

Qualifying Exam Procedures for Doctoral Students in Biology

(Adopted Spring 2023⁺)

Part 1: All doctoral students will complete a three-step qualifying exam

- **Step 1:** (Thesis Proposal) – The student will write and submit a thesis proposal to their committee. This can (and should) occur with input from their mentor and committee members. The proposal will be due at a prescribed time prior to the Written Exam.
- **Step 2:** (Written Exam Questions) – The committee will provide question(s) that will be answered independently by the student and submitted to the qualifying exam Chair. The format (e.g., open book, closed book) and duration to complete answers will be determined by the committee and communicated to the student at least one month prior to the written exam.
- **Step 3:** (Oral qualifying exam) – An oral examination will be scheduled with the graduate school. The scope and content of the oral examination will be determined by the committee and communicated to the student at least one month prior to the oral exam.

Rationale 1: There was consensus at the Graduate Program Retreat that the format of the qualifying exam should be standardized for all doctoral students. The Graduate School requires that doctoral students complete written and oral examinations. This proposal also includes a written *thesis proposal that provides questions under investigation, background for the proposed dissertation research and a plan for implementation. Development of the thesis proposal is an excellent opportunity for mentee-mentor interactions which will strengthen the significance and rigor of the student’s proposal. The thesis proposal also provides a platform for committee members to develop questions for the written and oral exam components. Because it can be difficult to assess the preparedness of a student for the oral exam from reading a proposal with significant mentor input, the written examination provides an independent writing component for committee assessment. The “unofficial” committee chair** will coordinate next steps in proceeding to the oral exam and communicating the decision (pass/fail of written exam) to the student.

*Note that the thesis proposal document is not approved/rejected at this phase.

**See Proposal 4

Part 2: Committee members must approve the written documents before proceeding to the oral exam during a minimum two-week waiting period between Step 2 and Step 3.

Rationale 2: This is an opportunity for the committee to identify considerable gaps in the students’ knowledge or conceptual understanding that could be problematic at the oral exam. Two weeks gives sufficient time to committee members to review the written exam and give approval to proceed to the oral exam.

**The student should go ahead and schedule their oral exam prior to Step 1 and can reschedule should the committee suspend the process.

Part 3: The oral qualifying exam will be scheduled for a duration of no more than 3 hours.

Rationale 3: A 3-hour oral exam will standardize the format for students.

Part 4: A committee member other than the student's primary mentor will serve as the "unofficial" Chair of the qualifying exam committee. The student in consultation with either their committee or the DGS chooses the "unofficial" Chair prior to Step 1. By unofficial, we mean this information will not be communicated to the Graduate School.

Roles of the unofficial chair include: (i) Administering the written question(s) to the student and relaying the answers to the committee members; (ii) Coordinating the decision to proceed with the oral examination; (iii) Presiding over the oral examination; (iv) Communicating the committee decision to the student after the oral exam is complete.

Rationale 4: There was general agreement at the Graduate Program Retreat that a student's primary mentor can sometimes unfairly influence (positive or negative) how the exam proceeds. By installing another committee member as Chair for the entirety of the qualifying exam, we aim for more objectivity when assessing the student.

Part 5: Once the committee has agreed that the oral exam is over, the primary mentor will leave the room to provide the committee an opportunity to have an initial discussion about the student's performance on the qualifying exam. Following this discussion, the primary mentor will return to the room for a full discussion and then the committee will vote to pass or fail the student.

Rationale 5: Some faculty (e.g., pre-tenure faculty) may not be comfortable expressing opinions about a student supervised by a more senior faculty member. This arrangement gives all committee members an opportunity to express their thoughts without pressure from the student's primary mentor.

[†]**Note:** Adopted February 2023. These policies will go into effect for the Fall 2021 entering class once they are eligible to sit for the QE exam (Summer 2023).