

Oral Defense of the Dissertation

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Most universities require an oral defense of your dissertation before the final version of your dissertation is submitted to the university and published by UMI. This is usually the *icing on the cake* and a way to celebrate your great accomplishment. Most doctoral candidates are allowed 20–30 minutes for their initial presentation. Think of your doctoral defense as a collegial conversation with brilliant minds rather than as an inquisition.

Prior to the oral defense, talk to your committee chair regarding areas of concern based on comments received from committee members. Be well prepared for your presentation—academically, mentally, and physically. Make sure that you practice your presentation and pace yourself well. If possible rehearse in a mock defense. A friend or family member can drill you with some of the questions that appear in this document. You need to be well rested and focused before your defense. It would be good to have a glass of water available, and remind yourself to periodically take deep breaths. In your preparation, don't try to memorize all the studies cited in your dissertation, but do know the details of a few key studies that form the basis of your conceptual and theoretical framework and the reason for your investigation.

Make certain you begin your presentation by introducing yourself and thanking your audience for attending. Your chair cannot tell you the specific questions the examiners will ask, but she or he can direct your attention to issues or areas that require some thinking or additional research. If possible, speak to graduates of your program about their experiences at their oral defense.

Discuss with your chair the possibility of having a PowerPoint presentation available for your defense. This is common practice at many universities, but there may be limits on the length and style of your presentation. If you prepare a

PowerPoint presentation, make sure the slides are numbered, and if you put in links to add value to the presentation, explain how the links are to be used.

Check out the sample oral defense slideshow at:

<http://dissertationrecipes.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Oral-Defense-slideshow-example.pdf>. Be sure to include the problem you investigated, the research questions, the theoretical and/or conceptual framework, a brief review of the literature (include only the most germinal studies), the methodology, the data analysis techniques, the findings, the conclusions, and how the study contributes to the university mission and society as a whole. Make the presentation interesting and **do not read from your slides**. Rather, hit the high points of each slide, and focus on the most important elements. Use graphs, charts, and figures as appropriate. Make sure you can answer the age old question: *So What?* What has been accomplished now that your study is complete?

If you are doing a teleconference, be sure to send the PowerPoint presentation to the participants via e-mail at least 3 days in advance. Make sure you let your participants know what slide you are on and inform them when you are going to advance to the next slide. If you are giving your presentation in front of a live audience, have copies of the slides so your audience can follow along and take notes as needed.

Occasionally, an examiner or committee member might ask a question that appears to be unfair or seems unrelated to your study. It is acceptable for you to ask for clarification and explain that this seems to be beyond the scope of your study. However, it would be a good idea to try your best to provide a response if you have one, with that caveat. If you find yourself in a situation where you do not know the answer to a legitimate question or concern, acknowledge the value of the question or concern and be honest about not knowing the answer. Let the committee know that you will conduct further research to find a resolution and that you will get back to them with an answer. People can usually tell when you are trying to *serve* an inferior product.

Your dissertation committee chair is usually the moderator for your defense, and he or she will explain the rules on procedure and protocol. During the defense, the committee could ask for further elaboration on the research methods employed in the study; question your findings, conclusions and contributions; elaboration on the relevance of your study to your profession and society at large. Specific to your study, you need to be ready to discuss: why and how you selected the problem to investigate; the instrument for data collection you chose; the basic assumptions of your study; the theoretical and conceptual framework; the methodology you chose; the way your data were analyzed; and how you solved your problem, reached your conclusions, answered your research questions, and obtained your purpose. In this way, you and your examiners can reach more extensive insights into the area that you researched.

