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Acing Your Qualifying Examination

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Strategies for a Successful QE

The qualifying exam can be one of the most uncertain, stressful, and time consuming aspects of graduate education. The exam may include a written component in addition to the oral component and follows a format according to the specific requirements of the graduate program.

Although the content and structure of qualifying examinations varies by discipline, this information focuses on strategies for success valuable to graduate students in all departments. This is also a resource for graduate student advisors as they help graduate students prepare for this important milestone.

Understand the QE

Understanding the format and process of the QE is imperative to success. You should determine:

- How much time does the exam usually take?
- What is the format of the exam?
- How is your performance assessed?

Ask your major professor and QE Chair for input. Your graduate program coordinator can also provide advice on how the QE is typically scheduled and organized for your program.

Review the [Doctoral Qualifying Examination webpage](#) and the [QE Regulations](#) to learn how the QE is evaluated and what the results mean.

Know your examiners

The members of your QE committee will determine if you are ready to advance to candidacy. Learn about their background and research interests. Take a class with them if possible. Try to determine the following:

- What topics do your examiners write about? What are their publications? In what journals do they publish papers?

After you have thoroughly researched your committee members, and have verified they are suitable and applicable for your committee, you should meet with them. Try to meet with them in person at least once before the exam, as this will let you get to know their style of questions and their personality. When you meet with them ask the following questions:

- What is their philosophy towards the examination?
- Is there a particular topic area they expect to cover during the examination?
- What types of questions do they usually ask?

Talk to fellow graduate students about their QE experiences, especially those who have had the same committee members.

This information will help put you at ease with your examiners, and can help you anticipate possible questions they may ask. Think of the QE as an exchange of information with your senior colleagues rather than a test.

Prepare early and systematically

What to study varies according to your program and research field, but some strategies apply to all students. Organize the topics you will study from general to specific as this is often how your exam questions will progress, and it is the best way to re-learn material.

Ideally, you should begin your systematic studying six months in advance. However, do not stress if you only have a couple months. As long as you are systematic in your preparation, you will be in good shape.

1. Review the basics of your field. You can achieve this by reviewing your past lower division courses. You can use old notes, textbooks, exams and lab write ups. Focus on the main themes and concepts. You may think that you have forgotten everything, but it will begin to come back to you.
2. Review the specifics of your field. This means reviewing the material covered in any of your upper division or graduate level courses. Again, focus on the major themes and concepts. However, if there are details that relate to your research or your field of study, study those as well.
3. Prepare and practice your dissertation research proposal. Often your dissertation proposal is formulated under guidance from your major professor. This includes a thorough literature

your research topic. Therefore, any questions that your committee has about your research proposal you will be able to answer.

4. A great strategy for practicing your dissertation research proposal is to explain your research to others. Begin with those in your department, because they will be able to give you scientifically based critiques. The greatest test of your ability to clearly explain your research is to present it to people outside of your field of study. This could include your friends in and outside of academia, and family members. The more you talk about your research and answer questions, the more prepared and confident you will be for your QE.
5. Prepare your "how I came to be here" speech. Again, all programs are different and you should consult with your major professor and committee chair to see if this applies to you, but most QEs begin with a "how I came to be here" speech.
6. Your committee may ask, "How did you come to be before us today?" or "Why did you decide to get your Ph.D.?", or "Why did you choose your topic of study?" There is no wrong answer to these questions. This gives you a chance to tell the committee about yourself, perhaps things they never knew before. You also should think of this speech as a platform for you to plant seeds for further questions from your committee members. Information you provide may prompt additional questions from them, so be sure to mention things you would be happy to discuss further.
7. Prepare for anticipated questions. After you review the general and specific topics in your field, interview and meet with your committee members, and prepare your research proposal, you will have covered all of the potential topics in play for your QE. Now, you should begin to generate anticipated questions.
8. Set up a practice qualifying exam. Enlist the help of your colleagues, fellow graduate students who have already passed their QE, or even friends or family. Present to them your "how I came to be here" speech and your research proposal. One of them should keep time for you, so you can adjust the length of your speech and proposal accordingly. Have them ask you several of your "anticipated questions" and questions they create. Ask them for critiques on your speech, volume and body language... anything you could work on before your oral exam. Try to conduct your mock exam in the same room you will hold your QE to become comfortable in the location.
9. Review recent journals. As the date of your qualifying exam approaches, be sure to read the latest editions of the most important research journals in your field and subfield. Your committee members often read these same journals and they may draw some of their questions from recent articles.

Reduce your stress

additional [resources](#).

1. Schedule your exam at a time and location convenient for you. Talk to your committee several months in advance about scheduling a time, and they may be more flexible in accommodating your needs.
2. Decide in advance:
 1. How will you respond to off-the-wall questions? Expect you will receive a few unanticipated questions and create a response plan. Perhaps you can ask your committee member to repeat or clarify the question. Take a few moments to think about it. Restate the question out loud so you can make sure you understood the question as it was asked. Then go for it! You are prepared to answer.
 2. How will you respond to questions you do not know? It is inevitable that you will be asked a question or two and not know the answer. Prepare ahead how you will answer those when asked. These questions are designed to test how you think about a problem. Do not try to “fake” an answer. It is best to be honest and say you don't know. Some possible answers include:
 - “I don't have that information at this time. However, I would obtain that information from...”
 - “That is a good question and I am not sure about the answer. However, I would find the answer by...”
 - “I am not sure what the answer is, but if I was to make a hypothesis based on my knowledge it would be...”
3. The week before:
 1. Reconfirm the date, time, and location of the QE with all your committee members. This way you can touch base one last time before the big day.
 2. Visit the exam room and check that the keys fit, the lighting and any equipment are all functional and ready to go.

Have an exam day plan

The morning of your exam:

- Ensure you have reliable transportation to the exam location and account for unforeseen delays.
- Bring some water - you're going to do lots of talking. You are not expected to bring refreshments for the committee.

During your exam:

- Know the time constraints of the exam. Use your watch and pace yourself accordingly. Speak slowly, and clearly. Do not cut off your examiners when they are speaking.
- At the end of the examination, be sure to thank all of your examiners politely for their time, consideration and effort.

After your exam:

- The committee will review and determine the result of your exam
- They will notify you of their decision – a unanimous, pass, not pass, or fail; or a split decision.
- If you passed – Congratulations, you're ready to advance to candidacy! If you didn't pass, the committee will provide feedback and a timeline/format for completing the second exam if applicable.
- Don't be discouraged if you don't pass the first time. Your committee may have identified an area or two on which you need to gain more knowledge. Don't look at a "no pass" as a "vote of no confidence." It's the responsibility of your committee to make sure that you're ready to advance to candidacy.

For more information on the QE process and the meaning of the various results, consult the [UC Davis Qualifying Exam Regulations](#).

The gathered information was part of a Professors for the Future student project and uses exam preparation material from Dr. Louis Grivetti, Department of Nutrition.

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