

Prelim Oral Examination Guidelines

Adopted by the Department of Chemistry on January 28, 2009

Preamble

The Preliminary (Prelim) Exam is a formal part of all doctoral programs at Virginia Tech. Students **must** read the “Examinations” section of the on-line Graduate School Policies and Procedures:

http://www.grads.vt.edu/graduate_catalog/poli/UIPo.jsp

Purpose of the Prelim Exam

The purpose of the Prelim Exam is to determine whether a student demonstrates sufficient academic preparation, progress toward scholarly independence, productivity in research, and promise for future intellectual growth to justify continuing toward the doctoral degree. The oral exam format allows the Advisory Committee to assess these qualities in a single, vigorous session of direct, interactive questioning without recourse to textbooks, course notes, online databases, or other aids. Students should not expect their Advisory Committee members to “coach” them toward the right answers.

Graduate School Policies and Their Interpretation

Enrollment. A prelim exam can only be held during a term in which the student is enrolled. The exam may not be held during a Summer Sessions unless the student has paid tuition (3 credits) for that session. With prior permission from the Graduate School, prelim exams may be held during Exam Week.

Two-Week Rule. The Graduate School requires that the *Request to Schedule Prelim 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 Prelim 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 they plan to defend their dissertations. 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 allows Departments to decide whether a student may take the Prelim Exam if the GPA is less than 3.0. At present the Chemistry Department usually allows students with a GPA lower than 3.0 to proceed to the Prelim Exam.

Committee Attendance. Graduate School policy requires that the Examining Committee comprise no fewer than four professors who are members of the student's doctoral Advisory Committee. These are the professors that must sign the *Request to Schedule Prelim Exam* form. The Chemistry Department recommends that students involve all five of their Committee members in their exams for two reasons: (1) Four "satisfactory" votes are required for a student to pass the exam; (2) The exam can proceed if one professor suddenly becomes unavailable (see "Professor Absent" below).

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 Prelim Exam* Form should list the name of the professor who will actually attend the exam. Also, the tan Prelim 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 Prelim 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.

Completion of Graded Course Work. The Graduate School requires only that students explain any uncompleted courses on a student's Plan of Study that are scheduled for semesters *prior* to the Prelim Exam. The Chemistry Department allows **only one** required Foundation Course to be incomplete at the time of the Prelim Exam. All of the student's Major courses must be completed; however the student may schedule the exam if *currently enrolled* in the last remaining course(s) required for his or her Major.

Chemistry Department Policies

Annual Reviews. If possible, the Prelim Exam should be coupled to the student's Annual Review for the second year of study. The Advisory Committee should schedule time (0.5 hours) after the scheduled end of the Prelim Exam to conduct the review and complete the required Evaluation Form.

Time Allotted for Exam. Traditionally the Chemistry Department has allowed two hours for each prelim exam. Because of the extra time (up to 0.5 hours) that professors will need to complete the Annual Evaluations after the exam, each student should consult with his or her Research Director to determine whether a 90-minute exam is to be scheduled (requiring the professors to commit 2 hours), or whether the traditional 120-minute exam is to be scheduled (requiring the professors to commit 2.5 hours).

Guidelines for the Prelim Exam

Exam Coverage. The Prelim exam is based primarily on the Literature Review document, a review of knowledge relevant to the student's own research project. However, all Annual Evaluations meetings should consider the student's research progress. Therefore, during the Prelim Exam, students should present both (1) the key points of the Literature Review, emphasizing the Research Plan section, *and* (2) an update of their research progress. The Prelim Exam is comprehensive, and students should also expect questions of a general nature. Often these questions will arise naturally during the presentation. The specific balance of the exam coverage is left to the Advisory Committee to determine, and typically that decision depends on how the student responds to the first few questions asked during the exam.

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: About 10 for the Literature Review and Research Plan (the background of the project), and about 10 for the student's research progress. Again, the specific balance is subject to the preferences of the student's Advisory Committee.

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 Prelim Exam.

Executing the Exam. Prelim 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 should **not** participate in the exam.) The student's presentation, including the typical interruptions, should consume about one hour. Then the student can respond to additional questions (including any comprehensive questions) for about 20 minutes. Then the Committee can convene briefly (10 minutes) to determine the result of the exam and convey that result to the student. These intervals are somewhat flexible and are based on a 90-minute exam (see "Time Allotted for Exam" above). The student is then dismissed, and the professors should convene the Annual Evaluation Meeting.

Annual Evaluation Meeting. The Committee should discuss the student's (self-) Evaluation Form, Student Activities Report, and Research Update. They should then complete the tan Graduate School Exam Card, the Departmental Prelim Exam Result form, and 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.