Rules for the format of the Master’s degree comprehensive exam

The examination committee is to be composed of three committee members from the subprogram area of the student’s concentration (NS, MCD, EEB), or from two areas if the student’s program covers a broader range of material (for example MCD and NS, or MCD and EEB). At least one of the members of the committee should be a member of the Biology department Graduate Studies Committee (or have been on it in the past), but it is permissible to have committee members from outside the Biology dept.

The student should make an appointment to meet with the committee to discuss the topics on which the student will be examined (based on interests and coursework taken), or exchange emails to clarify this point. Each committee member writes 1 or 2 questions, and provides some references based on what the student took for coursework. The student is then charged with writing papers for each examining committee member; this should be roughly 5-10 pages long for each question in the format of a minireview or analysis of some aspect of the primary literature, and should be done within 2 months of the assignment. Each committee member grades only the portion written for him/her, but is free to see the other portions.

If all committee members agree that their portion of the written exam is satisfactory, the student may only THEN schedule an oral examination. In the oral portion the student’s knowledge is tested further, not only on the specific papers read and the 3 papers written, but also a bit more broadly on the topics studied in the student’s coursework that led to the specific examination topics. For example, the committee may ask the student to support his/her answers further with specific questions, or may also ask basic background questions on topics the committee feels the student should know with an M.S. in that area, or that were apparently weak based on the answers to the written portion of the exam. Prior to the oral examination, the committee should meet to discuss the breadth of the exam, and should inform the student what is to be expected.

Further questions should be referred to the director of the M.S. program.