

THE DEFENCE

Structure of Examination

For a thesis defence, a Chair is appointed by the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies. They can ask questions if they choose, but will primarily chair the examination. For a project, the external examiner and the Chair is the same person, and the Chair is expected to ask questions. After introductory comments, the student presents the research (in less than 20 minutes). Then, questioning begins, starting with the external examiner (for a project, the community member/client starts the questioning), then committee members, and finally the supervisor. After questions are exhausted (usually after 90 to 120 minutes), the student is asked to leave the room while the committee deliberates on whether the thesis as presented is satisfactory and whether the oral defence of the thesis was satisfactory. The student is then called back to the room and the decisions are shared. The chair of the examination is asked to send a report of the examination to the Dean.

Suggestions for Preparation for the Defense

- Prepare and practice your presentation. It should NOT exceed 20 minutes. The presentation should focus on: what you have done; why you have done it; how you did it; what you found; and what the implications are.
- If you are planning to use an LCD projector, ensure that you are familiar with the equipment and you know what to do if there is a technical problem. This is not the time to use Power Point and an LCD projector if you never have before.
- It is acceptable to acknowledge that you don't know the answer or hadn't thought about the question. It is usually better to do that than to guess or make up a response. You can ask to have a question repeated. Also, you can indicate that you hadn't thought about the topic, but could speculate that
- Review your thesis before the defence and think about possible questions that might arise. While it's useful to be familiar with your citations and sources, it is not necessary to re-read every article that you cited in the literature review.
- You may wish to do a "mock defence" with your supervisor or with some friends
- Avoid overgeneralization of your findings.
- Highlight areas in your thesis, where you may be asked questions (e.g., limitations) using post-it notes so you can find them quickly.
- Sit in on some other defences to get a sense of what they are like.

Typical Questions

- Based on your findings, what will your next research project be?
- How would you summarize your findings to a practitioner in a few sentences?
- How can your research be used in practice?
- Why did you select the method?
- What would you change if you were to do the study again?

Tips and Hints

- In consultation with your supervisor, select the external examiner carefully. They play a key role and often set the tone
- Check out the room in advance. Feel free to rearrange the furniture or “make the room your own”.
- If your approach to the defence is out of the ordinary (e.g., different opening/closing) or you have specific request regarding the process, contact the chair of the examination in advance
- Don’t prepare refreshments for the committee
- Know the work and perspectives of your internal and external examiners; it will give you some clues as to the types of questions they might be interested in
- Be prepared to make revisions afterward – that is normal
- Don’t worry if the committee takes longer than you think they should. They may be discussing other things.
- Don’t expect your supervisor to respond to questions for you or advocate for you during the examination.
- Ensure that your thesis is in great shape before you distribute it to committee members. It is not their role to edit your paper.
- It is acceptable to hire a professional editor to help you check grammar and references.
- A useful strategy, if you get a question that you can’t answer, is to ask the examiner to rephrase the question. It may give you more time to think.
- Plan to meet with your supervisor after the examination to review requested changes while it is fresh in his/her mind.
- The defence is open to the university community and the public. You can invite colleagues, friends, and family members if you would find that helpful/supportive. If more people will make you more nervous, don’t invite them.
- Remember to bring the signature pages (2 pages, 2 copies minimum) – ensure that names and departments are accurate

Additional Resources

Glatthorn, A. A. (1998). *Writing the winning dissertation: A step by step guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mullins, G., & Kiley, M. (2002). ‘It’s a PhD, not a Nobel prize’: How experienced examiners assess research theses. *Studies in Higher Education*, 27(4), 369 – 386.

The final hurdle: Preparation for the PhD viva examination. *Nurse Researcher*, 10(2), 66 – 76. [no author listed]