Frequently Asked Questions
about the Generals Paper requirement

This document is not a replacement for the official rules, which you should read online at http://web.mit.edu/linguistics/graduate/requirements/generalexam.html. This document is an informal supplement to those rules, developed to clarify and demystify the process of writing and defending your Generals papers. Please let us know if you find this document useful, and also if there is any additional information you would like us to add to it.

• Why is there a Generals paper requirement?

From the start, a unique feature of the MIT program has been its strong focus on original research (guided and advised by faculty) as the best way for graduate students to become linguists. That is why our department asks students to write and defend two Generals papers as our program's version of the "General Exam" that each MIT department must administer as a milestone on the way to the PhD. The General Exam requires every graduate student to show the ability to formulate a significant research question of real interest to the field, carry out the research necessary to investigate that question, and report the findings in a paper written to a professional standard. By successfully completing your General papers, you are demonstrating your readiness to participate in the field, to help the rest of us figure out how language works.

We require two Generals papers, rather than just one, so that students acquire professional-level research expertise in more than one subdiscipline of linguistics, and also so that general lessons learned in writing the first Generals paper may be applied to the writing of the second.

• When should I start thinking about topics for my Generals papers, and how do I go about finding one?

Finding research topics is a regular part of every linguist's life, and there is no magic recipe for success at it. Where good questions come from (not to mention good answers) is a mystery that this FAQ list, alas, will not solve for you. On the other hand, there are two steps you can take that will significantly improve your odds of finding good topics for your Generals in finite time, and will help you develop them into excellent, defendable papers.

First, make sure you are exposing yourself to a variety of ideas and puzzles in linguistics. That is not hard to do in our department. If you find your classes interesting, if you attend colloquia and a reading group or two, if you like chatting about linguistics with your classmates and other students, you will inevitably acquire a personal collection of intriguing ideas and puzzles. Among these you will surely find at least two that are promising topics for Generals papers. The more you involve yourself in the intellectual life of the department, the greater the likelihood that you can enter the Generals process with appropriate topics already in mind.

Second, take full advantage of the expertise of the faculty and their eagerness to help you develop your research. By the end of your first year, you will probably have met one-on-one with several faculty members in connection with class papers and projects. You will also have worked closely with at least one faculty member in your second-semester independent study. If any of these interactions are particularly fruitful, or if there is someone new with whom you want to work, schedule a meeting with one or more of these faculty members, to discuss ideas for Generals paper research. (It is also fine to
just say "suggest a topic".) In all likelihood, you will sense when a topic and a working relationship "clicks", at which point you might consider asking for regular meetings.

The summer after the first year is the best time to start thinking about your first Generals paper, so that you begin the second year with some ideas already in hand. This might be a good time to revisit old squibs you wrote and interesting papers that you read, and an especially good time to talk with faculty about possible projects. At the same time, false starts and changes of direction are entirely normal as you undertake your Generals paper research. These should be no cause for concern (unless they start numbering in the double digits). Just the opposite, in fact. Even your false starts are teaching you something about language, and often end up as topics of your future work.

- **What are the faculty's expectations concerning the content of Generals papers? Is it true that they must be "of publishable quality"?**

As noted above, the Generals process requires you to show the ability to formulate a significant research question of real interest to the field, carry out the research necessary to investigate your question, and report your findings in a paper written to a professional standard. At the same time, we know full well that not all projects are equally successful, and they do not require equal amounts of time and effort. This is especially true of projects carried out under the artificial constraints of the Generals deadlines, by researchers just starting out in the field. Unforeseen difficulties and last-minute counterexamples are facts of life that neither you nor your advisors can predict or control for. For these reasons, we do not expect or require that your papers present conclusive results. Furthermore, contrary to persistent rumor, we do not require that your papers be "publishable".

A paper that reports an experiment that needs to be redone to eliminate an unanticipated confound, a proposal that works for Icelandic but fails for Faroese, or a paper that answers two of the three most obvious objections to your otherwise excellent analysis might not pass muster with a journal reviewer without more work — but if it is a well-written report on a well-conducted investigation of an interesting question, it is a perfectly satisfactory Generals paper. If you find yourself able to write such a paper, and the Generals deadline is at hand: write it up, defend it, and get on with your life as a linguistics grad student.

Yes, your next step after defending your imperfect paper might indeed include fixing its problems, with the ultimate goal of publication. Many Generals papers do indeed lead to conference talks and published papers. But by finishing and defending your actual Generals paper in a timely fashion, you set yourself free to complete your research and polish your paper without the formal Generals requirement hanging over your head. Trust us, it's a good feeling.

