Qualifying Exam Policies
and Procedures
Introduction

The Qualifying Exam (QE) is a comprehensive exam that evaluates the student’s level of competencies related to the PhD program learning objectives. Passing the QE allows the student to move forward with his/her dissertation research. This document provides information about the policies and procedures regarding the QE in a question/answer format. Information is provided regarding the student’s responsibilities, the timing of the exam and other deadlines, eligibility criteria, preparation tips, format and content of the exam, and grading procedures.

When does the department offer the QE?
The department will offer the exam once a year, in mid-August. The actual date will change every year at the discretion of the Department, but will be announced at least by May 31st of each year on the Department website.

What coursework must be completed to be eligible to take the QE?
All core courses with the exception of HLSA 601 and MIEH 600, all advanced theory and applications courses, and all advanced research methods and statistics courses must be completed with a passing grade of C or better before taking the QE. Students are required to take the first exam following completion of all requirements. For example, if a student finishes all courses listed above in December 2018 or May 2019, the student must take the QE at the next exam administration, which will be in August 2019. HLSA 601 and MIEH 600 can be completed after the exam, if needed.

Is it the student’s responsibility to schedule themselves for the QE?
Yes. If an eligible student does not schedule the QE within 30 days of the next exam administration date, then he/she will be dismissed from the program. For example, if the exam is to be administered on August 15th, the student must schedule themselves for the exam by July 16th. However, if the student’s advisor does not feel as though their advisee is ready to take the exam, the advisor can submit a request in writing to the DGS asking for an exception to department policy. The maximum delay is one year (until the next exam administration). If the student is still not ready to take the exam following the one year delay, the student will be dismissed from the program.

How does a student schedule the QE?
When the student has completed the necessary coursework to take the QE (see above), the student must provide the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) with his/her updated program plan. The student must obtain the signature of his/her faculty advisor in the specific space on the program plan indicating eligibility to take the QE.

What can a student do to prepare for the QE?
All students are required to attend a one-hour orientation session that is held each year during the spring semester for any students planning to take the exam within the calendar year. Exam logistics, preparation tips, and general format will be covered. Students may ask questions about the general exam content and/or preparation. The actual questions of a specific exam will not be revealed. Students can attend the orientation session in the
year prior to his/her anticipated date of taking the exam. Students may attend the
orientation session more than once, but students are strongly cautioned not to attend early
in the program if they are prone to high levels of anxiety.

In addition to attending the orientation session, some students prepare for the exam by
forming study groups. Other students prefer to study on his/her own. Some students work
with faculty to help them review material. The student is responsible for requesting help
from faculty to help prepare them for the QE, but help sessions with faculty are entirely
dependent on the faculty’s willingness and availability. There is no right or wrong way to
prepare. The student should use his/her own judgment as to how they should prepare for
the QE. It is important to remember that the QE evaluates student progress toward
achieving competencies that have been taught throughout his/her coursework. Thus,
the student should review the competencies to understand his/her own personal
strengths and areas of weakness.

What content areas comprise the QE?
The content areas that are most critical are health behavior theory, research methods, and
statistics. Specific key skills include writing a grant proposal, analyzing an article, and
orally responding to questions.

I have a documented disability. What accommodations can be made with regard to
the QE for students with disabilities?
If you have an acute or chronic physical or mental disability, please inform the DGS 30
days prior to the date of the exam. Proper accommodations can then be made within the
department and/or through UMD Accessibility and Disability Service (ADS). It is
imperative to inform the department ahead of the time if accommodations are needed as
performance may be adversely affected. Additionally, it is not possible to appeal on the
basis of the disability after the completion of the exam. If the student does not notify the
DGS within 30 days of the exam date about the need for special accommodations, then
the student will not be allowed to take the QE with any accommodations.

What is the format of the QE?
The exam consists of three parts: 1) a research proposal; 2) an article analysis and 3) and
an oral exam. The student must complete the research proposal and article analysis during
a period of two weeks. For the research proposal, the student will be asked to write a
grant application in response to an actual Request for Application (RFA) or Program
Announcement (PA). For the article analysis, students will be asked questions regarding
the author’s application/evaluation of theory, interpretation of data in tables/figure,
strengths and weaknesses of the methodology used and other features of the research. The
oral exam must be scheduled by the student within 30 days of receiving feedback on the
research proposal and article analysis and will focus on the weaknesses of these
components. Students may want to “revise” their research proposal to address
weaknesses identified in their results letter, yet not completely revise if there are portions
of their research proposal they believe are strong, but may need to be clarified orally.
Please be reminded that students have the opportunity to the change the evaluation of
their research proposal and/or the article analysis during the oral exam. Students should
not automatically believe they have failed any portion of the exam after reading the strengths and weaknesses in the results letter. In addition, students should not be defensive, but open to constructive criticism and positive feedback.

