

MFA

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY CREATIVE WRITING

PREPARING FOR THE MFA EXAM

POETS



*The MFA Exam is a requirement for all students concentrating in poetry.
It is taken during the summer between second and third year.*

MFA Exam (Poets)

Overview

Although your writing and studio practice will and should be your focus as a Master of Fine Arts student, the exam is an essential part of the MFA poetry program. Reading and preparing for the exam, even more than the exam itself, is a chance to deepen and broaden your experience and understanding of poetry, to develop your own aesthetic ideas, and, in the end, to demonstrate knowledge of the genre.

Preparation begins early in the first year with exploration toward a reading list and rationale. Then it is encouraged to take the Poetry Proseminar (a.k.a. "Poetry Planet) in your second year to help form your list and rationale, and prepare for the exam. Most students take the exam during the summer between their second and third years of study, so that they can begin their third thesis year with that momentum behind them.

What Is a Reading List?

An MFA reading list is a compilation of 20 poets' names, which is created in preparation for the MFA exam and presented for final approval to your thesis/exam committee well before the MFA exam itself, usually during the early spring of the second year. Students are encouraged to begin compiling their reading lists early. In this way, the lists help shape student's reading and coursework even in the first year of study. Faculty are happy to advise students as they draft lists, even before exam/thesis committees are assigned.

Please note: Students must submit reading lists and rationales prior to registering for their first three hours of thesis (ENGL 799).

Program Expectations for a Reading List

- An MFA reading list should consist of 20 poets.
- At least 10 of the poets on the list must be writers we are willing to consider "major" in the context of the exam. No one is seeking to define or endorse a particular canon, and the categories "major" and "minor" are necessarily ambiguous. However, for exam purposes a "major" poet is defined as one who has composed a significant body of work and about whom there is a substantial body of secondary literature. A poet's previous importance to you is not relevant to the major/minor criteria; our list is not meant to be a list of past favorites. That said, your list should reflect your interests and will, of course, reflect your own evolving tastes. It's bound to include some of those poets who have been important to you as a writer, but the goal is to widen that list of "important" poets to allow for new favorites and new understandings of poetry's power and possibility.
- With rare exceptions (Sappho and Dickinson, for example), all poets on the list must have published at least two books.
- If you include poets in translation, be sure to consider multiple translations (where available) and/or to have made some effort to appreciate the poetry in its original language. Students whose lists include four or more poets in translation should be prepared for exam questions about the art and theory of translation.
- At least five poets on your list must have written their work before the Twentieth Century. At least two of those five must have written their work before the Nineteenth Century, meaning poets who died prior to

1800 or who wrote all of their poems before 1800.

- Poets on the list may not be current Mason faculty.
- Lists are expected to include racial, ethnic, gender, and aesthetic diversity.

How to Format Your List

- Lists should be attached to a completed cover sheet.
- Poets on the list should be grouped in two columns: major and minor
- Within each column, the poets should be listed by their full names and in chronological order, with birth and (if appropriate) death dates after each name.
- A rationale should be attached to the list.

How to Compose Your List

- One good way to compose your list is to begin with a few poets you know you would like to include and then do a little exploratory research. Who were the important influences on those poets? And who were the poets they rejected and why? For example; if you begin with William Carlos Williams, you will find that John Keats was an important early influence, as was Walt Whitman, and you will soon see that you need to learn about the Symbolists, Imagists, Objectivists, and perhaps Surrealists. You will find that William Carlos Williams had important connections to Spanish poetry and to the visual arts. Among Williams' fellow-travelers you will find H.D., Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore; among the poets he couldn't abide, T.S. Eliot and the poets of the New Criticism; among the poets he influenced, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Allen Ginsberg, Jorie Graham, Ross Gay, and all the poets who continue to read and learn from Williams's work today.
- Another good way to begin drawing up a list is to investigate a particular form, the lyric essay or the sonnet or the ghazal, for example. How did the form evolve and who are some of its major contributors and innovators?
- Or you might research an interest in African-American or Native American, or Chicanx poetry.
- Or perhaps you'd like to think thematically; for example, you might investigate poetry written in response to war—Walt Whitman, Guillaume Apollinaire, Paul Celan, Wislawa Szymborska, Yusef Komunyakaa, Ilya Kaminsky....
- You might begin with a look into a modal form like the elegy (from John Milton to Natasha Trethaway and Jericho Brown) or the "love poem" (from Sappho to Anne Carson, Adrienne Rich to Terrance Hayes and Dawn Lundy Martin).

