



Preparing for the Oral Defense of the Dissertation

by Marianne Di Pierro

For many doctoral students, the dissertation defense—the apex of doctoral study—resides in the distant future. But without warning, students find themselves bracing for the final hurdle. They wonder how or if they will manage to pull off this “last hurrah” as graduate students and enter into the scholarly realm as bona fide academics.

Students are never quite as prepared for this event as they would like to be. This rite of passage looms before them as a mysterious and unknown event, a gothic terror in its own right. It certainly should not be this way, and some forethought and preparation will go far in fostering confidence.

The following suggestions will help students take control of this nerve-wracking experience and transform it into the exciting, memorable and joyful event that it should be.

1. Attend dissertation defenses. The best way for graduate students to prepare for the dissertation defense is to regularly attend the defenses of their colleagues—those internal and external to their respective fields of expertise. They should be doing so throughout their programs, not just several weeks prior to their own defense.

2. Know the rituals. What happens at a dissertation defense? Students should discuss the intricacies of the defense with their advisors, as there are many variations. Generally, the dissertation chair reserves a conference room or meeting room for the defense. At some universities, dissertation defenses are held in the graduate college or graduate school. Attendees may or may not be invited to sit at the same table as committee members. After the presentation, the student and the attendees are usually dismissed from the room while the committee members deliberate. Then, the candidate and the attendees are brought back into the room and the candidate is congratulated and referred to by his or her new title for the first time. At this point the committee meets privately with the advisee to discuss revisions or other relevant matters.

3. Know the time allocated. Students should ascertain how much time their particular departments allocate to the complete oral defense, presentation and questioning, and should confer with their advisors. Most defenses last approximately two hours, including deliberation time for committee members.

4. Use PowerPoint. PowerPoint presentations is a professional approach that can do justice to the vast research that comprises the dissertation. PowerPoint slides should encapsulate the study and focus on its most salient findings. In preparing, students should ask these questions: “What do I want people to know about my dissertation? What is the most important information that I can present and talk about?” Presenters should consider the rules of chartsmanship and create a goal-oriented presentation that navigates attendees through a logical, point-by-point sequence of information that builds to the conclusion in a clear and focused direction.

5. Be the authority figure. When presenting, students should think of themselves as authorities who best understand the information being presented and who stand in an ideal position to instruct attendees. The presentation should be instructional or expository, so they



should consider themselves as teachers—experts in their own right—informing the audience about the research findings. This perspective reverses the power differential and re-centers the student in a position of authority—one who has wisdom and knowledge and who teaches the committee the knowledge acquired.

6. Prepare slides. Prepare PowerPoint slides by using information in the dissertation's first chapter (which actually is the overview of the dissertation) as a framework or outline that reflects the logical sequencing of information. However, substantive information in the entire dissertation should correspond with the slides and also with the notes (see suggestion 8). In essence, presenters are reducing their dissertation to a PowerPoint format. The amount of information presented should correspond to the time allocated for the defense presentation. Ensure the internal and external quality of the slides, and make certain there is integrity of information, as well as integrity in appearance of the slides. Slides should be readable and professional-looking. PowerPoint provides a framework for the presentation but it should not become the epicenter of the dissertation defense.

Slides should reflect the following:

- Title of the dissertation, including the presenter's name, department and date.
- Department or program of study.
- Committee acknowledgment: Include the names of the dissertation advisor and committee members. Presenters should speak briefly about the contributions of each to the success of the work. It is appropriate to acknowledge the spouse, significant other, family members, friends and others who have lent support. Presenters may describe to the attendees why they chose their research and what informed that decision: attendees are naturally curious about how researchers arrived at their topics.
- Statement of the problem: Include a brief statement that draws researchers' attention to a particular critical situation revealed in the scholarship. Presenters are encouraged to incorporate several slides that reflect statistics, data and information about the problem. Elements of the literature review should be included to provide a viable framework that stands as evidence that critical experts in a given field concur that there is merit in conducting the research, which fills a particular need for increased scholarship. (See "literature review," below.)
- Significance of the research: Presenters should address the importance of the research to a wide pantheon of shareholders, from those most invested as beneficiaries to those least. This segment of the presentation focuses on the wider applications of the research to the community at large.
- Research question(s): List all of the research questions exactly as they appear in the text of the dissertation.



