

## Final Oral Examination Guidelines – Updated Spring 2012

### Preamble

The Final Oral Exam is a formal part of all MS and PhD programs at Virginia Tech. Students **must** read the “Examinations” section of the on-line Graduate School Policies and Procedures:

[http://graduateschool.vt.edu/graduate\\_catalog/policies.htm?policy=002d14432c654287012c6542e3630013](http://graduateschool.vt.edu/graduate_catalog/policies.htm?policy=002d14432c654287012c6542e3630013)

### Purpose of the Final Exam

The purpose of the Final Exam is to determine whether a student demonstrates the same kinds of intellectual and professional aptitudes of someone who already holds a graduate degree in Chemistry. The courses listed on the student’s Plan of Study provide the education foundational for the degree, while the Thesis or Dissertation describes the student’s research accomplishments in a scholarly context. In the Final Exam, the Advisory Committee assesses the student’s ability to communicate those findings and to grasp their significance. The oral exam format allows these qualities to be assessed through direct, interactive questioning.

### Graduate School Policies and Their Interpretation

Enrollment. A Final Exam can only be held during a term in which the student is enrolled. With prior permission from the Graduate School, Final Exams may be held during Exam Week. Students who do not wish to enroll for the minimum 3 credits merely to hold the Final Exam should consult the Graduate Catalog section that describes “Defending Student Status” (DSS). The DSS policy allows a student to be registered for (and to pay for) only one credit hour, even during a summer session, providing certain conditions are met.

Two-Week Rule. The Graduate School requires that the *Request to Schedule Final Exam* form be submitted to the Graduate School no later than 2 weeks before the requested exam date. The Graduate Program Director will **not** sign forms violating this policy, except under extenuating circumstances.

The Exam Card. The Graduate School will issue, by campus mail, the tan-colored Exam Card to the Chair of the student’s Advisory Committee when the exam has been scheduled. The Chair will also receive notification by email that the exam has been scheduled, and if the card needs to be picked up in person.

Unscheduled Exams. The Final Exam may *not* be conducted if the student’s Research Director has not received notification from Graduate School that the exam has been scheduled. The Research Director must have the tan exam card to proceed with the exam. *No exception* to this policy is envisioned.

Latest Possible Prelim. Graduate School policy requires that students pass their Prelim Exam at least six months before the Final Exam. The target date for Chemistry Prelim Exams is the end of the fourth semester of study. Students transferring from another university or who have joined the PhD program after completing an MS thesis must pay special attention to this policy.

GPA Requirements. Graduate School policy requires that students have earned at least a 3.0 average overall *and* a minimum of 3.0 average on the courses listed on the Plan of Study. They do NOT make exceptions to this policy.

Committee Attendance. Graduate School policy requires that the student's **entire** advisory committee sign the *Request to Admit Candidate to Final Examination* form as the Examining Committee.

Substitute Committee Members. Graduate School policy allows a **maximum of one** member of your Examining Committee to be someone who is not a regular member of your Advisory Committee. This situation sometimes arises when one of your regular Advisory Committee members is on sabbatical leave or is impossible to schedule. In this situation, the *Request to Schedule Final Exam* Form should list the name of the professor who will actually attend the exam. Also, the tan Final Exam Card should be signed by the professor who actually attends. In addition, the Chair of the student's Advisory Committee (the student's Research Director) must prepare a brief letter explaining why another *specific* member of the faculty should serve on that particular Examining Committee. A hard copy of that letter must accompany the *Request to Schedule the Final Exam* form to the Graduate School.

Professor Absent for the Exam. Sometimes a professor suddenly becomes unavailable immediately before a student's exam and a substitute cannot be found in time for the exam. (Rarely, a professor forgets about the exam, but students should seek to minimize that problem by sending timely reminders to their Advisory Committee members.) If the student still has four Examining Committee members present, the exam can proceed. If not, then the exam *must* be rescheduled. After an exam where a professor was absent, the Chair of the Advisory Committee must prepare a brief letter explaining the situation; a hard copy of that letter must accompany the Exam Card back to the Graduate School so that the Graduate School staff will not expect all of the signatures to appear on the card.

Professors Must Review the Thesis or Dissertation. The *Request to Schedule the Final Exam* form indicates that professors signing the form are affirming, with their signatures, that they have read the document and found it ready for defense. This means students cannot ask for a professors' signatures until those professors have had *adequate time to review the thesis or dissertation*, otherwise they are essentially asking their professors to commit perjury. See "Deadline Recommendations" below.

