

Candidacy Examination Guide for Examiners and Advisors

Molecules, Cells and Organisms Training Program
Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology

Goal:

The purpose of the Candidacy Examination is to assess the student's qualification for independent research leading to the Ph.D. This encompasses various scholarly abilities: a solid background knowledge; familiarity with established ideas and open challenges in the chosen discipline; the ability to design experiments and to critically interpret their outcomes. The exam is also an opportunity for both candidate and faculty to identify a mismatch between the student's qualifications or commitment to research and Ph.D. training.

Written Proposal:

With advice and assistance from the advisor, the student prepares a dissertation research proposal that outlines the plan for Ph.D. research. The advisor must approve the proposal and should sign the title page. The student distributes this document to all committee members and the MCO Graduate Programs Office at least one week prior to the exam. Please note: It is the expectation that advisors of students in you will provide guidance and advice in the proposal development.

Advisor Role & Feedback:

The advisor is not a member of the Candidacy Examination Committee, but should be present at the start of the exam to inform the committee about the student's proposal and work. This is done in a pre-exam session without the student present. After this consultation, the student will return to the exam and the advisor must leave before the exam begins.

Pre-Examination Considerations:

The exam committee should consider all the information available at the time to inform their decision. This includes the student's academic record in courses; the student's rotation reports and the accompanying evaluation from rotation supervisors; the advisor's in-person report on the first year of research; and the written research proposal itself. It is recommended that the exam committee allocate 30 minutes prior to the exam to peruse these documents and issues, discuss with the advisor, estimate the student's strengths and weaknesses and chart the direction of the exam. Students do not need to present data at their Candidacy Examination. The exam is designed to test "Reading, Thinking, and Writing." The exam assesses the ability to define a project, set it in the context of what is already known, and to generate a realistic plan for completion, not the amount of experimental progress made. Each examiner is expected to lead at least one line of inquiry outside of the specific topic of the research proposal, into areas deemed essential basic knowledge in modern Biology.

Student's Oral Presentation:

The examination is structured around the student's presentation of the proposed research project. Though the project itself is not a target of the exam, it provides a good starting point for assessing the student's preparation (see above). To enhance the "real-time" character of the discussion, students are not allowed to use slides. A chalk or white board is available. Examiners are free to interrupt the presentation at any time to explore various threads in more detail.

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Outcomes:

The exam has 3 possible outcomes. The outcome and summary will be sent to the MCO program office by completing [this report](#), which will then be shared with the student and committee.

- **Pass**

The student continues in the program toward the Ph.D. Status is listed as Satisfactory, and the student may apply for the Master's (A.M.) degree.

- **Conditional Pass**

This indicates **minor** deficiencies in the candidate's preparation. The committee imposes certain conditions before a Pass may be granted. For example, the student may be required to teach or take a specific course, or one or several parts of the research proposal may need to be re-written. The committee must specify how and when fulfillment of the conditions will be certified, and the committee may or may not need to be reconvened. If the committee needs to meet again, this is considered a re-examination and must take place before the end of the fall of the third year. The committee should identify a specific date and if reconvened, this is considered a second examination and has outcomes of Pass or Fail only. The student must pass this re-examination in order to proceed to candidacy. Students who receive a Conditional Pass are placed on **grace status** with the GSAS immediately following the receipt of the Candidacy Examination report. Please see below for further details regarding grace.

- **Fail**

This indicates **major** deficiencies in the candidate's preparation. The student has the opportunity to re-take the Candidacy Examination **only once** in this situation. This must occur before the end of the fall of the third year, and the committee will identify a specific date. The committee may also impose additional conditions to be met by that time, for example teaching or taking a specific course. The second exam has outcomes of Pass or Fail only. As above, students who fail the Candidacy Examination are placed on **grace*** with the GSAS immediately following the receipt of the Candidacy Examination report. Please see below for further details regarding grace.

After successful completion of the candidacy exam, students must then complete Part 2 (G2 DAC) of their PhD candidacy requirement by June 30 of their G2 year (~ 6 months post Part 1). Because the qualifying exam does not require supporting experimental results, this first DAC in Part 2 is critical for students to get off on the right foot as they formulate their thesis projects. Instructions for the G2 DAC can be found [here](#).

Students can advance to PhD candidacy after successful completion of Part 2. Students that have not advanced to candidacy are not eligible to teach or to receive travel awards without approval from the program.

*Regarding Grace Status:

A student may be granted the status of "grace" for one year and remain eligible for institutional aid (not federal Title IV loans and/or work-study) during this period. At the end of the grace period, the student must have rectified the deficiency and be in compliance with all other established criteria in order to be considered to be making satisfactory progress. Ordinarily, only one such period of grace will be granted to a student during graduate studies. If a student continues to not make satisfactory progress, a department may withdraw the student. Only students making satisfactory progress are eligible for federal Title IV funding. Students in "grace" status are not eligible to hold teaching appointments. If a student has been given sufficient time to make up requirements and still has considerable work to do, the student may be placed in "unsatisfactory status" during which time the student may not teach or receive financial aid.