**How long does the student have to complete the written exam?**
The research proposal and the article analysis will be distributed via e-mail by the DGS to the students by 12:00 noon in mid-August. The student’s responses must be returned electronically via a PDF email attachment to the DGS by 12:00 noon on the day it is due, two weeks from the date the questions were provided to the student. Late responses are not accepted. If the completed research proposal and article analysis are both not received by the due date and time, a “no pass” grade will be given automatically. Experiencing problems with Internet connectivity is not a valid excuse for missing the exam deadline.

**During the two week period that students are working on the written exam, can they send each other motivational messages and/or emoticons or emojis?**
No. Students should be focused on their own exam, not other students.

**What resources can the student use to complete the QE?**
The research proposal and article analysis components of the QE must represent original work by the student. Background information can be accessed online—from books and other published material -- but the writing must be the student’s writing. The University Honor Pledge must be typed on the first page of the exam. The student should NOT sign or write his/her name under the typed pledge.

**Who writes the QE questions?**
The research proposal and article analysis components of the QE will be created by members of the Graduate Program Committee (GPC). The content of the exam changes every year.

**Who scores the student’s QE responses?**
GPC members, faculty who teach BCH doctoral courses, and faculty who advise BCH doctoral students are responsible for scoring the student’s written and oral responses.

**What overall assessment/grades are possible on the research proposal?**
Preliminary numerical scores of 0-2 will be given based on the rubric in Appendix 1. The overall scores will represent each committee member’s overall assessment of the merit of the proposal. Students will receive each committee member’s scoring rubrics in addition to strengths and weaknesses with their results form.

**What overall assessment/grades are possible on the article analysis?**
Preliminary numerical scores of 0-2 will be given based on the rubric. Due to the specificity of the rubric, it will not be provided in these guidelines. However, it will be provided to students with the exam questions in mid-August. The overall scores will represent each committee member’s average (or mean) of the three sub-sections (theory, methods, statistics). Students will receive each committee member’s scoring rubrics with their results form.
What grades are possible on the oral exam?
Based on a majority vote of the committee, the oral exam will be scored with a rating of pass/no pass.

Do the faculty members who score the responses to the research proposal and article analysis components of the QE know the identity of the student?
No. All faculty members who score the student’s QE responses are blinded to the identity of the student. No personally identifying information should be included on any of the answers. Students will be asked to put a 4-digit identifier code of their choosing in the footer on each page of his/her research proposal and article analysis.

What feedback will be given to the student regarding the written components (the research proposal and the article analysis) of the exam?
Within 30 days after completing the research proposal and article analysis components of the QE, a detailed results summary using the BCH QE Results Form and all committee member’s scoring rubrics will be e-mailed by the DGS to the student, the student’s faculty advisor and the Department Chair.

When does the oral exam take place?
Within 30 days of receiving the results from the research proposal and article analysis.

Can the student meet with their advisor, other faculty and/or their peers to discuss the feedback in their results letter in between the written and oral components of the exam?
No. The student is still in examination mode and should not consult any other individuals about their results.

What is the oral exam designed to measure?
The oral exam is designed to measure student’s critical thinking skills and the ability to think on his/her feet. During the oral exam, students will be asked to present a 10-15 minute (maximum) overview of their research proposal with or without slides and/or handouts that address the weaknesses identified on their results forms. During and after presenting, the grading committee will ask the student questions to clarify, justify and/or elaborate on sections/statements of the research proposal and article analysis that might not have been clear to the committee.

Can the student bring their results letter to the oral exam and consult it, if needed?
Yes.

Is the student responsible for scheduling his/her own oral exam?
Yes. The oral exam must be scheduled by the student using Doodle (www.doodle.com) within 30 business days of receiving the results for the written component of the exam. The student is also responsible for scheduling an available conference room in SPH for the oral exam through the Department Coordinator. The oral exam should be scheduled for one hour. The two BCH faculty members who graded the student’s research proposal...
and article analysis are required to attend the oral exam. The department chair will also attend. If a mutually convenient time cannot be scheduled within the 30 day time frame, the student must submit a written request for an alternate date to the DGS using a formal letter format (attached to an e-mail) immediately upon determining that the grading committee will not be able to convene within 30 days.

**What happens after the oral exam?**
Within 5 business days of the oral exam, a results summary using the BCH QE Results Form will be e-mailed by the DGS to the student, the student’s faculty advisor and the department chair. A description of the strengths and weaknesses and a final grade of either pass/no pass will be given for the entire QE. (See Appendix 2. Summary of QE Grading Process). The student must sign the form and return the form to the DGS within 3 business days. It is recommended that students keep a copy of the results for his/her records.

**What happens if the student does not receive an overall assessment/grade of pass after the oral component of the exam?** See Appendix 2 for a visual depiction of these scenarios.

