The Oral Candidacy Examination

*Background*

The Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGSR) admits all PhD students as provisional doctoral candidates; students do not get reclassified as candidates for a doctoral degree until they take an Oral Candidacy Exam. FGSR defines the goals of the Doctoral Program [Candidacy Exam](https://uofa.ualberta.ca/graduate-studies/about/graduate-program-manual/section-8-supervision-oral-examintations-and-program-completion/8-3-conduct-of-examinations) as:

Students must demonstrate to the satisfaction of the examining committee that they possess: an adequate knowledge of the discipline and of the subject matter relevant to the thesis; and the ability to pursue and complete original research at an advanced level.

Thus, the Oral Candidacy Exam should examine the student about much more than the student's dissertation topic or even the broader literature relevant to that topic; it is defined by FGSR as disciplinary, not just thesis-oriented. Nonetheless, the student must also demonstrate that he or she is capable of conducting research in the subject matter relevant to the thesis.

The Department has interpreted this set of goals to mean that the [Dissertation Proposal](https://www.ualberta.ca/psychology/-/media/psychology/pdfs/graduate/dissertationproposal.pdf), in an ideal world, would “fall out of” the readings done for the Candidacy Exam. That is, the area reviewed should be broad enough so that the student would know what he or she wanted to do for the dissertation and could immediately proceed to write the proposal.

There is no stricture against examining the student first on general, disciplinary issues, followed by questions that are quite specifically related to research issues.

*Reading Lists and Area Statement*

Students are responsible, together with their supervisory committee, for devising General and Specialization Reading Lists; the substance of the Candidacy Exam will be taken from the material on these lists. The General Reading List is to cover the student’s broad area (e.g., Cognitive; Developmental; Neuroscience; Social), and any other disciplinary readings deemed necessary by the student and his or her supervisory committee. The Specialization Reading List is to cover the student’s intended dissertation topic (e.g., Object Recognition; Memory; Neural Mechanisms of Memory; Spelling and Reading; Scientific Literacy; Affect and Cognition).

The reading lists should be designed to ensure that the student encounters core materials and integrating frameworks in the student’s discipline and area of concentration, and it should help the student to situate his or her interests within broader perspectives. In specifying a Candidacy Reading List, supervisory committees in various areas might also wish to consider special objectives (e.g., proficiency in relevant techniques) that will determine the character of the reading list.

Some time prior to the Oral Candidacy Exam, but not necessarily before the Specialization Reading List has been approved, each student should write a brief (2-5 page) Area Statement to be given to the [Oral Candidacy Examination Committee](https://uofa.ualberta.ca/graduate-studies/about/graduate-program-manual/section-8-supervision-oral-examintations-and-program-completion) members. A student’s Area Statement should reflect his or her Specialization Reading topic and the disciplinary rationale for how the general and specific readings fit into that topic. In addition, the statement should include the line of research that the student envisions will come out of these readings to form his or her Dissertation Proposal. The statement may be similar to the one-page (single-spaced) summary statement that is required for NSERC and SSHRC grant proposals.

*Administrative Considerations*

To aid in the construction of Candidacy Reading Lists and to foster some consistency, the Department attempts to implement two support measures. First, each area in the department is charged with maintaining a General Reading List to be used as deemed appropriate by the supervisory committees. The General Reading List for an area should reflect the members’ consensus on a set of readings that comprises what is necessary to be known about a given area. Thus, it is not envisioned that these lists should be completely overhauled each year; rather, they should change incrementally.

Students may request the most recent versions of the Reading Lists from the Psychology Graduate Assistant. On an annual basis, a reminder will go out from the Associate Chair for Graduate Studies in early August that areas should update their General Reading Lists (if desired). This update should be accomplished within a time frame to allow the General Reading Lists for each area to be available to students and supervisory committees no later than mid-September.

Second, the Department will be responsible for accumulating Specialization Reading Lists to serve as models of the Specialization Reading Lists to be developed by students for their Oral Candidacy Exams. The idea is that the example reading lists model both the scope and the depth of a “modal” reading list. It is understood that this can (and probably should) vary from area to area, as well as within areas from specialization to specialization.

After completing their Oral Candidacy Exams, students should give a copy of their Area Statement, and General and Specific Reading lists to the Graduate Program Assistant to be kept in their file. The reading lists will be collected and made publicly available to other students and faculty.

*Qualifying Exam*

Students will normally complete a written Qualifying Exam before the Oral Candidacy Exam is scheduled as partial assessment of the student’s preparation for the oral exam. The structure, format, and specific goals of the exam are determined by the supervisory committee. If the supervisory committee finds that the questions have not

been answered adequately, the committee may require either that the exam be retaken with new questions or that other remedial activities (e.g., writing a paper on a particular issue) be completed satisfactorily prior to the scheduling of the oral exam. Students should be provided with detailed feedback on their performance. A brief report on the supervisory committee’s evaluation of the Qualifying Exam should be written by the supervisor for the student’s file prior to scheduling the Oral Candidacy Exam. The answers on the written exam would normally be supplied to the other members of the oral candidacy examining committee.

There is usually a fair amount of ambiguity concerning the breadth or nature of questions that will be covered during the Oral Candidacy Exam. For example, Candidacy Reading Lists can be very long, and it is often not clear to students for how much, or for what kind of information from the list, they are responsible. The written Qualifying Exam requirement addresses these challenges to some extent. It helps students understand the kinds of issues and questions that their supervisory committees regard as important. The student’s responses in the Qualifying Exam can serve to structure the oral exm or to highlight issues that need to be addressed at that time. The Qualifying Exam also helps the supervisory committees decide whether students are properly prepared for the oral exam before it is scheduled.

The format and content of the Qualifying Exam is determined by the supervisory committee and should be tailored to the student’s program of study and the nature of the research area. There are several possible models for the exam. One is to have 3-5 take- home essay questions to be completed in a 48-hour period; another model is to have the student write a suitably circumscribed review paper by an agreed-upon deadline.

However, in selecting a format for the exam, supervisory committees should be careful not to impose requirements that are likely to take a significant time to complete. For example, a paper that would take many months to research and write would be inappropriate.

*Timing*

The Departmental interpretation of the FGSR rules for candidacy timing is that for students entering the PhD program with a Bachelor’s degree, the Candidacy Exam should normally be taken some time after their first year and no later than the end of their third year in the program. For students entering the PhD program with an external Master’s degree, the Candidacy Exam should normally be taken no later than the end of their second year in the program.

*Composition of the Candidacy Examining Committee*

[FGSR guidelines](https://uofa.ualberta.ca/graduate-studies/about/graduate-program-manual/section-8-supervision-oral-examintations-and-program-completion) state that the examination shall be carried out by the supervisory committee, to which at least two other full time faculty members have been added. The  [Notice and Approval of the Doctoral Candidacy Examining Committee and Examination](https://uofa.ualberta.ca/graduate-studies/-/media/gradstudies/forms-cabinet/records/examining-committees/notice-of-examining-committee-and-examination-date.pdf)

Date must be submitted to FGSR at least three weeks in advance of the candidacy examination date. The intent here is that there should be at least two arm's-length individuals at the examination who are added to the core committee for the examination. One of the additional members must be from a department other than Psychology.

The exam is chaired by someone who is not the student's supervisor, and may serve as a sixth examiner. After successful completion of the candidacy examination, a [Report of Completion of Candidacy Examination](https://uofa.ualberta.ca/graduate-studies/-/media/gradstudies/forms-cabinet/records/examining-committees/report-of-completion-candidacy-exam.doc) is filed with FGSR.

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