



MEMORANDUM

FROM: Anne-Marie Lauzon, Director, Division of Experimental Medicine

TO: Graduate Students and Thesis Supervisors in the Division

Thesis Committee Meetings Guidelines

Why have Thesis Committee Meetings?

The progress of a student during his/her graduate studies must be monitored on a yearly basis to ensure that the work is progressing satisfactorily, that the student will complete the thesis in a reasonable time, that when there are problems, either with the project or with the student-supervisor relationship, these are dealt with and solved promptly, that the student receives encouragement and advice from the members of the committee, and that the format and content of the thesis are discussed before the thesis writing begins. The Division has the obligation to have regular yearly thesis committee meetings for every graduate student in the program. Both students and thesis supervisors should understand the role of committee meetings.

Composition of the Thesis Committee:

Annual Thesis Committee Meetings are closed, private meetings for the student and committee members only. Observers are not permitted. For annual thesis committee meetings: The committee is composed of 4-5 members:

1. Student's supervisor (all co-supervisors, if applicable, count as 1 person)
2. Academic Advisor (Chair of the meeting)
3. Committee Member #1 (internal or external to Department of Medicine)
4. Committee Member #2 (internal or external to Department of Medicine)

Committee members are chosen for their knowledge in the field of the student's project so that they can help with and advise the work.

Potential committee members are first contacted by the supervisor and/or the student in order to confirm that they are willing to act as committee members.

The committee is chaired by the student's academic advisor, who is charged with making sure all guidelines are followed and who also draws up the minutes of the meeting. All new students are assigned an academic advisor by the Division at the time of admission. The name of the academic advisor is mentioned in the letter of admission from the Division.

Compulsory First Meeting Within Two (2) Months of First Registration:

All new students **MUST** have an initial, informal meeting with their supervisor within two (2) months of their first registration (i.e., by the end of October for students admitted in the Fall and by the end of February for students admitted in the winter) in order to:

- (1) Objectives will be set and timelines agreed upon with respect to the research to be performed in the context of the student's graduate program. These objectives and timelines must be written in the space provided on Page 1 of the new "[Graduate Student Research Progress and Tracking Form](#)". If necessary, additional pages may be appended. These objectives and timelines will be used as a guide in determining the student's overall performance at the subsequent annual thesis committee meetings. Both the student and the supervisor **MUST** sign this first report.

- (2) The composition of the student's thesis and comprehensive committee MUST be discussed and agreed upon, and the form "Composition of Thesis and Comprehensive Committees" MUST be completed and signed by the student, supervisor and academic advisor (Students are urged to take this as an opportunity to arrange an informal meeting with their academic advisor to introduce themselves, as your academic advisor will be your first point of contact should any problems arise during the course of your studies in Experimental Medicine).
- (3) Discuss the relationship between the student and his/her supervisor (s) that will affect the academic success and progress of the student. The [Letter of Understanding for Graduate Students and Supervisors](#) provides a basis for sharing views of the responsibilities and expectations of graduate students and supervisors. This letter must be signed by the student and his supervisor (s). A new version of the Letter of Understanding is available online. We ask students to please use the most recent version of this document. No older versions will be accepted.

The documents duly completed MUST be submitted to the Division's office via e-mail at experimental.medicine@mcgill.ca for inclusion in the student's file.

Who Sets Up Committee Meetings and When?

Students are responsible for scheduling their own thesis committee meetings. Each student in the Division has been assigned a specific month when his/her meeting must take place and this date must be respected unless there are dire reasons for not doing so. Meetings are held annually. The only exception to this is if the committee members request that a meeting be held at an earlier time, or within a short delay, due to certain concerns regarding a student's progress.

The Division contacts the student and supervisor via e-mail, three months prior to the student's assigned month, to prompt him/her to schedule the meeting. Students are responsible to contact their committee members and book a room for the meeting once a consensus is reached. Students must then confirm date, time and location via e-mail with all their committee members and cc the Division (experimental.medicine@mcgill.ca).

