

## Guidelines for the Written and Oral Qualifying Exams

(approved by the faculty on January 28, 2022)

### Goals of the qualifying exams

The qualifying exam process, and especially the preparation and reading process, is flexible in order to tailor at least some aspects to the particular needs of the student. While that has benefits, it can be challenging for students to understand where there is room for flexibility and where there is not. This document thus seeks to clarify this process and provide general guidelines for students and faculty. In so doing, we also try to make the exam process useful moving forward as many of the materials developed here (such as documentation of research interests, research statements, detailed CV, etc.) will become part of the student's research portfolio while also helping to prepare for job applications.

### Recommended Sequence in Preparation for Quals

- **By the end of the 1st year of PhD program:**
  - Student will identify internal members of the advisory committee.
- **By the end of semester 3 of PhD program:**
  - Ph.D. minor and the minor advisor are identified. Participation of the minor advisor in the qualifying exam is encouraged but not required.
  - Student and advisory committee members **co-develop** the set of research themes that will form the basis for the qualifying exam.
    - Research themes should be identified as broad areas of expertise for the student moving forward.
    - Examples: teleconnections, watershed hydrology and climate change, political ecology of forests, food security in Africa, climate change impacts on agriculture, remote sensing of urban landscapes.
  - Student develops a **3-5 page research overview statement**.
    - This statement provides a justification for the research themes by connecting them to the general research topic.
    - This is typically developed in multiple iterations with the committee members; discussed in annual committee meetings; etc.
    - The statement is intended to be general (such as one written for job applications, tenure, etc.), but can provide as much specificity as possible (e.g., a proposal that discusses plans for specific manuscripts if doing an article-based dissertation or an outline of chapters for a traditional dissertation). A more focused statement allows the student and committee to have a meaningful discussion of the research topic and how it relates to the readings.
    - This statement forms the basis for the proposal that is presented to the committee in an annual meeting.
- **By the end of semester 4 of PhD program:**
  - **Co-development** of reading lists
    - Each reading list will be based on a research theme as discussed with advisory committee members.

- Readings build on past coursework and current research themes while also including new reading material (that anticipates planned research) identified by student or faculty.
  - The readings should include both foundational material and current debates relevant to research themes.
  - Each reading list should include some explanatory text (up to one page) that describes the connections between the theme and the student's research.
  - Reading lists should have a clear focus and will vary in length depending on faculty and research theme.
- **Two weeks before written comprehensive exam (by the end of semester 4):**
  - Student submits a portfolio to the committee that includes the following:
    - A finalized version of the research overview statement
    - Finalized reading lists
    - CV
- **Written portion of quals**
  - Committee will coordinate beforehand on the questions, with the order of question delivery to be decided by the advisor and student. The specific format of each committee member's question(s) is flexible (e.g., one question or a set of questions, a list of questions to choose from, etc.).
  - Questions will be submitted to the Graduate Secretary to send to the student.
  - Questions are to be answered "open book" with a 3000-word limit for each committee member's question(s).
  - The intention is for students to work on the exams only during the work week (i.e., M-F), although this should remain flexible to accommodate varied work schedules.
  - A typical sequence will have one committee member's questions given to the student at the beginning of the written exam period (e.g., on a Monday morning) and the answers are submitted to the Graduate Secretary when completed (or time expires). Students can take a break between questions if desired.
    - The student may take 2-5 days per question. This range is designed for flexibility, but should be decided in consultation with the advisory committee ahead of time so that the oral exam can be scheduled accordingly.
    - Questions are done sequentially (i.e., not in parallel), with the intention that all questions should be completed within a 3-4 week period.
- **Oral portion of quals**
  - Takes place approximately two weeks after completion of written portion.
  - No presentation is necessary.
  - Focuses on clarification and extensions of responses to written exam questions and discussion of research overview statement. The amount of time spent on the written questions versus the research statement is determined by the advisor and communicated to the committee before the oral exam.