In 1967 the Yale College Faculty voted that a department or program might, with the approval of the Course of Study Committee, substitute an alternative to the departmental examination then required of all seniors in the spring. The standard two-day, four-hours-per-day departmental examination has almost disappeared, but this examination, or some specific and identifiable substitution approved by the Course of Study Committee, is a requirement of Yale College to which every department and program must adhere. The DUS is responsible for administering the departmental examination or its equivalent, though in the largest departments this responsibility is sometimes delegated to a colleague or to a committee.

The senior requirement measures whether the student can demonstrate some form of mastery or substantial competence in some significant aspect of the subject of the major. A few departments have substituted oral examinations on prepared special topics for the written examination; most have substituted senior seminars or tutorials in which a substantial project is required. The most common substitute is the senior essay. In most cases the senior project or senior essay carries course credit, but it does not necessarily do so. Every senior in the major must complete the senior requirement satisfactorily, or he or she cannot be graduated; it may not be waived in any circumstance. A department may not change its senior requirement without approval from the Course of Study Committee or the Committee on Majors.

The grade for the senior requirement, whether or not it carries course credit, is important in determining a student's eligibility for Distinction in the Major (see Honors and Distinction).