

The English Comprehensive Exam

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the purpose of the English Comp?

Contrary to popular belief, the English Comp is not designed to fill you with dread and anxiety. Rather, the exam is designed to give majors the opportunity to organize the many different courses they have taken into some kind of coherent whole. You have spent four years writing papers and reading literature in individual classes; now you must consider these courses together and identify both connections and differences among various genres and periods. What makes the nineteenth-century novel different from the twentieth-century novel? What characterizes medieval verse? How has the lyric poem shifted over the centuries? The Comp is your chance to organize a substantial body of knowledge and then show off what you know. Though students rarely believe us before the exam, the Comp is a significant and often triumphant moment in your senior year, when you realize that you have learned a great deal about literature in your time at Sewanee.

When do I take the exam?

The English Comp is usually scheduled on the first Saturday after Spring Break (though this date can change depending on Holy Week). The exam begins at 8:00am, and there is usually a table of breakfast-like snacks available at 7:30am. The exact location in Gailor will be announced ahead of time. If you are graduating at the end of Fall/Advent semester, please contact the Chair of English to arrange your comp date.

What should I bring to the exam?

You should bring your rested, well-fed self in comfortable clothes. You should also bring several pens or pencils, a watch, and **five blue books**. You will be given a copy of the exam, and you can take notes, write on, and refer to that, but only your responses written in the blue books will be graded. Please number your blue books according to the title page of the exam. You also might want to bring a snack and a drink that you can consume without undue noise (e.g. this is not the time for Doritos).

Please note: It is honestly rare to fail the exam, and you can retake it if you do (no one has been unable to graduate in the last decade at least because of the comp). You will be on your honor; we don't sit in the room watching you. However, if you *are* caught cheating, it would be an Honor Council case where your graduation would could come into question. Also, this is the capstone of your Sewanee career: do you want there to be a blemish on that forever?

What is the format of the exam?

The exam is divided into five parts:

Part I: Identification: In this section, you will be asked to define literary terms: You will need to define 5 out of about 25 choices. A definition and a specific example or context of the term is the basis of the grade. (10 minutes)

Part II: Quotation Explication: In this section, you will be offered 15 or more famous passages from literature, each identified by author and date. Here you are asked to produce a brief explication of the

passage by providing a close reading and putting the passage in the context of the entire work. (50 minutes)

Part III: Period Essays: In this section, you will be asked to write essays on five of the following periods or areas: (100 minutes; 20 minutes an essay. For each period, there will be two to three questions from which to choose. You should be sure you are prepared in at least five of these areas.

- *Medieval
- *Renaissance
- *Shakespeare
- *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century British Literature
- *Nineteenth Century British Literature
- *American Literature
- * American 20th and 21st century
- * British and non-American Anglophone 20th and 21st century

Part IV: Literary Comparisons: In this section, you will be asked to write an essay that covers two or more periods (e.g. comparing a nineteenth-century work to a twentieth-century work), or which compares work in English with a classical or early European work. (20 minutes)

Part V: Literary Analysis: In this section, you will be given a poem that you are unlikely to have encountered in any class. This poem is sometimes contemporary, sometimes not. You will be asked to write an essay analyzing the work. (50 minutes)

How long is the exam?

The exam is designed to take four hours. You will have, however, five hours to complete your work.

Can I get time-and-half or a quiet environment with an accommodation?

Yes! Please contact the chair prior to the exam, with the accommodation paperwork. If you would prefer a quiet room but do not have an accommodation, also contact the chair prior to the exam, and any additional space will be on a first-come, first-served basis.

How should I study for the exam?

Ideally, this is a question you should ask early in your senior year. First, you should make sure you have taken at least one class in five of the periods or areas covered in Part III of the exam (described above).

Students have different approaches to studying for the exam. Here are a few ways that students in the past have studied:

*Begin by organizing your class notes chronologically. You should then start to review your notes and any useful handouts you received in a given class. As you review, start a list of important literary terms that came up in the class. If time permits, you may want to copy over your notes by hand, especially for the early periods; writing by hand can aid memorization and help review, and this approach is usually better than typing, as it is easy to type without actually reading.

*Make flash cards of literary terms, names, and ideas to help with Part I. Many of these terms should be pulled from your class notes, and you may also want to obtain a handbook of literary terms. Recommended ones include *A Handbook to Literature*, by Harmon and Holman and *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, by Abrams and Harpham.

