

Social and Behavioural Health Sciences - PhD Program

Guidelines for the Qualifying Examination

Approved by the SBHS Curriculum Committee: March 20, 2018

Updated: April 16, 2025 - only on UofT plagiarism tool (back to Turnitin from Ouriginal)

Overview

The purpose of the qualifying exam (QE) is to assess the student's capacity to understand, apply, and compare theoretical perspectives with a primary focus on those taught in the Social and Behavioural Health Sciences (SBHS) core theory courses (CHL5101H, CHL5102H). Specifically, the QE process will assess the student's ability to theorize a topic using two different theoretical approaches and to propose theoretically sophisticated research questions that would advance the student's topic area of interest and may be used for the dissertation. The process of writing the QE and producing a final product should ideally contribute to the theory section of the student's thesis proposal.

Timing of the Qualifying Examination

The QE will be written in the spring (May 15 - June 30) of the student's first year of studies, after the required theory courses have been completed, and prior to defending the thesis proposal. **Students writing the QE in a given year are asked to send the QE Director the following information by May 15 (or the next business day): the substantive/empirical area their paper will focus on, and the two theoretical traditions that will be explored in the paper.** This information is used solely for the purpose of forming the grading committee (as further described below).

Flex time students will have the option to complete the QE in the spring of either their first year or their second year. Once the student has confirmed their supervisor and committee, has successfully passed their QE, has defended their thesis proposal, and finished all required course work, they will have achieved PhD Candidacy.

Qualifying Examination Paper – Focus and Content

Focus

In the QE paper, students will identify a topic in their substantive or empirical area of interest, describe and apply two theoretical perspectives relevant to this substantive or empirical area, and propose one or more specific research questions which reflect the theories covered, have the potential to make a significant contribution to the area

of study, and could form the basis for their dissertation proposal. The maximum word count for the paper is 6000 words, excluding references, figures, tables and appendices. The final word count should be included at the top of the first page.

Content

A brief (i.e., 1-2 page) introduction will provide a clear statement of the substantive or empirical area that the student plans to examine, including a concise review of key research literature in this area, a brief overview of the theoretical traditions that have largely been used in this area, and a statement of the rationale for pursuing the topic of interest (i.e., relevance to public health). A comprehensive review of the literature is not required for the QE paper, since this will form part of the student's future thesis proposal.

The paper will identify and describe two theoretical perspectives from which the topic can be considered. Students are expected to choose their two theoretical perspectives from a list (provided below) of theoretical traditions that centre around those taught in the two required SBHS core theory courses ([CHL5101H](#) and [CHL5102H](#)). The list of eligible theories will be updated annually to reflect the content of the three theory courses. If a student wishes to focus on a theoretical tradition not included on this list, they may request permission from the PhD Program Director, but at least one of the selected theories must come from the list provided.

For each theoretical tradition, students should develop a reading list of approximately 10-15 sources compiled in consultation with their supervisor, drawing from (but also extending beyond, where necessary) the required and recommended readings from the relevant course syllabi. Please include this list as an Appendix to your QE. Students who choose one theory from outside of the list of theories covered in the core theory courses will be required to develop their own reading list for this theory, and can draw on the expertise of their supervisor and committee members in developing this list. No approval from the supervisor/committee is required.

The QE paper will explain why these theories are relevant to the topic area, situate them in relation to other systems of thought or traditions, briefly describe the evolution or lineage of the theories, describe the key tenets/constructs of each theory, apply them to the chosen substantive or empirical area of interest, and discuss how the two theories compare to/contrast with/complement one another in relation to the substantive area.

The paper will then propose theoretically-informed research questions (at least one question per theoretical tradition, OR one question that draws from both theoretical traditions) which might be undertaken in future study, and that arise from the application of the selected theoretical approaches.

The final paper will include a full reference list of work consulted. Although students are expected to have read all of the readings included in their reading lists, not every reading on these lists will necessarily be cited in the final paper. As noted above, the student's reading lists should be included as an Appendix.

Students are permitted to draw from writing submitted as part of course assignments completed for CHL5101H and CHL5102H, up to a maximum of 1,000 consecutive words. Any material drawn from an assignment produced for another course must be cited accordingly.

Papers should be double-spaced with 1" margins and 12 point Arial/Calibri/Times New Roman/Cambria font. Any standard referencing style (e.g., Vancouver, APA, ASA) is acceptable so long as it is used consistently throughout the entire paper.

