

GUIDELINES FOR THESIS AND DISSERTATION ORAL EXAMINING COMMITTEES

A. THE ROLE OF THE GRADUATE PROGRAM DIRECTOR

The Graduate Program Director must contact all members of the Examining Committee one week before the oral examination to ensure that a majority of committee members agree that the thesis or dissertation is examinable. If the student does not receive a majority vote, the oral may be postponed for a period not to exceed one year. The members who did not find the thesis or dissertation examinable must give their reasons in writing to the student, the supervisor and the Dean within one week after the poll. However, the student has the right to decide to proceed with the oral as planned.

B. THE ROLES OF MEMBERS OF AN EXAMINING COMMITTEE

The exam committee members have the responsibility of ensuring that high standards of scholarship are met.

I. The Chair

For Master's theses, the Chair of the exam committee shall be chosen from among the voting members. Members of the student's thesis supervisory committee may be members of the exam committee, but the principal supervisor may not serve as chair of the exam committee.

For doctoral dissertations, the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies or her/his representative, who will be at arm's length from the supervision of the dissertation, will serve as Chair of the exam committee.

In general, the role of the Chair of the exam committee is to ensure that:

- the process of oral exam is fair and orderly,
- the student is truly being examined and challenged, and
- high standards of scholarship are met.

Prior to the formal start of the oral exam, the Chair should:

- verify that all members of the exam committee are present. (If any member is not in attendance, the examination shall be postponed. Only under rare, exceptional and compelling circumstances can an oral examination proceed in the absence of the external examiner. Please see *External Examiner* below for more details.)
- verify that the members of the exam committee are agreed that the thesis/dissertation is "examinable".
- discuss with the members of the Committee the expected length of the examination, and the order in which the exam committee will question the student.

At the outset of and during the oral exam, the Chair should:

- clarify to both the exam committee and the student the procedures to be followed,
- determine the point at which further questioning will not produce additional useful information for the consideration of the exam committee, and
- monitor the procedures throughout the oral exam.

After the candidate and any observers have left the room, the Chair should assess the committee's opinion from the discussion, including whether the exam committee considers the work sufficiently outstanding to merit nomination for the Faculty of Graduate Studies Thesis/Dissertation Prize.

If there is no consensus, the Chair should call for a vote to determine the outcome of the oral exam. The outcome of the vote shall be governed by the Master's thesis oral exam evaluation guidelines or doctoral dissertation oral exam evaluation guidelines, as appropriate.

After the exam committee has reached a decision, the Chair should:

- recall the candidate to convey the decision, including a description of any required revisions, as appropriate.
- inform the Graduate Program Director if the thesis/dissertation has been nominated for the Faculty of Graduate Studies Thesis/Dissertation Prize, where applicable.
- ensure that the Oral Examination Report Form is complete, including all signatures, and submitted to the Office of the Dean, Graduate Studies.

II. External Examiner

Note: All doctoral dissertation exam committee must include an external examiner. The following description of external examiner roles and responsibilities also applies to those master's programs that require an external or outside examiner on their exam committee.

External examiners are expected to be established academics, normally members of a graduate Faculty at another university. The assessment of the dissertation provided by the external examiner should be treated as the yardstick by which to measure the quality of the candidate's work relative to standards at other universities. The external examiner is a voting member of the Committee and must have been at arm's length from the dissertation. The external examiner does not have a formal power of veto, but the exam committee must have substantial reasons for not accepting an external examiner's recommendation, especially if the recommendation is negative. The external examiner's written comments will be provided to the other members of the exam committee prior to the oral exam and, where the exam committee deems advisable and the external examiner agrees, may be made available to the student at the end of the oral exam.

Only under rare, exceptional and compelling circumstances can an oral examination proceed in the absence of the external examiner, and only with the express permission of the Dean. In such circumstances, the following conditions must be met:

- the external’s absence must be unplanned and unavoidable (i.e. it must have been the initial intent that the external would be present);
- a written assessment of the dissertation must be received before the scheduled examination, including certification that the dissertation is examinable, and identification of any areas that need revision, or questioning and clarification at the oral exam. However, if the external examiner feels that the result of the examination depends upon the oral exam, then the external examiner shall be present or the oral exam will be postponed until the external examiner can be present or an alternative external examiner is appointed.

