

## Taking the M.A. Oral Exam

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This guide aims at telling you what you need to know when taking your M.A. Oral Exam with me as your examiner. Firstly, I will provide you with some general information about the exam. Secondly, I am going to walk you through its specific proceedings, and lastly, you will find a sample reading list which will already give you an idea of what I expect from you in the exam.

### 1. General Facts

- The M.A. Oral Exam is **60 minutes** long. Each of your three topics (*more on that below*) will be discussed for roughly 20 minutes.
- You will receive 10 ETCS for successfully completing the exam (N.B. the Master's Thesis is worth 20 ECTS).

→ **Before** your exam can take place, you need to:

- Complete and submit your M.A. Thesis (*for further information, please consult the guide 'Writing your Master's Thesis'*)
  - According to your Prüfungsordnung, the oral exam needs to be taken within two months (plus a week or two of grace period) after submitting your M.A. Thesis.
  - If you want to take your exam sooner (e.g., because you want to start a job), let me know and we will set a date for your exam accordingly.
  - Bear in mind that there is no official procedure for registering for your oral exam. Together, we will agree on a date which works for both of us, and that's it.
- Receive a 'Prüfungsprotokoll' which you have to bring to your oral exam
  - You will receive the 'Prüfungsprotokoll' when you hand in the hard copies of your M.A. Thesis at the Prüfungsamt (= PA).
  - If you do not submit the hard copies of your thesis in person but if you choose to send them in via EMAIL, make sure to ask the PA for a copy of the protocol via mail.
  - Note that you do not have to fill out the 'Prüfungsprotokoll' yourself. We will do this together on the day of your oral exam.

### 2. Proceedings of the Oral Exam

- As the supervisor of your M.A. Thesis, I will also be the one to conduct your oral exam.
- The oral exam will **not** be about (the topic of) your M.A. Thesis. Instead, we will engage in a **critical discussion of three selected aspects of American literature and culture**.
- The oral exam will cover **three broad topics** that you have to prepare.
- Note that we will not only talk about your topics in an abstract fashion. I will bring at least one or two "texts" in the broad sense (a short poem or an image) or excerpts (from a novel, a play, a longer poem, a film, etc.) to the exam to discuss them with you.

## → Choosing the topics for your oral exam

### PO 2015

- Note that one topic needs to cover the period **before** the Civil War, and one needs to cover the period **after** the Civil War. For the third topic, you can choose freely.
- Furthermore, one topic needs to focus on **Literary Studies**, and the other on **Cultural Studies**. The distinction here is a purely formal one: Literary Studies focuses on literature in the narrower sense: fiction, poetry and plays; Cultural Studies focuses on literature in the broader sense (travelogues, sermons, philosophical writing, etc.) and other media (TV shows, films, photography, paintings, etc.) (*See below for example topics*). Again, for the third topic you can choose freely.

### PO 2021

- Note that one topic needs to cover the period **before** 1900, and one needs to cover the period **after** 1900. For the third topic, you can choose freely.
- One topic needs to focus on **Literary Studies**, and the other on **Cultural Studies**. The distinction here is a purely formal one: Literary Studies focuses on literature in the narrower sense: fiction, poetry and plays; Cultural Studies focuses on literature in the broader sense (travelogues, sermons, philosophical writing, etc.) and other media (TV shows, films, photography, paintings, etc.) (*See below for example topics*). Again, for the third topic you can choose freely.

### Regardless of your 'Prüfungsordnung,' you should keep in mind that...

- each topic should be broad enough to discuss it for **20 minutes**. Hence, it is important to choose a topic that is not too narrow, yet nevertheless specific enough.
- the purpose of the oral exam is to go **beyond** the topic of your M.A. Thesis, meaning that you are **not** allowed to use either the topic or the materials that you engaged with in your M.A. Thesis in your oral exam.
- I will not accept topics that you already covered and got credit for in seminars over the course of your M.A. studies. It is, however, perfectly fine to get inspiration from the topics that you engaged with during your studies.
  - *Example:* If you took a course on Pocahontas plays from the 19<sup>th</sup> century for credit in the past, you can absolutely get inspiration from the seminar. But your topic cannot be Pocahontas, and you can use only one of the texts from the course. The topic could be, for example, Early American Drama and you study the play from the class that you liked best and other plays from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that focus on different topics.

