

Preparing your Graduate Student for Defence: Guidance for Graduate Supervisors

Preamble

Congratulations! Your student's work is ready for the final milestone of their graduate studies degree. Whether referred to as the 'Defence', the 'Oral Exam' or the 'Viva', the necessity of your mentorship at this stage cannot be understated. The aim of the defence is to engage graduate students in scholarly discourse with experts who have read and reviewed their work closely. It provides a rigorous opportunity to explain, clarify and defend their work as well as to enter into dialogue with other learned scholars. While it is both an examination (of the written work and their oral engagement) and a collegial discussion, the supervisory necessity to prepare the student is well supported in the literature. How your student performs confirms the quality of the 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 – our students need us to explain the role and rigor of the Defence, ensuring they understand the necessity of scaffolded preparations as well as the possibility of revisions after the exam.

Before Getting to this Stage

Along the student's journey, supervisors should be encouraging their students to present their work at conferences, and to engage in scholarly discussions ongoingly. Fielding questions at many stages of the work, builds confidence and sharpens the student's capacity to explain their work. During 1:1 meetings with you, render the asking of questions related to their work a norm, so as to allow you to assess their emerging readiness to proceed to defence. In addition to building your student's capacity to orally present their work, successful Oral Exams are best supported by strongly articulated theses/dissertations. To ensure the strongest version of the dissertation goes forward to defence, the supervisor has reviewed and provided formative feedback on each chapter and their subsequent revisions. The supervisor must also ensure that committee members have provided feedback along the way, versus at the end when time is often tight. Supervisory committee members are scholars with expertise, who have been asked to review and guide the graduate student's work – from proposal to the final version of the work. As the supervisor, it is your role to ensure versions of chapters have been reviewed by the full committee. Organizing full committee meetings to discuss the committee's questions and feedback, is considered best practice in the development of strong theses/dissertations. Finally, if the student or the work is not ready, it is best to plan an oral exam when the work and the student is at their best. Supervisors should put their students forward for oral exam when success is anticipated.

Know the Timelines and Work Backwards

Understanding the timelines associated with recommending a student for oral exam is an important role of the graduate supervisor. Knowing the examining committee is to be provided a minimum of 20 business days to review the work is a starting point from which to work backwards. Once the work is submitted for review, your work to prepare the student for the oral exam commences. While the final chapter or final revisions are being done in advance of submission to the examining committee, the supervisor is also working with the Graduate Program Director to secure examiners, (ensuring no conflict of interest exists) and tentative dates. It is a good idea to hold two dates, which often prevents a scramble when a sole date no longer works for an examining committee member. Developing a workback-timeline with the student and the supervisory committee is both proactive and lessens student stress.

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. Commence your preparatory work with your student by demystifying the defence for them, including the process, the typical patterns in defences, the role of the various examiners and the possible outcomes and subsequent next steps. Remind them that you will only put them forward if you believe them to be ready. Your decision-making in this regard is often experienced as reassuring for students, knowing they won’t be in that room until you believe them to be ready.

Develop and Practice the Presentation

Once you’ve explained what the defence is for and how it is normally enacted in your program and discipline, it’s time to guide your student to develop the presentation they’ll give at the exam. Encourage them to hit the highpoints and avoid attempting to include everything from every chapter. The range of time for them to present is generally between 20-30 minutes and should be done at a moderate pace. Discuss with them 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. Discuss the benefit of providing a handout for the examining committee’s reference during the defence’s presentation component. If a creative component accompanies the student’s scholarly work, be sure to build in presentation time for this.

The student should be encouraged to practice their presentation often. This assists them to address any areas they feel less confident with and gives them insights as to what may require revision. Additionally, repetition assuages nerves leading up to the day, as through practicing to different audiences and for themselves, graduate students about to defend become increasingly comfortable with the presentation itself, the words they’ll say and the presentation style they’ll enact.

Mock Defences

The coaching aspect of graduate supervision features large in preparing your student for defence. This is especially true for coaching your student leading up to, during and following mock defences. Ensuring your student can practice presenting their work and fielding diverse questions ranging from simple to complex, provides a scaffolded platform where students can grow their confidence in the skills necessary for the oral exam. To best prepare, 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.

Coach your student to prepare in chunks, reminding them to be prepared for questions related to every chapter and every juncture of their scholarly/creative work. Students should be encouraged to listen carefully to the question, pause to reflect and ensure their response relates directly to what is being asked. Encourage students to jot questions down as they're being asked, and to seek clarity if they don't fully comprehend what they'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. Provide students with feedback on how they responded to questions, how they presented on their work, and provide clear instructions with examples so they know exactly what needs to be addressed prior to defence. 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.

Assist your students to prepare responses to questions related to their 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 students to prepare responses for:

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?](#)

Having one of the mock defences in the actual room is beneficial. The student can get acclimatized to the space, can practice using the equipment and work through any technological issues, and can experience and push through a version of the nerves commonly felt on the actual day. Many students would appreciate having a casual coffee afterwards with you to destress.

The Day Before

Self-care and de-stressing are the central agenda items for the day before the scheduled defence. Help your students develop a self-care and rest plan choosing self-care strategies that make sense to them. Getting enough rest and being well nourished and hydrated cannot be understated. Discuss a plan to deal with nerves including ensuring they make plans to arrive well in advance of the scheduled start of their defence to allow time to settle in.

The Big Day

Given the scaffolded efforts you've led to prepare your student for the big day, your main role is that of support and empowerment. Reassurance of the student that they know their work best, is key. Some students might like to run some questions with you, others might like to come early to the space, set up and then have some down time with family or alone. Your role involves providing reassurance, keeping nerves under control, and reviewing any last-minute items. Be sure you remind your student of 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. Remember, your demeanor impacts your student's, so be the calm presence that they need. Be their rock before and during the exam.

Finally, this is a very big day – both for your student and you! Supervisors should work collaboratively with the supervisory and examining committee to host an in-person oral exam, unless the student themselves would prefer a different platform. An in-person defence provides the graduate student with the rich scholarly experience they deserve.

Supporting your Student Post Defence

The defence can be a celebratory moment, a mixed experience due to revisions being requested, or a bruising or disappointing experience. These experiences are meant to be processed privately with the supervisor taking the lead in opening the discussion. Since the feedback in some defences may have aspects that are more formative than summative, the work may feel in process versus 'complete.' While rare, there may have been a rogue examiner, and your role is to unpack the experience with your student and assist them to manage their feelings (when ready) in order to take the necessary next steps. This is another reason why ensuring your student knows all the possible scenario outcomes of a defence during your preparatory discussions is important.

Generally, it is the supervisor and the chair of the examining committee that is struck with the task of ensuring that revisions are sufficiently addressed. Schedule time with your student a few days after the defence, and go over the feedback with them, providing strategies and suggestions you will have prepared in advance. These may be in areas related to theoretical perspective congruence, gaps, unsupported claims, the need to add a perspective or others. After overtly congratulating your student for engaging with the oral exam and reassuring them that they are on their way to final confirmation of their work being passable, remember these three key points:

- Ensure your student fully understands the required revisions and due dates
- Ensure that revisions are clear, and ask your student to create a cover memo explaining where and how they have addressed each required revision
- With your sensitive mentorship, this can be a developmental moment understood as a typical part of the process, rather than a disastrous signal of unpreparedness

The best thesis or dissertation is an accepted one, so help your student to re-surface their determination and grit, so that they can work with you to 'get it done!'

Finally, plan to be present for your student's convocation. Having you with them on the stage when their degree is conferred will serve as a wonderful and lasting memory for you both.
