

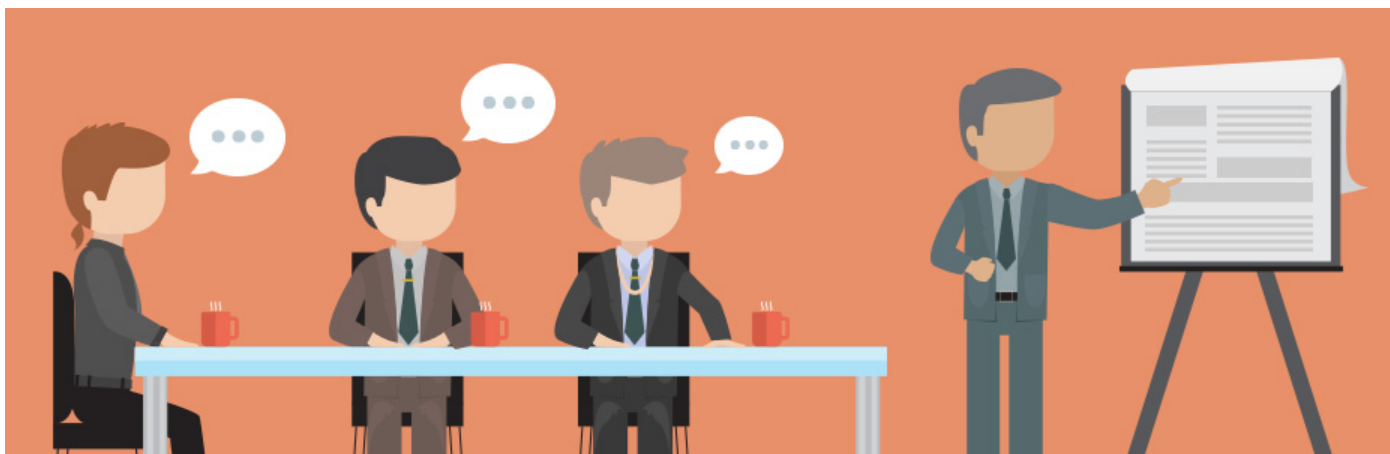
How to Defend a Dissertation

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A candidate for an advanced degree must write up his research in a [dissertation](#) and then defend it orally before his committee. The dissertation defense comes after the long and laborious work of writing the dissertation and can be the source of anxiety for the student. Here are some tips to quell the anxiety and make the process run smoothly.

Know Your Material

After several years of research and several months of writing it up as a dissertation you probably know more about the topic than anyone else in the world. Review everything anyway. This has two advantages. First, half-forgotten references and lab work will be fresh in your mind, instead of buried somewhere in a few hundred pages of print. Therefore, you will be able to respond easily and promptly to questions that come up. Second, knowing that you are well prepared [will give you confidence when you begin the presentation](#).

Narrow the focus

Your written dissertation is long, maybe 200–300 pages. The members of your committee have already read it, so there is no need to go over every detail. Stick to the main points, discuss the [most important results](#). If the committee members want to hear more details, they will ask.

Prepare Visual Aids Carefully

Time you spend [preparing visual aids](#) will be amply rewarded in the time saved during the oral defense. The usual pattern of a dissertation defense is the same as that of any presentation—[introduction, body, conclusion](#)—or as it is often expressed, “tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them.” The introduction describes the problem attacked and why it is important. The body describes the plan of attack and the results. Then follows a brief conclusion.

Rehearse

Defending the dissertation may seem old hat. Perhaps you have already given the essence of the defense in group or department seminars. Go through the graphs a few times anyway, speaking the words you will be saying. This will give you a sort of unconscious “muscle memory” of the tongue that will stay with you during the presentation. Even if you know what you want to say, the words might not come easily [unless you rehearse](#).

Relax

Don't worry too much about the defense. Your committee wants you to pass. If there were some major problem with your work, they would almost certainly have told you prior to the defense. Smile, be courteous, and don't be afraid to interject a touch of humor now and then. I rather enjoyed my dissertation experience. Speaking to a handful of professors that I knew well, [answering questions](#) concerning the work, genially agreeing that one experiment was worth ten theories, I felt a glow of collegiality. And when after a short wait in the hallway, I was called in to shake hands with them as a newly minted Doctor of Philosophy, I actually felt like one.

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