

English MA

Critical Writing, Researching, And Thinking Skills

Goal Description:

To produce graduates who have acquired measurable skills in critical thinking, researching, and writing about English literature, language, and writing disciplines and have acquired demonstrable breadth of knowledge in the field. While the number of graduates who have entered PhD programs or taken teaching positions at two- and four-year colleges is an objective measure of our success in accomplishing this goal, not all of our students pursue further graduate degrees or post-secondary teaching. That in mind, the department has determined three measurable learning objectives that apply uniformly to all students taking a graduate degree in English from Sam Houston State University: (1) the demonstration of critical thinking, researching, and writing skills, as measured by their class writing; (2) the demonstration of critical thinking and writing skills and breadth of knowledge, as measured by their performance on the written comprehensive examination; and (3) the demonstration of critical thinking skills and breadth of knowledge, as measured by their performance in oral examinations.

RELATED ITEMS/ELEMENTS-----

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1

Demonstrating Critical Thinking, Researching, And Writing Skills: Class Writing

Learning Objective Description:

English graduate students will demonstrate their abilities as independent critical thinkers, researchers, and writers capable of employing sophisticated skills in written analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of knowledge and of using a professional idiom in making written arguments. The program's success in achieving this objective will be measured by a holistic assessment of graduate class writing.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2

Holistic Assessment Of Graduate Writing

Indicator Description:

The ability of students to write according to accepted professional standards is a direct indicator of the English MA and MFA programs' success in producing graduates who have acquired appropriate critical thinking, researching, and writing skills and are prepared for future professional endeavors. To that end, a significant amount of student writing is required in English graduate coursework.

To assess the effectiveness of class writing assignments in developing students' ability to make sophisticated arguments about literature, language, and writing disciplines in a critical idiom appropriate to professional standards, the faculty will undertake an annual holistic review of representative graduate student writing produced during the reporting period.

Criterion Description:

At least 92% of representative graduate essays evaluated during the holistic assessment will be scored as acceptable or excellent (a combined score of 5 or higher on the scale described below).

A rubric for evaluating graduate student writing is attached.

Assessment Process:

1. To assure that the assessment reviews a representative sampling of writing, graduate professors in both long terms are asked to submit term papers or other significant writing from every third student listed on their class rosters.
2. Two primary readers from among the graduate English faculty independently read and score each essay under review; in the case of an unreliable result, the essay is referred to a secondary reader, who reads the essay independently, without any knowledge of the previous results (see number 5, below)
3. Each primary reader scores each essay on a 4-point scale, with a score of 4 the highest possible. The two primary scores are added to yield a total, with the final scores ranging from 8 (highest possible) to 2 (lowest possible). A combined score of 5 or higher is passing. A score of 7 or 8 indicates an excellent essay; a score of 5 or 6 indicates an acceptable essay; a score of 4 or less indicates an unacceptable essay.
4. Reliability of the two scores is assumed when both scores from the primary readers are congruent, that is, when they are within 1 point of each other. For example, a score of 6 that would be seen as reliable would mean that both readers marked the essay as a 3. A reliable score of 5 would mean that one reader assessed the essay as a 3 while the other reader assessed it as a 2.

5. Should the primary scores for an essay not be reliable—for example, a 4 and a 1, a 3 and a 1, a 4 and a 2—the essay is referred to a secondary reader. If that reader agrees with the higher score, the essay is certified as acceptable or excellent; if the secondary reader agrees with the lower score, the essay is certified as unacceptable.

Attached Files

[!\[\]\(3dfb8d66e81160ad61421a3452093d1b_img.jpg\) Holistic Grading Rubric](#)

Findings Description:

On July 18, 2016, seven members of the Department of English graduate faculty holistically scored a representative sample of 15 essays written by students in graduate classes from Fall 2015 and Spring 2016, ranging in topics from literature to linguistics to rhetoric and composition. Two committee members read each essay and rated it on the scale of 1-4 described in the grading rubric attached to the criterion description, above; the combined scores are as follow (see also attached table):

- Score of 8 (excellent): 2 essays
- Score of 7 (excellent): 1 essay
- Score of 6 (acceptable): 5 essays
- Score of 5 (acceptable): 3 essays
- Score of 4 (unacceptable): 2 essays
- Score of 3 (unacceptable): 1 essay
- Score of 2 (unacceptable) 1 essay (failed to follow instructor's prompt)

Our goal was that 92% would be scored a 5 or higher in the holistic scoring. Eleven of the fifteen essays were rated at a 5 or higher (acceptable-excellent); four were rated at 4 or lower (unacceptable). The results show that only 74% of the essays were assessed as acceptable or excellent. The program fell far short of its goal of 92%. This is a matter of some concern that must be addressed during the 2016-2017 academic year.

