

MFA COMPREHENSIVE EXAM GUIDELINES FOR 2008-2011

The comprehensive exam requires you to write essay answers in response to three questions—two on a major genre and one on a minor genre. On the day of your exam, you'll spend 2-1/2 hours in the morning on the major-genre essays, and 1 hour in the afternoon on the minor-genre essay.

Additional points about the exam:

- Poetry must be one of the genres—i.e. a Fiction (major genre)/Creative Nonfiction (minor genre) pairing would not be acceptable, while a Creative Nonfiction (major genre)/Poetry (minor genre) pairing would be fine.
- A semester before you intend to take the exam, you must put on file with the department's Graduate Director and Creative Writing Director the names of those authors and works you intend to discuss. No overlaps of authors and works will be allowed. See the sample list of authors and works at the end of this exam description.
- The Creative Writing faculty assumes you will determine your list in consultation with your advisor.
- You will not be allowed to bring any notes, drafts, or texts into the exam, just a copy of the exam itself and a copy of your list of authors and works.

The 2008-2011 exam questions are listed below. It's up to you to choose the questions you'll be tested on, the authors and works to which the essays will refer, and to do the preparation beforehand that will allow you to lend your answers the depth and scope they deserve. Under some circumstances, it would make perfect sense to form study groups around one or more questions that you and others have chosen in common.

FICTION EXAM

If fiction is your minor genre, select one from #1-8 only. If fiction is your major genre, select one from that group and make #9 your second answer. (In the latter case, your two essays should not in any significant way overlap each other. You may not discuss the same writer in more than one essay.)

Instructions for Questions #1-8

Listed below are eight of the primary elements of fiction. Choose one of these elements, then write an essay in which you first *define* the element and then *discuss* and *analyze* the element as it functions in *a work* (short story or novel) by *two contemporary writers of some stature** (i.e. one work by each of the two writers). Select as examples those works you feel best exemplify the use of the element of fiction you are writing about. These elements, of course, always operate in concert in a piece. You must, therefore, artificially separate them in a way that will allow for most insights. Your essay should clearly demonstrate your understanding of the element of fiction and the works of fiction you are discussing.

* By "contemporary" we mean a writer who has written during your lifetime, or during the past 30 years. By "some stature" we mean recognized for book-length collections that have achieved a wide following by peers and critics.

1. Point-of-view.
 2. Characterization.
 3. Style.
 4. Structure (you will probably want to include but distinguish between structure and such related elements as pacing, plot, and storyline).
 5. Setting/Place.
 6. Tone (an aspect of voice, related to but distinguished from mood and/or atmosphere).
 7. Imagery.
 8. Thematic development.
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(over)

Additional Question for Those with Fiction as a Major Genre

9. Taking the occasion of one source below as your inspiration, imitate one of the narrative passages as you imagine a contemporary fiction writer of some stature might do it, and then write an essay that analyzes (a) what key elements of the original occasion you are focusing on, and (b) what key elements of the contemporary writer's style provide the rationale for your imitation. The examining committee will assume you're familiar with the entire story from which the passage is excerpted.

A Clean, Well-Lighted Place [excerpt from the beginning of the story]

It was late and every one had left the café except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light. In the day time the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference. The two waiters inside the café knew that the old man was a little drunk, and while he was a good client they knew that if he became too drunk he would leave without paying, so they kept watch on him.

"Last week he tried to commit suicide," one waiter said.

"Why?"

"He was in despair."

"What about?"

"Nothing."

"How do you know it was nothing?"

"He has plenty of money."

—Ernest Hemingway

A Rose for Emily [excerpt from the beginning of the story]

When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old manservant—a combined gardener and cook—had seen in at least ten years.

It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores. And now Miss Emily had gone to join the representatives of those august names where they lay in the cedar-bemused cemetery among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who fell at the battle of Jefferson.

—William Faulkner

CREATIVE NONFICTION EXAM

If creative nonfiction is your minor genre, select one from #1-7 only. If creative nonfiction is your major genre, select one from that group and make #8 your second answer. (In the latter case, your two essays should not in any significant way overlap each other. You may not discuss the same writer in more than one essay.)

Instructions for Questions #1-7

Listed below are seven of the primary elements of creative nonfiction. Choose one of these elements, then write an essay in which your first *define* the element and then *discuss* and *analyze* the element as it functions in *a work* (essay or book-length volume) by *two contemporary writers of some stature** (i.e. one work by each of the two writers). Select as examples those works you feel best exemplify the use of the element of creative nonfiction you are writing about. These elements, of course, always operate in concert in a piece. You must, therefore, artificially separate them in a way that will allow for most insights. Your essay should clearly demonstrate your understanding of the element of creative nonfiction and the works of creative nonfiction you are discussing.

<p>* By "contemporary" we mean a writer who has written during your lifetime, or during the past 30 years. By "some stature" we mean recognized for book-length collections that have achieved a wide following by peers and critics.</p>

1. Voice and/or the role of the "I" in the narrative.
 2. Characterization and/or the writer's responsibility to subjects.
 3. Style.
 4. Structure.
 5. Setting/Place.
 6. Research, Reporting, and/or "Immersion" in the subject.
 7. Thematic development.
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Additional Question for Those with Creative Nonfiction as a Major Genre

8. Taking the occasion of one source below as your inspiration, *and drawing from your own experience for the content*, imitate one of the narrative passages below as you imagine a contemporary creative nonfiction writer of some stature might do it, and then write an essay that analyzes (a) what key elements of the original occasion you are focusing on, and (b) what key elements of the contemporary writer's style provide the rationale for your imitation. The examining committee will assume you're familiar with the entire essay from which the passage is excerpted.

