

PhD Defense: Preparing for Your Oral Examination

The student being examined must be present in person at Queen's University for their oral thesis examination.

1. The defense is a public presentation and discussion of the findings of the research program are conducted before a committee of selected faculty. This event marks the first time that the candidate truly expounds on and defends the meaning and significance of his or her research and knowledge of the discipline to peers and colleagues alike. The thesis examination will be OPEN unless a request based on justifiable reasons has been approved by an Associate Dean (SGS) (see regulation here: <http://www.queensu.ca/calendars/sgr/thesis.html> Attendance at the oral thesis examination).

The doctoral thesis must be original and be of such value as to merit publication.

The designated person in the student's home department (the candidate, the supervisor, the graduate coordinator or graduate assistant) will schedule the Oral Thesis Examination by filling out the *Oral Thesis Examination Form* (Ph.D). This form outlines the composition of the Thesis Examining Committee and the other details of the thesis examination.

The completed and signed form must reach the School of Graduate Studies no later than 25 working days before the tentative examination date. In preparation for the oral thesis examination, the candidate must submit one copy of the thesis, to each member of the Thesis Examining Committee including the Chairperson. Distribution of the thesis copies to the examining committee must follow the same deadlines as outlined above.

Doctoral students: A PDF copy of the thesis must be submitted to the School of Graduate Studies (thesis@queensu.ca) to be reviewed for formatting (25 days in advance). The student will be notified of any required corrections. Please note: if the thesis is too large to send by e-mail, go to the link below for instructions on how to give access to the Thesis Coordinator to review your thesis on [QSHARE](#).

Composition of the Thesis Examining Committee — Doctoral Programs:

- 1 Chairperson - (*selection made by the Thesis Coordinator if Department cannot*)
- 1 Head of the Department (*or delegate*)
 - *One faculty member can serve both the Chair and Department Head role but they would not have a vote if serving this dual role*
- Supervisor(s)
- At least one other member of the Department
 - *Can be from the student's supervisory committee*
 - *Includes Core and Cross-Appointed faculty*
- 1 Internal-external examiner
 - *A faculty member from another Department, but may be cross-appointed with Environmental Studies)*
- 1 External examiner
 - *A faculty member from a different University or government agency*
 - *Must hold a PhD*
 - *Must be at arm's length from the student's research*
 - *Can not have published within five years with the student's supervisor(s)*

Notes on Committee Composition:

1. With the exception of the Chairperson for Doctoral Programs, it is the responsibility of the Department to select, verify eligibility, and invite all members of the Thesis Examining Committee.
2. Final approval of the Thesis Examining Committee members lies with the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies.
3. The Internal-External Examiner is not permitted to be a co-author on any papers contained in the PhD thesis. It must be confirmed that the External Examiner has not published with the supervisor within the last 5 years.

Forms:

Confidential Report Form: The Thesis Coordinator circulates the oral examination particulars and confidential report forms to each member of the Thesis Examining Committee by e-mail.

The reports must be submitted (*in confidence*), to the Thesis Coordinator for circulation to the Chairperson of the committee by the deadline date indicated. Each member of the Thesis Examining Committee must indicate whether the examination should be held, and if the candidate is permitted to defend the thesis.

Oral Thesis Examination Outcome Categories: At each oral thesis examination, the examining committee will reach one of the three outcome categories below:

- Passed
- Passed with major revisions
- Referred
- Failed

These outcome categories are outlined in full detail below, or in the [Graduate School Regulations](#).

[Oral Thesis Examination Form - Ph.D](#) (PDF, 187 KB)

Examination Procedure:

The following are notes on the conduct of oral examinations, including all parts and some comments.

- 1) At the oral, when the examiners and the candidate have been introduced to each other, the candidate is asked to withdraw briefly, but to remain close to the examination room.

The Chair then reads aloud the examiners' reports in this order (with lengthy reports, the Chair may read a summary of the reports that has met with the approval of the examiner concerned):

- Examiner external to the University (Ph.D., some Masters' exams)
 - The "internal-external" examiner
 - The second departmental reader
 - The head of the department or his or her representative, and
 - The supervisor(s).
- 2) The Chair asks if there are any general questions that the examiners wish to discuss before the candidate enters.
 - 3) The candidate is recalled. The Chair begins the oral examination. Candidates will give a brief exposition of his or her thesis. This should take no longer than 20 minutes.
 - 4) The questioning then follows in the order set out above in 1) for the reading of the reports. The time allowed for each examiner is at the discretion of the Chair. Ph.D. examinations run on average for 2 hours or slightly more. Each examiner, therefore, has a rough quota of 20-25 minutes, but the Chair must exercise his or her discretion rather than enforce this allotment in any mechanical fashion. The examiner external to the university is usually allowed as much time as he or she wishes, which is one reason the external examiner goes first. The Chair may help to guide the time limits that he or she feels are reasonable. Often the supervisor has fewer questions than the other examiners. The supervisor can give the candidate a chance to tie up any loose ends from previous questions, or to speak on matters, which have not been the subject of earlier questions.

