

GUIDELINES AND PROCEDURES FOR PRELIMINARY EXAMINATIONS

To be provided to PhD students and their supervisor's after successful completion of the ATC examination

A. Introduction

The Preliminary Examination has three components:

- 1) An **essay** reviewing the literature in the area of biology of the thesis.
- 2) A research **progress report**.
- 3) An **oral examination** in defense of both the essay (1) and the research in progress (2).

B. Essay Requirements and Guidelines

General Purpose: Students in a Ph.D. program are expected to develop some breadth of knowledge in addition to the depth and focus they acquire through research into a specific biological problem, and the writing of a thesis. In the essay, they should address the area of their research from a broad perspective and in a critical manner.

The essay should provide the student with an opportunity to select the appropriate body of literature and to evaluate it in writing. It should help to develop the skills needed later in writing the thesis, and where the task proves difficult, to indicate the need for assistance or practice in written presentation of information.

Length: It can be misleading to prescribe a fixed number of pages since quality, not quantity is what will be judged. However, a total text length of 20 pages, typed double-spaced on letter-size paper plus references would be a reasonable maximum. Tables and figures may be added. More than 40 pages total is excessive and may be considered justification for rejection by examiners. In terms of effort, the essay should take six weeks to three months to complete.

Format: The review should be critical (i.e., including evaluation of conflicting evidence) and organized and written in the style appropriate to the thesis.

Content: A mere survey or summary of the literature is not enough. The essay must not only provide significant information about the topic but must assess it as well. The writer's views and conclusions are an important part of an essay. These should lead to a new synthesis of previously scattered ideas and disconnected facts as an appropriate beginning to the development of the thesis.

Plagiarism: Never transcribe information in its original written form. Put it into your own words and acknowledge its source. The Academic Integrity website provides information on plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty (http://www.dal.ca/dept/university_secretariat/academic-integrity.html).

Getting Assistance: Supervisors are expected to help students improve their writing ability by carefully criticizing drafts of the essay. Other members of the Supervisory Committee may also be willing to help, but on a voluntary basis. The Writing Center provides academic support for improving writing skills (http://www.dal.ca/campus_life/student_services/academic-support/writing-and-study-skills.html).

C. Research Progress Report

The document should provide an up-to-date report of research progress and a plan for completing the thesis project. This report should be concise, but sufficient for the examiners to make critical judgement of progress. Papers published, or in preparation for submission to journals, are useful appendices.

D. Format of Oral Examination

The oral examination will include a twenty minute oral presentation of the essay as an introduction, but focusing on the research results, followed by questions from the examiners including supervisor(s). The student will be examined for mastery of all aspects of the thesis research including its background. The examiners should be satisfied that the student has a thorough understanding of concepts and methods needed to complete the project, as well as the intellectual ability and independence expected of a PhD candidate.

The Examining Committee consists of at least the following individuals:

- A Chairperson
- An External Examiner
- Supervisory Committee Members (Supervisor or two Co-supervisors and at least two individuals)

The examination will be chaired by a Stream Chair or designate of the Graduate Coordinator. The External Examiner, usually from outside the department, is selected based upon suggestion from the Supervisory Committee. The External Examiner should be knowledgeable and experienced in the area of research covered by the thesis, and must not have been involved in the thesis work, or other research, of the student or supervisor(s). All members of the Examining Committee must be present for the examination and only one examiner may take part remotely via telephone or video conferencing.

E. Scheduling, Submission of Essay and Report

Preliminary examinations are to be held more than 2.5 years after commencing the graduate programme. Also, the examination should be completed at least 12 months before the expected date of defence.

When ready, the student in consultation with the supervisor(s) selects potential date(s) for the examination and consults the Supervisory Committee members as to their availability. At least four weeks in advance, the supervisor should contact the Graduate Secretary and provide the names and contact information of members of the Supervisory Committee and External Examiner. The Graduate Secretary along with the Graduate Coordinator will schedule the examination and arrange for a Chair. The Graduate Secretary will notify the student and Examining Committee of final arrangements, including the date, time and room of the examination.

Students who, with their supervisory committee's approval, plan to extend their programmes at least one year beyond residency requirements, may apply to the Graduate Coordinator in writing for a 6 months' extension of the deadline for the examination. No more than two such extensions will be permitted.

Students who do not to complete the essay and oral defense requirements by the scheduled (or rescheduled) date will be deemed to have failed the examination. The Graduate Coordinator will notify the student and supervisor in writing.

At least two weeks before the scheduled date of the examination, the student must submit to each examiner (including the Chair) a copy of the essay. Prior to submission, the student should consult his/her supervisor for suggestions for improvement.

At least one week before the scheduled date of the examination, the student will submit to each examiner (including the Chair), an up-to-date report of research progress report.

The essay and progress report should be submitted electronically to all members of the examining committee; however students must submit hard copies of either document to any examiner that requests one.

F. Evaluation and Outcomes

Each examiner (except the Chair) will independently complete an evaluation form (*Prelim. Exam. Form Part 1*). After the defence, these are collected by the Chairperson who enters the results on a consensus form (*Prelim. Exam. Form Part 2*). The examiners discuss the evaluation amongst themselves; the chairperson enters the decision, all useful comments, and an overall evaluation on the consensus form which is then signed by all present, to indicate their concurrence. The forms are returned to the Graduate Coordinator.

The examination can have only two outcomes - pass or fail. The Chairperson will accept the view of the majority of examiners but may cast a deciding vote if necessary. Students who fail the defense may apply within 2 weeks to the Graduate Coordinator for reexamination. Faculty of Graduate Studies regulations allow a second attempt within one year of the first examination. The Chairperson will inform the Graduate Coordinator and student as to the reasons for failure. Scheduling of a second defense and the composition of the examining committee will be at the discretion of the Graduate Coordinator after consultation with the original examining committee and the supervisor(s). If the student fails upon reexamination, or if no request for reexamination is received, the Graduate Coordinator will so inform the Department Chair and the Dean of Graduate Studies and recommend that the student be dismissed from graduate studies.