Submission of the Qualifying Examination Paper

The QE paper should be submitted to the QE Director in Microsoft Word format via email (sbhs.dlsph@utoronto.ca), by 11:59pm on June 30. No hard copy submission is necessary. Late submissions will not be accepted, except with an extension previously approved by the QE Director (e.g., on the recommendation of Accessibility Services). If the QE paper is not submitted by the deadline, the student will be considered to have not passed the QE submission, and accordingly will have only one opportunity to submit the paper (see "**Possible Outcomes of the Qualifying Examination**", below).

Students will also be required to submit their qualifying examination paper to the University's plagiarism detection tool for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their papers to be included as source documents in the reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. Students will have the opportunity to view their similarity scores and make any changes necessary prior to submission for grading; however, if you wish to take advantage of this, please allow for sufficient time prior to the deadline. As of September 1, 2024, the University's plagiarism detection tool transitioned from Ouriginal to Turnitin (Turnitin has acquired Ouriginal). For instructors and students, the transition from Ouriginal to Turnitin will not result in significant workflow changes, as both tools are integrated directly with the Canvas Plagiarism Framework in Quercus, which provides a consistent user experience regardless of the plagiarism detection tool. There are no changes to the University's plagiarism detection tool conditions of use, or syllabus statement. Any student papers that were submitted to the Ouriginal platform between 2021 and 2024 will be migrated over to Turnitin's submission bank, along with all papers submitted to Turnitin prior to the University moving to Ouriginal in 2021. More information about plagiarism detection tools at U of T is available [here](#). Students will receive instructions for the Turnitin submission via email

prior to the submission deadline.

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and will not be tolerated. The procedures outlined in the University of Toronto's Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters will be followed in any cases of suspected plagiarism. For a complete discussion of the university policy on plagiarism and other offenses, please refer to the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters:

<https://governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/secretariat/policies/code-behaviour-academic-matters-july-1-2019>

Evaluation of the Qualifying Examination

Each QE paper will be graded as pass/rewrite by two members of a grading committee; one of the graders will normally be the student's supervisor, and at least one of the graders will be a core faculty member of SBHS with a full SGS appointment. The competencies that must be demonstrated in order for the student to pass the QE paper are indicated below (**Table 1**). Each grader will submit to the QE Director by July 15th their assessment of the QE paper on the basis of these competencies, together with approximately 1 paragraph of constructive written feedback to assist the student in further developing their ideas for their thesis proposal. Students will receive this feedback, along with the name of the grader, at the time they receive the results of their QE, and can follow up with their graders for further discussion if they wish. If there is a disagreement in outcome (as described below, **Possible Outcomes of the Qualifying Examination**) between the two graders, the paper will be graded by a third member of the grading committee who is at arm's length from the student, and the outcome will be determined by majority vote between the three graders.

Possible Outcomes of the Qualifying Examination

The student will be informed of the outcome of the QE (including written feedback from the graders) from the QE Director no later than July 31st. The possible outcomes of the examination are:

- i. *Pass*. A pass indicates that the student's paper has adequately demonstrated the competencies described below (**Table 1**).
- ii. *Rewrite*. An outcome of rewrite indicates that the student's paper has not adequately demonstrated two or more of the 11 competencies indicated below (**Table 1**), and will require a re-examination. The student is permitted to resubmit the revised QE paper only one time, incorporating specific feedback that will be provided by the QE Director at the time of

notification of the outcome, and must do so by August 31st (unless a time extension has been granted by the QE Director in advance). Students must leave the PhD program if they do not pass the QE on the second submission or if they do not resubmit the QE paper by the deadline. The revised paper will normally be graded by the same two faculty members who graded the original QE paper.

Role of the Supervisor, Committee, SBHS Faculty and Other Supports in the Qualifying Examination Process

The student's supervisor and committee, and other faculty members as appropriate, can provide advice and support to the student in identifying the substantive area of focus for the paper and in selecting appropriate theoretical perspectives. If the student chooses one theory that is not included in the core theory courses, the supervisor and committee should also advise the student on developing the reading list for this theory, and the student is free to consult with other faculty members for this purpose. The supervisor, committee, and other faculty members will not provide feedback to the student through the process of writing the QE paper (i.e., after May 15), and are not permitted to review drafts of the paper prior to its submission.