Some general questions that are often asked at a defense include:

1. If you were to do it all over again, what changes would you make?
2. What surprises did you find in your study?
3. What was the most challenging aspect of your research?
4. What specific aspects of your findings can be taken to practice?
5. How generalizable is your study?
6. What is the most important contribution your study can make to your profession or society?
7. Is there an alternative interpretation of your findings?
8. How would a policy maker be able to utilize your findings?
9. Will your research change current thinking in the field? If so how?
10. How will you communicate your work to other scholars in your field?
11. What will you do, personally, with the findings to make a difference?
12. What advice would you give a student who is starting the dissertation process and considering using the methodology you used?
13. How did your course work at the university prepare you for your dissertation work?
14. What is your next research project?

Some other helpful hints include treating your presentation as a public speaking engagement. There could be people outside your profession at your presentation, so avoid using jargon from your field or presenting too much detail. You need to explain in simple, concise language (a) what you did, (b) why you did it, (c) how you did it, (d) what you found, and (e) what the results mean.

Don't speak too fast and don't read from your notes. Try to keep friendly chit-chat to a minimum. Don't spend too much time on any one issue. Don't rush to answer each question. It is perfectly acceptable to think for a couple of seconds, or ask the questioner if you are on the right track. If you are not clear about the question ask for clarification. Try to be concise and to the point, but at the same time demonstrate that you have a good grasp of the complex issues involved in your study. In other words, do not give superficial answers, but at the same time, stay focused and speak with authority. Balance is important. Spend proportionately larger amounts of time with very important matters and less time with matters of medium importance. Quickly mention or pass by matters of small importance.

The best defense is a good offense—anticipate what will be asked and be confident without being smug. A good defense means that you can provide strong logical arguments as well as empirical support to defend your position or conclusion. When an examiner criticizes your study and points out some flaws or weaknesses in your study, and the criticism is sound and well grounded, accept his or her criticism with humility, grace, and gratitude. Do not allow unfounded criticism to go unchallenged (using professional courtesy), since that will undermine the integrity of your work.

Remember, this dissertation will be part of your scholarly portfolio. Any improvement offered, at any time, should be seen as a gift. After the oral defense, meet with your chair for debriefing and determine how best to revise your final dissertation. Putting together a change chart (see: <http://dissertationrecipes.com/guides-tools-worksheets-slideshows/>), where you acknowledge concerns that arose during the defense, who raised the concern, and how you dealt with the concern, is most useful. Don't lose momentum. Even

if the requested revisions are extensive, it is advantageous to make them right away while they are still fresh in your mind. Thank your participants for their time and their involvement.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION AND EDUCATION

Most nontraditional universities require that the oral defense be conducted via telephone. Once you have been authorized by your chair to conduct your presentation, contact all committee members to determine their availability to attend your presentation. Some things to keep in mind when arranging for a teleconference:

1. Be aware of different time zones when proposing times for the call. It is unreasonable to ask a person to participate before 8 AM or after 8 PM.
2. Respect the availability of your committee members. Committee members understand the time constraints you may be facing and will likely make accommodation to help you meet your goals, but you should be prepared to be as flexible as possible. This might entail taking time off from your work.
3. E-mail communication is an efficient way to determine committee members' availability. Make sure that everyone who needs to attend the presentation is copied on all e-mails regarding time availability.
4. After you have made arrangements with your committee members, contact a teleconferencing company to schedule the call [some universities will provide this service for you]. You can find a listing of many teleconference providers at this link: <http://tinyurl.com/25cez>.
5. Usually participants will be given a phone number and code for the conference call. It is a good idea to send a friendly e-mail reminder a day before the defense. It is also good to have a phone number to reach the participants, just in case. Make sure you provide your personal phone numbers. Bad connections, disconnections, and such may (and do) happen. Be prepared. Allow for mishaps. Keep the agenda flexible. Your chair will likely have alternative scenarios if a committee member loses connection, but just in case, be sure to have some alternatives of your own, especially if it is your chair that loses his or her connection.

6. It is a good idea to record the teleconference.
7. Review the tape of the oral presentation while revising your dissertation.
8. Try to remove all distracting noise from your environment. A barking dog or a radio in the background can divert your audience's attention from your presentation.
9. Follow up with a thank-you note. These are always appreciated.