

# NUTR 701 Doctoral Comprehensives Examination

## School of Human Nutrition Ph.D. Comprehensives Exam Guidelines

### 1. Overview

The NUTR 701 Doctoral Comprehensives Examination is an oral exam, and a PASS/FAIL course. The candidate is required to demonstrate global knowledge in human nutrition and competency in both the general and domain-specific areas related to the candidate's doctoral research topic. Candidates are asked to review this document, the McGill Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies webpage on comprehensive exams:

<https://www.mcgill.ca/gps/students/comprehensive-exams> and McGill's Ph.D. Comprehensives Policy: [https://www.mcgill.ca/study/university\\_regulations\\_and\\_resources/graduate/gps\\_gi\\_phd\\_comprehensives\\_policy](https://www.mcgill.ca/study/university_regulations_and_resources/graduate/gps_gi_phd_comprehensives_policy)



**It is the responsibility of the candidate to consult the current version of the Ph.D. Comprehensives Policy in the McGill University Regulations and Resources website.**

Candidates must also familiarize themselves with the following documents:

- A. McGill's Policy on Academic Integrity and Plagiarism  
<https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest>
- B. McGill's Policy on Conflict of Interest  
<https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/academicrights/conflicts>

### 2. Timing within the Ph.D. Program



**Candidates are required to complete the Ph.D. Comprehensives Exam (NUTR 701) NO LATER THAN THE END OF Ph.D. III.**

It is the shared responsibility of the candidate and the candidate's advisor to ensure that the scheduling of the candidate's Ph.D. Comprehensive Exam complies with the timing policy. Candidates with extenuating circumstances may apply to defer the exam with the written support of their advisor to either the Fall or Winter semesters of Ph.D. IV. **The petition must be submitted to the School's Graduate Program Director (GPD) BEFORE the end of Ph.D. II.** If approved, the GPD will send the candidate an approval letter with a copy to the NUTR 701 course directors.

### 3. Prerequisites

**NUTR 701 is an in-person course.** The candidate must be on campus while registered in the course. To enroll in NUTR 701, the candidate must have completed all their required course work (e.g., graduate courses in statistics, and/or in research methods or equivalent courses prescribed by the Admissions Committee) and have established a fully functioning Ph.D. thesis advisory committee (Advisory Committee).

For NUTR 701 forms, see Doctoral Comprehensive Examination section of Ph.D. Program Requirements at: <https://mcgill.ca/nutrition/programs/graduate/requirements-and-policies-graduate-studies>

The candidate's Advisory Committee is responsible for the evaluation of the candidate's written research proposal to be completed **within 4 months BEFORE the first day of the semester the candidate is registered for NUTR 701.** If the Advisory Committee considers the research proposal to be acceptable, the candidate will be granted

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permission to register for NUTR 701 and undertake the Ph.D. comprehensives exam.

## 4. Required materials from the candidate

The following three (3) items must be submitted in the NUTR 701 section of myCourses by the first day of the semester.

- A. A PDF copy of the signed enrollment form (NUTR 701 Form 1) indicating the candidate has completed all the required course work. If the candidate has an approved deferral, a copy of the deferral approval letter must be submitted along with the enrollment form.
- B. The candidate's Progress Report dated **within 4 months BEFORE the first day of the semester the candidate is registered for NUTR 701** and duly signed by the candidate, all Advisory Committee members and the Graduate Program Director (GPD).



**The Progress Report must EXPLICITLY include the following statement: "The Advisory Committee grants permission to the candidate to register for NUTR 701 and undertake the Ph.D. Comprehensives Examination."**

- C. The candidate's Literature Review. The development of the research project will normally be supervised by the candidate's Ph.D. research advisor(s) with the help of the candidate's Advisory Committee. **The candidate will submit an original literature review. The specification of the document is as follows: 6 to 10 pages (not including references), 1 inch margins, 12 point font size; note: pages in excess of 10 will not be transmitted to the examining committee. The literature review may be based on the candidate's research area (the candidate can submit the literature review portion of their Ph.D. research proposal) with an additional section that introduces AT LEAST three (3) contemporary research questions in the candidate's research area (but cannot include the research question or questions addressed by the candidate's own doctoral research project).** NOTE: Candidates will not be able to consult the submitted literature review document during the exam. The document itself is not graded but serves as the starting material for the oral exam. The candidate's research project is not a formal topic of the candidacy exam. No additional materials are permitted in the exam.

