

## Student FAQs about the EEB Advancement-to-Candidacy exam

### **When should I advance?**

Officially, normative time to advancement is at the end of the third year (during the ninth academic quarter), but advancement during the tenth academic quarter (typically the beginning of the fourth year) is acceptable. Some students advance before normative time if the committee agrees that the student is ready – that is, you've completed your required classes, you have a plan to complete most of your thesis, and you've demonstrated that you are likely to complete your plan. Some students worry that after advancement, they are bound to what is written in their proposal. This is not the case. Your plans will likely change as you are confronted with unexpected challenges (as all scientists face!), and you can discuss those changes with your committee moving forward.

### **How do I prepare for advancement?**

This is something to discuss with your committee and advisor beforehand. Some members may ask you to be familiar with particular literature, but often, you will not be given such specific guidance. Instead, your preparation should involve the background work needed to write your proposal. This will likely include reading literature in your area to help you write the introductory material to your

### **What is the format of the written proposal?**

Most faculty appreciate a concise (~10 page) proposal so that they have time to read it thoroughly. However, this is a guide and will depend on things like how many figures you have, if you have already published any of your work, and whether your committee wants to see the details of your methods.

The proposal often outlines separate “chapters” or projects that make up your thesis. An example format might be: (1) A short (~2 page) introduction of the big science question that you are addressing, the state of the science in that area, and an overview/outline of your chapters. A good exercise of what to include here is to think about how you would introduce your dissertation defense if you had to do it at this point. (2) Separate sections for each chapter, that summarize specific background for the chapter with references, your questions and hypotheses, methods, preliminary results, and outstanding issues/problems. Most committees will want to discuss work that is not yet completed; therefore, if you have already submitted work for publication, then that might be sent as a separate document and not be included in the proposal. (3) A timeline for the rest of your PhD. This might be as simple as a table, indicating the different components of your thesis (experiments, fieldwork, writing papers, TA duties, etc) and when you plan to do each.

### **What should I include in my presentation?**

Perhaps the most common mistake that students make during the AtC exam is to talk too long. You should assume that your committee has read your written proposal. Therefore, you do not need to present everything in the proposal again. Instead, you

should use this time to give them an overview of your thesis (how it all fits together, what are the main questions), a couple of key highlights, and even the biggest challenges you are thinking about that you would like the committee's feedback on. You might also prepare slides of the figures from your proposal and any others that you think will be useful in answering the committee's questions.

### **What kinds of questions will the committee ask?**

There are three common types of questions that committee members ask. The first type is how your work fits in to the broader science literature. For instance, "What do the results of previous studies say on your topic?" and "How is your project different than those others?". The second type asks about your methods, for example: "What are some challenges that you might face?" and "What kind of statistical test will you use to analyze your data?". Finally, you might be asked about the interpretation of your proposed research: "What will be some caveats of your proposed work?" and "What further experiments could you do, or data you could collect, to disentangle your results even further?". Of course, not all questions will fit in these categories, but many will.

### **What are the possible outcomes of the advancement exam?**

There are three possible outcomes: pass, fail, or provisional pass. If you pass, you will meet your committee again for the next committee meeting (in the fall or spring). If you fail, you would be placed on ACS (academic conditional status). You and your advisor would meet with the EEB Graduate Advisor and the BioSci Associate Dean to discuss and agree upon the expectations for passing the AtC. You would have one quarter to retake and pass the exam.

An informal option is a provisional pass. This option may be appropriate when the committee has a specific concern that a student can address relatively quickly. For instance, the committee might ask the student to revise their written proposal to reflect the committee's input, or they might ask the student to review some specific literature and present part of the research proposal again. In this case, the student would be asked to wait until this concern is addressed before they submit their final advancement paperwork.

### **Where can I get more information?**

The most important source of information for advancement is your committee. Every committee has slightly different expectations and preferences. Your peers that have recently advanced can also offer their advice and may be willing to share their written proposals. The EEB [Graduate Student Handbook](#) has more detailed information about advancement and the composition of the advancement committee. UCI's [Graduate Policies and Procedures](#) has official information about policies for all graduate students that our department must follow. Finally, the EEB Graduate Advisor is always available to answer your questions.