

BHI policy statement on the Ph.D. General Exam

Approved by BHI faculty 3/4/10

The General Exam is an evaluation of the student's ability to pursue in-depth research in a specific area. It is also a defense of the student's proposal for their dissertation research. The exam will include both an oral and a written part. The oral portion is a public presentation of the student's area of research, and includes an oral exam covering the student's in-depth knowledge of their area. Evaluation of the General Exam (both written and oral) is entirely up to the student's Ph.D. committee, including the Graduate School Representative (GSR). (See [Graduate School memo #13](#) for more on the Ph.D. committee.)

It is our policy that the oral exam includes the following four parts:

- A public student presentation: 45-60 mins
- Questions from audience (public): 15-30 mins
- A closed session (the "exam") with questions from committee members
- An evaluation session (committee only)

As this exam primarily tests depth of knowledge, it is expected that most exam questions will focus on the student's area of specialization within BHI.

The written portion of the General Exam should be in the form of a page-limited research proposal. The committee chair and the student may choose from a number of possible formats, but the page limit must be between 13 and 25 pages. The format of NIH or NSF research grant proposals are recommended. Regardless of format, the document must include sections that provide the following content:

- a) A concise overview of the research proposal. (What do you intend to do?)
- b) A section that describes the background and significance of the proposed work. (Why is the research important? What is the related prior work by others? What are the unsolved problems in this area?) This section should review relevant literature as space permits.
- c) A description of preliminary work. (What work have you carried out to date? How do these preliminary results support further work in this direction?)
- d) A plan of action for carrying out the proposed work. (How will you do the work? What specific steps will you carry out to complete the dissertation?)

We recommend that the student schedule a tentative exam date with the committee well in advance (3-4 months). However, before the student schedules the exam with the Graduate School, all committee members must have read and approved of a near-final draft of the written document (the student's research proposal). As part of our policy, students must also supply a title and an abstract for dissemination three weeks prior to the scheduled date of the exam.