Attached Files

[!\[\]\(3211b5d1d968fc1665909b34f9f16010_img.jpg\) Holistic Reading Results](#)

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Graduate Writing

Action Description:

Graduate Writing: The Graduate Director distributed the rubric of standards for writing excellence to graduate faculty before the beginning of this reporting period. Nonetheless, graduate-level critical and research writing in 2015-2016 fell far short of the 92% acceptable-excellence rating. There may some explanations for this deficiency (as, for example, the range of essay types among the representative samples, including in-class examinations). In 2016-2017, however, the department must give particular attention to expectations for graduate writing and to the best means for raising the quality of this writing uniformly.

Demonstration Of Breadth Of Knowledge

Goal Description:

English students will demonstrate that they have a graduate-level breadth of knowledge in literature, language, and writing disciplines and that they can express that knowledge in writing.

RELATED ITEMS/ELEMENTS -----

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1

Demonstrating Critical Thinking And Writing Skills And Breadth Of Knowledge: The Written Comprehensive Examination

Learning Objective Description:

English students will demonstrate that they have a graduate-level breadth of knowledge in literature, language, and writing disciplines and that they can express that knowledge in writing. The program's success in achieving this objective can be measured by the pass rate for the written comprehensive examination required of all students who take a graduate English degree at Sam Houston State University.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2

The Written Comprehensive Examination

Indicator Description:

A passing score on the written comprehensive examination is a direct indicator that a student in English has acquired a breadth of knowledge in the subject, has developed critical reading and writing skills appropriate to a graduate-level education in English, and is well-prepared for future professional endeavors. For the examination, students choose three comprehensive areas from among thirteen broad topics in literature, language, and writing disciplines. To demonstrate their mastery of a broad range of materials, they are required to choose at least one British literature area and one American literature area and at least one early (pre-1800) British or American literary area and one later (post-1800) British or American literary area. For each area, students are given a reading list of works selected by

faculty area experts.

During the exam itself, the student chooses one of three questions for each area and has two hours to respond to that question. A double-blind grading system is used to evaluate the candidates' proficiency. Three graduate faculty members read and evaluate each essay.

Criterion Description:

At least 90% of examination essays will pass (with a grade of pass or high pass).

An examination grading rubric and sample pass, fail, and high pass essays are attached.

Attached Files

- [!\[\]\(79de0df6c6ddd2d4eb74f1cc5f48ec50_img.jpg\) Grading Rubric Written Exam](#)
- [!\[\]\(d4c9768318b38eff1042b07478e20b4c_img.jpg\) Sample Pass Comprehensive Exam Essay](#)
- [!\[\]\(27d314856359a9d7feca17161bc1f4a4_img.jpg\) Sample Fail Comprehensive Exam Essay](#)
- [!\[\]\(d355663486c698e3972a8b93ac8b2102_img.jpg\) Sample High Pass Comprehensive Exam Essay](#)

Findings Description:

By Summer 2016, 100% of students who sat for the written comprehensive examinations in the 2015-2016 academic year had passed all areas of their exams. However, as measured by all individual essays (a total of 36), there was a 77% pass rate, a 17% fail rate, and a 6% high pass rate. (Please see attached chart.)

So while the 100% pass rate for all students who sat for the written comprehensive exam in 2015-2016 is reassuring, the 77% pass rate for individual essays fell short of the 92% goal.

