

Preparing for a Thesis Defense

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Upon the approval of your thesis committee and the appointment of an external examiner, the date for your defense is selected. The thesis defense committee includes the three members of your thesis committee plus an external reviewer.

The thesis defense may be, arguably, the most important step in the thesis process. Although it may seem intimidating, the defense provides you with the opportunity to share your research with peers, colleagues, and members of the community at large. It allows you to showcase your efforts and present your findings in a supportive environment.

There are two parts to a thesis defense: (a) the presentation of the findings by the student, and (b) questions by the thesis defense committee (and others present) that follows this presentation.

The thesis defense presentation:

The development of your thesis presentation is your first opportunity to showcase your work. Your presentation should be about one-half hour long and should concentrate on your findings and recommendations. A sample outline of your presentation might look like this:

- goal/objectives of the research (2 min)
- literature review/theoretical framework (5 min)
- methodology (5 min)
- findings (10 min)
- recommendations (5 min)

Hint: Practice your presentation at home. This will help increase your comfort level with the slides and speakers notes, the timing of each piece of your presentation and allow you to remain within the recommended time for the presentation. Practice will provide you with the means to speak to your work without relying on your speakers notes word-for-word. Some of the best presentations I've seen are done by those who don't have to rely on their speakers notes, but can expand on their statements in their own words.

The findings and recommendations are the crux of your thesis defense presentation. The literature review, theoretical framework and methodological/ethical issues should form the backdrop and context for these findings.

Hint: Develop your presentation starting with your findings and recommendations and work backwards. By understanding which pieces of your literature review and theoretical framework are needed to support your findings, you will ensure all of the appropriate information is included. This also helps you make decisions about the inclusion of extraneous information, which may be interesting but may not support your findings and recommendations.

As I mentioned above, the thesis defense is the time to showcase the time and effort you have put into your thesis. However, keep in mind that your audience is not always familiar with your topic. When developing your presentation, try to ensure that there are no inherent assumptions in your statements; spell out your rationale for your findings and recommendations. Not only will this help your audience better understand your research, it might ward off a few questions at the end of your presentation!

Development of the slides:

The information you include in your slides helps to formulate the flow of the presentation. Your slides are intended to provide an outline of what you would like to say and should not include, word for word, your presentation. Short, concise, summary statements will make the most impact with your audience.

Hint: include only key words or phrases on the slides for your presentation. This will help your audience concentrate on you, not on your slides.

Hint: diagrams, picture, graphs, charts etc. are always helpful. In the case of your thesis defense it can help you share key pieces of information in a visually stimulating manner. For example, the inclusion of graphs rather than tables or the use of flow charts will help make your findings more user-friendly.

Question period:

After the completion of your presentation, your committee and the audience have the chance to ask any questions and engage in discussion with you about your study. I found this to be both the best and the worst part of the thesis defense. On one hand, it is scary. On the other hand, it gives you the chance to expand on information you have already presented and demonstrate your understanding of the topic. After all, in most cases, no one knows your research as well as you. With this in mind, there are a few hints that will help make this process a little less daunting.

Hint: Record the questions that your committee members ask you during meetings, particularly as you get close to defending. These questions, or questions like them, may be asked at your thesis defense.

Hint: Consider the strengths, research expertise, and areas of interest of your thesis committee members and your external examiner. These areas may help you formulate possible questions that may be asked during your defense.

Hint: Brainstorm!!! In the days before your defense, take some time and brainstorm about the questions you would ask at a thesis defense. Then, think of the answers. This will help get you in the mindset for the question period.

Hint: During the question period, write down the questions you are asked (have a paper and pen handy), particularly if they consist of two parts. Having this information in front of you will help you answer the question more comprehensively. And remember, it's okay to take a few seconds to gather your thoughts before answering.

Additional reminders:

There are some additional items to remember during the process of preparing for your thesis defense.

- Don't forget to book your room and your Audio-visual equipment. AV needs about 48 hours notice.
- Technology doesn't always work; try to have a back-up plan, such as overheads, just in case.
- Leave yourself enough time the day of the defense to review your presentation on the computer equipment you will be using. In many cases, different computers will change your slide transitions or delete them altogether.
- Have handouts on hand for your committee members and your external examiner.

Although the thesis defense is one of the final steps in the road toward graduation, remember that there will, almost certainly, be revisions to your thesis as a result of your defense. This is a normal part of the process. However, revisions also take time, so if you are meeting deadlines, particularly for graduation, remember to take this time into account.

The thesis defense is your opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge of your research area and the research process you undertook to collect and analyze your data. Throughout your presentation and the question period, be true to your study, your methods, and your analysis. Good luck!