

Character and rationale of language exams. A language examination in the English Department asks the student to render a passage (a prose passage, ordinarily) of about 300 words into idiomatic English prose in 90 minutes, with the help of a dictionary. This is meant to test a graduate student's ability to read the language with a sufficiently precise and informed sense of its grammar, vocabulary, idiom, and distinctive forms as will allow its translation into English with full, though not necessarily flawless, accuracy. The language requirement arises both from the general demands of humanistic scholarly research (the need to consult relevant scholarship, and the consequent importance of knowing those languages in which it will most likely be encountered) and from the specific character of literary study (the need to apprehend and describe those properties of language deployed by literary expression, and the consequent importance of having that conscious awareness of linguistic structure that derives from experience of a foreign language). That the latter as well as the former is involved in the rationale of the language requirement is suggested not only by testimony of colleagues over several years, but also by the long and uncontroversial continuance of examination of languages in which scholarship will only rarely be consulted (Latin and classical Greek). That departmental practices also allow a student to demonstrate proficiency by achieving a grade of B or better in an *advanced* course in the language suggests that the command of the language expected is something better than rudimentary, and that the exam should present the student with a passage that, while uneccentric, contains a sampling of distinctive elements of the language in question.

Guidelines for examiners. Given these practices and policies on the one hand, and the relatively uncontextualized circumstances of the exam on the other, rigor and fair-mindedness suggest that examiners should consult previous exams in order to insure consistency from year to year and should keep the following in mind:

1. The passage may be drawn from literary or intellectual prose or from scholarship. While it may display a writer's distinctive voice or style, it should represent what common sense suggests are vocabulary, register, and construction reasonably accessible to a contemporary reader, except in cases where the language being examined exists itself in an obsolete form. Passages using obsolete constructions, and editions using archaic spellings, should be avoided.
2. The passage should test at least some of the distinctive properties of the language in question.
3. Though the specification of 300 words is a guideline and not a limit, it is a guideline that should be reasonably observed. While it is impossible always to stop at precisely 300 words, the guideline itself loses meaning, and students have legitimate grounds for complaint, when passages grow beyond 320 or 325 words.
4. A passing exam should render the sense of the passage accurately and its components with tolerable, though not necessarily perfect, fidelity. Since the alternative route to fulfilling the requirement entails passing language courses with a grade of B or better, this should serve as the standard by which to determine whether an exam has been passed.
5. In marking the exam, mistakes should be noted and correct readings given (within reason), and in the case of failures, a brief characterization of what is lacking. It is

- well to keep in mind the feelings of the students in doing so: complaints and appeals seem at least sometimes to arise less from a sense that a failing mark was unfair than from offense taken at what seems the disrespectful tone of the corrections. This may be unfortunate, but such appeals do create extra work for the language-exam chair and for colleagues who are called to review the exams.
6. Latin traditionally is a special case: the Latin exam always includes a choice of passages, one in classical and one in medieval Latin.

Guidelines for students. Students should come to the exam with an adequate dictionary appropriate for more than conversational purposes. They should consult copies of previous exams, available in the Graduate Office. They should also be aware that intensive summer language courses may not in themselves provide sufficient preparation to pass exams designed to test mastery beyond the beginning level.

Complaints and appeals. Failed exams may be appealed to the language chair, who will appoint a second examiner. If the second examiner disagrees, the two examiners should try to reach agreement in discussion; only if they cannot will a third reader be called in to break the tie.