

BIOLOGY PH.D. 'QUICK START GUIDE'

The following topics and others are covered more extensively in the [Graduate Student Handbook](#). Students are responsible for adhering to Department Policies as detailed in the Handbook, and also must familiarize themselves with [GSAS policies](#).

Classes

Classes are an integral part of the first year of the PhD program. The department uses a Tier system to give students greater flexibility in designing a program that fits their interests in specific fields while maintaining breadth in biomedical sciences training. Two courses are chosen from Tiers 2, 3 and 4. Tier 2 courses are considered foundational for any field; Tier 3 courses are considered foundational for specific fields; and Tier 4 courses are electives in any area relevant to Biological Sciences, and includes highly specialized courses.

Further information can be found [here](#). Before you start the program, you will receive information on signing up for courses from Sarah Kim Fein, and you will have a one-on-one advising session with a co-DGS during Orientation. Even after you sign up for courses there is a shopping period where you can sample courses before deciding on your final schedule.

Teaching

Two semesters of teaching are [required](#). Serving as a Teaching Assistant generally begins in the second year, and it is possible to serve as a grader for one semester as early as the second semester of the first year. Students generally complete their teaching requirement by the end of their third year but are required to finish by the end of their fourth year. The Lead Teaching Fellow (LTF) distributes the course instructor contact information and TA opportunities a semester or two in advance.

Rotations

Rotations are an important part of choosing a thesis lab. First year students must complete three rotations according the schedule below; students are encouraged to start rotations as early as feasible within each period:

1st rotation: start no later than mid-September, to mid-late December

2nd rotation: start directly after the holidays, no later than January 8th to March 31st

3rd rotation: April 1st to June 30th

There are several successful strategies for setting up rotations, and what is best depends on the individual. It is good to have an idea about the first rotation, but some students prefer to keep the remaining ones flexible while others like to set up more than one early on.

Students may contact faculty members prior to arriving at Columbia to set up a rotation, but note that there will be significant guidance during Orientation, including meeting with a co-DGS and a student-led rotation panel where other students share their rotation experiences and advice. Regarding setting up multiple sequential rotations, the Pre-Research Seminar (required course in the Fall of first year) is an excellent venue to learn about different research opportunities and lab environments for later rotations.

While all three rotations are encouraged to be with faculty in the [Biological Sciences PhD program](#), only the first two are required to be in-program. See the [Lab Choice Policy](#); note especially that an out-of-program lab needs to be approved by a DGS and must be a seasoned lab in topics related to our program. Students commit to a thesis lab from May 15th - June 15th of their first year.

Vacations

Although coursework is on an academic calendar, research is not. Please consult the GSAS policy on vacations,

<https://gsas.columbia.edu/student-guide/policy-handbook/time-policy-doctoral-students-sciences>