The NUTR 701 course director (Exam Chair) will review the submitted materials to determine if the candidate can continue in the course by the ADD/DROP deadline.

## 5. Selection of the oral exam date

Exams are to be **scheduled from 9 AM - 1 PM or 1:30 PM to 5:30 PM in the first two weeks of last the full month of the semester before final exams.** No NUTR 701 exams may be scheduled in the last two weeks of the Fall or Winter semester as per McGill policy on exam scheduling. The candidate and advisor must inform all committee members that the exam is scheduled to last four (4) hours and that all members of the examining committee must be in attendance for the full 4 hours. There will be no exceptions. **It is the responsibility of the candidate, the advisor and examining committee members to understand and commit to this course requirement.** If these terms are not finalized by the ADD/DROP deadline, then the candidate will be asked to drop from the course. It is then expected that the candidate will make ample preparations and re-register for NUTR 701 in the following semester in which the course is offered.

## 6. NUTR 701 Doctoral Comprehensives Examining Committee

The NUTR 701 examining committee is chaired by the NUTR 701 course director (Exam Chair) and is comprised of

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the one (1) member of the candidate's Advisory Committee (not the advisor or co-advisor) and two (2) additional examiners who are not associated with the candidate's doctoral research. Only the candidate may petition the Exam Chair, in writing and at least 30 days before the exam, to invite their advisor, co-advisor or another **McGill faculty member** who is not in a conflict of interest, as an observer during the exam. If approved, the invitee may not ask questions, provide comments during the exam, nor participate in examining committee deliberations.



**As a rule, all examiners must be present at the examination in person. In extenuating circumstances (e.g., the examiner is from an institution that is outside of Montreal), ONE (1) EXTERNAL EXAMINER may be approved by the School to participate in the exam via remote connection.**

At the start of the semester, the NUTR 701 course director will ask the candidate's advisor to nominate examiners, one (1) from the candidate's advisory committee and two (2) examiners selected from the School or McGill University faculty who are not in conflict of interest and have agreed to be available at the date and time chosen for the candidate's oral exam.

## 7. Format of the Oral NUTR 701 Doctoral Comprehensive Exam



**All NUTR 701 exams are in-person and held at the Macdonald campus – no exceptions. The scheduling of the exact date, time, room location, and the audiovisual equipment required by the candidate are the responsibility of the candidate and candidate's advisor. All the pertinent details regarding the room location, time of exam and email addresses of all examiners must be communicated to the NUTR 701 course director at the start of the semester.**

*Duration of the exam:* The total duration of the oral exam is 4 hours maximum, which includes the pre-exam meeting of the examining committee, candidate's presentation, question/answer period, examining committee deliberations and announcement of the exam results.

*Pre-Exam Meeting:* In the pre-exam meeting held in the absence of the candidate, the Exam Chair will review the candidate's academic record, and determine the order of examiners.

*Formal portion of the oral NUTR 701 exam:* Once the candidate rejoins the examining committee, the Exam Chair will formally start the exam by reviewing the examination procedures and the requirements of a PASS (see below) with the candidate. This is followed by a 15 min presentation by the candidate to introduce their literature review of their selected subject area (within the general topic of human nutrition). The question/answer session starts with a round of questions spanning 20 min for each of the examiners followed by a 5-10 min break and then another round of follow-up questions spanning up to 10 min for each of the examiners if needed. The Exam Chair reserves the right to participate in asking questions. **The maximum time limits are strictly enforced.**

*Assessment:* The Exam Chair will excuse the candidate and invitee (if present) to discuss the candidate's performance according to the Pass/Fail terms of reference already discussed with the candidate. Each examiner will provide the examining committee with their assessment the candidate's performance (PASS or FAIL) and justifications (with objective examples) for their rating. After all the ratings and justifications are presented, the Exam Chair will direct the discussion on the reports and the aggregate recommendations of the committee to the candidate. One justified FAIL rating will trigger an HH grade and a full re-examination.

