

Qual Checklist, Format, and Tips

Checklist for scheduling the qual: must be done by the end of your fifth semester

- Form your supervisory committee and submit the [request form](#) to make it official (this process takes a while, so submit the form as early as possible)
- Talk with your advisor, get their input for whether you're ready for your quals
- Gather your committee for a qual planning meeting (**Note:** you can have this meeting before your committee is official)
- Make sure your [plan of study](#) is up to date and signed by your committee
- Schedule a **two-hour block** for your exam. Use online polling to determine your committee's availability. Try not to schedule this for finals week, as that's a busy and unpredictable time.
- [Reserve a room](#)
- After the exam:** fill out the [qualifying exam form](#)
- For your milestone masters:** fill out [this application](#). You will need to attach the following forms:
 - [Change of classification](#)
 - [Reapplication for graduate degree](#)

What to prepare

The precise structure of your qual will depend on your committee. But there are (usually) two components:

1. **Oral component:** a 40-45 minute presentation with the following components:
 - a. **Detailed background:** starting from the basics, give *all* of the background and motivation behind your research topic (should take ~20 minutes)
 - b. **Research:** The work you've done so far or plan to do and/or a literature review as assigned by your committee (~20 minutes)
 - c. **Future plans:** Include a slide with a timeline for your PhD research. This will show your committee that you are prepared for your thesis
2. **Written component:** This varies by group, but your committee will help you decide what the written component should be. It could be a paper that is ready (or almost ready) for publication, the first chapter of your thesis, or a research proposal. See the [Grad Handbook](#) for more information, and discuss with your committee.

What to expect

- **Questions:** Your committee will ask questions throughout your talk and/or have a detailed discussion at the end. They do this to (a) see if you can correct yourself when you've said something wrong, (b) clarify anything that you haven't explained well, (c) dig into your knowledge to make sure you understand all the background to your work and how it connects to the broader context of the field.
- **Time:** Your presentation will be 40-45 minutes, but the exam could take up to two hours due to questions from your committee
- **Evaluation:** After your qual, you'll be asked to leave the room for a few minutes so your committee can discuss whether you've passed. You'll receive one of three grades:
 - **Passed at a PhD/Masters level:** You're good! You're a PhD candidate now! Or a Masters recipient!
 - **Conditional pass:** You're almost there! You just need to do a few more tasks as specified by your committee.
 - **Failed: This is rare,** but if this happens, your committee will decide whether you can re-take your qual, which needs to be done by the end of your sixth semester. If you fail a second time, if

they decide not to give you another chance, or if you're already through your sixth semester, you'll be dismissed from the program. You can petition against this decision.

- **For a masters:** If you are dismissed from the program because you didn't pass your quals by the sixth semester deadline, you can still qualify for a non-thesis M.S. by taking the exam late

Some tips:

- **Plots:** make sure you understand *all* the details of any plots you include! Your committee will likely ask questions about them. Don't forget to include citations
- **Practice**, especially at the grad research seminar! Getting feedback and practice answering questions is invaluable for identifying your blind spots
- **Course material:** If you've taken classes from any of your committee members, they might ask questions related to their coursework. Consider brushing over your old notes before the qual.
 - That said, your coursework may be beyond the scope of your qual! Clarify this with your committee at your planning meeting
- **Clarify expectations:** During your planning meeting, make sure that you are given extremely clear guidelines. For example:
 - How much feedback will your advisor offer on your slides before the exam?
 - Will you need to derive anything? Should you have any equations memorized?
 - What topics (from coursework, from your committee members' expertise, or your field) are beyond the scope of the exam?
 - What will be the structure of the exam? Will questions be asked during the talk or saved until afterwards?
- **If you take your exam early** (in the spring of your second year), you may need to take extra credit hours to receive a masters. This is because you need 30 non-thesis credits for the masters. You also need to be registered for credits during the semester in which you take the exam, so it's usually better to take it during fall or spring rather than summer.