PhD General Exam

By the end of Winter Quarter of the third year, a PhD student must choose an area of specialization and obtain the provisional agreement of a faculty member to be the student's PhD advisor. After this, in consultation with the advisor, the student should choose other members of the faculty to serve on the student's supervisory committee. This also includes finding a GSR (Graduate School Representative); note that faculty members with primary, joint, or affiliate appointments in our department are not eligible to serve as the GSR. The student then asks those faculty if they are willing to serve and provides the information to the Student Services Office. The UW Graduate School recommends that four months elapse between the formation of the committee and the taking of the general exam.

The general exam must be taken no later than the Winter Quarter of a student's fourth year, unless an extension is granted by the Graduate Program Committee. Prior to the general exam, through a combination of lecture courses and reading courses under the guidance of the thesis advisor, a student is expected to obtain some depth of knowledge in the chosen field, extensive enough to have an understanding of some outstanding contemporary problems in that field and the methods that currently exist to attack such problems.

The purpose of the general exam is for the student to demonstrate to the satisfaction of the supervisory committee the student's understanding of a problem or problems in the field. The exam has two components, the preparation of a written document called the General Paper that must be given to the members of the Supervisory Committee at least two weeks before the date of the oral exam, and the oral exam itself. The exact format of each of these components is up to the supervisory committee, but the Graduate Program Committee envisions the following as typical:

- In the General Paper, the student gives a 10-20 page expository account of the relevant research, culminating in a problem or list of problems to be studied, together with a discussion of some of the relevant literature.
- In the oral exam, the student gives a 40-50 minute lecture including a discussion of the background to the problem or problems to be studied, a discussion of recent work related to the problems, and a discussion of methods available to approach the problems. Following the lecture, the committee members ask the student questions about the problems or their background.

General exam checklist

Please consult this checklist (also available as a PDF) for details about the timeline and your responsibilities.

Basic requirements:

☐ Be registered for the quarter in which you plan to take the general exam.

☐ 60 credits must be completed (in-progress credits are allowed)

☐ Complete all Mathematics Program Requirements:

- Three years of full-time study (two of which must be at the UW)
Two three-quarter sequences of core mathematics courses
Pass two preliminary exams

4 months prior to exam:
Establish a supervisory committee. Consult with your research adviser for the members of this committee. Inform Sarah Garner (sterrs@uw.edu) of your committee members once you have their agreement to serve. The committee must include:

- A minimum of four members: Chair, Graduate School Representative (GSR), and 2 additional members (one of which must be a member of the graduate faculty)

1 month prior:
- Set an exam day and time with your committee.
- Collect and collate concurrences (email OK) from all faculty on the supervisory committee, indicating their agreement on the requested date and time. Forward emails to Sarah Garner (sterrs@uw.edu) for approval records.
- Submit the exam request online (https://grad.uw.edu/for-students-and-post-docs/mygrad-program/)

2 weeks prior:
- Provide the General Paper to your committee.

1 week prior:
- Your committee will decide if you are ready to complete the general exam.
- You should receive an email approving your exam request.

After the exam:
- You will receive an email with the outcome of your exam.
- If you pass, you may request your master’s degree if you have not already received it.
- You should register for MATH 800 dissertation credits starting the quarter after you pass your general exam.
- You will be promoted to PDTA II and receive a salary raise in the next quarter after you pass.
- Approximately 4 months after passing the General Exam, you will receive your candidate certificate in the mail.

Questions?
Ask the Graduate Program Coordinator or Sarah Garner.

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Source URL: https://math.washington.edu/phd-general-exam