Documents That Must be Completed and Circulated to Members of the Committee Meeting:

- (1) Page 1 of the "[Graduate Student Research Progress Tracking Form](#)" must be completed as follows:
 - 1st Section (Objectives): The student, in collaboration with his/her supervisor, must define the objectives and timelines for the upcoming year. These objectives and timelines will serve to evaluate the student's overall performance at the next meeting. If necessary, additional pages may be added.
 - 2nd Section (Progress): The student, in collaboration with his/her supervisor, must report his/her progress over the previous year. This progress report must specifically address the progress made towards the objectives set at the previous meeting (either the objectives set at the initial meeting or the previous annual committee meeting). This section should be quite detailed to give a global overview of the work thus far accomplished. Progress outside the scope of the preset objectives, i.e. class work, conferences attended, studentships obtained, etc. should also be included. If necessary, additional pages may be added.
- (2) A 2-5 page extended abstract must also be submitted. It should be formatted like a paper and include sections such as: Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion (encompassing challenges encountered, rationale, hypotheses, etc.). Background information should be referenced and a reference list included. Note that the extended abstract written by the student will help the committee members prepare their questions. If the supervisor and student believe that the student is ready to start writing his/her thesis within 6 months of this meeting, a proposed outline of the final thesis should be appended to this abstract, and should be discussed at the meeting, in order to obtain feedback and the go ahead from the committee members.

The documents listed above must be circulated to the members of the committee and the Division 1 week prior to the meeting.

What is the Format of the Thesis Committee Meeting?

The meeting begins with a presentation of 20-30 minutes by the student, followed by up to one hour of questions and discussion of the project by the committee.

At the first meeting, the student should present the hypothesis, objectives and rationale for the project.

The student may wish to be considered for the “fast-track” to the Ph.D., a decision that should be made with the supervisor(s). Fast-tracking can be done only AFTER completing 2 semesters and BEFORE completing 4 semesters. Permission to fast-track is granted only after a formal committee meeting, chaired by the academic advisor and requires approval by the supervisor(s) and committee members. During the committee meeting to assess the readiness of the student to fast-track, the scope of the meeting will be expanded to include a rigorous assessment of the student’s knowledge of the research project AND his/her prospects of successfully completing a Ph.D. thesis. For more detailed information regarding fast-tracking, please refer to <http://www.mcgill.ca/expmed/graduate-studies/fast-tracking>.

Also, at the first thesis committee meeting, the committee will decide on the areas related to the research project in which the student needs to further his/her knowledge and understanding, and on which he/she should expect to know at the next committee meeting or at the comprehensive oral examination (for Ph.D. students only). Subsequent meetings will evaluate the progress of the project. At the final thesis committee meeting before submission of the thesis, the student is expected to provide an outline of the thesis. This proposed outline should have been appended to the extended abstract and circulated to members prior to the meeting (as detailed above). The committee will discuss both the scientific content and the format of the thesis. If approved, the student can proceed with the writing and submission of the thesis. Note that at both the beginning and end of each meeting, the student is asked to leave the room to allow the committee to have a brief discussion and to enable them to complete the relevant sections of the tracking form. The student is then asked to come back to the room, and the evaluation by the committee members is then communicated and explained to him/her.

Minutes

Pages 2 and 3 of the “[Graduate Student Research Progress Tracking Form](#)” must be completed and signed by all members of the committee, as well as the student, **PRIOR to the meeting being adjourned**. The academic advisor MUST also subsequently write up detailed minutes of the meeting. A copy of the completed and signed form, along with the minutes, MUST be circulated in a timely manner to the members of the committee and the Division’s office via e-mail. These MUST also be sent to the student and should therefore include any recommendation for the project and for the student made by the committee during the meeting.



MEMORANDUM

FROM: Anne-Marie Lauzon, Director, Division of Experimental Medicine

TO: Graduate Students and Thesis Supervisors in the Division

Comprehensive Oral Examination Guidelines

Setting up the Comprehensive Oral Examination

Just like the annual thesis committee meetings, students are responsible for scheduling their own comprehensive oral exam. The oral is normally held in the fourth semester of the Ph.D., i.e. in the second year, except in cases where there has been a change of project or supervisor. At this stage the student has done a fair amount of research, although it should be emphasized that it is not the purpose of the oral to pass or fail a student on the basis of research accomplished.

The Division contacts the student and supervisor via e-mail, three months prior to their assigned month, to prompt him/her to schedule the meeting. Students are responsible to contact their committee members and book a room for the meeting once a consensus is reached. Students must then confirm date, time and location via e-mail with all their committee members and cc the Division (experimental.medicine@mcgill.ca).

