Completing Your Thesis: Workshop III

Tips and Skills for Defending your Thesis
Wednesday, February 20, 2019

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Why Defend?

General Questions:

- What is the purpose of a thesis defense?
- What do you know about the M.A. defense?
- Does your department have specific defense protocol?
- Why might “defense” be a bit misleading?

General Purposes:

- Demonstrate “on your feet” critical thinking about your topic
- Engender formal and professional academic discussion about your topic among your soon-to-be peers
- Formalize the longer process of your M.A. degree at CSUF

The oral defense is a ritual.
Leading up to your Defense

Who is on your committee?
- typically three faculty members; minimum of two from your department

When is your committee available to defend?
- working backwards, you should give your advisor at least 4-6 weeks to read your completed thesis

Where is your defense?
- be sure there is a space available in your department, scheduled in advance

Questions to ask your advisor and/or department coordinators:
Is the MA defense open to the university community or closed?
Is there a departmentally defined format?
What are the time limitations?
What is the room like -- technological capabilities, seating arrangements, etc.?
Is there another department defense you can attend prior to your own?
Really, Really Leading up to your Defense

Carve out time to read your thesis again -- think about the strengths and weaknesses of your own work

What are your advisor’s concerns (if any) with your thesis? What about the rest of your committee?

If you could write more or advance your thesis, how would you do so?

Brainstorm a list of questions that your committee may ask you -- you should (hopefully!) know them well by now

**PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE**

Invite your friends, family, and peers over for a “mock defense” (complete run through of your oral presentation) and ask them to prepare some questions for you

Make sure your technology is in order and the PowerPoint (or whatever presentation tool you use) is legible

Check out the room ahead of time so you know what you are in for
Oral Defense Structures

*** this will vary from department to department (consult your advisor!)

- Typically 10-15 minutes maximum
- Should include a brief introduction to your thesis (research questions, hypothesis, etc.), key literature contributions, methodology (brief), and your findings and analysis, conclusions and potential for further research
  - Remember that your committee has read your thesis; this is an opportunity to speak freely and concisely about everything you have worked on during your time at CSUF
  - Stick to what you know best; highlight the strengths of your work and thesis with the understanding that you may need to address the weaknesses
  - Appropriate number of slides for a 10-15 minute presentation
What if a committee or audience member asks you a question you don’t know the answer to?

- Exude confidence but not arrogance or defensiveness

What if your palms get sweaty and you start to panic?

- Take a deep breath, count down slowly from ten, and remember to speak slowly and deliberately during your presentation (we expect you to be nervous), and remember that it is okay to ask for clarification about a question
Don’t Forget the Minor Details

Dress appropriately -- suits, collared shirt, dress shoes, neat looking

Bring the following:

- Bottle of water
- A copy of your thesis (your committee may reference a page number)
- Something to write comments/questions on (and something to write with)
- Any forms that your department may require a signature on
- Slide advancer or laser pointer
Oral Defense Protocol (Example: Sociology)

“The candidate gives a 10-15 minute overview presentation on their thesis, preferably using PowerPoint to highlight key information on research questions, literature, methods, and analytical [sic]. Candidate should frame this presentation like a talk presented at a sociology conference.”

“Committee begins asking questions, and the chair preferably defers to the committee to start, as the chair has heavily commented throughout the writing of the [sic]. The chair comes in later to pose her/his questions (30-45 minutes).”

-- adapted from http://hss.fullerton.edu/sociology/academics/thesis.aspx#top
Potential Defense Questions

These questions may be as specific as clarifying data or analysis or as broad as the limitations of a particular methodology.

The best way to predict your defense question is to know your advisor and committee members (what are their theoretical leanings, who do they read/cite/follow).

Your committee may encourage you to think about scholarly work that you are unfamiliar with -- be agreeable and even though this may not be a question, you can respond with an affirmative “thank you for the suggestion, I will definitely explore this” type response.

Your committee may end by asking you what the next steps are -- is the M.A. a path to the Ph.D.? Are you preparing for a job in industry? How does your thesis serve as a stepping stone?
Remember...

If you have made it this far (your actual defense), you are on track to pass

Your committee wants to support you by helping you move on

Your committee wants to support you by intellectually challenging you (knowing that you have the skills and expertise to rise up to the challenge)

Your committee wants you to move onto bigger and better things

To critique is not to judge

It may be a defense but don’t be defensive!
Q&A or Comments?