**Scenario 1: Entire Retake of Exam**
If the student does not pass both of the written components (the research proposal and the article analysis), the student will still need to schedule an oral exam. However, the time that would normally be used for questioning the student will be an open discussion among the student, the grading committee and the student’s advisor to determine what needs to be done during remediation. The student will need to retake the entire exam at the next exam administration the following August.

**Scenario 2: Partial Retake of Exam**
If the student earns a no pass on only one of the written components (the research proposal or the article analysis) and is unable to adequately respond to questions during the oral exam about that component, the student will need to meet with his/her advisor to determine what remediation is required. In addition, the student will need to rewrite the response to the original failed component and submit it by the last day of the winter session that immediately follows the original exam session. The evaluation of the rewrite will be sent to the student within 30 days of the last day of winter session (i.e., late February). The student will then need to schedule another oral exam within 30 days of receiving the rewrite results letter. As with the first exam attempt, within 5 business days of the oral exam, a results summary using the BCH QE Results Form will be e-mailed by the DGS to the student, the student’s faculty advisor and the department chair. A description of the strengths and weaknesses and a final grade of either pass or no pass will be given for the retake of the QE. The student must sign the form and return it to the DGS within 3 business days. It is recommended that students keep a copy of the results for their own records.

Please note: If the student and their advisor decide that the student needs to take another class, repeat a class or complete a semester long independent study prior to rewriting the
exam and retaking the oral, alterations to the timing described above will be considered by the GPC on a case-by-case basis. An email from the student must be sent to the DGS within 30 days of receiving a “no pass” grade verifying that a meeting with the faculty advisor has taken place and detailing the remediation plan and timing alterations if needed. If the student and advisor are unclear about how to remediate/what to remediate, the student and his/her advisor can schedule a meeting to discuss the possibilities with the GPC within 30 days of receiving the “no pass grade”. Please contact the DGS to schedule this meeting with the GPC.

What steps must the student take after passing the QE?
Because students will not receive the grade on the QE until late October, they should have already registered for some of their 15 Individualized Research Plan (IRP) credits (HLTH 898) and any additional courses they wish to take.

When is a student allowed to apply for candidacy (ATC – advance to candidacy)?
Students may apply to ATC only after they have completed their 15 IRP credits. All part-time students are expected to apply for candidacy within three semesters of passing all components of the QE. All full-time students are expected to apply for candidacy within two semesters of passing all components of the QE.

How does a student apply for candidacy?
The student will fill out the ATC form on the UMD Graduate School’s website, obtain all required signatures, and e-mail the form to the Graduate School (the e-mail address is on the bottom of the ATC form).

What happens once a student advances to candidacy?
Once advanced to candidacy, students complete a minimum of 12 credits of dissertation research (HLTH 899) and orally defend their dissertation before graduating.

Is passing the QE necessary to advance in the program?
Yes. Students need to pass the examination within two attempts in order to continue in the doctoral program. If a student does not pass after two attempts, the student will be dismissed from the doctoral program.

Appealing Examination Results
If a student wishes to appeal the results of the examination, he/she must do so in writing to the BCH Associate Chair of Academics and DGS within 10 business days of receiving the results. If a student wishes to appeal the exam administration process or the overall grade, the student should write a letter to the BCH Associate Chair of Academics and DGS (can be sent electronically or hand delivered hard copy) describing his/her concerns.

If the student wishes to appeal something other than the exam administration or the grade, please contact the DGS for further instruction. Appeals will be discussed by the original grading committee, the GPC, or all department faculty, depending on the type of appeal. A decision will be communicated to the student within 30 business days of receiving the appeal. If a student appeals the exam administration process, the BCH
Associate Chair of Academics will conduct a thorough investigation, which may include but is not limited to in-person interviews with the student and the faculty involved. If it is determined that the exam administration process was violated, the student will be given another opportunity to take the exam within 60 days of the final decision made by the chair. If a student appeals the grade received, the BCH Associate Chair of Academics and the Department Chair will appoint two additional faculty members to review the student’s original response and assign a grade. The two new reviewers can agree or disagree with the original grading committee. If they both disagree, the grade may be changed and if changed, the student may be able to forgo any prescribed remediation or retaking of the exam. If a student is not satisfied with the appeal decision, he/she will need to first consult the BCH Associate Chair of Academics. If the student is not satisfied with the BCH Associate Chair of Academic’s response, the student should consult the SPH Associate Dean for Academic Affairs.

Please note: If the BCH Associate Chair of Academics is/was a member of your committee, you may file your appeal with the Department Chair.
Appendix 1. Research Proposal Instructions and Scoring Rubric

**Format:** Use Arial 11 point font, 0.5 inch margins, numbered pages, single spacing. Be sure to include your unique 4-digit identifying number in the footer of all pages. In the header of all pages, include page numbers and a brief header (i.e., short title).

