

Student Guide to the Thesis* Oral Examination

The purpose of this guide is to share information regarding the master's and doctoral thesis examination to help students prepare for this program milestone. This guide is intended to supplement, not replace, the *Faculty of Graduate Calendar* and a student's ongoing consultation with his or her supervisor and supervisory committee.

The Examination

The thesis oral examination is a requirement of the Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS), which regulates all graduate programs at the University of Calgary. FGS states that the purpose of the examination is as follows:

The purpose of the thesis oral examination is not only to defend independently the thesis, but also to serve as confirmation of the student's knowledge of the research topic within the context of their field of study.

The thesis oral Examination assesses the quality of both the thesis and the student's performance defending the work during the oral examination. To successfully complete the examination, students must pass both components. The thesis oral exam is considered 'open book'. Students are encouraged to bring a copy of their thesis and any other relevant reference material to the exam.

Examination Attendance

Normally, all thesis examinations are 'open', which means that interested parties may attend, such as students from the Werklund School of Education (WSE) or from other faculties. Guests are simply observers and cannot ask questions. If guests plan to attend, it is expected the student or the guests notify the student's supervisor 2 weeks ahead of time. The supervisor must ensure that the GPA has the names and contact information of the guests.

The examination committee members and/or the student may attend in person or remotely (via Zoom). When the student is not physically present for the oral exam, there must be a proctor in the room with the student during the examination. The supervisor is normally on campus for the exam.

Note: During Covid-19, when the Graduate Programs in Education (GPE) office is closed, all participants attend the thesis oral examination remotely, using Zoom videoconferencing technology. For details about procedures entailed in a Zoom exam, please see *GPE - Guide - Participating in a Remote (Zoom) Oral Examination*.

Neutral Chair

FGS requires that a WSE faculty member, who has not been involved with the completion of the thesis, oversees the conduct of the examination—the neutral chair. The neutral chair does not receive the thesis, nor do they ask questions of the student. The primary role of the neutral chair is to ensure that FGS procedures are followed and that students are examined in a fair and respectful manner.

Examination Procedures

Before the oral examination, all examiners read the thesis, independently write a formal assessment of the

*Note: The Faculty of Graduate Studies uses the term "thesis" in regard to both the master's and the doctoral degree; however, some Graduate Programs in Education documents also refer to the doctoral thesis as the "dissertation".

Some excerpts taken or adapted from the FGS website and *Calendar* and the *FGS - Handbook of Supervision and Examination - 2014-2015*.

written work, and formulate questions for the student. Before the examination begins, the neutral chair collects the examiners' written assessments of the thesis. The examination consists of three components: student's opening summary, examiners' questions and student's responses, and the examination committee's discussion and deliberations. The two components—student's opening summary and examiners' questions/student's responses—may not exceed two hours.

Student's Opening Summary

The neutral chair will ask the student if they wish to present an opening summary. This component is not a requirement, but most students elect to begin the exam this way. Students may take up to a maximum of 15 minutes to speak about their work. The aim of the summary is to give students the opportunity to contextualize the thesis. If students intend to use audiovisual aids (e.g., PowerPoint presentation)—not a requirement—it is their responsibility to make any required arrangements beforehand. Opening summaries may take various forms; however, students are encouraged not to read prepared statements verbatim. Making reference to notes is acceptable.

Examiners' Questions and Student's Responses

After the student's opening summary, the neutral chair invites the examiners to ask their questions. The external examiner is the first member to question the student and the supervisor is the last. The order is typically the reverse of how examiners are listed in the *Notice of Oral Examination*.

When all examiners have had at least one opportunity to question the student, the committee has completed what is referred to as the first *round of questions*. Normally, there will be two formal rounds of questions. There may be a short break after the first round of questions, during which examiners and the student are required to refrain from discussion of the examination.

After two formal rounds of questions, the neutral chair invites any examiner who has an additional question to proceed. At this point in the examination, there is no formal order and any examiner may ask questions. When the neutral chair observes that the examiners have no further questions, he or she asks the student to leave the room so that the next phase of the examination—the examiners' discussion and deliberations—can take place. At this time, and any guests who might be in attendance are asked to leave the room as well.

Committee Discussion and Deliberations

The neutral chair engages the examination committee in a discussion of the student's written and oral performance. Deliberations continue until the committee reaches a consensus. It is important for students to note that there is no time limit for committee discussion and deliberations. Students should not make inferences about the nature of the decision based on the length of time this last component takes.

Once the examination committee has reached a decision, the neutral chair or the supervisor asks the student to return to the room. The outcome of the thesis oral examination is shared with the student.

Post-examination Procedures

Following the examination, the student and supervisor meet to discuss any required revisions. The supervisor will inform the student of the time frame for completing revisions and submitting the final version of the thesis to FGS.