

BDS PhD oral preliminary exam information

The preliminary exam is a major milestone towards the PhD. After successfully passing the prelim exam the student becomes a dissertator. This exam is typically taken in the third year of a student's study and after the core program requirements are completed. Prior to taking the preliminary exam, the student together with their advisor will form a **PhD committee** (See section below). The oral preliminary exam has two parts, a **written document** describing the research direction that will be pursued during the student's PhD, and, an **oral presentation**.

Written document

This document is expected to be 15-20 pages (excluding references) and should be shared with the PhD committee at least 1 week in advance of the oral presentation. Please use 1 inch margins, with no less than 11 point font. The goal of this document is to provide the committee a description of the proposed dissertation work. This document should provide background of the primary research area, major goals of the dissertation work and any preliminary work that provides the basis of the proposed work.

A good but not required format for this document is the NIH or NSF research proposal with the following sections: Specific Aims (1 page), Background & Significance (~1.5 page), Innovation (1/2-3/4 page), Preliminary Work (~3 pages), Approach (7-8). The specific aims page, should be ~1 page long, should introduce the research area and the key problem(s) the PhD research will undertake. There should be 2-3 aims describing the proposed work. The Background & Significance section should build on the primary literature review of existing work and highlight the key gaps that exist in the specific field that would be addressed by the proposed research. The Innovation section should present the novelty of the proposed work. The Preliminary Work section should provide the foundation and present the feasibility of the proposed work. Often a published paper is a good body of work to present as preliminary work. The Approach will describe how the proposed work will be carried out. This section would be broken down into the aims and for each aim, should provide the expected results and products (e.g. algorithms, software etc).

Oral exam

The oral exam should be planned for at least 2 hours and has three parts. The first is an open, public presentation where other members of the department can attend (~45 mins). The second is a closed meeting with just the student and committee. The third is a meeting among the committee members without the student in which the faculty make a pass/fail decision of the exam. The public part of the meeting should include a 20-30 min presentation by the student followed by questions from the audience. The second part of the meeting is for additional in-depth questioning about the approach and proposed research plan. In the third part, the committee will make a pass/fail decision for the student. At the end of this meeting, the student will be asked to rejoin the meeting and the chair of the committee will convey the decision along with the major strengths and areas to improve of the proposed work. It is ultimately up to the student's advisor to determine which aspects of the feedback should be strictly followed. A student has two attempts to successfully pass the preliminary exam.

PhD committee

The committee should follow the PhD dissertation/oral exam committee policy provided by the graduate school (<https://policy.wisc.edu/library/UW-1201>). It should include at least four faculty members of which at least three members should be BDS program faculty and one member comes from a different UW department or program. A BDS faculty member must chair the committee. The student's advisor may not serve as Chair of the preliminary exam committee. The chair is responsible for timing of the meeting and mediating the discussion. Three of the committee members should be designated as readers, who would be responsible for close reading of the proposal and dissertation.

Important timelines

1. Form a committee at least 2 months in advance.
2. Share the written document with the committee at least 1 week in advance.
3. Ask Graduate Program Coordinator to request the warrant at least 3 weeks before the meeting.
4. Remind your committee about the prelim meeting the day before.