Students are invited and encouraged to seek out writing/editing support in the process of developing their QE paper (e.g., from the Graduate Centre for Academic Communication: <https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/resources-supports/gcac/> or the Health Sciences Writing Centre: <https://www.hswriting.ca/>). Any support accessed by the student should be limited to feedback on issues such as structure, organization, and clarity of writing, and should not address the empirical or theoretical content of the

Table 1: Competencies to be demonstrated in the SBHS Qualifying Examination paper

Competency	Demonstrated by:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can clearly and concisely synthesize literature in a substantive or empirical area of focus in order to demonstrate a compelling rationale 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear and appropriate articulation of the substantive or empirical area of focus Clear, concise, appropriately referenced overview of relevant literature, which provides a strong basis for focusing on this substantive area of focus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can justify the selection of theoretical approaches that are appropriate to investigate the substantive area of focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Articulation of an appropriate justification for each theoretical approach, with use of relevant literature Selection of theoretical perspectives that are an appropriate fit for the substantive area of focus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrates a clear understanding of how theoretical tradition A is situated in relation to related systems of thought or traditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear and correct articulation of theoretical tradition A's paradigmatic positioning, foundational thinkers, and historical development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrates a clear understanding of theoretical tradition A's key tenets or constructs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear and correct definitions of the key terms, tenets, or constructs typically associated with theoretical tradition A are provided Where there is variability in the definition or use of theoretical tradition A's key terms, tenets, or constructs: appropriately articulates and attributes the terms/tenets/constructs as they will be applied in the QE paper A holistic understanding of the theoretical tradition is demonstrated, recognizing that theory is more than a collection of key concepts and constructs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can effectively apply theoretical tradition A to the substantive area of focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear and compelling application of theoretical tradition A's key terms, tenets, or constructs on to the substantive or empirical area of interest

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulation of the strengths and limitations of theoretical tradition A in relation to the substantive or empirical area of focus, demonstrating a clear understanding of theoretical tradition A
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates a clear understanding of how theoretical tradition B is situated in relation to related systems of thought or traditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear and correct articulation of theoretical tradition B's paradigmatic positioning, foundational thinkers, and historical development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates a clear understanding of theoretical tradition B's key tenets or constructs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear and correct definitions of the key terms, tenets, or constructs typically associated with theoretical tradition B are provided • Where there is variability in the definition or use of theoretical tradition B's key terms, tenets, or constructs: appropriately articulates and attributes the terms/tenets/constructs as they will be applied in the QE paper • A holistic understanding of the theoretical tradition is demonstrated, recognizing that theory is more than a collection of key concepts and constructs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can effectively apply theoretical tradition B to the substantive area of focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly and correctly mapping theoretical tradition B's key terms, tenets, or constructs on to the substantive or empirical area of interest • Articulation of the strengths and limitations of theoretical tradition B in relation to the substantive or empirical area of focus, demonstrating a clear understanding of theoretical tradition B
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can effectively describe how theoretical tradition A and theoretical tradition B compare to, contrast with, or complement one another in relation to the substantive area of focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear and correct articulation of the similarities and/or differences between theoretical tradition A and theoretical tradition B • Clear and correct articulation of the compatibility of theoretical tradition A and theoretical tradition B in relation to the

	<p>substantive or empirical area of focus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing a cogent and well supported argument for choosing one theory over the other, or combining theoretical tradition A and theoretical tradition B, for future research in the identified substantive or empirical area of focus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can propose sound theoretically-informed research questions that follow logically from the arguments presented in the paper 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For each theoretical approach selected, clear articulation of at least one research question that is consistent with this approach (note that students may also propose a single research question that draws on both theoretical perspectives covered in the QE) • Each research question follows logically from the arguments made throughout the paper
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates written communication abilities at a level appropriate to PhD studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well organized, logical writing with sound structure and flow

List of Eligible Theoretical Perspectives (2025)

Bio/Medicalization (CHL5102)
Biopolitics/Governmentality (CHL5101, CHL5102)
Critical Race Theory (CHL5101, CHL5102)
Diffusion of Innovations (CHL5101)
Feminist Theories (CHL5101, CHL5102)
Fundamental Cause Theory (CHL5101)
Indigenous Ways of Knowing (CHL5101, CHL5102)
Individual Theories of Behaviour Change (CHL5101)
Institutional Ethnography (CHL5101)
Intersectionality (CHL5101, CHL5102)
Political Economy (CHL5101, CHL5102)
Postcolonial theory (CHL5102)
Posthumanism and New Materialisms (CHL5102)
Queer Theory (CHL5102)
Social Constructionism (CHL5101, CHL5102)
Social Ecological Model (CHL5101)
Theories of Organizational Change (CHL5101)
Theory of Fundamental Causes (CHL5101)