do Mark Twain, Faulkner, Hemingway, or Wright problematize “manhood”?
2. How do the essayistic texts by Jefferson, Thoreau, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Booker T. Washington, and James Baldwin “talk to each other”? What themes do they share in common, and how do they articulate their differences?
3. Give a few examples of how American poets write about the landscape, flora, and fauna of the United States. What do they stress in these descriptions? Is there such a thing as a shared American appreciation or interpretation of nature?
4. Trace religious discourse through exemplary texts from different centuries (your choice). For example, how do Hawthorne, Ellison, Martin Luther King or Phyllis Wheatley evoke American versions of Christianity?
5. In which way can the short story be called “the American genre”? Refer to its genesis and history, its contexts, and its forms of address.
6. What is specific about American women’s writing in a world so often defined as masculine? Use any genre to make your argument.
7. How do American literary texts reflect the notion that there is no such thing as “an American” but that, instead, varieties of Americans define themselves in writing?
8. Why is the “I” nearly omnipresent in American literary texts?
9. How do texts evoke regional identities and particulars? Give specific examples concerning the South, the West, or another region of your choice.
10. Why did stage drama develop so late in the history of American literature? And when it finally developed, why did it so strongly focus on “the American family”?

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 Simlons 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?