

The Completion Agenda, Part 2: The Best Defense

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[Advice](#)

It probably won't be harrowing, but you need to be prepared in case it is



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By David D. Perlmutter June 03, 2015

Early in my career, I sat on a doctoral committee in a field outside my discipline for the first time. I recall being startled at the dissertation defense when professors in the young man's department began delivering scorching assessments of his theory, method, cases, and conclusions. As the incendiaries kept flying I grew concerned about his health. He whitened, started sweating visibly, and several times laid his forehead on the table. When it came my turn to speak, I froze and ended up sputtering, "Well, you have answered all my questions!" and fell silent.

But then something incredible happened: The candidate was asked to leave the room, and the committee briskly and unanimously voted in favor of passing his dissertation with minimal revisions. He was ushered back in to the accompaniment of back slaps, clapping, and exclamations of "Welcome, Doctor!"

The Completion Agenda

In any academic career, the first supreme hurdle you face is finishing your dissertation. This series explores how to get it done.

Turns out that the scene was a norm in the department, a version of some tribal coming-of-age ritual, except the scarring was mental, not physical. Misery and stress were inflicted to test resolve and fortitude. Survival meant passing.

A vast majority of dissertation defenses are much less harrowing, but the principle of "testing" the candidate on more than just the content of the dissertation manuscript is widespread. A successful defense, thus, is not just a knowledge quiz; it is also about performance and communication. What follows in this column — the second [in a series](#) on completing your dissertation — are some suggestions for before, during, and after your defense.

Gauge what you will be asked before the defense. It is often said that good lawyers only ask questions in court to which they already know the answers. Likewise, you will probably face few surprises or "gotcha" experiences in your defense. But it won't be serene, either. Either way, it will help if you scout out as much of what may happen as possible. Tactics to deploy include:



- Try to finish your draft and distribute it to committee members ahead of the defense date. A reasonable time would be more than a month early.
- Follow up with emails or schedule a meeting to get their reaction.
- Above all, make sure you and your chair/adviser are in sync.

The ideal predefense outcome is the entire committee telling you, "I see no big issues; looking forward to the meeting." In reality, it is unusual to have all five to seven committee members be both conscientious and fully in approval. Somebody always seems not to have read the dissertation until the night before or changes his mind on a major point just before the defense. But by distributing a draft early, you can make sure as much as possible that no one on your committee has any truly major problems.

Know your material cold. Not often, but enough to be alarming, I have sat in on (and heard about) defenses in which the candidates didn't seem to have studied their own dissertation enough — or at all. You may shake your head in disbelief, especially if you are still immersed in your tome. How and why would doctoral candidates be unfamiliar with their own dissertations?

- Dissertations are written over a long period of time, so parts of them may become less recognizable to you.
- You finished it long before the defense, then got distracted by other tasks (like the job hunt).
- You are burned out, and in the closing months you were more interested in "finishing the damned thing." So it is painful to review it all in depth.
- Some sections were more interesting, more stimulating, or less tedious to write than others, and so you recall the former better.
- You thought you knew it cold. But you blanked on defense day in the stress of the moment.

All of those things can happen. You need to do what you can to avoid giving the impression that your committee members care more about the content than you do. So force yourself to review your paper in advance of the date. Make detailed notes and reminders of key points, especially in areas about which you're likely to be questioned.

Present clearly and precisely — with handouts. Obviously, local culture and disciplinary demands define the elements of what constitutes a good initial presentation by a defending doctoral candidate. I have heard of one-hour slide shows, a musical performance, a five-minute sum-up — all were acceptable by their respective committees. Your adviser should have guided you on what is expected in terms of length and format, even tone. It also helps to seek out recent Ph.D.s from your program and ask "what did you do?" and "what would you do differently?" questions.

Nevertheless, there are some universal principles of good defense.

- Do not recite too many points from the dissertation; deploy highlights that tell the story.
- Do not read directly from the manuscript; prepare separate summaries.
- Always know which page and section you're referring to so that committee members don't get lost.
- Provide handouts or slides if possible. Make them clear and to the point.
- Rehearse your presentation. Let peers critique you.
- Ask friends gifted in grammar and in the topic to review your presentation materials.
- Check all technology. Have a Plan B in case of tech failure.

Be candid; don't try to cover up. In *Seven Samurai*, there is a great tactical observation that applies both to fighting bandits and to defending a dissertation (which in practice can seem surprisingly similar): Every fort should have a flaw, so you know where the enemy will attack.

OK, so your committee members are not your enemies, and you need not create initial weaknesses in your manuscript just to draw their attention to them. But the principle is a sound one. Consider including a "limitations" section for both the dissertation and the defense. Specifically, you should:

- Go into the defense aware of the document's shortcomings. Of course, you shouldn't be defending at all if several committee members feel the flaws are fatal. But usually the weaknesses are modest and fixable. If they are there in your manuscript, and they usually are, you want to know about them.
- Point out problems yourself. An issue you raise at the defense is almost always going to be seen as less problematic than if a committee member noted it and you seemed startled. You also come off as a professional when you are candid.
- Comment on how problems affected the work. What were the limitations? Basically, think about how the project might have turned out if you had corrected issues earlier. Or: Note how you had to make choices, and the "flaws" would have been different if you had to make other choices.

No doctoral student has unlimited time, money, and hindsight. Your committee, if composed of quasi-rational folks, should know that what you completed is what you could complete. But it always helps to make your case for reasonable expectations.

Take copious notes on what they want. Like every professor, I am irritated when a student comes to me for advice on a class topic and fails to take notes. Likewise, with several orders of magnitude, for the dissertation defense. No matter how good a memory you think you have, it is important to record what you need to know — and for the committee members to see you caring about what they are telling you.

- So pay attention to "you must do this" advice, like the kind the committee expects to see executed in the revisions.
- Take lots of notes, preferably on a paper copy of the manuscript.
- Don't be afraid to slow things down to confirm what you are being told if there seems to be any vagueness or

ambiguity.

- At the end, review key points with the group.

Don't leave your defense with any uncertainty about what you are expected to do next.

Defend without being defensive. No matter how galling a committee member may act, no matter how unfair the criticism may be, always keep your cool. Most professors will give you points for a mature performance. And really good committee members will jump to your defense.

Tone, phrasing, and body language count. No need to cringe and obey every whim. If a committee member is plain false in a point they make, you can refute it, but more in the line of a reasoned "Well, I was working with the data that showed ... " instead of an indignant retort. Also recall that some faculty members like to "gotcha" a bit in the defense, but then temper that attitude in the follow-up — the terrifying beatdown I described was an outlier example of such.

Most dissertation defenses are undramatic. The committee members know what you will say and mostly agree on it. But the importance of the event demands you plan for its successful conclusion.

David D. Perlmutter is a professor in and dean of the College of Media & Communication at Texas Tech University. He writes the "Career Confidential" advice column for The Chronicle. His book on [promotion and tenure](#) was published by Harvard University Press in 2010.