

Practical Tips for Preparing for the Thesis Defense

The thesis defense is a long-awaited and hard-earned personal event, as well as a major professional presentation. Obviously, you want to be mentally prepared for a discussion and explanation of your work, and putting forth a good impression through appearance and conduct is an important part of a successful defense. You probably have loads of questions about the minutia of a thesis defense; the following will help answer a few of them.

Where should I turn for tips on resources for my defense? Your first stop should be to see your advisor. Your advisor will guide you through all the necessary stages. He or she will also know the habits and personalities of perspective committee members, and may be able to share insights concerning your selection of committee members. In addition to guiding you through your committee member selections, your advisor will also communicate with these members, allowing you advance notice of what to expect in the way of their conduct during the actual defense. Develop a good working relationship with your advisor. Also, do not hesitate to talk to other graduate students; they can be a good source of practical ideas and tips for preparing for this important occasion.

Is there some way to know what a defense is like, in advance? Yes. Professors highly recommend attending at least one (if not more) defense in your discipline, as a way of getting to know what the general process entails.

What are the most important last minute things to do when preparing for my defense? Professors invariably give the same response: be prepared! Do all the necessary “last minute” prep work for your defense at least two days before the actual defense. Be sure that you have all the necessary materials ready to go. Review your thesis thoroughly before the defense; all aspects of your research should be fresh in your mind. You may be sick of the material by this time, but you’ve got to stay intimately involved with it until after the defense is successfully completed. Most importantly, be prepared to think quickly while on your feet!

What should I wear to my defense?

Women should wear conservative attire—the type of two-piece garment appropriate in an office environment—of a reasonable, non-garish color. Avoid wearing shoes that have an extremely high heel, and do not wear gym shoes. Choose footwear that is comfortable and business-like.

Men should wear standard formal attire: a jacket, dress shirt, and tie, conservative slacks, and dress shoes. Under no circumstances should men wear gym shoes to their defense.

I’m very nervous. What should I do to combat this feeling? Feeling nervous about the defense is quite normal. Most professors offer similar responses: get plenty of rest the night before your defense, and if you practice some type of relaxation technique or mediation, by all means, do it. You will want to look and feel as refreshed as possible, and have the energy and concentration to respond intelligently to the questions posed to you.

How should I conduct myself during my defense? During the defense, you should conduct yourself confidently and professionally, and be well prepared to give a knowledgeable presentation of your work. Be conscious of not talking too fast and mindful of speaking clearly and loudly enough to be heard. If you gesture, do so in a natural manner, and don’t fidget while giving your presentation. Remember to be respectful of your colleagues and the academic environment—avoid coming across as arrogant, defensive, or dismissive. However, don’t forget that this is your opportunity to shine; you are the expert concerning your research.

How do I avoid “freezing up”? Try to anticipate problems that could arise with your defense, in advance. What are the most challenging questions that you might be asked? Plan and practice your responses. In other words, again, be thoroughly prepared; this is the largest component to avoid “freezing up.” The confidence that comes from knowing your material is more than half the ammunition needed for the defense. In the face of difficulty, stay centered, take a moment to gather your thoughts, take a deep breath, and...begin speaking.

I've heard that some committee members ask tangential questions during a defense. How do I handle that? If a committee member asked a question that falls outside the scope of your work, try not to get confused and flustered. Usually this sort of question stresses something the committee member thinks is significant. Give an honest answer, if you can—you may have to make a quick mental reference to the critical views of your topic. You should be familiar with the current research to avoid being caught with your pants down during your defense; otherwise, rely on your knowledge of your own topic to give a cogent response.

Can my friends and family help me get through this? Yes. Use them as a test audience for your defense. These individuals may not be able to offer academic comments, but they can offer tips on your defenses strengths and weaknesses, in terms of your delivery. In addition, arrange to have at least one family member or friend meet you after your (successful) defense, to help you celebrate your accomplishment.

Sources:

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Isaac, Alicia. The African American Student's Guide To Surviving Graduate School. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998.

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