MES4035 Methods in Middle Eastern Studies

Grading Guidelines

Autumn 2025

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This exam is a four-part portfolio. Each part focuses on a different methodology—history, ethnography, textual analysis, and literary analysis—taught by instructors with both research and practical experience in that method. Each module was taught across three seminars (12 seminars in total). For every module, students received a specific assignment and detailed instructions from the instructor (see below), submitted a draft during the semester, and received individual feedback. The portfolio is composed of the revised versions of those essays.

Assignment Instructions:

- Each paper should deal with one of the methodological approaches introduced in the course.
- The default length for each submission is approximately 1500 words, excluding bibliography, footnotes, and supplementary materials.
- The submissions should be written in a concise academic style, copy-edited, and it includes a consistent style of references and bibliography. For Arabic, Persian and other non-Latin script, consistent transliteration system (es. IJMES style).
- Students are allowed to write in English, Norwegian, Danish or Swedish.

Criteria for evaluation:

The exam should be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- Depth of analysis and critical engagement with primary and secondary sources.
- Clarity and coherence in writing and argument structure.
- Integration of scholarly sources and proper citations.
- Originality in thought and approach to the topic.
- Ability to improve the quality of the paper according to the feedback received by the teacher.
- When it comes to formal issues, es. accuracy of transliteration, consistency of citation style: they should be taken in consideration but should not be used as main criteria for evaluation.

Part 1: Historical Methods (Taught by Dr. Alisa Shablovskaia, Postodc, IKOS)

Assignment: Provide answers to the following questions as a cohesive and well-written running text:

- What is the main argument of the author?
- Has this argument appeared earlier in scholarship? Provide a brief state of the art on the subject
- What is the author's argumentation (chain of sub-arguments leading to the main argument)?
- On what sources is the study based? What method is used?
- Give your opinion about the strengths of the article (novelty, solid 2rgumentation, unique sources, interesting approach)
- Give your opinion about the weaknesses of the article (imappropriate terminology, bias, teleology, use of evidence, selectiveness and superficiality)

Part 2: Fieldwork Methods. (taught by Prof. K. Soraya Batmanghelichi)

Assignment: Fieldwork Project Prompt: Community Ethnography with Political Focus in Oslo

Your Objective: Conduct a mini ethnographic study of a community or group within Oslo that has connections to the MENA region, with a focus on how political issues impact their lives and experiences. Your findings will be presented in a comprehensive essay of 1500 words (approximately 3 pages single-spaced), integrating sources from our course syllabus to support your analysis. *Additionally, this exercise will help you consider potential research questions that could emerge from your study*.

Instructions:

1. **Identify a specific community or group in Oslo with Middle Eastern connections** (e.g., cultural organizations, activist groups, or refugee services).

2. **Conduct participant observation and informal interviews** with community members, focusing on their lived experiences relating to political issues such as migration, integration, representation, and activism.
3. **Analyze your findings** to illustrate the interplay between political dynamics and the community's social, economic, and cultural experiences. Highlight how these issues shape their identity, aspirations, and everyday lives in Oslo.
4. Integrate **at least five academic sources** from the course syllabus to support your observations and analysis. These could include academic articles, book chapters, or other relevant texts that discuss methodologies, theoretical frameworks, or case studies relevant to your research. Use correct bibliographic method for citation (Chicago style).
5. Include an **ethical reflection** on your role as a researcher and the ethical considerations taken during the research process, especially concerning sensitive political topics.
6. **Essay Structure**: Your reflective essay should be approximately 9 to 10 pages long. Ensure that your writing is well-organized, clearly presented, and properly cited. Here are some suggestions for what the essay should include:

1. *Introduction*: Briefly introduce the community and the political issues you are focusing on.
2. *Fieldwork Experience*: Share your experiences conducting fieldwork and the insights you gained from observations and interviews.
3. *Analysis and Reflection*: Reflect on the themes and patterns that emerged from your research and how they relate to the political context.
4. *Emerging Research Questions*: Conclude your essay by proposing 3-5 research questions that arose during your study, considering how these could guide future research.

