

Gearing up for Your Defence: General Guidance for Graduate Students

Congratulations!

Your supervisor and supervisory committee members have assessed your work to be ready for the final milestone of your graduate studies degree. Whether referred to as the ‘Defence’, the ‘Oral Exam’ or the ‘Viva’, the need to prepare for your exam is crucial.

The aim of the defence is to engage graduate students in scholarly discourse with experts who have read and reviewed your work closely. It provides a rigorous opportunity to explain, clarify and defend your work as well as to enter into dialogue with other learned scholars. While it is both an examination (of the written work and your oral engagement) and a collegial discussion, it is an academic milestone that benefits greatly from preparation. How you perform confirms the quality of the thesis/dissertation’s written component or exposes confusions, ideas, or gaps which, because they cannot be sufficiently clarified orally, may need to be further explained and expressed in writing. One thing is certain – your scaffolded preparations for this milestone set you on a path towards successful completion.

Before Getting to this Stage

To ensure the strongest version of the thesis/dissertation goes forward to defence, your supervisor will have reviewed and provided formative feedback on each chapter and their subsequent revisions. Additionally, supervisory committee members will have provided feedback along the way and helped you to shape your best work. Supervisory best practices indicate that supervisors should only put their students forward for oral exam when success is anticipated.

Ask your Supervisor to Explain the Process

Graduate students will have heard about ‘the Defence’ since their first year in the program, but may have erroneous, assumptive or incomplete information about its intent and process. Ask your supervisor and/or Graduate Program Director to demystify the defence for you, including the process, the typical patterns found in defences in your program/discipline, the role of the various examiners and the possible outcomes and subsequent next steps. Graduate student best practices include attending defences leading up to their own, to see how this milestone unfolds and to lessen the anxiety that comes from a lack of awareness.

Preparation is Key!

You’ve taken months to write and revise your thesis/dissertation. You know it best, as does your supervisor. Once you’ve submitted your final work to your supervisor, they take the reins and work with the Graduate Program to secure examiners and date(s). This is your time to develop the presentation you’ll give at the exam and ready yourself for anticipated questions.

Prepare in Chunks

Normally, you will be provided 20–30 minutes to provide an oral presentation (at a moderate pace) of your work. Many students use PowerPoint slides to do so, along with prepared notes accompanying each slide. Strive to hit the highpoints in your presentation and avoid attempting to include everything from every chapter. Explore good practices when using PowerPoint slides including 1-2 minutes of speaking time per slide, limiting text, prioritizing key visuals or points that support the main argument or point, and the use of prepared speaking notes to accompany the presentation. Many students have found it beneficial to provide a handout for the examining committee's reference during the defence's presentation component. If a creative component accompanies your scholarly work, be sure to build in presentation time for this. Discuss a draft with your supervisor and seek feedback.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Students are encouraged to practice your presentation often. This will build your confidence, and expose any areas you feel less confident with, and which would benefit from refinement. Students can practice staying on script and avoiding going rogue. Additionally, repetition assuages nerves leading up to the day, helping you to feel increasingly comfortable with the presentation itself, the words you'll say and the presentation style they'll enact.

Gear Up for Questions

In addition to refining your oral presentation, preparing responses to potential questions you'll be asked at the defence is important. You can anticipate questions related to your topic, it's importance and contribution to the field; how it's situated in the current literature and/or research or creative work landscape; the research questions, methods and theoretical underpinnings; the key findings, analysis and the perennial favorites at oral defences including: "What did you decide to leave out to explore in the next phase of your scholarly work?"; "What surprised you most in your work?"; and the ever popular "What's next for you?" Additionally, the following general questions can be considered helpful for you to prepare responses for and then share with your supervisor in a 1:1 meeting:

Grad Coach's 13 Essential Questions to Prepare for the Oral Defence

1. What is your study about and why did you choose to research this in particular?
2. How did your research questions evolve during the research process?
3. How did you decide on which sources to include in your literature review?
4. How did you design your study and why did you take this approach?
5. How generalisable and valid are the findings?
6. What were the main shortcomings and limitations created by your research design?
7. How did your findings relate to the existing literature?