Wherever you begin, your reading is bound to lead you further into new reading, new beginnings, and in various new directions and ways of thinking about and building poems.

Although much of your reading will be done independently, some will go on as part of your coursework. We hope that you will be in conversation, as much as possible, with Mason's community of poets, including your faculty thesis/exam committee director. It is also strongly advised that you take ENGH 684: Poetry Proseminar, affectionately called Poetry Planet, in the fall of your second year. This is a course expressly designed to help you develop, draft, and finalize your list and rationale, as well as begin reading and researching a good number of poets in preparation for the exam.

What Is a Rationale?

A rationale is a 250-500-word prose discussion of the connections among the poets on the list, the various lines of influence and affiliation, as well as the thematic and formal concerns they share. Every poet on the list need not fit into a seamless scheme. Reading lists are comprised of multiple lines of interest, affiliation, and influence. In many cases, a couple of names may not fit into a scheme at all.

When Should Reading List and Rationale Be Submitted?

Rationales are required and, along with your reading list, must be submitted to your thesis/exam committee for approval **by no later than the end of the spring semester**. Reading Lists and Rationales should be submitted to the student's thesis committee and the Creative Writing Program's Graduate Academic Coordinator.

Exam Details

The MFA exam is a four-hour written exam. Each poet's exam is based on their own individual MFA reading list. The exam itself has three sections, with a choice of questions in each. Students are asked to write on one question in each section.

It is important to note that "major" poets from a student's list are not necessarily emphasized on the exam. The faculty do not have a policy of asking more questions about "majors" or of giving such questions more weight. Like you, the faculty are interested in the whole list and the whole exam, the list as a whole and the exam as a whole. That said, we make every effort to write the exam so that a student will have an opportunity to respond using any of the poets on their list.

Most questions on the exam allow a student to choose the poets and works they discuss. That is, questions will not be about specific books or poems. There are occasional, unsurprising exceptions to this rule; a question about Dante, for example, might well ask the student to consider *The Divine Comedy* or even one of its three books.

Students cannot base answers to more than one question on the exam on the same poet. You may mention a poet in passing elsewhere, but don't let them become the focus of more than one essay answer.

In taking the exam, it is important to pace yourself. Failure is extremely uncommon. However, the most common cause of failure is failure to finish, or producing a third answer that is too short and slight to be acceptable. Students need to answer the questions asked and not just offer everything they can remember about the poet or poem about which they are writing.

The exams are graded pass or fail. If a student fails or withdraws from the exam after it's begun, they may schedule a second attempt at the exam for the following semester. Unless there are extenuating circumstances, a second failure means no degree. Please note that this has not happened in the past 25 years. On rare occasions, a mark of "high pass" will be recorded. Thesis directors will let students know the results. The committee has up to two weeks to read and evaluate the exam. Those two weeks begin after summer break is over.

Please note: Students may not register for their final three credit hours of thesis until they have passed their MFA exam.

Reading for the Exam

All students are highly encouraged to take Poetry Planet (ENGH 684) to prepare for the exam. Students are also encouraged to form informal study groups. You will also want to meet one-on-one with your thesis director.

By the time you sit for your MFA exam, you should have read the poets on your list. That means the poetry as well as significant or representative work in other genres (such as fiction, drama, autobiography, literary criticism, etc.) You should read criticism of your poets, and where available, interviews and biography. If you have questions about the scope of reading necessary for a given poet, please consult your thesis/exam committee. You will want to meet one on one in office hours with your thesis/exam director throughout your preparation for the exam.

You have access to a “sample list” of questions from past MFA exams. Students are encouraged to read that list closely. Most exams consist of variations on questions from this list and some new questions specifically composed for you by your thesis/exam committee. The list gives you an idea of the kinds of questions you may encounter and the kinds of thinking and writing required.

Students may opt to take practice exams based on questions from the sample list. Often such practices are part of ENGH 684: Poetry Planet coursework, but you may want to give yourself further experience writing to list questions: remember to time yourself, allowing no more than one hour per question.

Most of the best exam essays have been written by students who compiled detailed study notebooks on the poets on their lists. Students should be precise in their note taking, giving full citations for books and journal articles and reviews. Be careful to distinguish your ideas from those of the critics and poets you are reading. You won't be expected to cite specific critical sources in your answers and you cannot bring these notebooks to the exam, but these notebooks, with that information, will be useful beyond the exam and throughout your career as you read, think about, and perhaps teach literature and/or poetry writing.