- Literature review: Presenters should provide an overview of salient critical studies. Such slides serve two functions: They delineate the current critical perspective and they justify that the research advances the scholarship through its research objective.
- Method: Such slides provide an overview of the application of particular methods through which research questions are answered. Presenters should include references to critical information that addresses the rationale for the selection of a particular method and addresses issues of validity and reliability.
- Results and analysis: Slides should reflect graphs, tables or charts that demonstrate critical elements of the research findings or outcomes. Presenters sometimes include their hypotheses and the corresponding results or analysis.
- Discussion: Presenters should list and discuss salient findings and their applicability to their field of expertise.
- Limitations of the study: Generally, limitations emerge out of the research process or after the research has concluded and draw attention to these questions: “If I had to do this study again, in what way would it differ? Would another approach affect outcomes, and if so, how?”
- Recommendations for future study: Where do students see the logical continuation of their work? This opens the pathway for future scholars and extends the opportunity to enter into the academic conversation.

The conclusion of the discussion, limitations and recommendations segments intersects naturally with the questioning phase of the dissertation defense. Presenters should anticipate the round of questions from committee members at this point.

7. Provide PowerPoint handouts. Prepare hard copies of the presentation for each committee member and attendees and distribute them before the defense—it may be useful to delegate this responsibility to a colleague (see No. 11). Send electronic copies to committee members who will attend the defense remotely.

8. Prepare PowerPoint notes. A notes section appears at the bottom of each slide and should reflect discussion points, culled from the text of the dissertation. Notes enable presenters to remain focused and on track in an organized manner that sets up a series of bullet points that jog the memory and help the presenters discuss additional details or elements of interest. The opportunity to elaborate may calm nerves and help presenters rise above the formality of the defense by dovetailing into interesting conversational elements that heighten audience interaction.

9. Anticipate questions. Successful graduate students are generally adept at anticipating test questions, as their years of experience bear out. Applying these skills to the dissertation defense will also keep them in good standing. Students should consider the



academic expertise of their respective committee members. In what areas would they most likely be focused? Advisees should be familiar with advisors' theoretical or methodological penchants, the manner in which they think and reason, and the emphasis placed on certain elements of the dissertation as they conferr throughout the dissertation process. Exposure to committee members as they serve at other defenses provides excellent insight into how they work together as a group and as individuals. Anticipation informed by knowledge is an important tool in students' dissertation defense tool kit

10. Conduct a dress rehearsal. At some universities, it is common practice to schedule a pre-defense of the dissertation, an opportunity to field possible questions from committee members and other faculty. Students are not provided with the committee's actual defense questions, but gain experience in responding to questions that relate to their research. This preparatory experience initiates students into the defense experience and inspires confidence. Several days prior to the actual defense, students should schedule a dress rehearsal in the same room reserved for the defense. Exposure to the surroundings ahead of time engenders comfort and reduces stress. Tech-smart rooms equipped with state-of-the-art technology make the setup for students somewhat easier. If tech-smart rooms are not a possibility, students should set up their own computer, projector and other equipment, such as phones, speakers or video conferencing for an offsite committee member.

11. Delegate. Students should delegate to a trusted individual some of the smaller but important responsibilities of the defense well ahead of schedule. This chosen person could set up the equipment for the presentation, prepare the room on the day of defense, and prepare and distribute handouts.

12. Consider the X factor. While there are no guarantees of technological integrity or flawless appearances, having Plan B as a backup is a good thing. Handouts can save the day if technology fails, and an additional fresh shirt for a spilled coffee can be a salvation for the X factor.

13. Dress for success. The defense is a formal event in which the entire university community is invited. The event signals a critical rite of passage for most doctoral students and for the faculty who have supported them throughout a long and challenging process. While there are no general rules governing appropriate attire at most universities, the event should be regarded with dignity and respect. Presenters should dress as if they were delivering a paper at a conference or going to a job interview.

14. Prepare the night before. Keep everything as normal as possible, including sleeping and eating patterns. Save the heavy celebratory meals and desserts for a post-defense treat.

15. Remember to laugh. Despite our best efforts and planning, we do not have complete control. Laugh at what does not go according to plan and move on.

16. Think about post defense. After the defense, committee members may decide the dissertation requires revision and will refrain from signing off until adjustments have been implemented. Such revisions may include minor changes to the text that can be dealt with immediately. Other adjustments may require elaborate restructuring, and there may be additional work to do. Students should immediately address the committee's concerns and



implement all changes. Students need to remain focused on graduation and complete the work that will take them there.

17. Consider professional editing and formatting services. The dissertation is not done until the monograph is in final form according to departmental or graduate college/school specifications. At the end of this process, students, as well as their budgets, are enervated. However, if budgets permit, it is advisable to secure the professional services of a formatter or editor who can put the document into final form.

The journey to the doctoral degree is long and often arduous, but knowing how to navigate the course will certainly sustain those who venture on the pathway to the Ph.D. The preparation of faculty and their advisees is key to the safe harbor of degree completion and graduation.

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