



McGill

Department of  
Pathology

## PhD Comprehensive Exam (PATH 701)

For current PhD students (enrolled before Fall 2024)

### Overview

Comprehensive exams are a **mandatory** component of all doctoral programs at McGill (refer to the [Policy](#)). The purpose of comprehensive examinations is to determine whether the student demonstrates the necessary research skills and academic achievements to continue in the Ph.D. program. The comprehensive exam **must be completed (i.e., passed) by the end of PhD3**; as an academic requirement, the outcome (S/U) will be reflected on the student's transcript.

**If you are approaching the end of PhD3 or are already beyond this point, please contact the GPD, Dr. Carolyn Baglole, ASAP for advice on scheduling your exam.**

### Registration

You must register in **PATH 701** via Minerva in the semester you intend to take the exam.

### Format

The PhD comprehensive exam in Pathology has **two components**:

1. A **written abstract** outlining your doctoral thesis research project(s).
2. An **oral presentation** followed by a question period by the Exam Committee.

### Composition of the Exam Committee

The Exam Committee consists of your **Advisory Committee** (i.e., your supervisor(s) and two other professors) **plus one External Member** (external to your regular AC but can be internal to McGill). The student's supervisor(s) must attend the exam as an observer but cannot speak during the formal presentation or question period segment of the exam. Therefore, in total, there should be **three (3) official examiners** who evaluate the abstract, ask questions during the examination period, and have voting privileges.

### Part 1: Written Abstract

An abstract not exceeding **two (2) single-spaced pages** in length must be sent to all members of the Exam Committee at least **one (1) week** in advance of the scheduled oral examination. The abstract text should provide an overview of the research being conducted

towards the doctoral thesis, including pertinent background information, specific hypotheses and aims, brief methodology, key results to date, and conclusions.

The **Progress Tracking Form** (see link below) with all boxes on Page 1 filled out should also be sent at the same time as the abstract.

### **Part 2A: Oral Presentation**

The student gives a formal presentation of 30 minutes describing their PhD thesis project(s), showcasing knowledge of the field/literature and research productivity to date. The format resembles a PhD defence more than a seminar. The presentation is not to be interrupted with questions.

### **Part 2B: Question/Examination Period**

The three (3) official examiners (two from AC and one external) ask questions based on the written abstract and oral presentation over 2 to 3 rounds, mimicking the oral defence proceedings.

### **Part 2C: Deliberation and Decision of the Committee**

Once the question period has ended, the student must leave the meeting while the Exam Committee convenes in a closed session. The final decision must come from the three (3) official examiners; however, they may ask any clarifying questions to the supervisor(s). The official examiners will determine whether the proposed research is defensible and feasible and whether the presentation demonstrates adequate knowledge and scientific rigour.

## **Scheduling**

Similar to the annual AC meeting, it is the **student's responsibility** to arrange the date, time, and venue of their comprehensive exam, and to ensure that all members of the Exam Committee can attend. In-person meetings are strongly encouraged whenever possible, though hybrid or remote options are permitted. To facilitate the process of scheduling these meetings, you may use **Doodle** or other web-based scheduling programs.

**It is important to plan your comprehensive exam well in advance to avoid stress and scheduling conflicts!** Your supervisor should help you determine an appropriate External Member and provide input on your written abstract and presentation slides.

*Note: The PhD Comprehensive Examination (PATH 701) may substitute an Advisory Committee meeting in PhD3.*

## **Evaluation and Record-Keeping**

Once the deliberation is complete, the student is invited back into the meeting to hear the exam outcome, including specific strengths and weaknesses and recommendations. The

official examiners must provide written feedback on the **Progress Tracking Form** and a verdict of **Overall Satisfactory/Pass (S)** or **Unsatisfactory/Fail (U)**.

**Link to form:** <https://www.mcgill.ca/gps/students/progress-tracking>

*Satisfactory:* If the student is deemed to have passed the comprehensive exam, the completed and signed form must be immediately sent to the Graduate Program Director (GPD) for approval. **The student then uploads the final approved form to MyProgress within one week of the exam.**

*Unsatisfactory:* As per the [McGill GPS regulations](#), “in the event that the student is judged to have failed the comprehensive, units must allow, without prejudice, one repeat of the comprehensive within a minimum of four months and a maximum of six months. After the first failure, a grade of HH (which designates “continuing”) will be recorded on the student’s transcript.” The completed and signed form indicating an unsatisfactory examination must be immediately sent to the GPD, who will set up a meeting with the student and supervisor to discuss next steps and re-scheduling of the examination.

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