8. What were your key findings in relation to the research questions?
9. Were there any findings that surprised you?
10. What biases may exist in your research?
11. How can your findings be put into practice?
12. How has your research contributed to current thinking in the field?
13. If you could redo your research, how would you alter your approach?

Mock Defences

Ensuring you can practice presenting your work and fielding diverse questions ranging from simple to complex, facilitates growth in the skills necessary for the oral exam. Preparation is key, and as part of your task to practice your presentation and to field questions, students should have a mock exam with their supervisor/supervisory committee, dry runs with trusted peers, and opportunities to practice question responses in chunks with their supervisor.

Preparing is best enacted in chunks, anticipating questions related to every chapter and every juncture of your scholarly/creative work. In a mock exam, you can practice listening carefully to the question, pausing to reflect and jot questions down as they're being asked, and to seek clarity if you don't fully comprehend what you're being asked to discuss. Mock defences should ensure students are asked questions, where they can practice their responses both during and then after, following self-reflection regarding areas needing further strengthening. Ask for feedback on how you responded to questions, and how you presented your work. Mock defences additionally provide students with the opportunity to consider strategies related to self-management and emotional resilience, so that confidence and articulacy are demonstrable at the exam.

Having one of the mock defences in the actual room is beneficial. You can get acclimatized to the space, practice using the equipment and work through any technological issues. Also, by being in the actual room, you can experience and push through a version of the nerves commonly felt on the actual day.

The Week Before

You'll want to avoid cramming during the final week before. Now is a good time to settle in and re-read your entire work front-to-back. Experience what your examiners will just have experienced—your words. Being freshly prepared for the exam is key to being ready for whatever you'll be asked.

The Day Before

Self-care and de-stressing are the central goals for the day before your scheduled defence. Identify and commit to a self-care and rest plan choosing self-care strategies that make sense to you. Getting enough rest and being well nourished and hydrated cannot be understated. With your supervisor, discuss a plan to deal with nerves. Finally, to avoid any unnecessary stress related to

traffic or transit delays, make plans to arrive well in advance of the scheduled start of your defence to allow time to settle in, see your supervisor, and breathe.

The Big Day

You have worked so hard to get here. Remember, you know your work best! You've read your work over, you've carefully prepared your oral presentation, including mulling over word choices, order, and the most salient points. On the day, some students might like to run some questions with their supervisor, while others might like to come early to the space, set up and then have some down time with family or alone. That is up to you. Your supervisor is there to provide reassurance, ground you in an attempt to keep nerves under control, and to reviewing any last-minute items including the order of events, as they can feel very formal and off-putting for some students, especially when asked to leave the room ahead of their presentation and after the final round of questions.

Finally, this is a very big day—both for your supervisor and you! Unless you'd prefer otherwise, it is generally considered to be a best practice to have your defence in person. An in-person defence provides you with the rich scholarly experience that you deserve.

Post-Defence

The defence can be a celebratory moment, as well as a mixed experience due to unanticipated revisions being requested. Your supervisor will have briefed you on the possible outcomes of a defence including the real possibility that revisions are necessary. Understand this as typical. Allow yourself the time needed to absorb the scholarly experience of your defence, and to congratulate yourself for achieving that portion of your studies. Schedule time with your supervisor to go over the feedback and requested revisions, being sure to ask for clarity and guidance. It's important to:

- › Ensure you fully understand the required revisions and due dates
- › Ensure that your revisions are clear, and to create a cover memo explaining where and how you have addressed each required revision

The best thesis or dissertation is an accepted one, so dig deep and bring forward the determination and grit that sustained you throughout your graduate degree. Let's *'get it done'*!
