

Oral Examinations

Oral examinations are used to determine whether a student's Master's thesis is acceptable (the thesis defense), whether a provisional PhD student should be allowed to become a PhD candidate (the PhD candidacy examination or "area exam"), and whether a PhD candidate should receive a PhD (the final PhD oral exam). An oral exam is also used as the final requirement for the second-year research project. The standards for these three examinations differ, but the procedures are very similar.

Guidelines for oral examinations in the Department of Psychology are described below. These guidelines are intended to conform to the rules and regulations of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR). FGSR policies for the Master's Thesis Exam, the Candidacy Exam, and the Doctoral Exam may be found on the [FGSR Graduate Program Manual](#) page. If questions arise, the Associate Chair for Graduate Studies or the Graduate Program Assistant should be contacted.

In these guidelines, "committee chair" refers to the chair of the examining committee, and "supervisor" refers to the student's supervisor. In the cases of the Master's thesis defense and the second-year research project examination, the supervisor may serve as the committee chair, or another individual from the department could serve in that capacity. In the case of the PhD oral candidacy examination and the PhD final oral examination, the examining committee must be chaired by a member of the Department of Psychology other than the student's supervisor. One of the examining committee members may serve as chair. If the chair is not one of the examining committee members, he or she does not vote or sign the thesis but may participate in the questioning. The Department encourages the arrangement in which the chair is not one of the examining committee members, especially for candidacy and PhD oral exams. Normally, the chair is selected by the supervisory committee, in consultation with the student. If the supervisory committee prefers that the chair be selected by the Department, the supervisor should contact the Associate Chair for Graduate Studies at least one month before the proposed date of the examination.

Preliminaries

Well in advance of the oral examination, the committee chair should brief the student on the nature of oral examinations and on the procedures that are likely to be followed. The student also should receive a copy of these guidelines.

At least one week before the meeting, the student and supervisor should discuss (a) preparation of the student's curriculum vitae and (b) the nature of the comments to be presented by the supervisor about the student's background.

Prior to the meeting, the supervisor should distribute a copy of the student's curriculum vitae to each member of the examining committee. The curriculum vitae

should include educational history, presentations and publications, a list of graduate courses that the student has completed successfully, and any other material that might be pertinent. The supervisor also should distribute a copy of these Guidelines to any examiners who are not members of the Department.

PhD Defense Oral Presentation

Normally, students are expected to give a public oral presentation on their dissertation research preceding their PhD defense. Although members of the audience should have an opportunity to ask questions, the question period should be circumscribed and is not intended to replace the PhD defense itself. Whenever possible, the address should be timed so that an attending external examiner may be present. The graduate program assistant will help in arranging the time and venue and advertising the presentation in order to foster a consistent format.

Examination Procedures

1. The committee chair should ensure that the candidate has met all of the examiners and then should request that the candidate leave the examining room so that specific procedural matters can be discussed.
2. When the candidate is not present, the committee chair should outline the examination procedures that are normally followed, as described below. Any changes that are proposed by the committee chair or other examiners should be agreed upon at this point. The committee should be sensitive to the candidate's expectations about the procedures.

Order. The order in which examiners ask questions should be established. Typically, the examiner who is least familiar with the candidate's past work (usually the external examiner) is given the option of asking the first set of questions, and the examiner who is most familiar (the supervisor) is the last to ask questions. In some cases the supervisor may choose to ask no questions.

Time per Examiner. Each committee member should be allocated a maximum of 15-20 minutes to examine the candidate on the first round of questions, and a subsequent round may be initiated by the committee chair if any of the examiners so desire. The committee chair must be prepared to monitor the time taken by each examiner and to enforce gently the limits to which the examiners have agreed. On the second round of questions, each examiner is allowed as much time as required to make an evaluation of the candidate's performance.

No limit on the total time of the examination is to be established, but the committee chair and other committee members are expected to be sensitive to the candidate's level of fatigue and whether prolonged questioning is useful. In extreme cases, the examination can be continued at another time. Examinations

normally last between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. The committee chair or the candidate may request a brief break at any point in the proceedings.

Format. Normally, the time allocated to each examiner is intended to be used primarily by that examiner. Other examiners may ask brief questions of clarification during that period, but extensive questioning by other examiners usually is inappropriate. The committee chair is responsible for determining that each examiner has an appropriate amount of time for questioning.

Judgments. The committee chair should remind the examiners briefly about the judgments they will be called upon to make at the end of the examination (see “Adjudication” below).

3. Before the candidate re-joins the examiners, the supervisor should describe, as appropriate, the candidate’s (a) academic and employment record, (b) current research activity and history of research productivity (e.g., publications and presentations), (c) record of scholarships and awards, and any other background information that might be useful for the other examiners.
4. The committee chair should invite the candidate to join the examiners at the table and inform the candidate about the order in which examiners will ask questions and about any other pertinent procedural details. The committee chair also should ask the candidate whether he or she has any questions about procedures.
5. Normally the candidate begins by providing a brief (5-15 minutes) overview of his or her research area or project. (This step may be omitted for the PhD defense when all of the examiners have been present at a preceding public presentation.) Questioning commences immediately thereafter, with the committee chair inviting each examiner to participate in turn. The committee chair should ensure that the candidate has ample opportunity to respond to each question.
6. When all the examiners have agreed that they have completed their questioning, the committee chair should ask the candidate whether he or she has any brief, closing comments. When the candidate and examiners are finished, the committee chair should ask the candidate to leave the room until the committee has reached a decision.
7. After adjudication, the candidate should be invited back into the room and informed of the committee’s decision. In the case of revisions or additional work, the supervisor typically provides details at a later time. The supervisor also is responsible for describing to the student the factors that influenced the committee’s decision.
8. If signatures of committee members are required, they should be obtained at the end of the meeting.

