

FAQ - Tips and Suggestions for EEB's Qualifying Exam Part 1

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Purpose: Qualifying Exam Part 1 is the first major evaluation of students in the EEB Graduate program. The FAQ below should help to address additional questions about process that may linger.

Target Audience: Second year EEB students, and the faculty who advise them

Use with: Grad Guide ([pdf](#)) | Committee meeting form ([doc](#)) | Sharepoint folder ([link](#))

1. Where to read about the exam:

- The [Grad Guide](#) talks about it, pg 8-10.
- EEB ORG's Resource doc talks about it in [section 14](#), under "prelims"

2. How do I learn more about the exam and what is expected of me (beyond these two descriptions)?

- Start talking during your regular meeting with your advisor about the exam format. Just bring up the topic!
- Reach out to more senior students (in your lab, in journal club, etc.) about their experience, perspective, and advice.
- Make sure your Advisory Committee includes your minor Advisor, and make sure they know they are your minor Advisor for this exam (e.g., for those pursuing minors in Genetics or Animal Behavior, such roles may not be clear).
- The goals of the exam center on:
 - demonstrating mastery of the major ideas and research strategies appropriate to the concentration area
 - demonstrating competency and recall of relevant literature and to use foundational literature fluently in written and oral answers
 - answering questions with appropriate level of detail in a logical manner
 - writing clearly, with supporting figures when appropriate, and largely free of grammatical and typographical errors.- Students should address questions that arise about fulfilling these goals with their Advisor and Committee.

3. What timing constraints should I be thinking about? Whose responsibility is it to... (logistics)?

- *Deadline:* Formally, you are to have passed the prelim by week 13 of your fourth semester in EEB¹.
- *General timing:* Normally, this means you start the exam soon in the spring semester (say, late Jan). If you start then, you can defend your answers and still retake the exam if needed.
- *Week-by-week:* Normally, advisors ask for questions from committee members (1 week); students write their answers (6 weeks); committee members review the answers (1 week); and the student defends the answer. So, it makes sense to anchor your timing (exam defense day) and work backwards.

¹ We flexed this deadline when we needed to during the covid pandemic, but now we should be back on track as a group.

- *Responsibilities for logistics*: It is the students' job to set the timeline, book committee members for the exam well in advance, and reserve the room in Biology for the exam (save it for three hours).

4. Can I talk to my advisor and committee members about my potential questions?

- *For sure!* Committee members can navigate what is appropriate and not appropriate to talk about.
- *Scope/types of question:* Many of us faculty seek to write questions that simultaneously deepen and broaden your understanding, i.e., we want the exam to be useful in multiple ways. But each committee member has latitude on what they ask.
- *When?* It is common for students to talk in person with their committee members in mid Dec or early Jan about their questions. Students can share their current research interests, and possibly brainstorm topics. Some faculty will be more open-minded to suggestions than others. My advice: Just have the conversation. Express curiosity and interest. Trust committee members can set boundaries.
- *During the exam?* You can consult your committee members about your approaches to their questions during the exam (i.e., while you write it) if you need to. They can decide how they want to handle your question (i.e., they may or may not be able to provide guidance, depending on what you ask - we just ask people to use common sense and fair judgment).

5. What is the role of my advisor during the exam? What else can you tell me?

- *Dos:* Your advisor will assemble the exam from the questions submitted by the Advisory Committee and distribute it on the start date (to you and your committee).
- *Don'ts:* Your advisor does NOT provide edits or precise guidance about your answers. (It is an exam).
- *More on the verbal/oral part:* Expect to verbally defend your answers, but also expect to be asked about papers you cite, ideas related to your answers, and core ideas in your field. Many students end up on the white board, sketching or drawing.
- *A heads up:* Many students end up not knowing answers to all questions asked of them - that is normal and by design, as your committee should identify the edge of your understanding. Just be honest when you do not know, when you are speculating ... and do not take wild guesses (without saying so).

Bottom line:

- The exam provides an important 'check-in' on your progress in EEB as a scholar, thinker, and writer.
- The process is not meant to be mysterious. Please initiate open dialogue with your Advisor for more insight. Also, ask your fellow older students about their experiences.
- Please ask the GPD any questions that may arise. They will do what they can to answer them.