Thesis Committee Requirements

In the BME graduate program, all students who stand for the Preliminary Examination must have a thesis committee comprised of at least five persons.

Four committee members are specified:

• The research advisor (typically the chair of the committee) who must have a primary or secondary appointment in BME department.
• Three BME faculty members (including the committee chair) one of whom must have a primary appointment in BME department.
• At least one cognate member from outside the department – typically from a clinical or basic medical science department.

The fifth committee member is at the student's discretion. Note that this is one more committee member than the Graduate School's requirement of four committee members.

General Timeline

The BME Ph.D. Program offers the following timeline for planning purposes. Please note that some aspects of the departmental timeline differ from that recommended by the Graduate School, and that some students will inevitably proceed towards the Preliminary Examination at faster or slower paces than that specified below.

Each BME faculty member and each BME graduate student has different interests, needs and expectations; consequently, there is no "one size fits all" approach to successful student mentoring and advising. That said, it is obligatory that each student, and his or her research advisor and thesis committee, be intentional and responsible in progressing towards the Preliminary Examination and subsequently towards the Defense at an appropriately timely pace.

1. In the first year, and by no later than 9 months following matriculation the student shall have identified a research advisor. In BME, the thesis advisor is synonymous with the research advisor, and is almost always the chair of the student's thesis supervisory committee. The research advisor is thus the primary source of information and resources regarding departmental requirements, course selection, research direction, and progress towards degree. In the vast majority of cases the research advisor is identified prior to the student arriving on campus.

In certain cases students may be admitted to the graduate program without prior identification of the research advisor. In these instances the Director of Graduate Studies will assign a temporary advisor to monitor student progress until the research advisor is identified by no later than the 9th month following matriculation.
2. **In the first year, and by no later than 12 months following matriculation the student shall have identified a departmental advisor.** The departmental advisor will serve as a member of the student’s thesis committee. The departmental advisor is someone other than the research advisor and the Director of Graduate Studies who is familiar with the student’s research topic and/or is a faculty member with whom the student has particularly good rapport. The role of the departmental advisor is to ensure that a second faculty member, besides the research advisor, is well aware of the student’s aspirations and progress. The departmental advisor can be especially valuable when matters arise outside the research advisor’s expertise or when there are conflicts between the student and the research advisor. The Departmental Advisor Form can be obtained from the BME Graduate Program Office.

3. **In the second year, and by no later than 24 months following matriculation the student shall schedule a “2nd Year Review” that includes at least his or her research and departmental advisors.** The agenda for this meeting shall include a review of the student’s course work to date, a discussion of the student’s research progress to date, and a discussion of the student’s plans for the formation of the full thesis committee. The outcome of this meeting is a written communication to the Director of Graduate Studies from the research and department advisors that states whether or not the student is making satisfactory progress towards the Preliminary Examination.

Any student pursuing a MS degree in BME on the way to the doctorate may use this meeting as the MS examining committee as long as the student complies with the requirements for a course work or thesis MS as described on the BME web site at [http://www.bme.duke.edu/grads/curriculum.php](http://www.bme.duke.edu/grads/curriculum.php).

4. **In the second or third year, and by no later than 36 months following matriculation the student shall have identified a full thesis committee.** Graduate School requirements state that: “As early in a student’s course of study as is practicable and not later than one month (thirty days) before the preliminary examination, the director of graduate studies in the major program or department will nominate for the approval of the associate dean a supervising committee.”

5. **In the third or fourth year, and by no later than 48 months following matriculation the student shall have stood for the Preliminary Examination.** The timing of the examination should be scheduled sufficiently early so that a post-examination change in strategic direction will not result in significant lost effort.

See the BME Guidelines for the Preliminary Examination, posted on the BME website, for more information. Graduate School requirements state that: “Ordinarily a student registered for full-time study should pass the Preliminary Examination by the end of the third year. A student who has not passed the examination by this time must file a statement with the Dean of the Graduate School, approved by the Director of Graduate Studies in the major department, explaining the delay and setting a date for the examination. Except under unusual circumstances, extension will not be granted beyond the middle of the fourth year.”

The BME department applies the same criteria as the Graduate School, but extends the targeted time for standing for the Preliminary Examination from the middle of the fourth year (month 42) to the end of the fourth year (month 48).
Students who are not prepared to stand for their Preliminary Examination by the 48th month following matriculation (1) must provide a written explanation to the Director of Graduate Studies by month 48, and (2) must schedule a meeting with his or her full thesis committee as soon as possible to discuss the student’s progress towards the degree. Acceptable written explanations for postponing of the Preliminary Examination may include but are not limited to changing research advisors, substantially changing research projects, a Graduate School approved leave of absence (e.g. military, health, maternity or family leave), or an advisor approved extended off-campus activity (e.g. a year-long internship, research, training or educational experience).

It is the responsibility of the student, and the student’s research advisor and thesis committee, to comply with this expectation. Failure to comply may result in removal from the BME graduate program.

6. **The Final Step: Writing the dissertation and passing the thesis defense.** Although the process for preparing, distributing, and defending the dissertation is much the same as the Preliminary Examination, there are a number of specific procedures and filing dates that absolutely must be adhered to.

It is critical that students be completely familiar with Graduate School requirements for student registration, thesis preparation, thesis submission, and scheduling the defense date: [http://gradschool.duke.edu/academics/degree_reqs/phd_reqs/index.php](http://gradschool.duke.edu/academics/degree_reqs/phd_reqs/index.php). Failure to do so may result in additional costs and substantial delays.

Typically, BME graduate students stand for their thesis defense approximately 2 years following passage of the Preliminary Examination, well short of the 4 year allowable time window stipulated by the Graduate School. Students should consider holding at least one meeting with the full thesis committee in the time between passing the Preliminary Examination and the scheduled defense date. This meeting provides an opportunity to discuss progress of the research, make course corrections, and reach consensus on tasks and content that must be incorporated for the dissertation to be “a mature and competent piece of writing, embodying the results of significant and original research.”