

School of Biological Sciences (SBS)
Graduate Committee Policies for MS-NT Comprehensive Exams

Last updated 24 Aug 2021

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 School of Biological Sciences program.

WRITTEN EXAMS

1. **Written exam timing.** Written comprehensive exams should be taken no later than the first few weeks of the student's **last semester** of their program.
 - a. This timeframe is dependent upon the student:
 - i. Completing a minimum of 5 graduate-level BIO courses at UNC and having earned at least a 3.0 GPA.
2. **Written exam format.**
 - a. By the end of the penultimate semester, the student must provide the MS-NT Academic Advisor with a list of 5 BIO graduate courses and instructors that they have already completed at UNC as part of their MS-NT program.
 - b. The MS-NT Academic Advisor will select 3 of the listed 5 courses to solicit comprehensive exam questions. The respective instructors will be notified. At that time, the student is encouraged to consult with the instructors for guidance on how to study for their portion of the Comprehensive Exam.
 - c. The questions are completely at the discretion of the examiner yet should relate to the overall conceptual knowledge gained from the specific course selected for examination. The complete comprehensive exam is designed to be able to be completed in 3 hours (with approximately 1 hour per selected course).
 - i. In preparation for each exam, students are expected to consult with their individual examiners regarding exam content.
 - ii. It is left to the discretion of examiners as to how much guidance they provide students in preparation for the exams.
 - d. The Comprehensive Exam will be administered to the MS-NT student generally within the first few weeks of their last semester (no later than the 10th week of the semester).
 - i. On-campus exams are often administered in the Biology conference room, and must be scheduled for three-hour time block (M-F, 8am-5pm).
 - ii. Online exam administration are often administered via an online proctoring system through the Biology Masters Non-Thesis Canvas Shell. The time allocated for each section of the three sections assigned a window of time (often 48-72 hours), but each section of the comp exam should be designed so that students could complete the exam in 60 minute (for a total of 3 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.
 - e. Once an exam has begun, it is considered an attempt at the exam.
3. **Written exam results.**

- a. Exams will be graded by the selected instructors within 2 weeks after the exam and the Graduate School will be informed of the results by the deadline established by the Graduate School.
- b. Each exam is evaluated as either pass or fail, as determined by the exam writer, using the standard of 70% as passing. All exam scores are compiled by the MS-NT Academic 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 100% of the exam committee (3 examiners) agrees a student has passed.
 - ii. **Conditional Pass:** A student is considered to have a conditional pass on their written comprehensive exams if, < 100% but > 33% of the exam committee (2 of the 3 members) agree the student passes.
 1. If this happens, the MS-NT Academic Advisor will convene the committee of 3 examiners to make a collective decision on the overall conditions or further actions.
 2. A student may be recommended to retake the exam again in a subsequent semester. SBS policy is students can only take the entire comp exam once a semester for a maximum of two attempts.
 3. A student may 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.
 4. A student may be required to write on a particular area or question(s) of a written exam, as determined by the committee.
 5. 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 33% or less of the committee (traditionally 1 of the 3 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.
- c. Notification of individual exam results and overall written comprehensive results
 - i. Following evaluation, exam writers will notify the MS-NT Academic Advisor of their decision for their exam (i.e. pass or fail) and may also directly notify the student, at their discretion.
 - ii. The MS-NT Academic Advisor will compile the individual exam results to determine the final decision. The MS-NT Academic Advisor and the Chair of the SBS Graduate Committee will sign the “*Report of Written Comprehensive Exams: Master’s Degree Non-Thesis*” to file with the Graduate School and SBS.

1. The results of the written comprehensive examinations must be reported to the Graduate School no later than deadline established by the Graduate School if taken during the student's final semester to ensure meeting graduation requirements.