

## Examinations: Tips and Strategies

- Prior to the exam, and after the committee is chosen:
  - Look at each examiner's recent/relevant publications to understand the perspective of the examiner (examiner questions may be guided by this).
  - For example, put yourself in your committee's shoes - what would you want to know about this project? Come up with a list of possible questions and how you would answer them.
- Be responsible for every word written in your thesis or proposal and be prepared to explain every concept, i.e. if it's there, it's testable.
  - Be prepared to discuss how your assays/experiments work. Know why you used a particular test over another, or at least be able to discuss the pros and cons of different approaches.
- Be familiar with the room and technology – try it out before the exam.
- Hold mock exam(s) in the weeks prior to the actual exam (with lab peers, and with your LMP Graduate Students' Group – this is a service they offer).
- Exam strategies (from students and faculty):
  - Take a deep breath, and don't panic!
  - Remember... as the student answering questions, you ARE in control: when you are answering questions, your answer may lead to an area where you are knowledgeable and this will generate questions in that area, so think about the direction you want to go.
  - Answer questions clearly but concisely – don't go on and on – showcase what you know, and learn to know when to stop (practice exams/mock exams help with this).
  - You don't have to respond immediately; take time to think and formulate your answer.
  - Do not answer just “yes” or “no” – give explanations for your “yes” or “no.”
  - Remember that most committee members aren't trying to trick you - listen for clues in the ways they phrase their questions (e.g. word emphasis, examples provided, etc.).
  - If you don't know the answer to a question, say so.
  - If you have an idea how to respond but aren't certain, make it clear that you are speculating based on what you do know.
    - Accept that there will be questions where you won't know the answer - don't try to bluff your way through them, but try to offer a reasonable hypothesis based on what you do know.
  - Do NOT guess or pretend.
  - If you aren't certain what the examiner is asking:
    - Ask them to rephrase/repeat;
    - Paraphrase back to the examiner: “are you asking me....”
    - These strategies give you more time to think and allow you to verify that you understand what's been asked.
  - If the examiner asks the same question after you've responded, this is an indication that you didn't respond appropriately or didn't understand the question.
  - If you feel like you've given a wrong answer and your committee has realized this, and you feel like you're going further and further down the wrong path, it's okay to say that you have reconsidered your answer and that you'd like to amend it.
  - When explaining concepts, use the whiteboard –demonstrates that you can teach the idea.
  - If you feel you didn't answer a question or explain a concept well, you will have an opportunity to do so again at the end of the exam.
  - Try to think about the "bigger picture" when it comes to your work. What relevance does it have to current issues/events? How would you pitch this project if you were looking for funding?

- Be prepared for some big-picture questions that might not seem to have much to do with the project itself - the committee may want to know how well you can think of your research relating to the "real world".
- At the end of the exam, you may also ask questions of the examiners to clarify any points raised during the exam.

**Additional tips for candidacy exams:**

- Although supervisors are expected to provide a minimum of two to three weeks protected time prior to the exam for your final preparations, it is expected that you are studying well in advance of this period.
- Prior to the exam, and after the committee is chosen, the date set, and the examination document has been distributed make an appointment with each examiner regarding the scope of topic that they believe is relevant for your knowledge.
- You need a very broad knowledge of topics related to your field.
- The purpose of the exam is to assess the breadth of your knowledge in your general field of research, your knowledge of the technical aspects of the proposed thesis research and your reasoning and critical thinking abilities.
  - The exam is NOT a defence of the thesis proposal, however your understanding of the proposed research and experimental methods will be assessed. It WILL focus on background theory, strategies for methods of investigation: be able to justify the rationale for your research.
  - Don't feel bad if you don't know all the answers. This is an exam to test the limits of your knowledge, so there are going to be things you don't know. Just do the best you can!