Scheduling the Exam

MFA poetry students should take their exam during the summer after their second year. Students must have formed their thesis committees of three professors, two poets and a third from beyond the poetry faculty, by March 1 and must schedule their exams with the program manager by April 1.

Students can take their exams in May, June, July, or August so long as their committees agree to the date and an exam can be ready by that time. In very rare cases, students take their exams in the fall semester. This is not ideal and only allowed in rare cases and almost always for reasons of health. Students may begin their exams anytime between 9am and 1pm. When students contact the graduate programs manager they should have a date and time in mind to schedule. In most cases, proposed dates and time will be confirmed and honored, assuming there is staff in the office to proctor the exam. Exam dates can be rescheduled, but last minute rescheduling is discouraged.

Preparing the Anthology & Poetry Anthology Guidelines

In preparation for exam you will compile an anthology of selected works from the 20 poets on your list. Below are some guidelines:

- Your poetry anthology may be a binder filled with hard copies of the poems. The poems in the binder must not have any marginalia or notes on them, and no critical material may be included with the poems. Instead of the binder, you may prefer to put your anthology on a USB flash drive, again without including any notes

or materials besides the poems themselves. This second method is perfectly acceptable and much more popular than the first.

- All anthologies (hard copy or electronic) must be checked prior to the exam. You should plan to arrive a few minutes early for that review. The graduate programs manager will let you know if anything you've included can't be used during the exam.
- Your anthology may include as many or as few poems as you choose. Try to represent the work of the poets on your reading list as well as the interests outlined in your rationale. Some students opt to include only a few select pieces from each poet; others choose to compile as comprehensive a collection as possible. Ask your thesis/exam director for advice. You'll want to create an anthology that allows you to reference the poems comfortably and quickly. Create an anthology to fit your needs.
- Your anthology may be organized as you like. Most anthologies are organized by poet, but some are organized according to date/time period or style; still others are divided into unique sections meaningful to the student.
- Your anthology is more than just reference material for the exam. It is a valuable resource that you can go to use during the rest of your academic and/or professional career as a writer. Many alumni have mentioned the value of the exam and the anthology long after they completed their degree.
- Your anthology is yours to keep, but it must be turned in along with your exam answers. Once your exam is graded, you are welcome to pick the anthology up from the graduate programs manager. Anthologies that remain in the office for one academic year or longer will be recycled.

A Final Word:

The MFA exam is like the traditional comprehensive exam in that it can be a way for students to demonstrate mastery of their field. More than that, however, the faculty hope that your intensive, deliberate reading toward the exam will motivate fresh ideas and critiques of long discussed works of poetry and instigate thinking toward new forms and ideas. It is an opportunity for you to demonstrate and especially to widen what you know. We hope you will take pleasure in both the solitary and the collaborative work of preparing for the exam and that you will enjoy the kinds of synthesis thinking and writing the exam process invites.

Sample List of Exam Questions

You are designing an "Introduction to Poetry Writing" course that includes reading assignments. You have decided to concentrate all reading on four poets who have come to prominence since 1945. Which four poets on your MFA list will you use? Why?

A great many readers of poetry and many contemporary poets are impatient with funny poems and lose interest as soon as a poet is associated with humor. Yet when James Wright was asked what role humor played in his writing, he said, "I could not do without it." Discuss the use of humor in three of the following poets: T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Gwendolyn Brooks, Matthea Harvey, Haryette Mullen and Heather McHugh. To what extent and in what ways do they employ humor? How do they combine humor and seriousness of purpose?

Choose one of these poets from the top of your list—Sappho or Dickinson—and expose evidence of that one poet's influence on two poets from the rest of your list. The most interesting and successful essay would probably be one that chose poets who show Sappho's or Dickinson's influence in different ways.

Either Sappho or Dickinson AND any other two poets from your list

In many of your poets--from Ovid to Brigit Pegeen Kelly--one could argue that the "image" is a central poetic element. What is an image? Discuss two of your poets and then investigate the different ways they create, handle, and manipulate the image. Please address this question through close readings of representative lines.

Any two poets on your list

When we use the term Confessional, we often tend to be speaking about a particular historical moment in poetry, concerning such writers from your list as Anne Sexton. Sometimes, however, confessional is used to mean something more like autobiographical. How do you distinguish between the terms? In contemporary practice has the mid-twentieth-century cap-C Confessional disappeared, gone underground, morphed, atrophied? Discuss two post-Sexton poets on your list and how they have used the conventions of the "Confessional," and in what ways have they innovated upon those conventions.

Sexton and any of the post-Sexton poets from your list