

## How to Achieve Success in the Exit Interview

A University Scholar will be able to do the following in the Exit Interview:

- Provide detailed information about the text, indicating thorough reading and preparation; review principal characters, major themes and motivations.
- Describe important distinctions, definitions or arguments advanced by the author/text.
- Discuss the context in which the text was written and received.
- Make connections between and among texts.
- Identify important themes, similarities or relational ties between and among texts.
- Draw personal or disciplinary relevance to selected texts.
- Remain composed, even when faced with a difficult or unexpected question.
- Answer succinctly and be prepared to elaborate.
- Articulate concrete and abstract ideas both clearly and logically; do not bluff.

## Additional Guidelines for the Exit Interview

The Exit Interviews are conversations. Like all conversations, they take on a life of their own. There is no single formula for participating in them. Prudence and judgment are indispensable. But since the Exit Interviews are the sole means by which the Program can assess the depth and seriousness of the Scholar's engagement with the texts on their Independent Reading List, some general guidelines may be helpful.

At the minimum, Scholars will be able to address the following questions with respect to any text on their list:

### 1. What is the book about as a whole?

*What problem is the book primarily concerned with? How does it solve its problem? What are the questions the author is asking? How does he or she answer them?*

### 2. What is being said in the various parts of the book, and how?

More discursive texts:

*What is the argument of the book? What are its starting points? What are its conclusions? How does it get from its starting points to its conclusions? (Simply getting the argument right can be difficult. But its importance cannot be overemphasized, since understanding a text's argument is a prerequisite for intelligently evaluating or criticizing it.)*

Less discursive texts:

*What are the major scenes that make up the story? How do these hang together to make up a coherent plot? Who are the principal characters? How do they interact? What is the internal logic that animates the work?*

### 3. Is the book true, in whole or in part? Is it a convincing representation of human experience?

*What in the book illuminates the problems that it is trying to solve?*

*Is there anything in the book that does not illuminate its problems in the best possible way?*

*To what extent does it accurately capture or otherwise shed light on our experience? In what ways does it distort or falsify it?*

**4. What of it?**

*Why does the book matter? From the author's point of view? From your point of view? If the book's way of looking at things is persuasive, what does this imply about how we should think differently? How we should live differently?*

Scholars who want to learn more about particular strategies for reading texts in ways that address these questions are invited to consult Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*. For insight into understanding texts as answers to questions, see R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (especially chapter 5 and chapter 7).

The examining committee may or may not ask the above questions. It may or may not ask them in the forms stated above. But Scholars who are capable of answering these questions with respect to every text that they read will be far more likely to excel in addressing the questions they are asked.

To attain the appropriate level of excellence, the Scholar will need to prepare systematically over the course of the (approximately) 30 months that lie between the initial creation of the list and the Exit Interview. In addition to highlighting important passages in the text and writing notes in the margins, the Program recommends that the Scholar keep track of his or her ongoing reflections in a notebook. The notebook should contain a page-length outline of every text the Scholar reads, so he or she can recall its form and content at a moment's glance. It ought to contain a record of attempts to describe and isolate the main problems and questions of each text. Names of the major characters, and the most important points about them, should be noted.

The Scholar's notebook will be indispensable in preparing for the interview. Although it is appropriate to bring the notebooks to the interview; he or she may not consult the notebook during the course of the interview itself. The purpose of the notebook is to enable Scholars to organize their thoughts and prepare more effectively for the interview.