

# English MA

## 1. Critical Writing, Researching, And Thinking Skills

### Goal Description:

One primary goal of the English MA program at Sam Houston State University is to produce graduates who have acquired measurable skills in critical thinking, researching, and writing about English literature, language, and writing disciplines. 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, as measured by their performance on the Written Comprehensive Examination; and (3) the demonstration of critical thinking skills, as measured by their performance in oral examinations (Oral Comprehensive Examination or Oral Defense of the Thesis).

### RELATED ITEMS/ELEMENTS-----

#### RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1

##### 1. Demonstration of Critical Abilities: 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

##### 1. Performance in Class Writing as Indicator of Students' Critical Abilities

#### 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 undertake an annual holistic review of representative graduate student writing produced during the reporting period.

Professors in graduate classes submit a term paper from every third student on their class rosters; although the number of samples is smaller or larger according to the number of courses taught in a given semester, the sampling represents a broad cross-section of students because it is random. One of the problems with representation, however, is that different sorts of graduate courses require different kinds of assignments. To help with the assessment, then, professors are required to submit the assignments; writing is evaluated not only by the standards that govern the profession but also by its success in fulfilling specific assignments.

#### 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; if the secondary reader's score falls in the middle of two extremes, the average of the three scores determines the outcome.

Attached Files

## [Holistic Grading Rubric](#)

### **Findings Description:**

In July 2017, a committee of five English MA faculty members assessed a total of eighteen representative essays taken from seven graduate courses taught during the 2016-2017 academic year. The essays covered a broad range of approaches and topics in English literature and language. The assessment committee assigned the following combined scores:

Combined score of 5 (acceptable): 1 (6%)

Combined score of 6 (acceptable): 6 (33%)

Combined score of 7 (excellent): 6 (33%)

Combined score of 8 (excellent): 5 (28%)

One hundred percent of essays were assessed as acceptable or excellent, with 39% deemed as acceptable and 61% deemed as excellent. The level of English MA writing exceeded the 92% standard for acceptable writing.

### RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

#### **Graduate Student Writing**

##### **Action Description:**

Although 100% of the student essays reviewed for the 2016-2017 assessment cycle were rated as acceptable or excellent, the importance of critical writing as a measure of success in achieving the goals and objectives of the English MA program requires continued attention. As a result of the recently undertaken external review of the program, the faculty have begun an overhaul of the graduate curriculum, which will involve both new degree requirements and the installment of new courses. The MA faculty are particularly concerned that research and critical writing are purposefully integrated into all new course plans, as reflected in forthcoming proposals; that instructors agree upon standards of competency for writing in the profession; and that students are made aware of these standards in their courses, especially as exemplified by models of critical research writing.

### RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1

#### **2. Demonstration of Critical Abilities and Breadth of Knowledge: 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

#### **2. Comprehensive Examination Pass Rate as Indicator of Students' Critical Abilities and Breadth of Knowledge**

##### **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.

Essays are evaluated according to standards outlined in the attached grading rubric. It is not possible otherwise to set an indicator for each area.

##### **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

[Grading Rubric Written Exam](#)

[Sample Fail Comprehensive Exam Essay](#)

[Sample High Pass Comprehensive Exam Essay](#)

[Sample Pass Comprehensive Exam Essay](#)

**Findings Description:**

During Academic Year 2016-2017, English MA students wrote a total of thirty-six comprehensive examination essays. The results are as follow:

High Pass: 5 (14%)

Pass: 30 (83%)

Fail: 1 (3%)

The combined pass rate of 97% exceeds the standard of 90%.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

**Written Comprehensive Examination**

**Action Description:**

For the first time in several years, the results of the written comprehensive examination (97% pass rate) far exceed the standard (90% pass rate). While this may be a consequence, in part, of having excluded MFA students and counting only MA students for this assessment cycle, the importance of the comprehensive exams in measuring the program's success in fulfilling its current goals and objectives requires continued attention. As long as the existing examination system is in place, the graduate director will continue to prepare students by making sure that they are well-informed about the exam processes and by having faculty conduct prep sessions. That having been said, as a result of the recently undertaken external review of the program and the decision to revise the curriculum and degree requirements, a comprehensive examination reassessment committee has been formed to explore and submit proposals for alternatives to the existing exam system that would better measure our success in fulfilling goals and objectives. The committee will begin its reassessment in Fall

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1

**3. Demonstration of Critical Abilities and Breadth of Knowledge: Oral Examination**

**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

**3. Oral Examination Pass Rate as Indicator of Students' Critical Abilities and Breadth of Knowledge**

**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

[Grading Rubric Oral Exam](#)

[Grading Rubric Thesis Defense](#)

**Findings Description:**

During the 2016-2017 academic year, three English MA students sat for the oral defense of thesis; all three passed the defense successfully, with one of them earning a high pass.

During the 2016-2017 academic year, nine English MA students sat for the oral comprehensive examination. Eight of them passed the exam successfully on their first attempts. One of the students failed the exam on her first attempt, in Fall 2016, but successfully passed the retake in Spring 2017.

One-hundred percent of MA students passed their oral examinations.