- **What are the faculty's expectations concerning the length of Generals papers?**

The answer to this question more or less follows as a theorem from the answer to the previous question. Your Generals paper should be the right length to report on the research that you conducted. This length will vary depending on the topics and what you have discovered about them. But do not confuse your Generals paper with your dissertation! Generals papers in theoretical syntax, semantics or phonology tend to range from 30 to 60 or so pages — depending on what needs to be said. Papers that report experimental reports are often a bit shorter than other kinds of papers in linguistics. If your Generals paper is starting to approach the 100-page mark, you have embarked on a project that is too ambitious for the Generals. You should work with the faculty who are advising you to find ways of limiting the paper's scope.
• **Who should I be meeting with as I work on my generals? How often?**

As noted above, you should meet regularly with one or more faculty as you develop your generals. It is extremely rare that a Generals project progresses successfully without regular meetings of this sort. It is usually useful to meet regularly with more than one faculty member (and as the project progresses, it becomes especially important to get more than one perspective) but there should be at least one member of the faculty guiding your research. How often you meet is up to the two of you. Weekly or biweekly meetings are common.

These arrangements are deliberately informal. If your research focus changes, or you realize that a different faculty member may have more to offer your project, you are free to change the person with whom you meet most regularly. Faculty may shed a tear when this happens, but we know that your needs and the needs of your project must come first.

• **How are Generals Committees chosen?**

Late in your third semester, you will be asked by the Graduate Program Officer to list your preferences for members of your three-person Generals Committee, and to list any faculty who you do not want on your committee. Your replies are strictly confidential. Only the Graduate Program Officer knows your preferences.

Most of the faculty participate actively in the Generals process, and the Department tries to assign each faculty member to a roughly equal number of committees. For this reason, you may not get your first choice of committee members (but you will never be assigned a committee member that you have requested not to be assigned to you).

You will also be asked to identify the likely areas of your two papers, and we will try to ensure that your committee includes at least one faculty member from each area. Since your plans may change, it occasionally happens that your committee lacks a representative from one of your areas of research, in which case an adjustment might be made in the composition of your committee for the defense of that paper. If a committee member is on leave when you defend your paper, work with your committee and other advisors to arrange for a substitute.

• **What is the role of my Generals Committee in the process of writing the generals? Do I need to meet regularly with every committee member?**

The most important role that your committee plays is to serve as the "jury" for your Generals defenses. It is highly desirable, however, to have discussed your work with the members of your committee in advance of the defense. In the case of faculty whose expertise is relevant to a particular paper, you will want to do this anyway, for the sake of the research — but even a faculty member from the "wrong" field can offer excellent advice (especially on how to make your paper maximally accessible to linguists from other subdisciplines), and will appreciate being educated about your paper before the defense happens. Some of the most interesting suggestions at the defense (as well as the most challenging questions) often come from faculty who are less familiar with your area of research, and are therefore "fresher" than their colleagues with more expertise.
• What if the faculty member who is helping me the most is not a member of my Generals Committee?

This is extremely common, and no cause for concern whatsoever. It is just fine to have a committee that does not include the person who knows your paper the best. In the real world, your papers will be read all the time by people with no personal knowledge of your project and its ups and downs. On the other hand, it occasionally happens that there is some especially compelling reason to add an extra faculty member to your committee when you defend a particular paper. That is something to discuss with your main research advisor and with the other members of your committee. If they all agree, the extra member can be added with no further formalities.

• What constitutes making acceptable progress on the Generals? How can I know if I am making progress?

One of the goals of the Generals process is to learn how to manage a project from the idea stage to the final writing stage. You have the right to know whether you are making acceptable progress in achieving this goal, and it is the duty of the faculty members with whom you work to let you know if any aspect of your progress is worrisome (and also to let you know when you are doing just fine). On the other hand, because real research always involves false starts, unexpected twists and turns, and some level of uncertainty, judging your progress is more of an art than a science. Be a bit patient about your progress, especially at the beginning — but do solicit advice and take it seriously!

• What is the relation between the Workshop classes and the Generals papers that I submit?

The Workshops are designed to support the Generals paper process. As a general rule, we expect that the research you discuss in the Workshops will be the research that ends up feeding into your Generals. Nonetheless, it might happen that one or more of your Generals papers ultimately differs from the work you discussed in Workshop — perhaps because your topic expanded or contracted, or because some other project of yours was more successful and ended up turning into your Generals. So long as you complete the requirements for the Workshops and successfully defend your two Generals papers, we will not complain if the various projects differ.