III. “Arm’s Length” Member

The “at arm’s length from the thesis/dissertation” committee member, sometimes referred to as the “internal external”, has a particular responsibility of ensuring that these high standards of scholarship are met from a perspective broader than that of the student’s own program. Such exam committee members who are appointed to the student’s program should be especially mindful of this responsibility.

IV. Ex-officio Members

In addition to the voting members, the Vice-President Academic & Provost and Graduate Program Director may participate as ex-officio members (non-voting, unless present as one of the voting members) on doctoral dissertation exam committees. They, along with the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies or his/her representative, may also participate as ex-officio members (non-voting, unless present as one of the voting members) on master’s thesis exam committees.

As the oral examination is the culmination of a graduate student’s study and advances the mission of York University as a whole, the inclusion of these positions as ex-officio members of the thesis and dissertation exam committees recognizes and emphasizes the importance of the oral exam. Due to the nature of the workload of the incumbents in these positions, they are not expected to attend every oral exam. When they do attend in their capacity as ex-officio members, they are encouraged to be active participants, but they do not vote.

C. ORAL EXAM PROCEDURAL GUIDELINES

- For all doctoral dissertation oral exams and for those master's programs that require an external or outside examiner, the written comments provided by the external examiner will be made available to the committee prior to the oral exam.
- At the oral exam, the student may be given the opportunity to present an oral summary of his or her work. If this procedure is followed, the Chair of the exam committee will inform the student and indicate the time available.
- Normally, the first round of questions will refer to general aspects of the work. Subsequent questions will deal with more detailed matters. For all doctoral dissertation oral exams and for those master's programs that require an external or outside examiner, the external examiner will normally begin each round of questioning and will be followed by the other members of the committee in an order agreed upon before the exam.
- The Chair of the exam committee will ensure that each member of the exam committee has an equal opportunity to pose questions. After the formal rounds of questioning, general discussion and order of further questioning will be at the Chair's discretion.
- The question period should normally run its natural course, with members of the exam committee indicating when they are satisfied. The Chair of the exam committee will, however use his/her discretion as to the appropriate closing point. For a master's thesis, a general guideline for the length of the oral exam is approximately 10 to 20 minutes for presentation (if applicable) and 1.5 hours for questioning. For a doctoral dissertation, a general guideline for the length of the oral exam is 20 to 40 minutes for presentation (if applicable) and 2 hours for questioning.
- After the candidate and any observers have left the room, the exam committee will discuss the work and the oral defense of that work, the discussion beginning with the external examiner's remarks.
- The Chair of the exam committee will then assess the committee's opinion from the discussion.
- If there is no consensus, the Chair of the exam committee will call for a vote to determine the outcome of the oral exam. The outcome of the vote shall be governed by the master's thesis oral exam evaluation guidelines and doctoral dissertation oral exam evaluation guidelines.
- In cases of *accepted pending specified revisions*, the nature of the revisions will be agreed to by the exam committee and reported in detail by the Chair in the "comments" section of the Oral Examination Report Form.