Adjudication

The committee chair should advise the committee members about the decisions to be made. For the Master's thesis defense, the second-year project exam, and the final PhD oral exam, the committee should consider both the candidate's performance in the oral examination and the thesis. In particular, the committee must decide on one of four possible recommendations:

Pass. Both the written material and the candidate's examination performance are acceptable. In the case of final Master's and PhD exams, members of the committee sign the signature page immediately. In the case of PhD Candidacy Exams, the Department submits a "Recommendation for Change of Category" form, which will allow the student's status to change from "provisional candidate" to "candidate" for the PhD.

Pass Subject to Revisions. The student is judged to pass, but some or all committee members withhold their signatures until additional work is completed (e.g., supplementary reading, or revisions of the thesis). At this point the committee must decide on who will be responsible for determining whether this additional work has been completed satisfactorily. Final approval might depend on the judgment of the supervisor, the supervisory committee, a subset of the examining committee, or the entire examining committee. A second meeting of the committee is judged to be unnecessary. In the case of Master's and Final PhD examinations, the thesis or dissertation must be turned in to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research within six months of the oral examination.

"Pass subject to revisions" is not an option for the Oral Candidacy Exam, but the student may receive a "Conditional Pass," which requires (a) an explanation for the recommendation, (b) the setting of conditions and associated timeline for the student, (c) details of assistance that the student may receive from committee members, and (d) the approval mechanism for meeting the conditions. This information is to be conveyed to the student, the Associate Chair for Graduate Studies, the Chair of the Department, and the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research.

Adjourned. If the amount of additional work required is substantial and the committee decides to reconvene, the examination should be adjourned. This decision would be appropriate, for example, if additional research or very major revisions are required, or if the committee finds that the written material is satisfactory but the oral defense is not. If this option is taken, the committee chair must (a) specify in writing the nature of the deficiencies, (b) indicate how the deficiencies are to be addressed, and (c) indicate whose approval (i.e., the supervisor's, the supervisory committee's, or the entire committee's) must be gained before the examination can be reconvened. This information is to be conveyed to the student, the Associate Chair for Graduate Studies, the Chair of

the Department, and the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research. The final date set for reconvening the examination must be within six months from the date of the original examination. “Adjournment” is not an option for the Oral Candidacy Exam.

Fail. If the committee decides to fail the student, the committee chair should describe the reasons for rejection to the student, the Associate Chair for Graduate Studies, the Chair of the Department, and the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research. The committee chair also should make recommendations, on behalf of the committee, about whether the candidate should continue in the program. In the case of the Oral Candidacy Exam, when the recommendation is “fail” the examining committee must consider also whether the student should repeat the candidacy exam (if the student has the potential to perform at the doctoral level), and if so, the written recommendation should include details of the exam deficiencies. The repeat exam is to be held within six months of the first candidacy exam. In the event that the repeat candidacy exam is failed, the examining committee must recommend either that (a) the student transfer in to a master’s program, or (b) the doctoral program should be terminated.

The adjudication of the second-year project oral exam has no formal status (i.e., no decision is communicated to FGSR) and is used purely to provide feedback to the student. However, the possible decisions may be used to structure the discussion.

Typically each committee member comments on the strengths or weaknesses of the candidate’s performance and expresses his or her preliminary opinion about what the final decision should be. Often the examiner who is least familiar with the student’s past work is offered the option of commenting first. The committee chair is responsible for encouraging discussion and for determining whether a consensus can be reached.

According to Faculty regulations, if all but one member of the committee agree on a favorable decision, the decision shall be that of the majority. If two or more examiners dissent, however, the case must be referred to the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research for appropriate action. In the case of Master’s and Final PhD exams, the dissenting examiner may choose not to sign the signature page.

In the case of Final PhD Oral Examinations, if the external member of the committee is the only person who does not agree to a favorable decision, the case must be referred to the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research.

In addition to the formal decision, committee members should provide informal and helpful comments, suggestions, and advice that are to be passed on to the candidate by the supervisor or the committee chair.

Announcement of Decision

The committee chair should inform the Graduate Program Assistant about the decision of the committee and, if it is favourable, ensure that the decision is reported to the Department.

The Graduate Program Assistant should prepare and forward the appropriate forms to the Faculty.

FGSR Exam Checklist

FGSR has provided the following checklist summarizing the requirements for various examining committees.

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Committee Membership Checklist

	MSc Final		PhD Candidacy		PhD Final		
Number of Faculty Member Examiners (UA or not)	At least 3		At least 5		At least 5 attending		
Exam Committee Chair	Faculty member from the Dept		From Dept. Not supervisor or co-supervisor		From Dept. Not supervisor or co-supervisor		
Number from Outside the Dept (UA or not)			At least 1		At least 2		
Number from UA but not the Dept	At least 1				At least 1		
Number from Outside the University					1		
Supervisory Committee is part of exam comm?			Yes		Yes		
Arms' Length Examiners = Not from supervisory committee			At least 2		At least 2		
Eligibility as	Sole Supervisor?	Co-Supervisor?	Supervisory Committee member?	Exam Committee member?	Extra to normal complement?	Internal/ External?	Decanal approval needed?
Professors Emeriti	No (except for early retirement)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes [good for 3yrs]
Faculty members from depts not offering grad. program	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes [good for 3yrs]
Clinical Appointees	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (if unit has PhD prog)	Yes [good for 3yrs]
Adjuncts, who are UA professors (in a different unit)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
UA Adjuncts, with primary employment outside the UA	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes [good for 3yrs]
Experts from Outside the UA	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes [ad hoc]
FSO/RA/PDF/Sessional: Normally not eligible. Ad hoc approval needed. Department recommends to FGSR.							

7

Revision History

Amended April 11, 1990

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