### Possible exam topics could be:

#### → Literary Studies

- **Pre-Civil War / Before 1900:** Puritan Poetry; The Novel of the Early Republic; American Romanticism; The Early Short Story; Hawthorne and Melville, etc.
- **Post-Civil War / After 1900:** Postmodern Short Stories; 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Drama; Philip K. Dick; Neo-Slave Narratives; The Modernist Novel; The Family on the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Stage; Contemporary Fiction, etc.

#### → Cultural Studies

- **Pre-Civil War / Before 1900:** The Hudson River School; The Salem Witchcraft Trials; Transcendentalism; Religion in Antebellum America, etc.

- **Post-Civil War / After 1900:** Hollywood Cinema; Superheroes in Contemporary Film; Complex Characters in TV Shows; Gender in Music Videos, etc.

→ **Example** (for the PO 2015):

- Topic 1: Early American Puritan Poets (Pre-Civil War, Literary Studies)
- Topic 2: Superheroes in Contemporary Film (Post-Civil War, Cultural Studies)
- Topic 3: Postmodern Short Stories (Post-Civil War, Literary Studies)

### 3. Reading List and Reading List Sample

- As mentioned above, your oral exam will be based on the reading list that you compile.
- The reading list comprises the three broad topics outlined above as well as primary and secondary texts that are linked to your topics.

→ **Compiling and formatting the reading list**

#### I. Compiling the reading list

- For each of your topics (*see above*), you have to choose a representative number of **primary sources**.
- N.B. it is not set in stone how many primary sources you have to list for each of your topics, since this really depends on the kind of texts you choose. But here's a rule of thumb: you should list 5 novels, or 6 plays, or 8 films, or 10 short stories, or 12 poems/paintings/songs.
  - If you choose to talk about paintings or images, please provide a link to the source. For series and films, please list a streaming platform, where I can watch the film/series (N.B. this especially concerns movies or films that have been released fairly recently).
- For each of your topics, you should also choose at least four to five **secondary texts** (i.e., articles or entire chapters).
  - The secondary texts do not have to specifically engage with any of your primary texts, they can be linked to the overall theme of your topic.
  - Example: If you were to talk about Postmodernist short stories in your exam, introductory texts on postmodernist fiction or postmodernism in general could be of interest here.

#### II. Formatting the reading list

- At the top of your reading list, you should provide a header containing (at least) your name, student ID, and e-mail address.
- Structure your reading list according to your broad topics.
  - Separate your topics clearly by providing a headline for each of your topics (*see sample*)
  - List all your primary sources in chronological order right beneath your headline. Provide the author's/creator's name (where applicable), the title of the work and the year of publication or release. Please keep in mind to provide links to primary sources if necessary (*see above*).

→ List all your secondary sources in alphabetical order right beneath your primary sources following MLA 8 standards.

### III. Sample Reading List

→ This is **one** topic extracted from a reading list (PO 2015), which has a post-Civil War and Literary Studies focus:

#### **Topic 3: 20th Century American Drama**

##### **Primary Literature**

Susan Glaspell, *Trifles* (1916).

Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947).

Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (1949).

Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959).

Edward Albee, *The American Dream* (1961).

August Wilson, *Fences* (1983).

##### **Secondary Literature**

Harjani, Emilia Tetty. "The Allegory of American Dream as an Attack to the Values of 1960's American Society in Edward Albee's *The American Dream*." *Kajian Linguistik dan Sastra*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2015, pp. 61-74.

Jacobson, Irving. "Family Dreams in *Death of a Salesman*." *American Literature*, vol. 47, no. 2, 1975, pp. 247-58.

Koprince, Susan. "Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson's *Fences*." *African American Review*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2006, pp. 349-58.

Saber, Yomna. "Lorraine Hansberry: Defining the Line between Integration and Assimilation." *Women's Studies*, vol. 39, 2010, pp. 451-69.

Stephens, Judith L. "Gender Ideology and Dramatic Convention in Progressive Era Plays, 1890-1920." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 41, no. 1, 1989, pp. 45-55.

Vlasopolos, Anca. "Authorizing History: Victimization in '*A Streetcar Named Desire*'." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 38, no. 3, 1986, pp. 322-38.