Tips for Interviewing:

Note: We will discuss this in class to help you better prepare!

1. Build Rapport and Trust:

- Take time to establish a connection with your interviewee (don’t just accost them on the street!). Engage in friendly conversation to ease tension and create a comfortable atmosphere. This rapport will facilitate more open and honest dialogue, especially around sensitive topics. You’ll likely have to have multiple encounters with them before an interview is agreed upon.

2. Do your best to be Culturally Sensitive and Aware:

- Familiarize yourself with the cultural and political context of the community you are studying. (Do your best to) understand cultural norms and taboos related to discussing political issues, which will help you ask questions respectfully and appropriately. (This means reading up TREMENDOUSLY on the subject you want to discuss before speaking with the interlocutors.)

3. Use Open-Ended Questions:

- Frame your questions to be open-ended rather than leading. This will encourage interviewees to express their thoughts and feelings in their own words, allowing for richer and more nuanced responses. Also, practice multiple ways of asking those questions. (Write them down first, say them aloud and adjust, accordingly.)

4. Iterative Consent and Check-Ins:

- Throughout the interview, actively check in with your interviewee regarding their comfort level. Ask questions like "Is it okay if I ask about this topic?" This practice demonstrates respect for their autonomy and ensures a safe space for discussion. Remember to pause.

5. Prepare for Emotional Reactions:

- Be ready for emotional and uncomfortable responses, especially when discussing sensitive political or personal topics. Listen actively and compassionately, allowing space for the interviewee to share their feelings. Avoid pushing for information if they seem uncomfortable or distressed; validate their emotions if they arise.

These guidelines will help enhance the quality of your interviews and ensure that you approach people and sensitive subjects with the care and respect they deserve.

Part 3: Textual Analysis (Taught by Prof. Brynjar Lia)

Assignment: Write a textual analysis of a (polemical?) text by a political or religious figure where the author's agenda is more manifest than in other types of texts.

As mentioned in class, you may benefit from looking at the examples in (the latter part of) Jørgensen & Phillips - Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method (2002) - chapter 2 and 3. (That is if you choose to do discourse analysis and not content analysis.)

Part 4: Literary Analysis (Taught by Prof. Teresa Pepe)

Assignment: Conduct a literary analysis of a text of your choice, illustrating your methodology and your choice of theory. Your findings will be presented in a comprehensive essay of 1.500 words (approximately 3 pages single-spaced), integrating sources from our course syllabus to support your analysis.

Instructions:

1. Choose a literary text from those analyzed in class, or from the anthology edited by Guth, Literary Visions (2019). Please make sure you discuss this choice with your instructor before starting the exercise.
2. Conduct a close reading of the text, either in translation and/or in its original language. If you can, investigate the paratext (elements that lies outside the text: interviews to the authors; introductions; covers, translations; film adaptations etc.).
3. Analyze and interpret your findings in the light of at least ONE of the theoretical frameworks we have discussed in class (trauma studies; ecocriticism; gender theory; relation to historical and political context) or feel free to come up with a theoretical framework that you see fit for this text.
4. Integrate at least THREE academic sources from the course syllabus to support your observations and analysis. These could include academic articles, book chapters, or other relevant texts that discuss methodologies, theoretical frameworks, or case studies relevant to your research. Use correct bibliographic method for citation (Chicago style).
5. Ensure that your writing is well-organized, clearly presented, and properly cited.

Tips for Analysis and Interpretation:

You essay should answer the following two questions:

- What are the main characteristics of the text? (description)
- How can these characteristics be explained (analysis supported by theory)

Each complex requires to look for different things, respectively.

