

Preliminary Exam Guidelines for Committee Members

(January 2023)

The successful completion of a preliminary (prelim) exam, which requires the preparation of a written component and a two-hour oral exam, is required to enter PhD candidacy. The successful passing of both must occur by **April 30 of year 2**. This deadline may be waived by the DGS at the request of both the student and mentor due to extraordinary circumstances that are beyond the control of the student. The committee will consist of the PhD mentor, a committee chair who is a member of CMB but is not the primary mentor, and at least two additional graduate faculty with appropriate research expertise. Because at least four committee members must be present to administer the oral exam, students are advised to consider recruiting five committee members. Once the committee is chosen, the student must complete the Graduate School's [Committee Approval Form](#) and submit it to the DGS and DGSA. The form must be approved by the Graduate School at least 30 days before the date of the prelim exam. It is the responsibility of the student to schedule the exam, reserve the meeting space and inform the committee and the DGSA of the exam date. The DGSA will create the exam event in T3 on the student's behalf. Currently, in-person, remote or hybrid exams (e.g., via Zoom) are permitted by the Graduate School. To maintain equity across in-person exams, students are not allowed to provide food or beverages for the committee.

Written prelim document

The final, revised document and an up-to-date CV must be directly emailed to committee members at least **one week** before the scheduled exam and uploaded to T3 by the student. The goal of the written document is to demonstrate proficiency in the student's field of study with respect to understanding pertinent literature, applying appropriate techniques, posing incisive questions and hypotheses to address them, and designing and interpreting experiments. The format of the proposal is that of an NIH F31 application. Required components are:

- a descriptive title (<200 characters)
- a project summary/abstract (30 lines or less)
- specific aims (1-page limit)
- research strategy section (6-page limit including figures/tables) that includes background, preliminary data, methodology/techniques, data interpretation, possible problems, and alternative outcomes.
- A list of abbreviations used

CMB mentors must give students a minimum of two weeks protected time to prepare for the qualifying exam. The mentor may discuss literature, ideas and experiments with the mentee. The mentor can provide feedback during the formative stage of the document and on the presentation prior to the examination.

Oral prelim exam

The oral exam will last for approximately **two hours** and its purpose is to determine whether the student has the sufficient knowledge base, critical thinking skills and competencies to continue on the PhD track. The exam will begin with a brief faculty-only discussion of the student's academic and research progress to date. The student will then present a **30-minute oral presentation** of the proposed research, after which the student will be questioned by the committee members. Interruptions during the presentation should be made only as points of clarification. Although questions will focus primarily on the proposed research, relevant general knowledge is expected as well as demonstration of critical thinking skills. During the exam, **the mentor is a silent observer who is not be allowed to ask or answer questions**. Following the exam, core competency areas will be evaluated by each committee member, including the

mentor, using T3. Because T3 constitutes the official exam record, **faculty must complete and submit their T3 exam evaluations before announcing the result to the student or leaving the exam room.** Four passing scores are required for the student to pass the oral exam; if the committee chair votes to fail, then the student automatically fails. The student will be informed of the outcome immediately after all T3 responses are entered. The committee may provide verbal advice to the student at the end of the exam, and T3 evaluations and comments should be discussed by the student and the mentor. In the event of failure, the committee votes on whether the student will be allowed to take the exam again. The re-take must occur no sooner than three months and no later than six months after a failed exam. The examining committee must remain the same and the vote to pass the re-take must be unanimous. Failure to pass the oral exam on the second try results in automatic dismissal from the Graduate School. If 24 eligible graded credits have been completed and other Graduate School requirements met at the time of the re-take, a master's degree can be conferred.