

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 the teaching requirement must be completed by the end of the G2 academic year in order to meet satisfactory MCO progress requirements. Note, preliminary data is not required or expected.

Step 1 – Get Advice From Your Advisor

It is important to meet with your advisor to discuss writing your dissertation research proposal. 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 not allow this). It is important that your advisor provides guidance and input regarding your proposal.

Step 2 – Assemble your Committee

After your Exam Committee has been determined by the MCO program, you may reach out to the members to schedule the exam and invite one member to act as the Committee Chair. **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).**

Please note: members of your Examination Committee may be retained as members of your Dissertation Advisory Committee (DAC); however, it is not uncommon for students to form a new or revised committee, in which case you must receive approval from the MCO Program.

Step 3 – Schedule Your Exam

After the members of your committee have been assigned, schedule a date, time (2-hour block), and location for your exam. 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 Lindsay, who will send an email confirmation to you, your advisor, and all committee members, as well as a reminder email 1 week prior to the exam.

Rooms: A room will be booked for you, and if you have any room preferences, please let Lindsay know. If you wish to use the room in advance to practice, Lindsay can help with this too.

Important: Please note that all Candidacy Exams should be scheduled by September 30 and completed by December 31. **However, flexibility may be given on a case-by-case basis due to delays in lab joining and progress caused by COVID-19.**

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 electric copy to the MCO Graduate Programs Office and 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 [MCO Intranet](#).

Step 5 – Take Your Exam

No later than December 31 of the G2 year, you must take your Candidacy Exam (Part 1). 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 that 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.

After successful completion of the candidacy exam, students must then complete their first DAC meeting by June 30 of their G2 year (~ 6 months post-PQE). Because the qualifying exam does not require supporting experimental results, this first DAC is critical for students to get off on the right foot as they begin their thesis projects.

Students advance to PhD candidacy after successful completion of the G2 DAC meeting. Students that have not advanced to candidacy are not eligible to teach or to receive travel awards without approval from the program.

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

Assuming all other pre-candidacy requirements have been met: Required coursework; teaching; 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 complete your G2 DAC will determine eligibility for one of Harvard’s three degree conferral periods (May, November or March).