Ktaadn [excerpt from the middle of the essay]

In the morning, after whetting our appetite on some raw pork, a wafer of hard bread, and a dipper of condensed cloud or waterspout, we all together began to make our way up the falls, which I have described; this time choosing the right hand, or highest peak, which was not the one I had approached before. But soon my companions were lost to my sight behind the mountain ridge in my rear, which still seemed ever retreating before me, and I climbed alone over huge rocks, loosely poised, a mile or more, still edging toward the clouds; for though the day was clear elsewhere, the summit was concealed by mist. The mountain seemed a vast aggregation of loose rocks, as if some time it had rained rocks, and they lay as they fell on the mountain sides, nowhere fairly at rest, but leaning on each other, all rocking-stones, with cavities between, but scarcely any soil or smoother shelf. They were the raw materials of planet dropped from an unseen quarry, which the vast chemistry of nature would anon work up, or work down, into the smiling and verdant plains and valleys of earth. This was an undone extremity of the globe; as in lignite, we see coal in the process of formation.

—Henry David Thoreau

Ask Me No Questions [excerpt from the first paragraph of the essay]

Going over family photographs, which we spread out on her bed, she nodded and smiled eagerly, sitting up among her pillows like a macaw on its perch, in her plumage of black hair and rouge and eyebrow pencil and mascara. She recognized the faces—her husband with a mustache, her husband clean-shaven, her son in a World War I uniform, her nephews, her younger son in a sailor suit, my mother dressed as a Spanish dancer, my mother in a ball gown—but she was vague about the names. “My father,” she decided after studying an obituary photograph of Grandpa, clipped out of a newspaper. “Son,” “husband,” and “father” were all one to her. She knew who I was, right enough, and did not mix me up with my dead mother, but this was not very flattering, since it was usually the people she had loved that she could not keep apart, melting them into a single category—father-son-husband—like the Mystery of the Trinity. One relation whom she had quarreled with she picked out instantly, while I was still fumbling for the name. “That’s Gertrude!” she proclaimed victoriously. Then she made a face—the same face she made when the cook brought her something she did not like on her tray. I reminded her that she had made up with Gertrude years ago, but she shook her head. “Bad,” she said childishly. “Gertrude said bad things about me.”

—Mary McCarthy

POETRY EXAM

If poetry is your minor genre, select one from #1-8 only. If poetry is your major genre, select one from that group and make #9 your second answer. (In the latter case, your two essays should not in any significant way overlap each other. You may not discuss the same writer in more than one essay.)

Instructions for Questions #1-8

Listed below are eight of the primary elements of poetry. Choose one of these elements, then write an essay in which you first *define* the element and then *discuss* and *analyze* the element as it functions in a poetry collection by *two contemporary poets of some stature** (i.e. one book by each of the two poets). Select as examples those books you feel best exemplify the use of the element of poetry you are writing about. These elements, of course, always operate in concert in a piece and across an entire collection. You must, therefore, artificially separate them in a way that will allow for most insights. Your essay should clearly demonstrate your understanding of the element of poetry and the poems you are discussing.

* By "contemporary" we mean a poet who has written during your lifetime, or during the past 30 years. By "some stature" we mean recognized for book-length collections that have achieved a wide following by peers and critics.

1. Voice.
 2. Image and metaphor.
 3. Diction and syntax.
 4. Rhythm and music.
 5. Form and line.
 6. Modes (narrative, lyric, dramatic)
 7. Setting/Place.
 8. Thematic development.
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(over)

Additional Question for Those with Poetry as a Major Genre

9. Taking the occasion of one source below as your inspiration, imitate one of the poems as you imagine a contemporary poet of some stature might do it, and then write an essay that analyzes (a) what key elements of the original occasion you are focusing on, and (b) what key elements of the contemporary poet's style provide the rationale for your imitation.

#1745

The mob within the heart
Police cannot suppress
The riot given at the first
Is authorized as peace

Uncertified of scene
Or signified of sound
But growing like a hurricane
In a congenial ground

—Emily Dickinson

When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the
lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

—Walt Whitman

[sample fiction/poetry list]

**Ima Goode Writer
Comprehensive Exam Plan
List of Writers and Works**

Major genre: Fiction

Minor genre: Poetry

Fiction

Question #2: Characterization

Ford, Richard *"Communists"*
DeMarinis, Rick *Year of the Zinc Penny*

Question #9: Style Imitation and Rationale

Tallent, Elizabeth *"No One's a Mystery"*

Poetry

Question #1: Voice

Clifton, Lucille *The Terrible Stories*
Glück, Louise *Meadowlands*

[sample creative nonfiction/poetry list]

Ima Goode Writer
Comprehensive Exam in Creative Writing
List of Writers and Works

Major genre: Creative Nonfiction

Minor genre: Poetry

Creative Nonfiction

Question #4: Structure

Grealy, Lucy *"Mirrorings"*
Ondaatje, Michael *Running in the Family*

Question #8: Style Imitation and Rationale

Abbey, Edward *"Havasu"*

Poetry

Question #1: Voice

Clifton, Lucille *The Terrible Stories*
Glück, Louise *Meadowlands*

[sample poetry/fiction list]

**Ima Goode Writer
Comprehensive Exam Plan
List of Writers and Works**

Major genre: Poetry
Minor genre: Fiction

Poetry

Question #1: Voice

Clifton, Lucille *The Terrible Stories*
Glück, Louise *Meadowlands*

Question #9: Style Imitation and Rationale

McGrath, Campbell *American Noise*

Fiction

Question #2: Characterization

Ford, Richard "Communists"
DeMarinis, Rick "Medicine Man"