Attached Files

- [!\[\]\(1e63609ed98a835f4eb8c01936fe5abe_img.jpg\) Comprehensive Exam Results 2015-2016](#)

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Written Comprehensive Examination

Action Description:

Written Comprehensive Examination: The 77% pass rate for individual comprehensive examination essays fell short of the 92% goal; because 100% of the students who sat for the exam eventually passed, however, failure to meet the 92% goal may not be problematic. Of greater importance is our continued assessment of how well the comprehensive examinations measure the program's success in producing students with graduate-level/professional critical reading and writing skills and breadth of knowledge. A review of the expectations and format of the exams is more crucial to our continuous improvement than is the pass rate. To that end, a previously appointed committee of five graduate faculty members will meet this coming academic year to consider how effectively the written and oral exams serve to measure our success in accomplishing the program goals. Of particular concern are the expectations for English MFA students: While students in the relatively new MFA program have been required to sit for the same comprehensive examinations as MA students, the committee will consider any exam format changes that may be necessary to measure more accurately the knowledge and skills of all English graduate students. Having discussed the expectations and format of the written and oral examinations, the review committee will make a formal report to the graduate faculty. If it finds the need for any changes to exam formats, it will make formal proposals to that effect. Any such changes must be approved by the majority of English graduate faculty.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1

Demonstrating Critical Thinking Skills And Breadth Of Knowledge: Oral Argumentation

Learning Objective Description:

English graduate students will demonstrate their knowledge and critical thinking skills through oral arguments. We believe that the ability to make such arguments is necessary for future professional pursuits like teaching and further graduate education. The program's success in achieving this objective can be measured by the pass rate for the oral defense required of all thesis students and the oral comprehensive examination required of all non-thesis students.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 2

The Oral Examination

Indicator Description:

A passing grade on the oral examination required of all students who take the English MA or MFA degree at Sam Houston State University is a direct indicator that graduates are able to demonstrate their critical thinking skills and breadth of knowledge in the field. Thesis students sit for a one-hour oral defense of the thesis; having passed the written comprehensive examination, non-thesis students sit for a one-hour oral comprehensive examination covering the same three areas as those on the written exam. A committee of three graduate faculty members examines each student, awarding the candidate a pass, high pass, or fail, according to her or his ability to respond to specific questions. The committee for the oral defense of thesis comprises the members of the student's reading committee; the oral comprehensive examination committee comprises area experts appointed by the Graduate Director.

Criterion Description:

At least 92% of degree candidates will pass the oral defense of thesis or oral comprehensive exam at the first sitting or upon retaking it. Assessment rubrics for the oral comprehensive examination and thesis defense are attached.

Attached Files

- [!\[\]\(0cbc7cdca7d071aa179d7aa169df42b4_img.jpg\) Grading Rubric Oral Exam](#)

Findings Description:

In Academic Year 2015-2016, six students sat for oral comprehensive exams. All six passed, three of them with a high pass. The pass rate was 100%; the high pass rate was 50%; the fail rate was 0%.

In Academic Year 2015-2016, one MA student sat for a defense of thesis; he was awarded a high pass. The pass and high pass rate were 100%; the fail rate was 0%.

For the 2015-2016 academic year, the MA program surpassed its target pass rate of 92% on oral examinations.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

Oral Examination

Action Description:

Because 100% of MA students who sat for the oral comprehensive examination and oral thesis defense passed the oral component of their degree, with 57% of those receiving high passes, no further action for achieving this goal is planned at this time. We will, of course, continue to record and assess the results of the oral examinations.

Update to Previous Cycle's Plan for Continuous Improvement

Previous Cycle's Plan For Continuous Improvement (Do Not Modify):

1. Despite continued discussion in departmental meetings of both the expectations and format of the written comprehensive examination, the committee of graduate faculty appointed to review the exam did not meet formally: First, a key member of the committee was awarded a year-long researching/writing grant and asked that we postpone the deliberations as long as possible because, as a junior faculty member, he has much invested in future graduate program plans. Second, there has been some discussion of how the new MFA program will affect general program matters such as the written comprehensive exam; it seemed advisable to put off any changes in the exam until such general matters are settled.
2. While the graduate faculty did not undertake the comprehensive review of comprehensive exam questions (see item #1), the Graduate Director did solicit new exam questions from a number of faculty, to broaden the question banks, especially in a couple of areas (early American literature and 20th-/21st-century British literature) in which there were too-few questions.
3. The Graduate Director did distribute the holistic reading rubric to graduate faculty and encouraged that they make students aware of the standards for writing excellence outlined in that document.
4. Despite some informal discussion about appointing graduate faculty as mentors to students, no further action was taken with this proposal. The Graduate Director remains the primary advisor to all graduate English students.

