

# How to survive a thesis defence<sup>1</sup>

1. Take time to schedule your defence. You are required to hand in your work 3-4 weeks before your defence but there is no guarantee the defence will happen in your requested timeframe – especially during the spring term. Do not inconvenience committee members when deciding on a defence date. If your committee has to rearrange his/her schedule and are forced to cancel other events and vacation previously scheduled, they may take it out on you. Please let administration handle these details – they (The Graduate Coordinator, graduate advisors, and your supervisor) can work with you in determining a number of dates and times.
2. Practice by presenting at conferences, in classes, MX reviews, and organize mock defences with other students. Also, attend as many defences as you can – especially those ones that have the same supervisor and committee members as yours. This is a great opportunity and preview to see first hand what types of questions are being asked and how your committee acts/interacts during the defence. For the most part, many committee members often ask standard/similar ‘themed’ questions.
3. Set-up your defence room that feels most comfortable for you. Make sure that you leave plenty of time to test equipment (go through a dry run) and that the lighting, seating, and overall environment is to your liking.
4. Have someone record the questions and answers during your defence. Often, much of this discussion pertains to additional work that the committee may request to be done in your final submission. It will be much easier to refer to these notes – especially if you answered them during the defence and ask to include them into your body of text later on. You will forget because of the excitement/nervousness you experience when being in the moment.
5. Please do not read your entire thesis. Prepare it as a presentation highlighting the key areas of your research: What is your research question and what context does it fit into? How did you answer it (the approach and/or steps taken)? What were the results (site analysis and design approach) What did you learn? What you want Architects to take away from your research?) Remember your committee has read your thesis and are aware of its contents. It is your responsibility to provide an overview so that your audience understands the spirit and overall work undertaken for your thesis.
6. The thesis defence is an oral examination that is coupled with your written thesis. This defence is an opportunity for the candidate to take the most salient points and research findings from the written work and discuss them verbally with the committee. Students

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<sup>1</sup> portions adapted by J. Wolfe The University of New South Wales, Sydney as well as Kathy Lemon of the Thesis Defence Sidebar

should convey confidence but not be cocky. You are considered by the committee as the expert - but only to your specific topic. Although the defence is partly a conversation among colleagues, you examiners are experts in your field and they hold the key to your entry into that particular community/profession/institution.

7. The defence is made up of two rounds of questions from the committee. The external reader goes first, followed by the committee members and then your supervisor. Once these rounds are completed, questions are opened to the public.
8. Consequently, some questions will be sincere ones. The exam committee asks because s/he may not know and expects that the candidate will be able to rectify and/or clarify this question. Students often expect questions to be difficult and attacking, and answer them accordingly. Often the questions will be much simpler than you expect and that it may take more form of debate/discussion at times (of course, this depends on your committee structure).
9. You need show the committee that you learned from your work. Feel free to say that some omissions are avenues of inquiry that you hope to pursue in further work and that they are not within the scope of this particular research. It is okay to say "I don't know". It is not okay to pretend that you do – you will be caught. If no one knows the answer, you can say that you hope you or others will pursue that area someday. Remember, at this level of research, there are really no "wrong or right" answers just "some better than others".
10. The phrase "That's a good question" is useful. It flatters the asker and may get him/her onside, or less offside; it gives you time to think; it implies that you have understood the question and assessed it already and that you have probably thought about it before. If absolutely necessary, it can be followed by a bit more stalling "Now the answer to that is not obvious/straightforward..." which has some of the same advantages.
11. Take your time when presenting. Repeat examiners' questions back to them in your own words. Stop and think before you respond to criticism. Be professional.
12. In a curious relativistic effect, time expands in the mind of the student. A few seconds pause to reflect before answering seems eminently reasonable to the panel, but to the student it seems like minutes of mute failure. *Take your time*. For the same reason, let them take their time. Let them finish, or even elaborate on, the question. Sit back and listen. Some examiners just want to talk about their own work and have no questions for you. Let them talk and listen attentively then offer some insights as to how your research relates to their own.
13. If an examiner found a question that put something in the work you did in doubt... (very rare though) ...then what? The first thing would be to concede that the question imposes a serious limitation on the applicability of the work "You have identified a serious limitation in this technique, and the results have to be interpreted in the light of that observation". The committee member is then more likely to back off and even help answer it, whereas a straight

denial may encourage him/her to pursue more ardently.

14. Committee members have read your work (and in some case has read many iterations of the thesis). They will have looked closely at some parts that interested them most for the defence in particular. The examiners have standards to uphold, but they are not out to fail you. In general, they feel good about the idea of a new, fresh researcher coming into their area. You are no immediate threat to them. They have to show that they have read it and they have to give you the opportunity to show that you understand it (you do, of course). And they usually have a genuine interest in the work. Some of them may feel it is necessary to maintain their image as senior scholars and founts of wisdom. Judicious use of the "Good question", "Yes, you're right of course", "Good idea" and "Thanks for that" will allow that with a minimum of fuss.
15. If one of the examiners is real nasty, your thesis defence is probably not the best place and time to do anything about it, except perhaps for allowing him/her to demonstrate his/her nastiness clearly and thus to establish the support of the rest of the committee.
16. Be ready for a 'free kick'. It is relatively common that a panel will ask one (or more) questions that, whatever the actual wording may be, are essentially an invitation to you to tell them (briefly) what is important, new and good in your thesis. You ought not stumble at this stage, so you should rehearse this. You should be able to produce on demand (say) a one-minute speech and a five-minute speech, and be prepared to extend them if invited by further questions. Do not try to recite your abstract: written and spoken styles should be rather different. Rather, rehearse answers to the questions: "What is your thesis about, what are the major contributions and what have you done that merits a Masters?"