

Department of Biological Sciences (BS)
Graduate Committee Policies for Ph.D. Comprehensive Exams

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Please note that much of this information can be found in the [UNC Graduate Student Handbook](#). Additional clarifying information has been added specifically to address the Department of Biological Sciences program.

WRITTEN EXAMS

1. **Written exam timing.** Written comprehensive exams should be taken no later than the first six weeks of the student's **5th or 6th semester** of their program.
 - a. This timeframe is dependent upon the student:
 - i. Completing a minimum of 36 credit hours of graduate-level coursework, with a minimum of 24 credit hours completed at UNC and having earned at least a 3.0 GPA;
 - ii. Successfully filing paperwork with UNC's Graduate School identifying the members of their graduate committee (*Request to Appoint a Doctoral Committee* form on the Graduate School website), as well as having filed the *Plan of Study* form (available on the BS website);
 - iii. Meeting all requirements to date, as outlined in the relevant 4-yr or 5-yr flow charts, and fulfilling provisions (if applicable from admission) to maintain adequate forward progress towards degree completion.
 - b. Extensions will only be granted for serious extenuating circumstances, such as medical/family reasons or faculty sabbatical leave.
 - i. Students who complete their 6th semester without taking their written comprehensive exams will be considered to be making inadequate progress, according to a 4- or 5-year timeline, and will not be eligible for departmental funding (i.e. teaching assistantships and summer funding) until such time that the comprehensive exams are completed.
 - ii. Extensions require the student, their entire committee, and the Department Chair sign an extension request form (available from the Chair of the BS Graduate Committee) no later than the 6th Friday of their 6th semester. This form requires that everyone will agree upon a new planned year and semester that the student will take these exams, considering the student's situation.
 1. The committee should be given a minimum of a week to discuss the proposed new date and make a decision.
 - iii. Students who complete the agreed upon semester in their extension request without taking their written comprehensive exams will be considered to be making inadequate progress, according to their agreed upon timeline, and will not be eligible for departmental funding (i.e. teaching assistantships and summer funding) until such time that the comprehensive exams are completed.
2. **Written exam format.**
 - a. No more than four committee members will provide written exams. Traditionally, the committee member from outside the BS will not contribute written exams, but this decision is determined jointly by the committee and student. The research mentor also provides written questions.
 - b. Exams may include questions on general biology, topics specific to the student's project, teaching philosophy, coursework taken by the student, interpretation of published research in their field, and various other possible topics.

- i. In preparation for each exam, students are expected to consult with their individual committee members regarding exam content.
 - ii. It is left to the discretion of committee members as to how much guidance they provide students in preparation for the exams.
 - c. Each committee member will notify the student, in advance of the exam, as to whether their exam will be open- or closed-book and on-campus or take-home.
 - i. On-campus exams are often administered in the Biology conference room or in a space agreed upon by the committee, and must be scheduled by the student in four-hour time blocks (M-F, 8am-5pm).
 - ii. Take-home exam administration should be agreed upon by the student and the committee member who prepared the exam. The time allocated for each take-home exam will be a maximum of 48 hours, but the exam should be designed so that students could complete the exam in four hours.
 - iii. Written comprehensive examinations may not be performed on weekends or when University offices are closed for the holidays.
 - iv. If a student is registered with the Disability Resource Center (DRC), arrangements can be made with the DRC Director to administer exams and proctoring at the DRC or to address other accommodations.
 - d. The student needs to complete the Department of Biological Sciences (BS) form called "*Request to Schedule Doctoral Written Comprehensive Exams*" (see [Forms & Instructions page, Doctorate tab](#)) and submit to the Chair of the Graduate Committee.
 - i. Each exam is scheduled for a different day, often within a week.
 - ii. All written exams must be completed within a 2-week time period and before the 6th Friday of their 6th semester.
 - e. It is the student's responsibility to arrange with each committee member the day and time for each exam, acceptable exam-taking locations, and distribution of the exam (i.e. how the student will receive the exam and how they will return the completed exam to the exam writer).
 - f. Once an exam has begun, it is considered an attempt at the exam.
- 3. **Written exam results.**
 - a. Each exam is evaluated as either pass or fail, as determined by the exam writer. All exam scores are compiled by the research advisor into a final result (i.e. pass, conditional pass, or fail).
 - i. **Pass:** A student is considered to have passed their written comprehensive exams, if at least 75% of the committee (traditionally 3 of the 4 members, including the research advisor) agrees a student has passed.
 - ii. **Conditional Pass:** A student is considered to have a conditional pass on their written comprehensive exams if, < 75% but > 25% of the committee (traditionally 2 of the 4 members) agree the student passes.
 - 1. A student will be provided with the specific conditions and timeline to complete the conditions to transition to pass. The timeline will never be more than 12 weeks.
 - 2. A student may be required to write on a particular area or question(s) of a written exam, as determined by the committee.
 - 3. If conditions are not met by the date provided by the committee members, the student is considered to have "Failed" their comprehensive exam.

- iii. **Fail:** A student is considered to have failed their written comprehensive exams if 25% or less of the committee (traditionally 1 of the 4 members) agrees a student has passed.
 - 1. The committee must determine if the student is allowed a “retake” of their comprehensive exam.
 - a. If this is permitted, the retake must be completed by the end of the following semester. A retake **may not** be scheduled during the same semester that the original examination was completed.
 - i. If a student does not pass after a retake, their program will be terminated.
 - b. If a retake is NOT permitted, the student’s program will be terminated.
- b. Notification of individual exam results and overall written comprehensive results
 - i. Following evaluation, exam writers will notify the research mentor of their decision for their exam (i.e. pass or fail) and may also directly notify the student, at their discretion.
 - ii. The research advisor should compile the individual exam results to determine the final decision. All members of the committee who participated in the written exams should sign the BS “*Report of Doctoral Written Comprehensive Exams*” to file with the Graduate School.
 - 1. The results of the written comprehensive examinations must be reported to the Graduate School no later than the semester following the examination or the Graduate School may require a repeat of the examination.
 - 2. A passing report of written exams must be accepted by the Graduate School, AND the student should submit the Graduate School’s “Request to Schedule a Doctoral Examination” form at least 14 calendar days prior to the date of their oral exam.