Update of Progress to the Previous Cycle's PCI:

1. Members of the comprehensive examination review committee met informally on two occasions, but a formal review of the examination was once again postponed: First, because the Department of English was undertaking a search for a new Chair in Fall 2015 and Spring 2016, we were hesitant to make formal proposals until the new Chair had taken his place and the Department had discussed the direction(s) in which we should take the graduate English program. Second, decisions about the comprehensive examination will also be affected by programmatic changes regarding the relations between MA and MFA programs, which the Department will be addressing this academic year.
2. While the graduate faculty did not formally undertake the comprehensive review of the comprehensive examination (see item #1), the Graduate Director did continue to solicit new exam questions from a number of faculty, to broaden the question banks, especially in areas in which there are too few questions.
3. Because the Graduate Director had previously distributed the holistic reading rubric to faculty and encouraged them to make their students aware of the standards for writing excellence outline in that document, no further action was taken with this initiative.
4. Despite some informal discussion about appointing graduate faculty as mentors to students, no further action was taken with this proposal. The Graduate Director remains the primary advisor to all graduate English students and, specifically, to MA students; the Director of the MFA program handles advisement matters specific to MFA students.

Plan for Continuous Improvement

Closing Summary:

1. Graduate Writing: The Graduate Director distributed the rubric of standards for writing excellence to graduate faculty before the beginning of this reporting period. Nonetheless, graduate-level critical and research writing in 2015-2016 fell far short of the 92% acceptable-excellence rating. There may some explanations for this deficiency (as, for example, the range of essay types among the representative samples, including in-class examinations). In 2016-2017, however, the department must give particular attention to expectations for graduate writing and to the best means for raising the quality of this writing uniformly.

2. Oral Examination: Because 100% of MA students who sat for the oral comprehensive examination and oral thesis defense passed the oral component of their degree, with 57% of those receiving high passes, no further action for achieving this goal is planned at this time. We will, of course, continue to record and assess the results of the oral examinations.

3. Written Comprehensive Examinations: The 77% pass rate for individual comprehensive examination essays fell short of the 92% goal; because 100% of the students who sat for the exam eventually passed, however, failure to meet the 92% goal may not be problematic. Of greater importance is our continued assessment of how well the comprehensive examinations measure the program's success in producing students with graduate-level/professional critical reading and writing skills and breadth of knowledge. A review of the expectations and format of the exams is more crucial to our continuous improvement than is the pass rate. To that end, a previously appointed committee of five graduate faculty members will meet this coming academic year to consider how effectively the written and oral exams serve to measure our success in accomplishing the program goals. Of particular concern are the expectations for English MFA students: While students in the relatively new MFA program have been required to sit for the same comprehensive examinations as MA students, the committee will consider any exam format changes that may be necessary to measure more accurately the knowledge and skills of all English graduate students. Having discussed the expectations and format of the written and oral examinations, the review committee will make a formal report to the graduate faculty. If it finds the need for any changes to exam formats, it will make formal proposals to that effect. Any such changes must be approved by the majority of English graduate faculty.

4. Recruitment: The most important issue facing the English graduate program is the recruitment of qualified students. During the 2016-2017 academic year, the Department of English will undertake a comprehensive review of the program and determine the best plan of action for reinvigorating graduate applications and enrollments, which have remained flat over the last couple of years. Faculty have suggested several possibilities, one of which is a program on line, either in whole or in part.

5. Certificate Program for Dual Credit Teaching: For the summer of 2016, an eighteen-hour online certification program for public high school teachers of dual credit classes was proposed by the Department of English and approved by the University. Although the program was put together too hastily to begin in Summer 2016, the Department will advertise it more vigorously during the upcoming academic year, with the intention of launching its first cohort students in the first summer session of 2017. Our incoming Chair, Dr. Jacob Blevins, has recommended that we review carefully the particular coursework offered in this certificate program before the first classes are put on line in Summer 2017.