What to look for in a text

The Analysis

aims at highlighting the text's main characteristics. It describes the text "objectively", without interpreting it, trying to answer general questions like:

- What is/are the main theme(s), the topic(s) of the text? What is it about?
- Characters & their actions: Who is / what kind of (main) characters are involved? Which features does the author give them / stresses in them (e.g., social standing, outward appearance, character)? Can the characters be divided into certain groups (e.g., 'good' vs. 'evil'), do some side with another character, or oppose him/her? Which are the essential traits of their actions (what do they do)? Are they (probably) meant to represent a certain class, a social group, a human virtue or vice, an idea?
- From which perspective are the events told? Is the narrator prominent at all, does one feel his/her presence? If so, how? Is s/he involved in the events, and if so, how? How is s/he related to the characters and their actions, whom does s/he side or sympathize with? Does perspective change (e.g., from outside to inside, thoughts, feelings, emotions, etc.)? Which social group does the narrator belong to?
- Narrated space: Where do the main events take place (which setting/s does the author choose, e.g. countryside, a train, …)? How are the spaces characterized? Are certain spaces 'connected' with certain characters? Is space important? How is space organized? Are there several spaces, and how is the relation between them? What about movements in space (e.g., travelling, horse-riding, space-switching)?
- Narrated time: When do the events take place? How is narrated time structured in the text? Can the story be segmented into narrative sequences and, if so, how are these 'building-bricks' arranged (chronologically, associatively, …)? Where is natural chronology inverted, where is time condensed or stretched?
- Stylistic features: e.g., dialect?, high/low linguistic level?, imagery: metaphors, symbols; long/short sentences; other stylistic devices: parallelism, hyperboles, contrast tropes; irony?; …

The Interpretation

has as its aim to explain the features that have been found and described in the Analysis. 'To explain' them means 'to contextualize' them, i.e., ideally, each of the text's characteristics and peculiarities should be made 'meaningful' in the context of the time in which the text was

written/published. To explain them means also using ‘theories’ and discuss their applicability to this specific text. Between Analysis and Interpretation it may be useful to insert a

- Synthesis that tries to answer the question what is, presumably, the author’s central ‘message’? What would be the most appropriate term to describe the author’s attitude and proceeding (e.g., a teacher, a critic, a moralist, a silent observer, …)?
- The Interpretation proper asks (and tries to find explanations from the socio-historical context/s for) questions like:
- Which function do the elements & structures discovered through analysis fulfil with regard to the overall ‘message’ of the text? Why, probably, did the author take up this topic at that time? Why did s/he choose the characters s/he actually has chosen to become the hero(in/es) of his/her story? Why with this type of actions/events, not others? Which function do space, time, style fulfil with respect to the overall ‘message’? => contextualize!

Do's and don'ts

► Focus on the text and its socio-historical context, NOT ON THE AUTHOR! Biographical information about the author may be useful in some instances, but only if it helps to explain the characteristics of the text (i.e., if the author’s life can help to contextualize the narrative in so far as the author can be looked at as a typical representative).

Where to look for information about authors, texts, and contexts

- Do not rely on (public) Wikipedia! There is almost nothing in there that can be of use in our context (except for some basic biographical informations on the most prominent of the authors. (But cf. "Do's and Don'ts" above.)
- You may find some ideas on analysis, interpretation, contextualisation in the collections from which the translated stories are taken, or in fore-/afterwords of translated novels, anthologies, etc. (see Reading List) always gives you the sources from which the texts are taken. If you do not find these in the library, just let me know, I might have a private copy.
- For general contexts try to localize the author in surveys of the history of modern Arabic/ /Persian literature.
- Via BibSys, you have online access to Index Islamicus, a bibliography specializing in studies on Islamic and Middle Eastern subjects. Type in the respective author's name, and you will probably get a number of hits, most of them translations into

European languages, but also some books and/or articles of his/her work(s). There are also many literary magazines and academic journals online that can be worth checking, among which: JAL (Journal of Arabic Literature); MEL (Journal of Middle Eastern Literatures); the blog/websine ArabLit.

- There may be some additional material, until now unpublished, that you can get from me as pdf. Do not hesitate to ask!