

COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION SAMPLE QUESTIONS

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

1. Compare and contrast the Present-Day English inflectional system to that of Old English. Make sure your discussion covers the lexical categories of nouns, verbs, and adjectives. How did Present-Day English end up having only eight inflectional morphemes?
2. Describe and discuss the similarities and differences of the following language-teaching methods: The Grammar-Translation Method, The Direct Method, The Audio-Lingual Method, and Desuggestopedia. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each? How would you rank the correspondence of these four methods to the (recently) popular Communicative Language Teaching approach? Explain your ranking.

EARLY AND MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

1. Define the Anglo-Saxon concept of *comitatus* and then compare and contrast it to the later code of *chivalry* (*courtesy*). Then using at least two exemplary Early English works and two exemplary Middle English works, show how these concepts are delineated within them. Reach significant conclusions about the larger cultural shifts indicated by the specific shifts in the codes of conduct.
2. What are the salient characteristics of “romance” as a medieval mode of writing? Discuss these in relation to Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* and at least two other medieval works, suggesting how the works both fit and exceed this label, and then reflect on the value of this term as a literary-historical category.

WORLD LITERATURE: EMPHASIS IN THE CLASSICAL TRADITION

1. Helene Foley argues that

[c]lassical literature, far more explicitly than much later Western literature until the nineteenth century, virtually begs us to ask questions about gender. . . . Most Greek comedies and tragedies commonly taught put gender conflict at the heart of the plot and allow their female characters to challenge male authority and assumptions: Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, Sophocles’ *Antigone*, Euripides’ *Medea* and *Bacchae*, Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, to name a few.

While you may disagree with Foley’s assertion about the *prevalence* of gender conflict at the heart of classical (and ancient) works, certainly the works that she cites feature clashes between men and women. Using Foley’s statement as a point of departure and discussing at least three works in some detail, make an argument about how women in the works of ancient and classical writers challenge traditional male roles and status. What do the challenges of women in these works say about the stability or instability of male values? In addressing the question, you may wish to consider whether the works specifically politicize gender conflict or use the collision between male and female characters as symbols of more universalized conflicts. (You may use

titles from among those cited by Foley, but you need not restrict yourself to the drama; there are also rich examples from the epics.)

2. Define and characterize the chorus in a Greek tragedy: How does it function as a character in the drama? What are some of the jobs that it does and/or ideas that it represents? In your response, refer to *at least* three Greek tragedies (you may use more). The three must be from the works of no fewer than two authors (for example, one tragedy from one author, two from another), or you may select three tragedies from three respective authors. Reach significant conclusions about how various dramatists use the Chorus for their own dramatic and thematic purposes.

WORLD LITERATURE: EMPHASIS IN WORLD LITERATURE IN ENGLISH (POSTCOLONIAL)

1. Stephen Slemon argues that a characteristic method of postcolonial studies is to “read for resistance.” Physical resistance to colonialism is sometimes literally dramatized, some works practice a cultural resistance to imperial ideology, and some texts resist literary and generic expectations. Begin your response with a careful definition of *resistance*, and then discuss its presence and use in at least three literary works.

2. Discuss issues of colonialism and patriarchy in at least three works of world literature. What is the position of women in traditional or pre-colonial culture, and what is their position under colonialism and post-independence government? To what extent do the literary texts reveal the interests of women to be aligned with the interests of anti-colonial nationalism, and to what extent are those interests at odds with each other?

THEORY AND PRACTICE OF COMPOSITION AND RHETORIC

1. Explain the major tenets of Aristotelian rhetoric and make an argument about how they are still relevant today. Choose a 20th-/21st-century rhetorical theorist and discuss either how his or her work has been specifically influenced by Aristotle and/or how it specifically responds to Aristotle.

2. Offer some reasons why modern composition theory is viewed by most scholars in this field as “fragmented.” Then offer some suggestions of your own that you feel would restore some sense of “cohesion” to the field of composition studies. Ground your discussion in the work of at least three theorists of composition.

TECHNICAL AND PROFESSIONAL WRITING

1. Sometimes it is useful to see key issues in a discipline as involving tension between opposites. Write a unified essay in which you define and distinguish the terms in *five* of the following pairs. Ground your discussion in relevant scholarship.

writer-based vs. reader-based prose
task-oriented vs. system-oriented documentation
writing process vs. written product
quantitative vs. qualitative approach

paper vs. online documentation
verbal vs. nominal style
academic vs. nonacademic writing
persuasive vs. expository writing

2. People often think that theory and practice have nothing to do with each other, especially when they think of studying writing in professional or nonacademic settings. Defend or criticize the claim that theory and practice are totally separate by explaining the relationship between the two and offering examples taken from research, theory, and/or experience to support your argument.

RENAISSANCE AND 17TH-CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE

1. Make an argument about how the writers of Renaissance and 17th-century Britain inherited, borrowed from, adapted, and/or manipulated materials (plots, characters, mythology, and imagery, for example) from the classical past for their own thematic and formal purposes and for their own audiences. In your response, discuss at least three works from at least two genres.

