

The Ph.D. Defense

How you should prepare for it and what will (probably) happen during it

Let's say that you've written three essays (or, in the old days, a monograph in which the various chapters are related). Let's also presume that you have circulated these essays to your advisors, received their comments, rewritten the material, and received approval by all three (or four) that you are ready to "defend." What happens next?

The next steps are to find a mutually agreeable date and time and to make certain that Brenda knows about it (so that you have a room and that bureaucratic details are taken care of). You should then give your advisors the final drafts of the essays (that is, those that you will be "defending") at least *two weeks* in advance of your defense. You should ask each of your advisors whether that schedule is reasonable for them since some might want more time and others might accept a bit less. Under no circumstances should you assume that your advisors have kept copies of the previous drafts and do not need a fresh copy. The "two week rule" is important if you want to make absolutely certain that you are not asked to revise your essays with the Registrar's deadline hanging over you.

It will also be very useful to add a preface to your dissertation in which you summarize your essays and, hopefully, relate them to each other in terms of facts, conclusions, theory, empirical methodology, and so forth. You will see in a moment that this brief preface can be a very useful entryway to your defense.

Okay. Now you are set for your defense. Let's say that it is scheduled for 10am in Littauer 219. It will probably last until 11:30am. What will happen during the defense and how can you prepare for it?

You should realize is that you are "defending" your dissertation. You are not (generally) going to be grilled about your first-year macro course or anything unrelated to your dissertation. Another important point is that you will be given the chance to set the tone for your defense. One of your advisors (generally the one you marked as the main advisor) will begin by asking you to briefly summarize your work. Here is where the preface comes in handy since you have just thought hard about the three essays, what they contribute, and how they are related to each other.

There are various ways to begin your summary. For example, you can say what your work concerns generally. You can then give brief (say 3-5 minute) summaries of each essay. You could bring handouts or use a PowerPoint presentation or just talk. Your committee will then ask you questions about each of the essays or about one or two of them. Your committee might interrupt you during each of your summaries with some questions. The precise format will depend on the committee and on the essays. Your committee will probably want to spend more time on one particular essay and their reasons will generally be noble. They have an interest in your future.

This brings me to the final point and perhaps the most important one. *The defense is almost always meant to help you.* Your committee will offer advice about where you

should submit your essays and how you can increase the probability of getting them accepted in very good journals. They will offer advice about whether you should cut an essay into two papers or merge two of them into one. They will give you counsel during your defense that you probably have not received before since this is, most likely, the first time that all four (or five) of you have sat in the same room and have focused entirely on your work.

This summary would be remiss if it didn't mention the following. It is possible that your committee or one or two members of it will decide that you have passed your defense but that you must do more work on one or more essays before you can submit them for graduation. That occasionally happens. But you will be protected from that event (and a worse one of actually failing the defense) if you make certain that your advisors actually approve each of the essays as you are finalizing them. Giving them the essays two (or more) weeks in advance will allow them to find any residual problems that were not noticed before and give you enough time to rectify the matter.

In sum your defense, in all likelihood, will be an enjoyable and productive event. Being prepared with brief, yet complete and informative, summaries will help set the tone. Circulating your papers at least two weeks in advance will help your committee prepare their questions and give them time to think seriously about your work and where it should be published. The term "defense" is an inappropriate one to describe the occasion. It should be called a "dissertation fest." You'll see why.

Claudia Goldin
Henry Lee Professor of Economics
Harvard University

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