



Guidelines for the Conduct of a Dissertation Defense

These guidelines describe the general conduct of a dissertation defense at The University of Texas at Tyler. The responsibility for the defense belongs to the dissertation committee chair, and departures from these guidelines may occur for various reasons.

What is a defense? A dissertation defense is an oral presentation and discussion of a dissertation study. The purpose is to share the results of the study and to demonstrate to the committee and the academic community that the candidate has done work of sufficient quality to receive the doctoral degree and is able to speak to it in an open forum.

Dissertation chairs do not allow candidates to schedule defenses until the quality of the dissertation document is acceptable. It is expected that if the candidate speaks to his or her study as well as s/he has written about it, s/he will be successful in the defense.

Who attends? The doctoral candidate and his or her committee members attend the dissertation defense. Sometimes, committee members attend via a conference call if the logistics of attendance make it too difficult to schedule his or her presence.

Dissertation defenses are open to any interested members of the academic or professional community. Only the presentation and questioning portions of the defense are open; individuals who are not members of the official committee will be excluded from other portions of the defense. Faculty who are not members of the committee may not question.

Personal guests (adult friends or family members) may attend, but this should be approved by the committee chair ahead of time. Personal guests who attend should realize they are attending a professional meeting as observers and may not ask questions.

What is the order of events? This varies and will depend in large part on discussions between the committee chair and the doctoral candidate. The customary practice is to begin with the chair welcoming the attendees, and then the candidate making a presentation based on the dissertation. The purpose of the presentation is not to substitute for the committee's reading but rather to demonstrate that the candidate can speak to what he or she did.

Speaking about one's research is an academic skill that is different from writing the study. Presentations have been done in many formats: seated at a table with the committee or standing in front of a large or small audience, with or without the aid of PowerPoint slides.

The format itself is not as important as the substance and should reflect the most effective way to communicate to the audience. Questions should be held to the end. The chair will inform participants at the start of the defense how questions will be managed. After the presentation, the dissertation committee asks questions designed to:

- Explore further some of the candidate's methods, findings, or theoretical and practical applications of results.
- Allow the candidate to demonstrate what he or she knows about the general topic.

- Probe what the candidate learned in general, or about his or her professional practice, from conducting the study.

The questions may range quite broadly, from very specific to very general. They may be retrospective, intended to ask about something that was already done in the study, or prospective, intended to get the candidate thinking about future possibilities or uses for the findings. They may include open-ended questions to which there is no known or “right” answer as well as closed questions about literature, theory, methods, or findings. It is not “mean” to ask “hard” questions. The intent is for the candidate and all the attendees to learn as much as possible about the study, the new knowledge the candidate’s study has generated, and the candidate’s fitness for the degree.

After the candidate speaks and the committee finishes with their questions, the committee excuses the candidate and any observers to discuss whether the candidate should pass, and the dissertation defense form should be signed.

- If the entire committee approves with no changes, they all sign the signature page, and the candidate proceeds to final format approval.
- If the entire committee approves with changes that are deemed editorial and/or cosmetic, they all sign the signature page, and the candidate proceeds with final editing and subsequent format approval.
- If the committee requests specific changes, they will give the chair the responsibility of seeing that they are made; in this case, the committee members except for the chair sign the signature page, and the chair waits until he or she is satisfied with the revisions before signing.
- If the committee decides that the candidate’s defense was not of sufficient quality to merit passing and that he or she needed to repeat the defense, no one will sign the signature page.

In summary, the following basic script is a recommended process to insure a complete, clear presentation of the study and examination of the candidate.

- Presentation by candidate.
- Committee members ask questions and discuss study.
- Committee adjourns for final evaluation; observers and candidate are excused.
- Committee calls the candidate back in to review required changes in the dissertation document.
- Post-meeting announcement to observers of outcome of committee deliberations.

Adapted from Duquesne University