

# The Dissertation Defense: Being well-defended in a good way

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The thought of the dissertation defense often elicits anxiety in addition to raising a slew of anxiety-provoking questions: What will they ask? What if I cannot answer? What if they want revisions? What if I fail? Reframing the dissertation defense as a dissertation *presentation* is a more user-friendly perspective as well as a more accurate one. The fact is, if you already have the defense date, rather, the presentation date set, the brunt of the work is complete. The defense is your ability to present the research in a knowledgeable and confident way.

There are both logistical and psychological considerations to be taken into account when preparing for the dissertation defense. Generally there is about a month between the submission of the final draft and the defense date. This time delay reflects the time needed to coordinate professors' busy schedules as well as giving them time to read it. In this month, you have time to focus on two goals 1) planning your presentation and 2) calming your nerves. Knowing yourself, your committee, and your work are key components in achieving these goals.

## Mental Preparation

*Know thyself.* Everyone experiences and copes with anxiety-provoking situations differently. Here is where knowing yourself is critical. Knowing your personal style in how you deal with anxiety provoking situations lets you plan accordingly.

If you tend to over-plan, limit how much time you will spend on preparing the actual defense, and focus on trying to relax and reduce your level of anxiety. If you know you tend to avoid or procrastinate, work on the defense presentation promptly to avoid last minute planning. If you know that you tend to become highly anxious in these types of situations, you may need to spend less time on the defense and more time on learning to relax. Practice self-care, such as regular exercise, socializing, or planning for your post-defense celebrations.

*Know your committee.* Consider a last meeting with the committee members prior to the defense to get an idea of what their questions or perspectives are on the research. If this is not possible, review the feedback that committee members have already given you and how you responded to it in your draft. They are very likely to bring up these questions within the defense. Though experiences vary, it may be helpful to ask colleagues who had the same professors on their committees what their experiences were like with these professors.

Optimally, your chair and colleagues have advised you of any issues to be aware of regarding committee composition. With the case of "thorny" committee members, consult with your chair on how to minimize tensions or address the matter. This should not be anything terribly new to your graduate student's repertoire of skills.

Forget the urban myth (fantasy?) that they "don't even read it." The professors have a vested interest in the program's reputation, would they really sign off on *anything*? It is true that they will not know your dissertation like the backs of their hands-that's your job. Trust that they will be familiar with it and that they will have expertise and questions intended to help improve the dissertation. Though in the student role it may be hard to grasp, you are the expert on this project.

## **Logistics of the presentation**

The structure and process of the dissertation defense can vary widely across programs, therefore talk with your chair and other students to find out what may be unique to your program. Some defenses are open to the general public/department, while others may be less public. Generally speaking, you can expect the dissertation defense to last about 1½ - 2 hours, after which, you will be asked to leave the room for about 10-15 minutes while they discuss the merit of your work. You will then be asked to rejoin them in the room, where they generally greet you with, "Congratulations, Doctor."

Presentation requirements may range from presenting your findings to not preparing anything and letting the committee "just start talking." For those that will be asked to present their findings, include your chair in the defense preparation. Ask him/her if there are any particular preferences he/she has. It is to your advantage to show your chair the presentation outline in advance so he/she has an idea of how you are presenting the research. Remembering that your committee members are often your chair's longtime colleagues, he/she will have important insights into what to expect in terms of your committee members' style in dissertation defenses.

In the interest of professionalism, using Power Point instead of overheads is highly encouraged. Though programs vary, plan a 10-15 minute presentation for the two-hour presentation. This time frame may appear brief, but when you consider the interruptions and questions, your presentation will easily expand to a two-hour discussion. Another urban myth is that during the defense, the professors spend a lot of time arguing points with each other: this is actually true. This is a good thing: the more time they spend debating each other, the less time you are in the hot seat. Pay attention to their points of argument because they are often relevant to include in the revisions.

As you create the outline for the slide presentation, remember that the objective is to focus on the results and discussion sections of the dissertation. Do not feel obligated to include the literature review to set up the presentation. Though it seems counterintuitive not to address the literature review given all the hours you spent on it, the committee is more interested in hearing about your work. In the case that some of the committee members may be unfamiliar with the uniqueness of the statistics, issues of diversity, etc., you may consider including brief background information for their benefit.