*You can help yourself write smoother answers in Parts II, III, and IV by having the important *details* in a literary work—the names of characters, the precise setting—at your fingertips. How much better to say “Wessex,” rather than “the rural area where Hardy sets his novels, or “Ahab” rather than “that one-legged sea captain in *Moby-Dick*.”

*Students often find that the introductions to Norton Anthologies offer useful overviews of literary periods and styles.

*Be sure you can identify which authors and which works belong to which literary period. It is hard to write on a nineteenth-century writer if you cannot identify one.

*Flip through the literature as you review your notes, reminding yourself of the works’ main characteristics. Note passages you discussed at length in class.

*Consider some of the central characteristics of particular periods and particular genres, and start to compare them. How does medieval poetry differ from Renaissance verse? What characterizes the nineteenth-century British novel? The American slave narrative? Romantic poetry?

*You may wish to form a study group with a small group of majors. Be aware that anxiety can breed anxiety, so stop meeting if you are only making each other nervous.

*The English Department reading list is another good guide, and you might also want to consult the sample comprehensive exam. Both are available on-line at <https://new.sewanee.edu/programs-of-study/english/resources/>

How is the exam created?

Each year, a different team of professors creates a new exam, with suggestions and input from all members of the department. We use materials that have been taught in recent semesters; the point of the exam is not to trip you up.

How is the exam graded?

The entire English Department has a role in grading the exam. Each section is read and graded by two professors; each professor assigns a separate grade, and these grades are averaged together. Professors do not necessarily grade within their period. Please do not ask which section a professor is grading; it usually changes every year.

Looking just at the final number grades (with no names), the department decides the cut off for distinction (usually only the top few exams), and the cut off for failures. We also determine the cut off for students writing an Honors Paper; if you are writing an Honors Paper, and your exam is below this cut off, you will need to switch your Honors Paper to an independent study.

How and when do I find out the results of the exam?

We grade the exam as quickly as we can. Results are usually available at 4pm on the Thursday after the exam. You will be able to pick up a letter with your name on it outside of the Chair's office. The letter will tell you whether you passed the exam, or whether you will have to retake part or all of the exam.

What if I fail the exam?

It is possible to fail a particular section of the exam, and it is also possible to fail the entire exam. If you fail a particular section, you will be asked to retake that section (with a different set of questions) sometime in April. If you fail the entire exam, you will have to take a new exam sometime in April.

Any other tips?

*Do not panic the first time you look over the exam. In a typical exam situation, if you did not know 50% of the material on the exam, you would fail. In the Comp, however, this is not the case. The exam covers all the classes we offer (though all classes are not covered in all sections), and despite your hard work and the many classes you have taken, you have still taken a subset of the classes we offer. Remind yourself of this fact as you read the exam for the first time, and concentrate your efforts on answering the questions that you know.

*Pace yourself. We offer guidelines on how much time each question should take, and you should follow these suggestions as closely as possible. Keep track of your time as you write. If you run out of time, quickly outline as much of the answer as you can. Remember that the times are geared for a four-hour exam, but you will have five hours to finish; thus, if you go over your time in a particular section, you should still have enough time. Since a common mistake is to spend too much time and write too much about the literary terms and quotations, which come first in the exam but carry few points, students sometimes find it a good strategy to write the exam in reverse order, beginning with Part V.

*Remember that in the quotation section (Part II), the quotations appear in chronological order.

*On Part II, first read through all the quotations quickly, and then decide which five passages to consider. If you don't know five with confidence, use what you know about the period, and be sure to write out a full comment based on what is there on the page in front of you.

*If you give no answer for a required question, you will receive zero points for that question. By contrast, a short answer might earn you 60% or more, so it is wise to write something for all the required questions.

*Pay attention to the number of essays you are writing. Every year, at least one person writes seven essays for Part III, for example, when only five are required. We can only give you credit for the first five, so do not spend time answering questions you do not need to answer.

*For Part I, you really need to have examples.

*For several days before the exam, work hard on getting eight hours of sleep a night. The exam requires recall and stamina, and both will be impaired if you have not slept.

*Pace your studying so that you will not feel the need to cram the night before; if you do, then whatever you studied last may be the only thing you remember on Saturday morning. Be sure you already know well examples and characteristics of particular genres in different periods, and then you can use the final

day(s) of preparation to work on small details (e.g., the names of characters in works you may discuss).
Knock off early in the evening, take in a movie, or just go to bed.

Good luck! Please let us know if you have any questions!