RELATED ITEM LEVEL 3

## **Oral Examination**

### **Action Description:**

Despite the continued success rate of MA students in passing both the oral defense of thesis and the oral comprehensive exam, the reports of faculty who serve on oral comprehensive examination committees suggest some continued disappointment with students' abilities to formulate creditable oral responses to questions about literature and language. This can be explained, in part, by reasons other than a lack of knowledge in the field. However, in light of the findings of the recent external review, and corresponding with the reassessment of the written comprehensive examination, the graduate faculty will reassess the oral comprehensive examination to determine whether it best measures the program's success in fulfilling its goals and objectives.

## **2. Breadth of Knowledge in the Field**

### **Goal Description:**

A second primary goal of the English MA program is to produce students who have a graduate-level breadth of knowledge in literature, language, and writing disciplines and who are able to express that knowledge in writing. One measurement of the program's success in accomplishing this goal is the students' completion of five Block Courses in good standing; another is their satisfactory performance on the Written Comprehensive Examination.

### RELATED ITEMS/ELEMENTS -----

#### RELATED ITEM LEVEL 1

### **2. Demonstration of Critical Abilities and Breadth of Knowledge: Written Comprehensive Examination**

#### **Learning Objective Description:**

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## **Update to Previous Cycle's Plan for Continuous Improvement**

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

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 be 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.

#### **Update of Progress to the Previous Cycle's PCI:**

Since the last assessment cycle, the English graduate faculty have undertaken an extensive review of the MA program; this included an external review by two professors from outside universities. The comprehensive review looked closely at all of the features identified in the previous cycle's plan for continuous improvement.

In response to our own findings of the self-study and those of the external reviewers, the MA faculty developed a strategic plan for addressing many of the program issues identified in the 2015-2016 assessment continuous plan. The response to the comprehensive review is attached here; included is that strategic plan.

As updates to specific features of the previous cycle's plan for continuous improvement, we report the following:

1. Graduate Writing: English graduate student critical and research writing for the 2015-2016 assessment cycle fell below the standard of 92% acceptable-excellent ranking; these results were not alarming enough to cause concern, but they did warrant closer monitoring of graduate-level writing, especially as it fulfills the goals and objectives of the English MA program. The results of the holistic review of graduate-level writing for the 2016-2017 assessment cycle deemed 100% of the essays under review to be acceptable or excellent. While certain variables like the kinds of writing assignments and class objectives likely affect the results in a given academic year, we are satisfied that the quality of graduate-level writing meets the standards that we have established. Because of the importance of writing as a measure of our success in meeting the goals and objectives, however, we will continue to monitor our graduate students' writing closely.

2. Oral Examination: Because 100% of MA students who sat for the oral comprehensive examination and oral defense of thesis in the 2015-2016 assessment cycle passed their examinations, we did not institute a formal plan for improvement of this degree component. In the 2016-2017 assessment period, a single student failed the oral comprehensive examination on her first attempt. Because she passed all sections of the exam upon retaking it, however, we see this failure as an anomaly. There is no plan for continuous improvement in this area although, as before, we will continue to assess the results in light of program goals and objectives.

3. Written Comprehensive Examinations: All English MA and MFA students sit for the written comprehensive exam, as required by both degree programs, and past results have combined students from both programs. Because of the increasing separation of program goals and requirements, however, we selected out only MA students in the results for the 2016-2017 assessment cycle. Excluding MFA students this time, we found that 97% of essays from MA students earned either a pass or a high pass, with a single essay failing. These results are encouraging. However, because of the crucial role of the comprehensive exams in measuring the success of the MA program in fulfilling its goals and objectives, we continue to prepare students for the exam and to monitor the results closely.

4. Recruitment: As one feature of the extensive review of the English MA program in 2016-2017, including an external review conducted by two professors from outside universities, the graduate faculty developed a strategic plan, which included a calendar of projected actions. By May 2018, the MA program will have developed a coherent recruitment and marketing plan. Among other initiatives, we will develop a teacher-alumni advisory board, by which MA graduates who now teach in local high schools and junior colleges cannot only advise the program on the practical needs of MA graduates but also help recruit new qualified MA students.

For Fall 2017, thanks in part to the redoubled efforts of graduate faculty in recruiting qualified MA students from our own undergraduate ranks, we have ten new students entering the program, eight in regular admission status and two in probationary status.

5. Certificate Program for Dual Credit Teaching: The new online dual credit teaching certificate program received official approval by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and has begun offering classes for Fall 2017, with a first cohort of six students. Because this program is our first experiment with an exclusively online program, albeit a certificate program as opposed to a full MA degree program, we will closely monitor and assess our success with it, not only in preparing qualified students for dual credit teaching but also in recruiting future students.

## **PCI**

### **Closing Summary:**

Based on the our recent external and internal program review, our plan for continuous improvement consists of the following:

- 1) Re-focus recruiting strategies to our undergraduate population and to area teachers.
- 2) Update our course offerings and curriculum to address external reviewer concerns and faculty resources.
- 3) Update our current exam and thesis assessments to better reflect student needs and current professional trends.