ORAL EXAMS

- 1. **Oral Exam Timing.** After passing the written comprehensive examination, every doctoral student must take and pass an oral comprehensive examination.
 - a. The research advisor directs the student to arrange the date, time and place of the oral examination with *all committee members*.
 - i. After all arrangements are made, the student or research advisor will notify the Graduate School by forwarding a signed and completed *Request to Schedule a Doctoral Examination* form (available on UNC’s Graduate School website) **at least two weeks** (14 calendar days) prior to the date of the examination.
 - ii. No exam will be allowed with less than one-week prior notice to the Graduate School.
 - iii. As a general recommendation, students planning ahead should consider an oral exam date roughly three weeks after the week of written exams – which leaves a week for the committee to grade the written exams, any necessary deliberations, AND the two weeks required by the Graduate School for scheduling. This extra time can be useful as many students find that committees will ask oral questions reflecting on questions or responses in the written exams – and these three weeks allow for extra preparation time.

- b. For the Graduate School to approve a request for the student to take the oral examination, the following conditions must be met:
 - i. The committee members and faculty representative must be the same as those approved by the Graduate School (and included on the *Request to Appoint a Doctoral Committee* form submitted early in the student's program);
 - ii. Passing written comprehensive examination results must have been received and recorded by the Graduate School prior to requesting to schedule the oral comprehensive examination;
 - iii. Annual progress reviews from the program are on file in the Graduate School for each year prior to student's scheduling their oral exam.
 - c. The student is responsible for confirming the date and time of the examination with all of their committee members.
 - d. The Graduate School will approve and publicize the examination date, time, and place. Once approved, the Graduate School will forward a fillable *Results of the Oral Comprehensive Exam* form privately to the student's Research Advisor, either via campus mail or secure email.
 - e. Any examination that is not scheduled in advance through the Graduate School will not be recognized as valid and must be rescheduled.
2. **Oral exam format.**
- a. The research advisor serves as chairperson of the oral comprehensive examination committee. **All committee members and the faculty representative**, or a substitute assigned according to the guidelines for Doctoral Committees, external and honorary members must be present at the examination.
 - i. Attendance, for the purpose of this policy, is defined as either a physical/in-person presence on campus or an electronic presence (e.g. telephone/conference call, video conferencing [Skype®, Facetime®] or other online meeting platform).
 - ii. Should the technology fail or be disrupted in the orals in excess of 15 minutes, the Research Advisor and/or Faculty Rep must contact the Graduate School and reschedule the examination for later date and are not subject to the two-week period required for public announcement of the examination. If the examination continues with failed technology for more than 15 minutes, the results will not be accepted by the Graduate School and the student will need to reschedule and will be subject to the two-week period for public announcement.
 - iii. No more than two committee members may attend the oral comprehensive examination electronically.
 - iv. The Graduate School expects to be notified of any committee members who will attend electronically at the time the oral comprehensive is scheduled.
 - b. The intent of the oral comprehensive examination is to provide the student the opportunity to express themselves scientifically and coherently, in a give-and-take exchange with their committee. Questions will probe the student's level of understanding, with a particular focus on the specific area of study; however, questions may involve a variety of areas in the Biological Sciences. With this in mind, the oral comprehensive examination itself should *not exceed 2.5 hours in length*.
3. **Oral exam results.**
- a. The student's performance on the examination will be evaluated as:
 - i. **Pass:** at least 3 out of 4 committee members (or $\geq 75\%$) agrees a student has passed, including the research advisor.

- ii. **Conditional pass:** A student is considered to have conditional pass if 2 of the 4 members (or < 75% but > 25%) agrees a student has passed.
 - 1. A student will be provided with the specific conditions and timeline to complete these conditions to transition to pass. The timeline will never be more than 12 weeks.
 - 2. Specific conditions and a timeline for completion must be recorded on the *Results of the Oral Comprehensive Examination* form before turning in to the Graduate School;
 - 3. If conditions are not met by the date provided by the committee members, the student is considered to have “Failed” their oral exam.
- iii. **Fail:** A student is considered to have failed their oral exam if 25% or less of the committee (traditionally 1 of the 4 members) agrees a student has passed. “Fail” outcomes can come with the option of "retake permitted" or "retake not permitted", which should be specified on the *Results of the Oral Comprehensive Examination* form before submitting it to the Graduate School.
 - 1. If “retake not permitted”: student's degree program will be terminated
 - 2. If “retake permitted”: the retake must NOT be scheduled during the same semester that the original examination was completed. Only one retake is allowed. If a student does NOT pass the retake, their program will be terminated.
- b. An electronic version of the “*Results of the Oral Comprehensive Examination,*” formatted specifically for that student, will be emailed to the entire committee (and not the student) approximately two weeks prior to the scheduled oral comprehensive exam date.
- c. All members of the committee who participated in the oral exams should sign the electronic “*Results of the Oral Comprehensive Examination*” form to file with the Graduate School.
 - i. The results of the oral exams must be reported to the Graduate School no later than the semester following the examination or defense.
 - ii. The Graduate School may require a repeat of the examination if the form failed to report to the Graduate School within the timeline.