

Transcript: Your Thesis Defence: Tips for Success

Section 1: Your Thesis Defence – tips for success before the big day

We've compiled the top pieces of advice from recent PhD graduates and PhD defence chairs to help ensure you're prepared to defend successfully. This video shares some of their top tips for success. The video will cover

- 1) Tips for preparing for your defence
- 2) Tips for day-of logistics
- 3) Tips for success during your defence.

First, we'll start with tips on preparing for your defence.

1) Start learning about your defence timelines early on

Many students want to complete their degree by a certain term, or in time for a specific convocation ceremony. Learning about timelines can help make things go more smoothly before and after your defence. In particular, make sure you're aware of timelines around the approval of your thesis for defence, submission of your thesis for defence, applying to graduate, revisions (after your defence), and your final thesis submission to UWSpace.

2) Go to other defences

Most defences at Waterloo are open to the public and you can find a list of upcoming defences in Waterloo's online Daily Bulletin. Going to another PhD defence is a great opportunity to see how the defence works and what types of questions are typically asked.

Consider taking a notebook with you to write down questions that are asked. Try to rephrase the questions for your own thesis topic, and practice writing out your answers.

3) Schedule a mock defence

Consider doing this with your lab mates and colleagues, but also with people outside your discipline.

You might be surprised by the interesting, but relevant, questions you get from those outside your discipline. And remember, you have an internal-external examiner who is from outside your department.

4) Look at your thesis with a critical eye

What are the issues you would critique if you were an examiner? For example, think about the limitations of your study – what you did and what you consciously did not do.

Think about each chapter – what contribution does each chapter make to the whole? Are there weaknesses in the data in some chapters? Can some of your conclusions be challenged?

It's actually easier than you think to predict questions.

5) Think about the bigger picture

Where does your work fit in with the literature in your field? What is your contribution to the field?

The very purpose of the defence is to assess your scholarly contribution, and to evaluate your ability to engage in scholarly discourse in your discipline. So, always keep the bigger picture in mind.

Section 2: Planning your Day-of Logistics

As your defence day approaches, you may have a lot on your mind, from preparing for your defence to managing the administrative considerations and thinking about what comes next.

With all of this excitement, it can be easy to forget about some of the fundamental logistics of planning for your defence day. So, now, we'll cover the key tips we gathered for the day of your defence.

1) Don't forget your thesis!

Bring a copy of your thesis to the defence and mark main sections or chapters with post-it notes or flags. You don't want to be scrolling through your computer when you're supposed to be conversing with others.

You should also bring a notebook, because you will receive some great advice at the defence about how to improve the thesis for final submission, or for a future publication. You want to be sure you remember what the examiners tell you!

2) Plan your transportation

Plan in advance of the day how you will get to the defence including thinking about how much time you might need to get there.

Make sure you plan to arrive early to ensure that all of the technology is functioning as expected.

3) Plan your outfit

Plan your outfit several days in advance. Be sure you are comfortable, but try to look professional, too.

4) **Familiarize yourself with the technology you'll be using at your defence**

If possible, get access to the virtual or physical location of your defence to make sure figures, videos and text show up well on the projector, screen or streaming platform. Also, get comfortable with the controls of any projecting systems.

If you're showing a presentation, it's also a good idea to have backup copies of your file. For example, have one on a jump drive and have another copy in email.

5) **Spend some time relaxing the week of your defence**

You need that time to get perspective. And the night before the defence, be sure to get a good night's sleep!

Section 3: Defending Successfully

Once you have a plan to practice and prepare, and you've got your defence logistics figured out, what should you do during the examination?

We'll focus now on tips for succeeding at the defence.

1) **Keep the presentation simple**

Recognize that if anyone has questions, they will ask them during the examination period. Save the small details for the questioning period.

2) **Show you can think critically about your own work when you answer questions**

The best kind of answer is "Here's what I did, and here's why I did it", followed by acknowledging how you could have done it differently.

3) **Not everything needs to be defended**

The defence is not designed to prove you can "stand your ground." Sometimes the best answer is "that's a very good point, I'll change that."

4) **Ask for clarification**

Asking for clarification doesn't make you look "less smart." It is worse to just start talking, pretending that you know what you're talking about.

5) **Don't treat the question period like a speech**

Long answers are typically weak answers. The question period is meant to be an informed conversation between colleagues, so the best defences are conversations in which there's an exchange of information in both directions.

6) **Remember what you've accomplished**

As you prepare for your defence day, take advice from a recent PhD graduate who said – “be prepared for tough questions,” but “be confident in your research and work... take comfort in knowing you are the expert on your own project.”

Finally, our last tip is: **celebrate!**

You’ve dedicated so much hard work and so many years to completing your thesis. Be sure you take the time to celebrate your accomplishment. You earned it!