**Content.** Develop your grant application to include the following sections. Begin each lettered section on a new page. Adhere strictly to the page limits. Use all available space.

A. Public Health Relevance Statement (3 sentences maximum)

B. Project Summary/Abstract (30 lines of text maximum)

C. Specific Aims (1 page)

D. Research Plan (6 pages)
   
   a. Significance
   b. Innovation
   c. Approach

   *The approach must include but is not limited to the following:*
   
   - Theoretical framework
   - Research design
   - Procedures
   - Eligibility criteria and recruitment plans
   - Intervention development and description
   - Data collection methods—baseline and follow-up, as appropriate
   - Measures (operational definitions of study variables and psychometric properties)
   - Data analysis plan (including statistical analyses to test study hypotheses)
   - Power analysis/sample size calculation
   - Potential Problems and Alternative Strategies
   - Timeline for achievement of major project activities and objectives

E. Protection of Human Subjects Section (up to 3 pages)
   
   a. Human subjects involvement and characteristics
   b. Potential risks and adequacy of protection against risks (e.g., recruitment, consent procedures, data management)
   c. Potential benefits of the proposed research to participants and others
   d. Importance of the knowledge to be gained

F. References (APA or AMA style)

G. Intervention diagram(s) or description (1 page maximum, no other appendices are allowed). This is an opportunity to have additional space to share with the review panel more information on the conceptual underpinnings of the intervention and/or the specific intervention components.
QE Research Proposal Grading Rubric

Instructions: Please score each section of the student’s response using the 0-2 scale below. The overall score does not need to be an average of the individual scores. This score instead should inform the overall score, which represents an overall assessment of the merit of the proposal. Use whole numbers only (NO decimals) for all ratings. In addition, you must provide up to 5 bullets of strengths/weaknesses (e.g., 3 strengths and 2 weaknesses) per section on the QE grading summary sheet. Do not provide more than 5 bullet points per section.

Students will receive all committee member’s scores and their bulleted lists of strengths and weaknesses. Prior to the oral exam, each committee must meet to discuss each member’s rationale for the overall and individual scores and come up with a process/flow for the oral examination.

Proposal Scoring: 0=unacceptable, 1=marginally acceptable, 2=acceptable

Overall Score: _________

Specific Aims: _________
- identified and clearly articulated a relevant public health problem
- justified the need for the intervention
- spelled out clear and logical aims
- wrote a convincing and persuasive narrative using language and structure appropriate for an NIH grant
- used appropriate formatting, font, and citations

Significance: _________
- drew on relevant, appropriate and high quality literature to provide a convincing rationale for the work
- identified the gaps in the literature that this work will address
- articulated how this work will add to the field of knowledge or benefit practice

Innovation: _________
- explained how the application challenges and seeks to shift current research or practice paradigms (e.g., what is novel about this work)
- described any novel theoretical concepts, approaches or methodologies, instrumentation or interventions to be developed or used
- articulated any advantage over existing methodologies, instrumentation, or interventions

Approach: _________
- chose an appropriate research design and provided enough details on procedures to judge its adequacy
- provided an appropriate timeline to the study goals and design
• provided a logical conceptual model and described bringing in one or more appropriate theories
• identified appropriate measures that reflected the theoretical constructs (e.g., mechanism, outcomes)
• included appropriate analyses to answer the research question
• described appropriate power analyses for the chosen study design and correctly described how the analyses are carried out

Human Subjects: 
• described the risk to participants
• provided an adequate plan to protect against risk (e.g., sensitive information, vulnerable populations, coercion, voluntary participation, withholding of benefits)
• identified the potential benefits of the research to participants and the field
• articulated the importance of the knowledge to be gained
• justified the inclusion or exclusion of women, children, and minorities
Appendix 2. Summary of QE Grading Process

The student must achieve a passing grade on all three components to pass the QE.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article Analysis</th>
<th>Research Proposal</th>
<th>Overall QE Grade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0: no pass (score = 0)</td>
<td>0: no pass (score = 0)</td>
<td>Pass QE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: pass (score = 1-2)</td>
<td>1: pass (score = 1-2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Use oral exam is used as an opportunity to thoroughly discuss a remediation plan; retake QE in a year.</td>
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<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Use oral exam to assess adequacy of preliminary scores. If a no pass is reassessed as a pass, student may be determined to have passed the overall exam. If the oral does not lead to the reassessment of a score, the student will receive a no pass and will need to retake the written and oral components of the QE. The student will then meet with his/her advisor to discuss a remediation plan. The student must rewrite the response to the original failed component and submit it by the last day of the winter session that immediately follows the original exam session. The results of the rewrite will be sent to the student within 30 days of the last day of winter session (i.e., mid-March). The student will then need to schedule the oral exam within 30 days of receiving the rewrite results letter.</td>
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