

Thesis Committees

Biochemistry Biophysics and Chemical Biology (BBCB) Graduate Group. May 2025

The thesis committee is there to support and guide the student through dissertation research. They evaluate your progress and help to make sure you are on track to get your PhD within a reasonable time. Early in your graduate career, their focus will be on making sure you have defined and reasonable goals. Later, they will help you decide when it is time to write your dissertation. Finally, they will be there as you present your thesis seminar and defense. Their support as mentors will likely continue as you move on in your career.

The Overview First:

Select your committee by end of summer semester of 2nd year

1st meeting by Oct 31st of 3rd year. After that EVERY 6 MONTHS until you have permission to schedule your defense

Summary of general advice from BBCB faculty:

- ⌘ As you go through your first few committee meetings, bear in mind that it is normal for our students to start out with a relatively long learning period with minimal, or even no, tangible productivity. Do not become discouraged. You **will** advance to a phase when you will accumulate real results. For most students the majority of your useful data is attained in the last third of your time as a graduate student.
- ⌘ Seek advice from your committee members between committee meetings. This is strongly recommended, almost to the point that we should make it mandatory.
- ⌘ A thesis committee meeting should not feel like an exam. The outcome should be productive advice. After your committee meeting, if you do not have a clear picture of your goals for the next six months, you should follow up with your advisor and/or thesis committee Chair.
- ⌘ Take advantage of the opportunity to discuss science with your committee members, whether at your formal thesis committee meetings, at the water cooler or in the elevators.
- ⌘ Scheduling can be difficult. **Use when2meet.**
- ⌘ Send out a reminder email the day before your meeting with **time and location in subject line.**
- ⌘ Talk to your advisor about what you will present. Get input on your one page summary before sending out to your committee, and if possible go over your presentation with you advisor - don't spring new data on your advisor at the meeting.
- ⌘ Think about what you want to get out of the thesis committee meeting and prepare accordingly.
- ⌘ During your thesis committee meeting, you should focus on the current problems rather than background. Only spend as much time on background as is relevant to what you will be talking about. Similarly, there is no need to spend much time on completed and published projects.

Thesis Committee Meetings – Practical Stuff

The Working Thesis Committee

3 faculty, 2 of whom, including the Chair, must be members of BBCB

Your advisor is not a member of your working thesis committee but must attend your committee meetings

Selecting your committee: By end of summer semester of 2nd year

Discuss with your advisor. Select for breadth as well as expertise in your planned area of thesis research

It is your job to decide who will be Chair of your thesis committee.

Thesis committee approval form must be signed by Chair of BBCB

Setting up committee meetings: 1st meeting by Oct 31st of 3rd year. After that every 6 months

It is your job to find a time that all of your committee can attend - this can be the toughest part of the process, so start early! Ask the GG coordinator to book the room for your meeting

Preparing for your committee meeting

- ⌘ A one-page summary of progress and plans should be prepared by the student and submitted to the committee at least 2 days prior to the meeting
- ⌘ Make sure that you have gone over this summary with your advisor
- ⌘ When submitting the summary, also remind the committee members of time and location of the meeting
- ⌘ If you have any manuscripts published or accepted send your committee a pdf reprint or preprint
- ⌘ You should prepare a presentation (**no more than 20 minutes without interruption**) that includes brief background, covers your progress and details your immediate and long term goals
- ⌘ At your first committee meeting, you will present an outline of your plan for your dissertation research - which may be quite different from what you proposed in your candidacy exam proposal. But remember, it's **not a seminar - no more than 20 minutes**.
- ⌘ At subsequent meetings you should present a brief introduction (one or two slides) to remind the committee of your research area - don't expect them to recall everything from the last meeting, but no need to go into great detail. Aim to put your project in context.
- ⌘ No need to present details of any published work. Provide a reprint or preprint ahead of the meeting.
- ⌘ Give a time line of your plans. What are you going to do in the lab tomorrow, and over the next month, and what do you hope to accomplish before your next meeting in the next six months time.
- ⌘ Have additional slides (from group meetings or other presentations) at the ready in case you are called upon to go into some detail that you did not include in your prepared presentation - you can include slides that you think are important but do not have time to cover at the end of your presentation
- ⌘ Make sure you are comfortable moving back and forth among your slides

What to bring to your meeting

Copies of your one-page summary to give to the faculty

The thesis committee report form. Please fill out relevant parts, especially the year you started thesis work.

Give to the Chair at start of meeting

All of your laboratory notebooks since the last committee meeting

If you are using an electronic notebook, you should bring a laptop to show your committee or you will need to make alternative arrangements with your Chair to view the notebooks.

Your most recent individual development plan (IDP)

What to expect during the meeting

The Chair of your committee will probably first ask you to leave while the committee hears from your advisor on your progress

You may request to speak with the committee in your advisor's absence before you begin discussion of your progress and plans, otherwise this will more usually occur at the end of the meeting

You should expect to be interrupted during your presentation

Be ready to present things in a different order depending on questions

After the meeting

A written summary of the meeting will be prepared by the Chair of the committee and returned to the BBCB office. You will receive a copy of this, and a copy will be placed in your academic file

Other important roles of your thesis committee

You may need them to write letters of recommendation for fellowships or in the future when you are applying for jobs

Your committee, in particular the Chair, will be available to help if you have a disagreement or other problem with your advisor

They are there to give extra advice between formal meetings - maybe you want to change direction or do some experiments that might draw on their expertise, or you might want a different perspective on why you cannot get your experiment to work - you will often find they can spot the problem and save you a great deal of time.

What if things are going really badly?

If the committee and/or the advisor are not satisfied with the student's productivity, a written report will be prepared by the committee outlining a proposed course of action

A copy of the report will be forwarded to the Graduate Group Chair, the student and the advisor

The student will have the opportunity to reply to the written report of the committee

Within 6 months an additional meeting of the thesis committee will take place to determine the progress

In the event that the student does not make sufficient progress, he or she will be placed on academic probation

If progress is not apparent by the next Committee meeting, the student will be asked to petition for a terminal Master's degree

But this will not happen - instead you will soon be ready to finish up

After consultation with your advisor, you should have a committee meeting at which you will ask for permission to schedule your defense of the dissertation for a date **within 6 months**

You will present an outline of the anticipated contents of each chapter of your thesis, and discuss a detailed timeline for completion of outstanding experimental work

Once you have permission to schedule

- ⌘ In discussion with your thesis advisor, you select the External Examiner to add to your committee. This will be the examination committee at your thesis defense. The External Examiner is defined as a faculty member or industry/government equivalent not in the BBCB graduate group.
- ⌘ You write, your advisor gives input, you edit

AT LEAST Two weeks in advance of your planned date of defense, you give each committee member a draft of your thesis.

Consult the checklist for graduation, available on the BBCB website

If the committee sees major deficits in your dissertation, they inform you within one week of receiving the draft.

If they cannot be corrected in time, you may have to reschedule.

Following the public seminar, you have a closed session with your committee

Your committee may ask for additional changes to your thesis so it is important to ensure that you have adequate time following your defense before you need to submit the final copy of your dissertation to the graduate school. For thesis deposition deadlines, consult the academic calendar