

THE THESIS/DISSERTATION DEFENSE

What a terrible name - a *dissertation defense*. It seems to suggest some sort of war that you're trying to win. And, of course, with four or five of them and only one of you it sounds like they may have won the war before the first battle is held. I wish they had called it a dissertation seminar or professional symposium. I think the name would have brought forward a much better picture of what should be expected at this meeting.

Regardless of what the meeting is called, try to remember that the purpose of the meeting is for you to show everyone how well you have done in the conducting of your research study and the preparation of your dissertation. In addition there should be a seminar atmosphere where the exchange of ideas is valued. You are clearly the most knowledgeable person at this meeting when it comes to your subject. And, the members of your committee are there to hear from you and to help you better understand the very research that you have invested so much of yourself in for the past weeks. Their purpose is to help you finish your degree requirements. Of course other agenda often creep in. If that happens, try to stay on course and redirect the meeting to your agenda.

The following ideas should help you keep the meeting on your agenda.

✓ 30. The most obvious suggestion is the one seldom followed. Try to **attend one or more defenses prior to yours**. Find out which other students are defending their research and sit in on their defense. In many departments this is expected of all graduate students. If this is not the case for you, check with your adviser to see that you can get an invitation to attend some defenses.

At the defense try and keep your focus on the interactions that occur. Does the student seem relaxed? What strategies does the student use to keep relaxed? How does the student interact with the faculty? Does the student seem to be able to answer questions well? What would make the situation appear better? What things should you avoid? You can learn a lot from sitting in on such a meeting.

✓ 31. Find opportunities to **discuss your research with your friends and colleagues**. Listen carefully to their questions. See if you are able to present your research in a clear and coherent manner. Are there aspects of your research that are particularly confusing and need further explanation? Are there things that you forgot to say? Could you change the order of the information presented and have it become more understandable?

✓ 32. I hope you **don't try circulating chapters of your dissertation to your committee members as you are writing them**. I find this practice to be most annoying and one that creates considerable problems for the student. You must work closely with your dissertation director. He/she is the person you want to please. Develop a strategy with the dissertation director regarding how and when your writing should be shared. Only after your dissertation director approves of what you have done should you attempt to share it with the rest of the committee. And by then it's time for the defense. If you prematurely share sections of your writing with committee members you will probably find yourself in a situation where one committee member tells you to do one thing and another member says to do something else. What should you do? The best answer is not to get yourself into such a predicament. The

committee meeting (the defense) allows the concerns of committee members to surface in a dialogical atmosphere where opposing views can be discussed and resolved.

✓ 33. It's important that you have the feeling when entering your defense that you **aren't doing it alone**. As was mentioned earlier, your major professor should be seen as an ally to you and "in your corner" at the defense. Don't forget, if you embarrass yourself at the defense you will also be embarrassing your dissertation director. So, give both of you a chance to guarantee there is no embarrassment. Meet together ahead of time and discuss the strategy you should use at the defense. Identify any possible problems that may occur and discuss ways that they should be dealt with. **Try and make the defense more of a team effort.**

✓ 34. **Don't be defensive at your defense** (this sounds confusing!). This is easy to say but sometimes hard to fulfill. You've just spent a considerable amount of time on your research and there is a strong tendency for YOU to want to defend everything you've done. However, the committee members bring a new perspective and may have some very good thoughts to share. Probably the easiest way to deal with new input is to say something like "Thank you so much for your idea. I will be giving it a lot of consideration." There, you've managed to diffuse a potentially explosive situation and not backed yourself or the committee member into a corner. Plus, you've not promised anything. Try and be politically astute at this time. Don't forget that your ultimate goal is to successfully complete your degree.

✓ 35. Probably the most disorganized defense I've attended is the one where the dissertation director began the meeting by saying, "You've all read the dissertation. What questions do you have for the student?" What a mess. Questions started to be asked that bounced the student around from one part of the dissertation to another. There was no semblance of order and the meeting almost lost control due to its lack of organization. At that time I vowed to protect my students from falling into such a trap by helping them **organize the defense as an educational presentation.**

Here's what we do:

I ask the student to prepare a 20-25 minute presentation that reviews the entire study. This is done through the help of a series of 10-12 large pieces of paper, wall charts, that have been posted sequentially around the walls of the room. Each piece of paper contains key words regarding each of the different aspects of the study. Some pieces of paper contain information about the study setting, questions and methodology. Other pieces of paper present findings and finally there are those pieces that present the conclusions and implications. By preparing these wall charts ahead of time the student is able to relax during the presentation and use the pieces of paper as if they were a road map toward the goal. No matter how nervous you are you can always let the wall charts guide **YOU** through your presentation. Lettering is done with a dark marking pen and extra notes are included in very small printing with a pencil (that no one can really see). We've also tried it with overhead projected transparencies but it doesn't work as well. With the transparencies they're gone from view after a few seconds. The wall charts stay up for everyone to see and to help focus attention.

Following this structured presentation the committee begins to ask questions, but as can be expected the questions follow along with the wall charts and the whole discussion proceeds in

an orderly manner. If guests are present at the defense, this form of presentation helps them also follow along and understand exactly what was accomplished through the research.

✓ 36. Consider **tape recording your defense**. Using a small portable recorder, record your entire presentation and also the questions and comments of the committee members. This helps in two ways. First, the student has documentation to assist in making suggested changes and corrections in the dissertation. The student can relax more and listen to what is being said by the committee members. The tape recorder is taking notes! Second, the student has a permanent record of his/her presentation of the study. By keeping the paper charts and the tape together, they can be most useful for reviewing the research in future years when a request is made for a presentation. (Bring out the tape and the pieces of paper the night before your presentation and you can listen to *you* make the presentation. What a good way to review.)

Well that about does it. By following the above suggestions and ideas I hope it will be possible for you to finish your graduate degree program in a most timely and enjoyable manner. By looking ahead to the different aspects of this final part of your graduate study it becomes clear that you can do a number of things to insure your success. Good luck!

✓ 37. Oh, I almost forgot. There's one last thing. Get busy and **prepare an article or paper that shares the outcomes of your research**. There will be no better time to do this than now. Directly after your defense is when you know your study the best and you will be in the best position to put your thinking on paper. If you put this writing task off it will probably never get done. Capitalize on all of the investment you have made in your research and reap some additional benefit - start writing.

From a Research Faculty