Note: While each examiner in turn holds the right to question, he or she may allow supplementary questions from other examiners during his or her allotted time, when appropriate. The oral may, therefore, temporarily take a more discursive form. The Chair should be careful to see, as tactfully as he or she can, that each examiner has his or her own quota of time without excessive interruption.

- 5) At the conclusion, the Chair asks if there are any supplementary questions and, if not, the candidate is again asked to withdraw, staying within call.
- 6) On the candidate's withdrawal, the Chair calls for a discussion of the candidate's performance in the written thesis and in the oral defence. Although unanimous decisions are usually reached, a vote of two or more examiners places a thesis in the "lowest" of the three categories. For example, if the

vote is two or three to refer, the thesis is referred. If the vote is two or four to fail, the thesis is failed, and so on.

- 7) The four decisions that the examining committee may reach are those set out in the "Thesis Examination Result" sheet. These are:
- **Passed:** A thesis is passed if it is acceptable in its present form or pending minor revisions. A thesis may be placed in this category if no substantive changes are required. Changes in the form of corrections to include typographical or grammatical errors, minor modifications to the thesis, editorial revisions or the like, may be recommended with a thesis classified as passed. The Chairperson should indicate clearly whether or not some changes are required before final acceptance of the thesis by the School of Graduate studies. *A list of the required revisions must be provided by the Chairperson to the student and the supervisor*, and the completion of the revisions must be certified to the School of Graduate Studies by the thesis supervisor or other designated person.
 - **Passed with Major Revisions:** **A thesis is passed with major revisions if it is not acceptable in its present form or pending minor revisions but** could be acceptable pending major revisions. Major revisions could include, for example, re-articulation and repositioning of research purpose, substantive integration of new literature, major additions or revisions to conceptual framework, methodology, results, and/or discussion. In cases of portfolio or manuscript theses, a passed with major revision outcome may be assigned if one or more of the manuscripts requires major revisions. A passed with major revisions may not require revaluation of the written thesis by the whole examining committee. Revisions must be certified to the SGSPA by those whom the examining committee deem responsible for oversight of revisions.
 - **Referred:** A vote of two or more examiners will place a thesis in this category if it is not acceptable in its present form, but could be acceptable pending major revision. A thesis will be referred if it requires substantive changes such as rewriting a chapter, reinterpretation of data, corrections to calculations or additional research in order to attain acceptable standards of coherence and integrity in argument and presentation. The Chair, in consultation with the committee, may also decide to reconvene the examining committee and hold another oral examination. The examining committee may also use the referred category if it determines that the oral examination itself, either separate from or in conjunction with the written thesis, is unsatisfactory. In such cases, a second oral examination must be held, and the committee must then return a decision of either "pass" or "fail". In all cases of referral, the nature of the revisions and/or additional work, and/or the holding of a second oral examination, must be specified in writing by the Chairperson to avoid dispute or ambiguity. *When outlining the revisions and/or additional work required, the Chairperson must be as specific as possible.* These comments will be passed on to the candidate by the School of Graduate Studies as conditions to be met for the thesis to be passed. Any outlined revisions must be certified by the Chairperson or delegate as having been completed satisfactorily. Usually, this certification is delegated to at least two members of the examining committee. In all cases of referral, the examining committee remains in being until it has agreed that the thesis is either passed or failed.
 - **Failed:** This means that the thesis is unacceptable to the discipline, even with major revision. If the committee returns two or more votes showing failure, this means that the committee recommends the student be required to withdraw from the program on academic grounds.

General Notes:

If the committee returns two or more votes for referral it may decide to hold another examination after the candidate has carried out further research and/or rewritten the thesis, but *normally not more than one year later*.

Candidates have up to twelve months to complete the revisions to their thesis but should be encouraged to do so as soon as possible. In cases where the thesis has to be re-submitted to the examining committee, this has to be done no later than twelve months from the date of the first oral examination.

A thesis that has been defended by oral examination can be submitted once more only in revised form. A candidate whose thesis does not satisfy the examining committee on the second submission will be failed (General Regulations 8.9b).

The student will be notified of the results immediately by the Chair of the Committee.

It is permissible to note corrections on your copy of the thesis. Alternatively, examiners may hand in lists of typographical and stylistic errors to the candidate or supervisor after the oral examination. The candidate is responsible for carrying out all the required corrections to the thesis. The nature of any required revisions will be specified in the space provided in the "Thesis Examination Result" sheet and the completion of these revisions will be certified to the School of Graduate Studies as directed in paragraph 7 above.

At the conclusion of the oral examination, the examiners return all copies of the thesis to the candidate.

Only members of the examining committee have a vote in deciding the result of the examination. The Chair may use his or her position to guide the examining committee in reaching a decision, but he or she is not a voting member of the committee. The external examiner is present to assure universal standards, and an examining committee should not disregard his or her opinion unless it is certain that it knows better. The external examiner, however, has only the same voting power as any other member of the committee.

Examiners are to be present at and for the duration of the examination. Any exception must be arranged with and approved by the Dean of School of Graduate Studies prior to the examination.

15.9 Master's Thesis Results in PhD Thesis. The results of a Master's thesis must not form a substantial part of a PhD thesis; citation of the Master's thesis is adequate. In some cases, limited inclusion of Master's results are acceptable if they help to clarify the PhD thesis.