- In cases of *major revision*, the Chair of the exam committee will confirm which of the following two procedures, agreed upon by the committee before the exam is adjourned, will be used to finalize the oral results: a) the committee will reconvene within twelve months to continue the oral examination; or, b) the revised dissertation will be circulated within twelve months to all members, who will inform the Chair whether they feel the stipulated requirements have been met.
- After the exam committee has reached a decision, the candidate will be recalled and informed by the Chair of the outcome of the examination. Should revisions be required, their exact nature will be transmitted to the student by the Chair.
- The written comments of the external examiner will, with his or her permission, be provided to the student and program director.
- The Oral Examination Report Form will be properly completed (including, where appropriate, a clear description of required revisions) and signed by the Chair and returned to the thesis coordinator in the Office of the Dean, Graduate Studies.
 - In cases of *accepted pending specified revisions*, it is the responsibility of the supervisor to ensure that all of the specified revisions are made and the Chair will confirm that this is the case. Specified revisions must be completed within six months of the date of the oral examination. Approval of specified revisions should be reported to the Office of the Dean, Graduate Studies, via the Revisions Approved Memorandum (which can be found here: <http://www.yorku.ca/grads/forms/revisionsapprovedmemorandum.doc>) or via email to the thesis coordinator at gsthesis@yorku.ca.
 - In cases of *referred pending major revisions* or *failure*, the Chair will provide detailed reasons for the exam committee's decision in writing to the Dean, program director and student within two weeks of the oral exam. When major revisions have been completed satisfactorily as decided by the exam committee, the Chair should report approval of the major revisions to the Office of the Dean, Graduate Studies, via the Revisions Approved Memorandum or via email to the thesis coordinator at gsthesis@yorku.ca.

D. RESULTS OF ORAL EXAMINATIONS

1. *Accepted with No Revision*

2. *Accepted Pending Specified Revisions*

Specified revisions could range from typographical errors or changes of a minor editorial nature, to specified insertions or deletions which do not radically modify the development/argument of the dissertation. The committee must specify such changes with precision. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to ensure that all such changes are made, and the Chair will confirm that this is the case. Specified revisions must be completed within six months of the date of the oral examination.

In cases where there is one vote for major revisions (for a Master's thesis) or no more than two votes for major revision or one vote for failure (for a doctoral dissertation), then specified revisions are expected.

The nature of the revisions should be agreed to by the exam committee and reported in detail on Oral Examination Report Form under "comments". Specified revisions must be completed within six months of the date of the oral exam. Specified revisions must be completed within six months of the date of the oral exam. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to ensure that all of the specified revisions are made and the Chair will confirm that this is the case. Approval of specified revisions should be reported to the Office of the Dean, Graduate Studies, via the Revisions Approved Memorandum, (which can be found here: <http://www.yorku.ca/grads/forms/revisionsapprovedmemorandum.doc>) or via email to the Thesis Coordinator at gsthesis@yorku.ca.

3. *Referred Pending Major Revisions*

A Master's thesis is referred for major revision if any of the following conditions exist:

- the committee agrees that the thesis requires substantive changes in order to be acceptable; or,
- there are a minimum of two votes for major revision; or,
- there is one vote for failure.

A doctoral dissertation is referred for major revision if any of the following conditions exist:

- the committee agrees that the dissertation requires substantive changes in order to be acceptable; or,
- there are two votes for failure; or,
- there is one vote for failure plus a minimum of one vote for major revision; or,
- there are at least three votes for major revision.

In cases involving a "referred pending major revisions" decision, one of the following procedures, agreed upon by the committee before the examination is adjourned, must be used to finalize the oral results:

- the committee will reconvene within twelve months to continue the oral examination;
or,

- the revised thesis or dissertation will be circulated within twelve months to all members, who will inform the Chair whether they feel the stipulated requirements have been met.

Please note that a clear consensus must be reached by the committee as to the extent and nature of the revisions required. Detailed reasons for referring pending major revision must be supplied in writing by the Chair of the exam committee to the Dean, the program director and the candidate concerned within two weeks.

Approval of major revisions should be reported to the Office of the Dean, Graduate Studies, via the Revisions Approved Memorandum or via email to the thesis coordinator at gsthesis@yorku.ca.

After an adjournment and when the major revisions have been completed, the thesis or dissertation is failed if there are two or more votes for failure. A thesis or dissertation cannot be referred for major revisions more than once and no further adjournment is permitted.

4. Failed

A Master's thesis is failed if there are a minimum of two votes for failure. A doctoral dissertation is failed if there are a minimum of three votes for failure. In the event of failure, detailed reasons must be supplied in writing by the Chair to the Dean, program director and student within two weeks.

Revised June 1, 1996
Revised November, 2001
Revised June, 2014