2. Discuss characteristics of Renaissance tragedy by examining a play by Christopher Marlowe, a play by William Shakespeare, and a play by a later Renaissance playwright such as Webster. How does each writer implicitly or explicitly define tragedy as a genre? How does each writer handle features like plot and characterization? Discuss not only differences between the tragic writers but also significant common values and techniques.

RESTORATION AND 18TH-CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE

1. In the long 18th-century, the lyric poem, celebrated by Renaissance writers and then rehabilitated by the Romantics, tended to recede into the background as poets used verse for rhetorical purposes. Treating in detail at least three representative poems from the age, discuss the use of poetry as rhetoric: How do the poets use their verse for political, social, satirical, and/or philosophical purposes? What cultural values or pressures inform this conception and use of verse? What particular challenges face the poets who use their verse for rhetorical purposes, and how do they negotiate these challenges? Finally, how effectively do they use their poetry as a rhetorical vehicle (try to make an argument here rather than merely speculate)?

2. Consider how literature of the 18th century responds to, reflects, or defines an emerging middle-class ethos. In your discussion, cite at least three works from at least two different genres.

AMERICAN LITERATURE BEFORE 1800

1. Drawing upon the work of at least three early American writers, discuss the influence of European ideas, habits of thought, and, as applicable, literary genres in American literature before 1800. At what point, if one can be located, does a distinctly American literature emerge that reflects a distinctly American identity?

2. Considering at least three early American authors and drawing upon at least two genres of literature, test the following claim made by historian Christopher Hill: Puritanism provoked many radical social and political changes; however, a revolution in gender relations was not one of them. Rather, despite the fact that Puritanism pushed for the individual to have the liberty to worship God as he saw fit, Puritans were still so patriarchal that they could not—and did not—even imagine a world in which women would enjoy greater access to this or any of the other new rights engendered by Puritan thought.

19TH-CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE

1. Nature is a favorite subject of poets and novelists, although its significance alters over the course of the 19th century in Britain. Considering one poet and one novelist from the Romantic era and one poet and one novelist from the Victorian era, discuss the importance and representation of nature in their works. Make an argument about the shifting attitudes toward and representations of nature.

2. Social criticism was a predominant concern in 19th-century British fiction and poetry. Authors of this time had much to say about the tumultuous changes taking place in their growing society in such areas as industrialization, religion, education, politics, and the domestic sphere. Choose three authors (poets and/or fiction writers) and analyze their views and treatment of at least two prominent social issues common to all three. At least one author should be a Romantic, at least one a Victorian. As you are able, make an argument about the way in which social criticism *develops* from the Romantics to the Victorians.

19TH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

1. American Realism and its later development in Naturalism as literary movements span the approximate years 1860 to 1914. Select three of the following 19th-century American authors writing during this time and discuss them as realists and/or naturalists:

Charles Chestnutt
Stephen Crane
Theodore Dreiser
Henry James
Sarah Orne Jewett
Mark Twain

In what way(s) is their work exemplary of the literary movement(s)? In what way(s) does their work diverge from the tenets of realism/naturalism, seem not to fit the criteria, or represent countercurrents to the movement(s)? Be as specific as possible in your discussion of the texts and the ways in which they exemplify your definition(s) of *Realism* and/or *Naturalism*.

2. The greatest watershed in American history, many argue, is the Civil War. Although, oddly, some mid-century writers (such as Hawthorne, who died toward the closing of the war) wrote comparatively little on the war, most were compelled to confront this Behemoth of our national history. Choosing representatively from among at least three 19th-century American writers, discuss both the political and literary aspects of writings about the issues leading up to the Civil War and/or about the war itself. Choose writers from at least two genres.

20TH-/21ST-CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE

1. Explore and define the unique nature of British Modernism in terms of its most important characteristics: innovative technique, vision of the self, and themes of how personal identity must struggle to remain coherent/whole under tremendous philosophical, political, cultural,

spiritual, and psychological pressures/changes. Use at least three works from at least two different genres to support your argument.

2. Beginning with a brief description of Modernist poetry in Britain, give a broad overview of subsequent movements, tendencies, and groups characterizing “British” poetry of the rest of the 20th century. Your overview should comprise concise chronological discussions, which should be given texture and support through references to specific poets and poems.

20TH-/21ST-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

1. American citizens are promised “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” In a well-developed essay, show how modern and contemporary American fiction exposes the hypocrisy and/or subverts the meaning of this statement in order to critique the idea of “the American dream.” In your response, discuss at least three representative works of 20th- (and/or 21st-) century fiction.

2. Test the thesis that reading a piece of short fiction by a writer can help us better read a novel by the same author: Select a short story *and* a novel by a 20th-/21st-century American writer on your reading list who works in both genres and explain how the story can serve as a guide for reading the novel in terms of such things as (though not limited to or necessarily including all of) theme, style, and literary techniques. If time permits, close with a discussion of which genre—the short story or the novel—better serves to present what you see as the essence of the author that you have chosen for discussion. (Suggestions: Faulkner, Hemingway, O’Connor.)