2017 Graduate School Workshop Series
Student Professional Development: The Dissertation Defense

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The Dissertation Defense Workshop

Content of Presentation

- Introduction of the panel members
- Tips for the Defense Presentation-Part I: Preparation
- Tips for the Defense Presentation-Part II: Delivery
- Tips for the Defense Presentation-Part III: Follow-up
- Do and Don’t Suggestions
- Questions and Answers
“There is nothing to fear but fear itself.” However, dissertation defenses do come with some level of high anxiety and apprehension and, therefore, require much rehearsing. Preparation for this requires you to be ready for some heavy questioning by the committee members and, at times, other attendees.

Mental Preparation

- Know thyself
  - Anxiety can get the best of the best
  - Attend others’ defenses and learn the rituals of the process
  - Plan, prepare, rehearse, rehearse and rehearse some more.

- Know your committee
  - When was the last time you met with the chair?
  - When was the last time you met with the members?
  - What are their expectations for the defense?

- Know your work
  - You are the expert or authority on the topic, but be prepared to defend it!
  - Committee members have a vested interest in your product; do not assume that they did not read it!

- Know your room and materials
  - Rehearse in the assigned room at least one day before. Make sure technology works.
  - Make sure you can find information quickly, if requested.
Here are some other things to keep in mind as you prepare before the presentation defense or “DD day”:

1. Get your dissertation manuscript reviewed and evaluated by chair and members or mentors
2. Ask questions to committee members and chair before defense meeting. Ask your chair how to address committee members.
3. Coordinate with your chair the date and time for the meeting of the defense.
4. Do not schedule a date/time without your chair and committee’s blessing.
5. Check deadlines for the graduate college.
6. Prepare copies of your dissertation for everyone on the committee
7. You may provide copies of your presentation defense to others in the audience
8. Keep everything professionally organized to avoid any kind of distraction.
9. Have all the administrative forms from the department, college, and graduate school completed, including signature form.
The Dissertation Defense
Part I: Preparation

Some questions to keep in mind that you need to anticipate and prepare *before* the presentation defense:

1. What is your dissertation about? Explain why you got interested in this particular research topic or problem.
2. What research has been done before on the selected topic?
3. Did you find any limitations or weakness?
4. Did you gain a better understanding or solution of the problem?
5. Where there any surprises along the way?
Questions to keep in mind to prepare before the presentation defense (Continued):

1. How does your dissertation significantly contribute to the overall body of knowledge in the area selected?
2. Will your dissertation results have an impact? What kind of impact? Who will change their attitudes, beliefs or behaviors after reading your work? How?
3. At least someone will ask the “so what” question. Be ready.
4. How is this work relevant to your future career plans?
5. What are your plans for publications, if any?
6. Think and prepare any other questions that may be asked.
A personal anecdote might be helpful at this point.

All throughout my dissertation writing and my final defense I had two questions put up to me again and again:

1. Is a study of science in a non-Western context philosophy of science at all? Or, is it just history?

2. Should a non-Western society even take up science as a serious concern? Or, should it just reject science?
Logistics of the defense presentation
(one possible way)

Although, your dissertation work can be very lengthy, you need to remember that the objective of the presentation is to focus on the Results and Discussion Sections of the Dissertation. However, you may briefly include some background information for the benefit of those in attendance.

1. Start by reviewing the research problem/question, describe the research gap, emphasize the importance and need for this study. Why is this relevant to you and to others?
2. Provide a brief overview of the theory and hypotheses.
3. Describe and justify the method employed to test the hypotheses: sample, instruments, data analytic procedures.
4. Get to the presentation of the findings without discussing their meaning until the discussion.
5. Stick with what you know. There is no need to address every point obtained in your results; focus on the salient or interesting ones.
Logistics of the defense presentation
(Continued)

6. Focus their attention. Remember that whatever you present, you are opening yourself for questioning.

7. Practice with an audience beforehand, whenever possible, and preferably in the same room of the defense.

8. Project professionalism. You get only one chance to do this. Pay attention to your attire. Handle questions professionally (write notes).

9. Plan for revisions. These cannot be avoided but remember these are to improve the paper.

10. Plan to have fun and relax.

Keep in mind that the committee wants you to succeed and they are not there to test you or trick you!
Organizing Your Presentation
(Another possible way)

1. **Title of dissertation.** Author, Department or program area, and Committee acknowledgment

2. **Statement of the problem.** Focus attention on the critical situation including background information about the problem. Some elements of the literature review to provide a viable framework and support from critical experts in the field.

3. **Significance of the research.** How does it address a gap in the existing scholarship? Why is it important to address that gap?
Organizing Your Presentation
(Another possible way)

4. **Research questions or hypotheses.** Research Objectives

5. **Brief review of extant literature** (Overview of critical studies, key variables linked to theoretical constructs in the study)

6. **Methods.** Overview of application of particular procedures, approaches, designs that assists in addressing and answering the research questions plus description of instrumentation validity and reliability linked to the study variables. Statistical or related procedures for data analysis and assumptions.

7. **Results.** Description of participants and reporting of findings through the use of graphs and tables demonstrating critical elements of outcomes linked to your research problem or questions.
8. **Discussion and conclusions.** Make sure to list and discuss salient findings, their relevance to the discipline, and interpretation of results from own and others’ context (link yours to extant published work by other experts).

9. **Limitations of the study.** Any unavoidable weakness that may diminish the overall validity or credibility of the study. Don’t shoot yourself but be honest.

10. **Recommendations for future work.** Where do you see any logical continuation of work. Any new pathways or extensions that you or others may consider for future work.
Some Do and Don’t suggestions:

Do
1. Keep it simple and to the point(s).
2. Engage questions honestly and answer them with aplomb.
3. Do not be afraid to say “I do not know” but also know when to shut up.
4. You cannot know everything – you are not expected to.
5. Be professional before, during, and after.
6. Get a good night’s sleep.
7. Be excited and have fun. If you’re not excited about your own research, who will?
The Dissertation Defense
Part II: Delivery

Some Do and Don’t suggestions (Continued)

Don’t

1. Don’t let fear or anxiety get the best of you
2. Don’t assume that you know everything that is going to be asked
3. Don’t assume that the members of the committee did not read it
4. Don’t be defensive.
5. Don’t be afraid to show some emotion (show your passion for the work).
6. Don’t be surprised if there are not fireworks at the end.
The Dissertation Defense
Part III: Follow-up

Sorry but... it isn’t over until it’s over.

1. Gather signatures from committee members and ask your chair to hold them if modifications are needed (especially if committee members reside elsewhere or if they are traveling).
2. Sit down with your chair and clarify comments and modification requests immediately after the presentation. Take notes.
3. Send a typed document detailing comments and modification requests to your chair and committee members, for approval.
4. Modify the document as soon as possible. Allocate sufficient time to work on the dissertation right after the defense.
5. Check submission deadlines with the Graduate School.
Make sure that you are following the format required by the graduate school regarding margins, section breaks, diagrams, in short about everything in your document.

Make sure that you have uploaded the document correctly and that you have received no error messages!
The Dissertation Defense

Questions & Answers
Conference Paper Workshop

Some of the material borrowed from the following references