

What should you expect at your dissertation defense?

If you Google “what to expect dissertation defense,” you will quickly see that different universities have different norms. Different committees will, too, so your first and best strategy is simply to **ask your adviser** what she or he expects at a defense.

Among the possibilities:

1. An introduction by your major professor. This might be very short, or it might include an overview of your career thus far. Be prepared for the possibility that your adviser might tell a funny story about you or simply drop the defense in your lap after a sentence or two.
2. An oral presentation of your work. If this is expected of you at all, be sure to find out how long your adviser and committee want you to speak. Some faculty may want a 20 to 30 minute presentation, and it would be lousy to learn that at the last moment, so ask early! Some may want to skip this part completely and go straight to Q&A. If you are doing a presentation, whether it's five minutes or 30, be sure that you hit some or all of these basics: what questions you started with; what you learned; what you accomplished; what you didn't accomplish that you expected to be able to do; where you will take your research next; and, most important, what you have added to the store of knowledge in your field. For this last element, try very hard to bring yourself up out of the weeds of your particular sub-sub-sub-specialty (the place where you have spent the last 2-6 years!) and think about the broader landscape of historical inquiry. Think also about your audience: are you expected to speak to a general audience or to the committee members themselves.
3. Q&A. This is the “loose cannon” part of the defense and it's the part that will probably scare you the most. But don't panic: under most circumstances, the committee will not let you come up for your defense until they think you are ready. Note that this does not mean that your dissertation is picture-perfect and ready to file. You may also face some very hard questions that you find difficult to answer. Some faculty may take a hazing approach even if they intend to pass you. Some faculty may appear to be hazing you when they are simply genuinely engaged with your work and regarding you as an equal. Some may think your dissertation is defensible *and* still has major weaknesses that need addressing for the book—and this is normal. Some may be exposing you to the sort of questioning you might face at a job talk. Whatever happens, don't panic. You are the world expert on your topic, so you should have confidence in your findings, but that doesn't mean you cannot acknowledge any flaws or must claim that you have discovered the holy grail of historical research.
4. Next steps. As the Q& A wraps up, make sure that you are very clear about what changes your committee expects you to make before you submit, and what suggestions are intended to guide you as you work toward a book manuscript. Take notes if you have to—or arrange in advance for a friend to note-take for you—and confirm your understanding of the dissertation-revision priorities either on the spot or via email after the fact, in the case of more challenging revisions.

5. **Deliberation.** After perhaps an hour of presentation and give-and-take, everyone but the committee members will leave the room, and the committee will deliberate on whether to pass the dissertation as is, to require minor revisions, or to require major revisions. The second option is the most common. The committee may call you back alone for some private conversation, or announce the verdict in public immediately.

Other stuff:

- *Should I be taking notes, and how?* It may be important to take notes, but you must do so briefly without interrupting the conversational flow of the Q&A. With that in mind, it's probably better to take notes by hand, rather than by computer. You don't want to get sucked into trying to transcribe what is said, and the computer may tempt you in that direction. In any case, it might be best to rely on a friend for a more extensive transcript of the event.
- *How should I dress?* Dress up. This is a formal, public, academic occasion. Don't go buy new clothes just for this, but wear the kind of outfit you would wear to a job interview or an academic conference where you are on the program. Aim for no less than business casual, and take your cues from your adviser about whether a suit, for example, is a good idea or over the top.
- *Can I invite friends and family?* The event is officially public, but you might want to consider the size of the room before you invite your whole family and all your friends.
- *Who gets to ask questions?* Technically, anyone can ask questions, but the adviser will probably "run the show" so that the committee has its say first, and he or she may not choose to solicit questions from beyond the committee.

Finally, bring copies of all the forms you need to graduate! This is an opportune time to collect signatures, even if your adviser chooses to keep them while you make final revisions.