



Rose M. Silva
Thesis Coordinator

thesis@queensu.ca
Tel (613) 533-6000 x77313

Notes on the Conduct of Oral Examinations: Guidance of External Examiners

Part 1: Introduction of Candidate, Procedural Matters, and Reading Reports

1. At the oral, when the examiners and the candidate have been introduced to each other, the candidate is asked to withdraw briefly while the examination committee reads their reports, but to remain close to the examination room.
2. The Chair then reads aloud the examiners' reports in the following order:
 - a. Examiner external to the University (Ph.D., some Masters' examinations);
 - b. Internal/External examiner;
 - c. Additional examiner (if part of examining committee);
 - d. Examiner;
 - e. Head of Department or delegate; and
 - f. Supervisor(s).

With lengthy reports, the Chair may read a summary of the reports that has met with the approval of the examiner concerned. The Chair will ask if there are any general questions that the examiners wish to discuss before the candidate re-enters.

Part 2: The Oral Thesis Examination

3. The candidate is recalled. If required by the department/program, the candidate gives a brief exposition (no longer than 20 minutes) of their thesis. Otherwise, the Chair normally opens the oral thesis examination by inviting the external examiner to begin their questioning.
4. Questioning follows in the order set out in Part 1(2) above. On average, Ph.D. oral thesis examinations run for 2-3 hours. Each examiner, therefore, has roughly 20-25 minutes for their questions, but the Chair must exercise their discretion rather than enforce this allotment in any mechanical fashion. The examiner external to the university is usually allowed as much time as they wish. The Chair may help to guide the time limits that they feel are reasonable. Often the supervisor has fewer questions than the other examiners and may provide the candidate opportunity to tie up any loose ends from previous questions.

5. While each examiner, in turn, holds the right to question, they may allow supplementary questions from other examiners during their allotted time, when appropriate. The oral thesis examination may, therefore, temporarily take a more discursive form. The Chair should ensure that each examiner has their time quota without excessive interruption.
6. At the conclusion, the Chair asks each examiner, in turn, if they have any supplementary questions and, if not, the candidate is asked to withdraw along with any visitors.

Part 3: Discussion and Evaluation of Thesis and Oral Defence

7. On the candidate's withdrawal, the Chair calls for a discussion of the written thesis and the defence of the thesis in the oral thesis examination. Although unanimous decisions usually prevail, **the lowest outcome category with two or more votes will result in the decision of the examining committee.** For example, if two examiners vote to refer the thesis and three vote to pass the thesis, then the outcome is referred. If two examiners vote to fail the thesis and four vote to pass the thesis, then the outcome is failed. Each member of the examining committee listed in Part 1(2) above must cast a vote for one of the outcome categories outlined on the next page. Only these members of the examining committee have a vote in deciding the result of the oral thesis examination. The Chair may use their position to guide the examining committee in reaching a decision, but they are not a voting member of the committee. The external examiner's vote carries the same weight as that of any other member of the committee.

The outcome of the oral thesis examination is based on the acceptability of both the thesis and the defence of the thesis at the oral thesis examination. The purpose of the oral thesis examination is to ascertain that the student is able to adequately present and defend the thesis and its underlying assumptions, methodology, results and conclusions in a manner consistent with the degree being sought. **At the oral thesis examination, the examining committee will reach one of the 4 decisions listed below and record it on the "Thesis Examination Results" form. The 4 decisions are Passed, Passed with Major Revisions, Referred or Failed.**

Passed: A thesis is passed if it is acceptable in its present form or pending minor revisions, and its defence at the oral thesis examination was satisfactory. A thesis may be passed if no substantive changes are required. Changes in the form of corrections of typographical or grammatical errors, minor modifications to the thesis, editorial revisions to improve clarity and revisions to clarify results, findings or conclusions, or the like, may be recommended with a thesis classified as passed. A list of the required revisions must be provided by the Chair to the candidate and the supervisor and the completion of the revisions must be certified to the School of Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs 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, rearticulation and repositioning of research purpose, substantive integration of new literature, significant additions or revisions to conceptual framework, methodology, results, and/or discussion. In cases of portfolio or manuscript theses, a passed with major revisions outcome may be assigned if one or more of the manuscripts requires major revisions. A result of passed with major revisions does not require a second oral examination; however, all revisions must be completed within 4-months (i.e., one term). All required major revisions must be documented by the Chair and certified to the School of Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs by those whom the examining committee deem responsible for oversight of the major revisions. A minimum of two members of the thesis examining committee are responsible for overseeing the major revisions.