*Reporting and adjournment:* The candidate will be invited to rejoin the committee to hear the outcome of the performance assessment, and plan for remedial action if the exam is failed on the first attempt. A written report of the examination will be provided to the candidate and a copy will be included in the student's records.

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## 8. Terms of reference for PASS and FAIL ratings

**NUTR 701 is a PASS/FAIL course.** During the oral exam, the candidate is required to: [1] demonstrate insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the current literature in the chosen subject area as well as general area of human nutrition and metabolism; [2] make linkages to relevant concepts or other pieces of information; [3] make interpretations of existing information in the literature; [4] distinguish between facts and interpretations; [4] demonstrate the ability to synthesize hypotheses and design feasible experiments that can test those hypotheses; [5] synthesize new ideas and to propose new directions or approaches that may serve to advance knowledge in the field or answer outstanding issues; [6] demonstrate the ability to provide a cohesive and informative discussion which illustrates a clear thoughtful understanding of the subject area.

Assessment of the candidate's performance will be made immediately following the oral exam. The examining committee discuss the merits of the candidate's performance and render a PASS or FAIL grade based on majority decision. The decision of the examining committee will be communicated verbally to the candidate immediately after the committee's deliberations. On behalf of the examining committee, the Exam Chair will prepare a report based on the committee's collective evaluation of candidate's performance and be made available to the candidate (within 14 days in the event of an unsuccessful first attempt).

**PASS:** The candidate demonstrates: ability to think critically (can analyze, conceptualize, synthesize, evaluate and apply information), to integrate information (can link information from diverse sources), to formulate hypotheses and appropriate study designs, to refine study designs or generate new ones, to prioritize issues and discuss them with originality, and is conversant in different aspects of nutrition research (e.g., having knowledge in different aspects of nutrition spanning nutrient metabolism, nutritional biochemistry, nutritional assessment/measurement, statistics and statistical analyses, etc.). **Awarding of a PASS means that the Ph.D. comprehensives exam is successfully completed, and a grade of "P" will appear on the candidate's transcripts.**

**FAIL:** Any of the following: the candidate may demonstrate ability to recall information from the literature but is unsure how to use this information to generate new information, or may recognize important issues but is unsure how to evaluate the issues, or is unable to differentiate irrelevant information from that relevant to the main topic of discussion, or requires significant hints and guidance in recalling pertinent information as well as in formulating experimental strategies, or lacks the requisite basic knowledge of the proposed subject area and/or human nutrition in general will result in an unsuccessful examination outcome. A candidate who does not successfully complete the doctoral comprehensives exam indicates minimal originality, minimal integration of relevant information, and/or failure to identify important issues within the selected research area of research and/or the general area of human nutrition will receive a **NOT PASSED** rating on the first attempt and will require the candidate to repeat the oral exam (refer to McGill's Ph.D. Comprehensives Policy). The report will include feedback on both strengths and weaknesses of the candidate's performance (e.g., ability to answer questions and quality of responses) as well as global competence in human nutrition. In the case of non-unanimous decision, a minority report section will be included in the full report. **A Ph.D. comprehensives exam that is not passed on first attempt will result in a grade of "HH" on the candidate's transcript.** Remedial actions will be prescribed by the examining committee and indicated in the oral exam written report. **Completion of the second full oral exam must take place no later than the following semester after the first attempt, as per McGill policy.** Normally, the second exam will be chaired by the same Exam Chair that chaired the first exam. The candidate must provide regular updates every two (2) months describing progress milestones to the course director (chair of examining committee) as well as the School's GPD, and work with the candidate's advisor in rescheduling of the second oral exam.



In the event of an unsuccessful second attempt, **or if the candidate does not repeat the exam in the semester following the first attempt**, the "HH" will be converted into "F" and the candidate will be withdrawn from the University, as per McGill policy.