

Candidacy Examination & Dissertation Proposal Guide for Students

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

The G2 Candidacy Examination demonstrates a student's qualifications for advanced research. It is when the student concludes their preparatory studies and introduces their dissertation research project. The student should prepare a short presentation (not more than 15 minutes) on their dissertation research proposal to members of their Examination Committee. Students may be examined on course work, readings, and other required knowledge in their field. A student must pass the Candidacy Examination in the G2 year. All pre-candidacy requirements, including all 4 core courses, 2 electives, and at least one teaching requirement must be completed by the end of the G2 academic year in order to meet satisfactory MCB progress requirements.

Step 1 – Get Advice From Your Advisor

It is important to meet with your Faculty Advisor to discuss writing your dissertation research proposal and selecting members of your G2 Candidacy Examination Committee.

Important: If your advisor is not from MCB, they may not know that they are expected to provide feedback to you (in fact, some Harvard programs do now allow this). It is important that you explain to your advisor they should provide guidance and input with regard to your proposal.

Step 2 – Assemble your Committee

Assemble your Examination Committee and submit a **Committee Request Form** to the MCO Graduate Office for approval by the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS). Invite members on your wish list and identify one member to act as the Committee Chair. The following conditions must be met in order for an Examination Committee to be approved; if any member satisfies two or more of these conditions, the other members do not have to meet those conditions. **Your Advisor is NOT a member of your committee but MUST be present at the start of the exam (~15 minutes). Keep this in mind when scheduling your exam (see Step 5).**

- The Examination Committee must contain at least 3 faculty members.
- The Committee Chair must be a senior faculty member from the MCO program.
- At least 2 of the 3 committee members must be members of your training program.
- No more than 1 member of your committee may be from outside your training program. A non-training program committee member requires prior approval by the Director of Graduate Studies.

Step 3 – Schedule Your Meeting

After the members of your committee have been approved, schedule a date, time, and location for your Exam. Scheduling of the exam must be completed and the exam must be taken by the end of March 2020. It is important to make your request before faculty calendars fill up with other commitments. Begin by contacting your advisor and all committee members/faculty assistants to block out one or two prospective dates with times. Once you have a time reserved, you must inform the Graduate Office. An email confirmation to you, your advisor, and all committee members will be sent following the booking. Please contact the MCO Program Office for assistance with booking a room. The office will prepare your file with a Candidacy Acceptance Certificate and blank exam report form and this will be submitted to your committee Chair in advance of your exam.

Important: Please note that all Candidacy Exams must take place no later than March 2020.

Step 4 – Prepare Your Proposal

Write your Dissertation Research Proposal. The topic of your proposal is your dissertation research project. Your proposal should be formatted in an NIH-style grant format consisting of an introduction, specific aims, research direction, and methods. **Your proposal may not exceed 2500 words (5 single-spaced pages), this includes figures.** You and your advisor must sign the title page and you should submit an original copy to the MCO Graduate Programs Office and electronic or hard copies to all committee members **at least 7 days prior to your Exam.** Include the date, time and location of your Examination on the title page. Sample past proposals are available on the shelves outside the Graduate Office and on the MCB Internal Website. You must plan your time accordingly so that your advisor can sign your proposal.

Step 5 – Take Your Exam

No later than March of the G2 year, you must take your Candidacy Exam. Your advisor should be present prior to the start of the meeting and is required to leave once the Exam has begun. It is important that the advisor provide feedback on your work to your committee members in person. The student is not present in the room for this discussion. After the advisor briefs the committee, the student is called in to begin the exam.

The exam is organized around the presentation of the dissertation proposal in the form of a “chalk talk” and slides are NOT permitted. You will be expected to think on your feet when answering questions from the committee. At its conclusion you will be informed of the outcome: **Pass, Conditional Pass, or Fail** followed by a report written by your committee members, and this will be sent to you and your advisor. The 3 exam outcomes are explained below:

- (1) **PASS**: The student continues in the program towards the Ph.D.
- (2) **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 specifies how and when fulfillment of the conditions will be certified. 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 G3. The committee will identify a specific date. A second exam has outcomes of Pass or Fail only, and the student must pass this re-examination in order to proceed to candidacy.
- (3) **FAIL**: This indicates **major** deficiencies in the candidate's preparation. The student has the opportunity to re-take the Candidacy Exam **only once** in this situation. This must occur before the end of the fall of G3, 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.

Important: If a student receives a Conditional Pass, the student is placed on Grace Status with the GSAS pending satisfactory fulfillment of the condition(s) and notification of the MCO Graduate Programs Office. A student is ordinarily ineligible to serve as a Teaching Fellow while on Grace Status. If a student fails the Candidacy Exam, the student is also placed on Grace Status until the re-examination.

Step 6 – Apply for the Master's (A.M.) Degree

Assuming all other pre-candidacy requirements have been met: Required coursework; at least 1 of 2 teaching requirement; and a pass outcome on the exam indicates eligibility to apply by for a non-terminal Master's (A.M.) degree. The date when you pass the exam will determine eligibility for one of Harvard's three degree conferral periods (May, November or March). Please contact the FAS Registrar's Office for the **Application for Degree Form**, dates, and instructions. Submit all degree applications to the MCO Graduate Office for signature and submission.

Members of your Examination Committee may be retained as members of your Dissertation Advisory Committee (DAC) in your G3 and later years; however, it is not uncommon for students to form a new or revised committee, in which case you must submit your new list of members for approval at that time.