Referred: A thesis is referred if it is not acceptable in its present form and, after extensive revision by the candidate, requires re-examination by the PhD oral thesis examining committee. For example, a thesis will be referred if it requires substantive changes such as rewriting a substantial portion of the thesis, substantial reinterpretation, reanalysis or recalculation of data or findings, or additional research in order to attain acceptable standards of coherence and integrity in argument and presentation. The committee will reconvene and hold another oral thesis examination of the revised thesis.

The examining committee may also use the Referred category if it determines that the oral thesis examination itself, either separate from or in conjunction with the written thesis, is unsatisfactory. This means that the candidate did not adequately present and defend the thesis and its underlying assumptions, methodology, results, and conclusions in a manner consistent with the degree being sought. Following the second oral thesis examination, the committee must then return a decision of either Passed or Failed; Passed with Major Revisions or Referred outcomes are not options.

In all cases of referral, the nature of the revisions and/or additional work, and/or the deficiencies associated with the oral thesis examination, must be specified in writing by the Chair to avoid dispute or ambiguity. When outlining the revisions and/or additional work required, the Chair must be as specific as possible. These comments will be passed on to the candidate in a letter from the School of Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs as revisions and/or improvements that must be met for the thesis to be reconsidered.

Any outlined revisions in relation to a referred outcome must be certified by the Chair or delegate as having been completed satisfactorily. Usually, this certification is delegated to at least two members of the Committee. In all cases of referral, the examining committee continues to exist until it has agreed that the thesis outcome is either Passed or Failed.

The outcome of 'Passed with Major Revisions' is not an option once the thesis and/or oral examination has been placed in the Referred category.

Notes On The "Referred" Category

1. If the committee returns two or more votes for referred it will hold another examination after the candidate has carried out further research and/or rewritten the thesis, but normally not more than one year later.
2. Candidates have up to twelve months from the date of the first oral thesis examination to complete revisions to their thesis but should be encouraged to do so as soon as possible.
3. A thesis that has been defended by oral thesis examination can be submitted once more only in revised form. A candidate whose thesis and/or defence of the thesis at the second oral examination, does not satisfy the examining committee on the second submission will be failed.

Failed: Failure can occur in two ways:

1. A thesis is failed if the document is unacceptable to the discipline even with substantive revisions. If the committee returns two or more votes of Failed on the basis of the document, this means that the committee recommends that the student be required to withdraw on academic grounds.
2. Failure may also result from an unacceptable second oral thesis examination, where the student was manifestly unable to adequately present and defend the thesis and its underlying assumptions, methodology, results and conclusions in a manner consistent with the degree being sought. A decision of Failed on the basis of the second oral thesis examination requires agreement by the majority (more than half) of the examining committee.

When the examining committee has reached a decision, the Chair will note the result on the "Thesis Examination Result" form and asks each examiner to sign it and check the appropriate box (unless the exam is occurring remotely in which case the chair will sign on behalf of remote examiners). The Chair then signs the form. The student is recalled and the Chair informs the student of the result, including details of any revisions required.

Additional Comments

8. 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 and Postdoctoral Affairs.
9. **Examiners are to be present at and for the duration of the examination. Any exceptions must be arranged with and approved by the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs prior to the examination.**
10. Examinations are typically open at Queen's to visitors. Visitors will leave proceedings during all closed deliberation sessions.
11. **Remote Participation in the PhD Oral Thesis Examination:** It is preferred that all examiners and the candidate being examined are physically present at Queen's University for the oral thesis examination. However, in certain circumstances, it is acceptable for the oral thesis examination to be scheduled so that a member or members, or all members, and/or the candidate being examined could participate in the oral thesis examination remotely using some method of videoconference or teleconference or online meeting arrangement (e.g., via Zoom, Teams, etc.). Arrangements for the use of remote access services must be made by the graduate department/program. All examiners, Chair, and/or the candidate connecting remotely must be present for the duration of the examination and if joining via videoconference are advised to keep their cameras on unless it interferes with communication and bandwidth. All examiners, the candidate, and guests must verbally agree not to record the examination and not to be in communication with the candidate during the examination (e.g., sending texts, photos, or any answers during the examination).