

Candidacy Exam Tips

From Faculty:

- Students do *not* need to present any 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 generating a realistic plan for completion, not the amount of experimental progress made.
- Candidacy exam committees understand that the rate at which progress is made during the first year in a lab is controlled by many variables, not all of which are under the student’s control.
- As the exam does not assess experimental progress, there is no need to delay the exam to include lab results. It’s better to get feedback from the committee to avoid potential problems before it’s too late.
- Students should meet with their PI by no later than the end of January to discuss their committee composition and their proposal.
- The Director of Graduate Studies can assist with selecting committee members if you run into difficulty.
- The dissertation proposal reflects the student’s best understanding at the time it is written; it may not be binding and nothing is “locked in steel.”
- The dissertation proposal must be concise. It is limited to five pages plus four or five figures and references.
- It is critically important to discuss the dissertation proposal with the PI before submitting it to the committee. **For students who are in labs of PIs from other Harvard departments, this is not necessarily a familiar process for them so you must make them aware.**
- Exam format: The exam typically lasts 1-2 hours between the proposal itself and ensuing discussion. It is likely that committee members will interrupt the proposal to ask questions. The exam is given as a “chalk talk;” students are expected to use the board to illustrate their proposal. PowerPoint slides may not be used.
- It is normal to be anxious while preparing for their exam. Just remember the candidacy exam is as much about holding a good discussion as anything else; the committee’s intent is to help guide the students toward successful research.

From Some Past G3s:

- Some students find that presentation practice with classmates, who don’t necessarily know about the lab’s research, was more useful than practice with lab-mates. Practice in your planned exam room.
- The process of writing the proposal and taking the exam is a good time for you to practice responding to constructive criticism and feedback. These are all good opportunities to practice your skills at considering and responding appropriately.
- Since you can’t use slides in your exam, you will probably find it helpful to write intricate or time-consuming diagrams on the board in your exam room *before* the exam occurs. **Let Lindsay know if you want to reserve your room for 1-2 hours prior to your exam, or if it’s first thing in the morning, the night before (doors lock after a certain point though).**
- Be prepared for interruptions from the committee members. Be flexible. The committee may or may not allow a full presentation. Some committees request only a ten-minute summary of the proposal. Don’t be overly nervous.
- Don’t be too attached to your presentation plan, as your committee may not allow you to proceed exactly that way. At the same time, make sure you *have* prepared a planned, practiced talk.

- Plan your exam room carefully. Make sure it has the kind of table, seating, and black/white boards that you want.
- Be sure to allow sufficient time (at least a month!) for your PI to read and comment on your proposal before you submit it to your committee, and make sure *they* have your proposal at least a week before your exam.
- Try to finish writing your proposal early. Don't ignore the deadlines, you will likely be assigned a committee or exam date that you don't like.
- Use an online scheduling application to facilitate scheduling your exam date/time.
- Slides can be attached to the written proposal as figures. Don't attempt to plan your presentations around slides.
- Pick your committee chair before you pick the rest of your committee. A fourth member can be helpful, but it makes scheduling that much more complicated.
- Establish good relationships with all of your committee members if possible. These relationships may be helpful in the future.
- Planning preparation with your advisor is very important. Do you have clear and respectful communication with him/her? If not 100%, now is the time to work towards such a relationship while you discuss your upcoming (and at times unpredictable) Ph.D. work.
- If you have preliminary data, don't be oversold on it. It is important to be open to and know of other research directions.
- Committee members who aren't experts in your particular field can still be very helpful; but try to have at least one committee member who has "seen it all."
- Don't assume that your committee is well-versed in your topic.
- Know by heart every citation that you write down. They may or may not come up during the discussion with your committee.
- Previous dissertation proposals are on file for viewing at the Graduate Office and on the internal website.