### **Chemistry Department Policies**

Annual Evaluations. An Annual Evaluation is not required in the same academic year as the doctoral Final Exam. However, students do need to arrange an Annual Evaluation in the same academic year as the Final Exam if they are planning to continue toward a doctoral degree after completing a Thesis MS.

Time Allotted for Exam. Traditionally the Chemistry Department has allowed two hours for each Final Exam. However, in the case of a thesis MS Final Exam, where the student plans to continue in the PhD program, the professors will need extra time (perhaps up to 0.5 hours) that to complete the Annual Evaluations after the exam and to decide whether the student should be invited to proceed to the PhD if appropriate.

Deadline Recommendations. The Graduate School requires students to schedule their Final Exams two weeks in advance. Professors need to read the thesis or dissertation before signing the scheduling form, and it is customary to allow them two weeks to do so. Therefore it is recommended that students give their *final* thesis version to their Advisory Committee members four weeks before the planned exam date. In addition it is recommended that the student's Research Director review and critique the thesis before it is submitted to the Advisory Committee (another two week interval), and students should allow themselves enough time (perhaps two more weeks) to revise the document based on the Research Director's recommendations.

- A student planning to hold the Final Exam in a given semester should plan to give their Research Director a substantially complete document no later than the sixth week of the semester.

### **Guidelines for the Final Exam**

Exam Coverage. The Final Exam is based primarily on the thesis or dissertation. However the Final Exam is comprehensive, and questions of a general nature are permissible.

Refreshments. Students should *not* bring refreshments to their exams. The Chair of the Advisory Committee may, if he or she wishes, bring refreshments for his or her colleagues.

PowerPoint. Students should prepare their presentations in presentation software such as PowerPoint. A presentation of about 20 slides is suggested. The student's goal should be to summarize their main accomplishments and assume that their professors have already become acquainted with the literature background and experimental details from the written document. The presentation should not be a repeat of the student's internal seminar, because the audience is not a general audience. The audience is a committee of accomplished scholars who will want to know if the student has grasped the full significance of their findings and has critically evaluated the potential weaknesses of their own work. Students who are planning to continue in the doctoral program after an MS Final Exam should include about 5 additional slides in the presentation outlining research plans for the dissertation.

Room Scheduling. Schedule a room by calling the Department office (231-5391). You must either get a room with an LCD projector or reserve a projector with the front office staff. It is the student's responsibility to make sure that the projector is functioning and that the laptop can be connected to the LCD projector prior to the exam, and that the room can be unlocked and made available for use.

Reminding the Committee. Students should send an email reminder to their Advisory Committee members the day before the Final Exam.

Executing the Exam. Final Exams are not open to the public. Typically only the student and the Examining Committee are present, although Graduate School policy allows other faculty members to attend if they wish. (Professors who are not members of the Examining Committee may attend but should **not** participate.) The student's presentation, including the typical interruptions, should consume about 45 minutes. Then the student can respond to additional questions (including any comprehensive questions) for about 45 minutes. Then the Committee can convene briefly (15 minutes) to (a)

determine the result of the exam (b) complete the tan Graduate School Exam Card and the Departmental Final Exam Result form, and (c) convey the result of the exam to the student. These intervals are flexible and are based on a 120-minute exam (see “Time Allotted for Exam” above). The student is then dismissed, and the professors should convene the Annual Evaluation Meeting if needed.

Annual Evaluation Meeting. The Annual Evaluation Meeting is only held in cases where the Final Exam was the defense of an MS Thesis, and where the student intends to continue in the doctoral program. In this case, the committee should pay special attention to the question of whether the student should actually continue. Aside from this question, the meeting is conducted as usual. The Committee should discuss the student’s (self-) Evaluation Form, Student Activities Report, and Research Update, and then complete the Annual Student Evaluation Form. Afterward the Chair of the Advisory Committee should obtain the student’s signature on the Evaluation Form, and then promptly submit all of the cards and forms to the Graduate Coordinator (staff) for filing. Professors should expect that thoughtful discussion of the student’s progress and diligent completion of these forms might require about 30 minutes.

The MS Exam is Not a Prelim. The Final Exam for a Thesis MS degree cannot serve “double duty” as the student’s Preliminary Exam for the doctoral degree. The Prelim Exam must be arranged separately, after determining that the student should continue in the doctoral program, and after ensuring that the student is actually eligible to enter the Preliminary Exam.