Documents That Must be Completed and Circulated to Members of the Comprehensive Oral Examination:

- (1) Page 1 of the “[Graduate Student Research Progress Tracking Form](#)” must be completed as follows:
 - 1st Section (Objectives): The student, in collaboration with his/her supervisor, must define the objectives and timelines for the upcoming year. These objectives and timelines will serve to evaluate the student’s overall performance at the next meeting. If necessary, additional pages may be added.
 - 2nd Section (Progress): The student, in collaboration with his/her supervisor, must report his/her progress over the previous year. This progress report must specifically address the progress made towards the objectives set at the previous meeting (either the objectives set at the Initial meeting or the previous annual committee meeting). This section should be quite detailed to give a global overview of the work thus far accomplished. Progress outside the scope of the preset objectives, i.e. class work, conferences attended, studentships obtained, etc. should also be included. If necessary, additional pages may be added.

- (2) A 2-5 page extended abstract must also be submitted. It should be formatted like a paper and include sections such as: Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion (encompassing challenges encountered, rationale, hypotheses, etc.). Background information should be referenced and a reference list included. Note that the extended abstract written by the student will help the committee members prepare their questions.

- (3) **A confidential letter from the supervisor assessing the student’s performance.** The letter should include comments on intellectual ability, laboratory skills, demonstration of independence in the conduct of research, diligence and hard work in the performance of experiments. The supervisor must e-mail this letter to each member of the committee and to the Division’s office prior to the meeting.

The documents listed above must be circulated to the members of the committee and the Division 1 week prior to the meeting.

Composition of the Committee

For the comprehensive oral examination, the committee only differs from the ongoing thesis committee in having one (1) extra member. This person **MUST** be from outside the Department of Medicine of McGill University. This ensures impartial assessment of the student's performance, at this critical stage. The committee is chaired by the student's academic advisor, who is charged with making sure all guidelines are followed and who also draws up the minutes of the meeting. As with Annual Thesis Committee Meetings, comprehensive oral exams are closed, private meetings for the student and committee members only. Observers are not permitted.

Purpose of the Comprehensive Examination

The purpose of the examination is to test whether (i) the student's work is progressing satisfactorily and is of sufficiently high caliber to warrant continuation in the program, and (ii) the student has acquired broad enough knowledge not only of his own field of research but also of related areas in his or her discipline.

Thus, the comprehensive examination consists of a presentation by the student of his/her project followed by a period of questions, asked by the committee and answered by the student. Submission of a good project description written by the student with guidance from the supervisor is necessary. The student must also prepare well in advance by (i) undertaking an ambitious review of the literature, which includes having the ability to situate his/her project in the broader context of the current research field; and (ii) putting together a well-organized presentation to demonstrate a profound understanding of the Ph.D. project.

Procedure at the Comprehensive Examination

The oral is preceded by a private meeting of the committee during which the candidate's background, academic performance and current performance in the Ph.D. program is discussed.

The student then gives a 20-30 minute presentation of his/her Ph.D. project which should include an introduction setting the Ph.D. proposal in the context of field and of the other work going on in the laboratory, methods, results and conclusions. A period of questions of at least one hour but generally no more than two hours follows.

Examination Evaluation

At the end of the meeting, the student is asked to leave the room to allow the committee to discuss the candidate's performance. A Pass or Fail decision is reached by consensus of the committee during the private discussion. The role of the chair is to obtain that consensus and to complete the relevant sections of the tracking form. The student is then asked to come back to the room and the evaluation of the committee members is then communicated and explained to him/her.

If the student fails, he/she is given the option to exit the program by writing a Master's thesis. It is also possible to award a Conditional Pass in the case where the performance was not satisfactory but extenuating circumstances justify re-evaluating the student at a later time. This must be done **no later than** 6 months after the first comprehensive. The committee members have the duty to specify to the student and supervisor the areas that require improvement, e.g. changes in the project, improvement his/her knowledge of the literature, etc. A Pass is awarded if the second examination is judged satisfactory.

Minutes

Pages 2 and 3 of the "[Graduate Student Research Progress Tracking Form](#)" must be completed and signed by all members of the committee, as well as the student, **PRIOR to the meeting being adjourned**. The academic advisor **MUST** also subsequently write up detailed minutes of the meeting. A copy of the completed and signed form, along with the minutes, **MUST** be circulated in a timely manner to the members of the committee and the Division's office via e-mail. These **MUST** also be sent to the student and should therefore include any recommendation for the project and for the student made by the committee during the meeting