



## EARTH & SPACE SCIENCES

UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON

College of the Environment

# A Rough Guide to the ESS General Exam

Written by grad students for grad students

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Official ESS department policies can be found here:

[http://www.ess.washington.edu/ess/education/grad/research/ess-GradGuide.html#\\_PHD](http://www.ess.washington.edu/ess/education/grad/research/ess-GradGuide.html#_PHD)

**Purpose:** Admits you to candidacy for Doctoral Degree (*Note: technically you are not a Ph.D. candidate until you pass the general, even if you passed the prelim with distinction*)

### Benefits:

- You can put PhC after your name (you become a “PhD candidate”)
- You earn \$75 more a month (or 15 Agua Verde happy hour margaritas/25 PBRs at College Inn)
- You are pretty much done with classes: “After candidacy, you should devote your time primarily to completion of research, writing of dissertation and preparation for the final exam.”

### Requirements (compliments of The Graduate School):

- You must have completed 60 credits (some can be the same quarter as exam)
- You must have officially formed your committee (i.e. it’s in the Graduate School computer system) at least four months before your exam (can be shorter for special cases)
- All members of your committee must agree you are ready and approve the exam (therefore you should have met with your committee beforehand)
- At least 4 members of the committee must be present at the exam, the chair and graduate school representative MUST be there
- You must be registered as a graduate student the quarter you take the exam
- You cannot take the general exam and doctoral exam in the same quarter
- For more details, go to:  
<http://www.grad.washington.edu/policies/doctoral/general-exam.shtml>

### To do list:

- 1 Establish with your committee that you should take your general exam and discuss their expectations (for example: What do they expect for the proposal? What do they want you to address? How long do they want you to talk? etc.)
- 2 Find a date and time for your exam when the required members of your committee can make it (this may be the hardest part of your exam)
- 3 Find a room by checking out the schedules posted outside the classrooms (ATG154 and JHN 027 are popular rooms). When you find a room, write your exam on the schedule, if the schedule isn’t up yet, ask Student services (essadv@uw.edu) for the schedule and to make you a reservation.

- 4 Go to: <http://www.grad.washington.edu/mygrad/student.htm> and click on 'schedule a doctoral general or final exam' to schedule your exam with the graduate school. The site does a degree audit and makes sure you're allowed to take it.
- 5 A few days before the exam, make sure your advisor (or yourself) requests the General Exam warrant from Student Services ([essadv@uw.edu](mailto:essadv@uw.edu)) and brings it to your exam.
- 6 After you pass your exam, have all participating committee members sign the warrant and make sure someone (or you) turns it into Student Services at least before the end of the quarter, but ASAP so you can get your pay raise. You probably won't get a confirmation email for a while, but your pay will go up in the next pay period. You should contact Kathy Gabriel ([mina@uw.edu](mailto:mina@uw.edu)) if your pay does not go up.

### **Loose guidelines for the ESS General exam:**

The content and expectations of each individual general exam is *very* committee dependent therefore any and all guidelines listed below are *very* rough estimates of a typical exam and DO NOT have any bearing on your actual exam experience or committee's requests. If you are in a certificate or dual-title PhD program, there may be additional requirements not listed here.

- 1 The committee includes:
  - a At least one advisor
  - b A Graduate School Representative (GSR)
    - i their job is to make sure the exam is fair
    - ii they must be part of the graduate faculty
    - iii the GSR typically has some knowledge of some aspect of your field, but it's not a requirement.
    - iv *cannot* be in or affiliated with your department, cannot have co-Pi'd a grant with your advisor or committee, and has no vested interest in your success/failure. Adjunct faculty is OK as long as there's no conflict of interest  
(<http://www.grad.washington.edu/policies/doctoral/gsr-eligibility.shtml>). This tool (<http://www.grad.washington.edu/gradfac/>) locates graduate faculty, and lists their affiliations; can search by research interest, though it's often a bit out of date and kind of vague.
    - v can be replaced at any time, including last minute, if necessary
  - c Some other Ph.D.s for a *minimum* of 4 committee members
  - d A majority of the members must have UW Graduate Faculty Status
  - e You can have as many committee members as you want!
  - f Some committees allow members to skype or conference call in. Check with *your* committee
  - g You should form your committee as early as possible after you pass the prelim exam and choose members who have the expertise you need for your

research. It is easy to change your committee as your research evolves, you are not stuck with your initial committee if your research paths evolve.

2 The ESS general exam may consist of:

a Written proposal

- i Official ESS policy is that you have to do one: "A dissertation proposal is to be presented to the Supervisory Committee prior to the General Exam. A copy signed by the Supervisory Committee should be turned into Student Services following successful completion of the General Exam"
- ii Suggested length is typically 5-10 pages. CHECK with YOUR committee.
- iii This presumably contains what you have done and what you will do to finish your Ph.D. Ask your committee for specific guidelines.
- iv Feel free to use this as your insurance plan...i.e. show it to your committee early so they have a chance to ask questions or raise red flags before your actual exam.
- v Ask grads who have taken their exams to see their candidacy winning proposals. This can be a good way to get a sense of how to organize the proposal and what to add.

b Talk (*this is inevitable*)

- i Length is somewhere between 30-50 minutes, ask your advisor what they expect.
- ii The talk is to an open audience, anyone can attend and ask you questions
- iii There is an open questioning session after your presentation
- iv Anticipate your advisor... will (s)he interrupt? or stay silent during the talk? You know best!

c Closed Door Questioning

- i The general audience leaves the room and you are at the hands of your committee! Note that *anyone* from the graduate faculty can sit in on this part.
- ii *Your GSR's role is to make sure the exam is fair.* i.e. your committee should not fail a geochemist for not knowing string-theory. Be aware of this job/expectation when choosing a GSR.
- iii The department is moving in the direction of putting a greater emphasis on examining your general knowledge in coming years than there has been in the past, so take this into account in your preparations.
- iv **what happens in there?**
  - 1 Some committees/ advisors view this as an intelligent, detailed conversation about YOUR research. This means you have a lot of great minds listening to you talk about your research and thinking about the same problem...you might know this can be hard to come by in day-to-day grad school!

So, it can be a very rewarding and satisfying opportunity.  
(especially if you have prepared well!!)

- 2 Some advisors/ committees may prefer an adversarial approach. They ask you questions, you defend your research and knowledge base. They might also ask you “general” knowledge questions (hopefully related to your research) and expect you to spit out an answer.
  - 3 It can be a combination of 1 and 2!
  - 4 Some might expect you to derive or regurgitate formulas!
  - 5 ***We don't really know, ask your committee.***
- 3 When should I take it?
- a This is personal, i.e. *between you and your committee* BUT the department recommends you take it by the end of your third year and will be pushing us to take it then rather than our 5th or 6th year as many have done in the past.
  - b Timing can depend on
    - i when you are academically ready
    - ii once you have a plan for your Ph.D. thesis
    - iii ***ULTIMATELY: when your committee thinks you are ready. But you might have to be the one to start the conversation!***
    - iv when your committee is available
    - v when you are available

***THE most important General Exam guideline:***

***TALK to your committee beforehand and KNOW what THEY expect from you.***

One grad's experience may differ wildly from another! Communication with your committee is key for a successful exam.

The ESS General Exam is a test of your knowledge as well as your ability to communicate with other scientists (your committee) and make things happen! Ultimately, it's your responsibility to make your General Exam a success. While the above suggestions and guidelines are meant to get you started, expect the hand holding to end here and the Ph.D. career path to begin.