• Can I submit a paper written for a class as a Generals paper?

Yes. In fact, the faculty is delighted when work done for a class becomes a Generals paper. This is a sign to us that the class did its job of preparing and inspiring you to do research of your own. It is particularly common for Generals papers to grow out of squibs from first-year classes, including the second-semester independent study. Of course, because most class papers are written quickly at the end of the semester, they will often need work and polishing before they can be defended as a Generals. But if you have written a good paper for a class that you suspect might fulfill the requirements for a Generals, discuss the possibility with relevant faculty members, and feel free to use the paper.

• How do I schedule and prepare for my Generals Defense?

When you and your research advisors agree that it is time to schedule a defense (either because your paper is done, or because it will be done very soon) you should take the initiative to contact your committee and find a two-hour block when all of you are free. One efficient way to do this is by setting up a Doodle poll (http://doodle.com). Once you have settled on a time, book one of our seminar rooms
if possible, or else ask your committee if one of their offices can be used. These arrangements are your responsibility.

Most faculty want to have the final version of your paper a week or so in advance of the defense. Their deadlines are sometimes flexible, but that is a topic that you need to negotiate with your committee — and they are within their rights to ask for a rescheduling of the defense if your paper is too late.

How much should you prepare for the defense itself? Well, by the time you have finished a Generals paper, you will be the world's expert on your paper. You don't need to spend the night before your defense studying. It's not that kind of exam.

In most cases, your main pre-defense task is to prepare a handout (or slides, if appropriate) to serve as a framework for your defense. There is generally not much need for any other kind of preparation — but make sure you confirm the advice in this document with your advisors and committee members, in case they have some recommendations specific to your paper.

• What happens in a Generals Defense?

The structure of a defense may vary if there are special circumstances, but defenses normally proceed as follows:

Step 1: After giving your handout to your committee members, you will be asked to leave for a short time (and to not go far). While you are out of the room, the committee will designate one of its members to chair the defense, and will briefly discuss their evaluation of the paper and what sorts of questions they would like you to answer about it.

Step 2: They will call you back into the room, looking quite serious. At this point, you will probably be asked to start talking about the paper, using your handout or slides. Sometimes, you will be told that the committee would like to begin at some point other than the beginning of the paper. For example, they might want to leave lots of time to discuss a particular section, and are therefore willing to skip a presentation of the facts or a discussion of the literature. All in all, you are basically giving a talk or classroom presentation — except that you should expect to be interrupted a fair amount, and you should not be surprised if parts of your carefully prepared handout are never used. Expect challenging questions, including new ideas and possible problems that occur to committee members in the process of the defense. Expect committee members to insist that obscure, complex or troublesome parts of the paper be explained clearly to them. You will not be asked "trick questions" or quizzed on general knowledge. This is a defense of your paper, not a defense of you.

Step 3: About fifteen minutes before the two-hour block is up, the committee will end the proceedings and ask you to leave the room once more. The committee will then call you back with their decision.

The two most common decisions are: pass and pass with revisions. A decision of pass means that you are done. A decision of pass with revisions means that you will count as having passed that Generals defense once you make certain specified changes in your paper, and satisfy one or more committee members designated to approve those changes.
It is theoretically possible to fail one's defense, but that is a vanishingly uncommon outcome. A student whose paper is clearly unsatisfactory will not normally be allowed to schedule a defense in the first place.

- **What else happens in a Generals Defense?**

After rendering its decision, the committee will often offer further advice concerning the paper. In particular, if the committee feels that the paper might be developed into a conference paper or journal article, the committee will often make suggestions about how to achieve that goal. Though, as discussed above, there is no requirement that the Generals paper itself be publishable, the research started in the Generals process does often lead to publishable results (one of the exciting things about our still-young field).

The committee might also ask you about your own plans for the immediate future, including the topic of your next Generals paper or your thoughts about possible dissertation topics. You can use this opportunity to ask questions of your own about how to develop your research or about your progress in the program (though needless to say, this is not your only opportunity to ask such questions!).

- **What is the relation between Generals paper topics and dissertation topic?**

With any luck, you are now intrigued by a range of questions that arose as you worked on at least one of your Generals papers. One or more of these questions *might* lead you to a dissertation topic. It is quite common for a Generals paper to form the nucleus of the dissertation, or to end up developed as a chapter of the dissertation. On the other hand, that does not have to happen, and it is certainly not an expectation of the program. As always, talk to those faculty members who you have chosen as your research advisors.