1. Start by reviewing the research questions and the instruments and analyses used. Remind them why the research questions are relevant and/or lack of current research on the topic.
2. Then, *get straight to the point* and present the findings. Make it short and sweet: "Regular sleep was positively related to a good mood" and present the data to support your conclusions.
3. Stick to what you know. Do not feel the need to have an overhead for every point you want to make-you do not have to present *all* your findings. Just as your discussion highlights some results more than others, the defense will likely focus on the more interesting findings as well.
4. Focus their attention. Remember that whatever you present, either in overheads or orally, you are opening yourself up to questioning. If you are not that comfortable with statistics, consider minimizing the number of tables you present on overheads (instead refer to the table/page orally). Again, just as your discussion may emphasize and explore some findings more than others, it is acceptable for you to focus your defense in a similar manner. Practically speaking, it is simply not possible to discuss all the nuances of a 200-page research project within 2 hours.
5. Practice with an audience beforehand. Because you have probably been looking at this dissertation for a minimum of 243 light years, fresh eyes will ensure that you are making smooth transitions and a clear presentation. Practicing in the actual room in which you will be defending is highly advisable, especially if you will be able to test-run using Power Point, a laptop, or other audio-visual aids.
6. Project professionalism. Dressing in formal attire will contribute to your credibility and perception as a future colleague. Though completely optional, you may also consider providing beverages, even just bottled water, to further create a professional atmosphere.

## **Being in the Room**

Once you are at the defense stage of the doctoral process, you probably have a greater appreciation that the dissertation is more a test of perseverance than of intellect. It is more a mind game with yourself than with the committee. Reminding yourself of the following during the defense should help you focus on the reality of the situation, not on your nerves.

Reality 1: You are the "expert". This might feel uncomfortable or arrogant, but consider how many articles you have read and all the time you have invested. You did all the work to synthesize the information into a draft to inform the committee members about your work. In the midst of all the anxiety, it is easy to forget that you are the one who is most familiar with *this* information. If anything, the defense should be another step in the transition to your professional identity as a colleague and psychologist.

Reality 2: *Your committee is there to listen and understand, not to test or trick you.* Though it may not always feel like it, your committee wants you to do well. It is true! They agreed to be on your committee, haven't they (and no, they didn't *have* to)? They have invested a lot of time and energy in your education as well. Professors are very busy people and chairs are not going to waste everyone's time by setting a date if you are not ready. If they let you set at date, they think you are ready to present your work.

It is normal to be nervous about what they will ask: Will I be able to answer?? It is ok to say you do not know the answer or that you do not feel you have enough information to answer the question. In fact, it is wiser to acknowledge when you do not know the answer rather than demonstrating: 1) ignorance of your ignorance or, worse, 2) your ego's inability to acknowledge your limits. When the question is hard, thank them for the observation and ask for time to think about it. Thanking the professor serves the dual purpose of acknowledging the professor's expertise while psychologically keeping you in a more collegial role.

Reality 3: There will be revisions. Every defense should result in some revisions, accept them as a matter of course so do not to take the critiques personally. Though revisions require more work, they are intended to improve your paper. This document will be sitting on a library shelf with your name on it. It wouldn't be bad if it were the best draft it could be. Whether or not the revisions seem petty or like busy work, the fact is you need their signatures. Another skill in the graduate student's repertoire is learning to accommodate the wishes of the committee members: whatever makes them happy.

The extent of revisions tends to vary by chair and program. Some chairs may only permit you to defend if it is more or less a finished product. Others may accept the revisions as part of the defense process. They will allow you to defend, fully expecting input from the committee members that will lead to a fair amount of revisions. If the latter is the case, it may be helpful to have a friend recording their input during the defense so you can maintain focus on the discussion.

In summary, the defense should be considered a presentation of your research and the opportunity to benefit from your committee's input in order to improve your thesis. Give yourself credit as a colleague-in-the-making: after the two-hour presentation, a little piece of paper with the committee's signatures will be the most beautiful piece of paper you have ever seen.