

Best Practices for Dissertations and Defenses

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After you have received approval for your post-quals prospectus by your committee, you proceed to research, write, and refine your dissertation, using your approved prospectus as a blueprint for this stage. Your finished dissertation, along with its oral defense, is the final part of your requirements for the PhD degree.

This “Best Practices” document, along with the dissertation defense routing form, has been developed to clarify the program's expectations for you, the committee, the dissertation, and the defense.

Committee Communications

The TCR program generally expects that the entire committee will work closely with you during your preparation for the qualifying exam and the subsequent period of developing a solid dissertation prospectus.

After the prospectus has been accepted by the entire committee, the next stage of work will generally involve you and your chair, with periodic progress reports to the entire committee. Every committee may set up its own rules for progress reports, the sharing of text, and communication channels, but the default position of the program is that you and your chair work closely to transition from the post-quals prospectus to finished dissertation prose. Further, the faculty expect to receive the first two or three finished chapters midway between quals and the defense as a way of ensuring that the work is progressing according to the prospectus. Committee practices may vary, but we generally agree that early approval of the first three chapters helps keep the project on track. For many committees, these chapters include the introduction, literature review, and methods, that is, material that deals with the nature and scope of the project itself, your coverage of the foundations in the pertinent scholarship, and your research method. Other types of dissertations may proceed in different ways, of course; you should discuss the order of submissions with your committee.

You should plan on submitting brief progress reports to your committee at least every semester, identifying work completed, changes made, proposed changes to the prospectus, and work remaining. Be sure to set up good protocols for archiving and version control. Many of us spend hours providing feedback to better your dissertation; please make sure to deal with every comment made before sending in another version. If a committee member feels that his or her earlier comments were not yet dealt with, he or she can refuse to review again until they are.

For the faculty's part, you may expect us to respond to your polished prose within four weeks. Many times, we will be able to read and comment more quickly, of course, but you should factor faculty workload into your expectations for progress.

Calendar

One of the main reasons for the development of the attached tracking sheet is to reaffirm a philosophy about scheduling defenses. It is not acceptable to “plant your flag” on a particular semester of graduation, and then insist that the faculty meet your calendar of deadlines. Doing so creates incredible pressure on both the student and the committee, and almost always results in a weak and unfinished dissertation, not to mention a sometimes contentious defense. To clarify the process, your faculty have written this document to lay out the steps and timing of the dissertation defense. You'll graduate when you are finished with the outlined steps.

These expectations are represented in the accompanying dissertation defense routing sheet. As you complete a stage, collect a signature, or check a box, please submit an electronic copy to your committee and the DGS so that we can all be on the same page (literally). When you have secured your committee's approval of a defensible draft, then you may schedule a date and a room for your defense. **Please note:** From the time you have finished your dissertation draft, which is as complete and proofread as you know how to make your dissertation, it is 3 months to your defense date. The chair gets four weeks with the dissertation defense draft, the committee receives another four weeks, and when the entire committee says you are ready to defend (at the end of these eight weeks), you can schedule a defense four weeks in the future. There may still be revisions after the defense, too, so keep that in mind when hoping to graduate in a certain semester.

Quality and Completeness of Work

When you submit work to your chair, and when you and your chair are ready to send that work to the rest of the committee, we expect that work to be polished. We expect it to be well-argued, proofread, grammatically and structurally correct, and free from spelling errors. We expect the formatting to be consistent, with page numbers, appendices and other back matter included. Work that needs basic editing will be returned—that's your job, not the committee's. Committee members will send the chapter back if it's full of typos and other basic problems.

What is a **defensible draft of a dissertation**? It is all of the above, consistently applied across the entire dissertation. It is as close to a finished document as you are able to produce, understanding that the defense may raise questions that will need to be addressed before the dissertation is finally approved. You have finished everything you know that needs to be done. There are no comments about "to be inserted," no missing references. It is as perfect as you alone can make it. The only changes that remain are those that the committee requests, and this may be little or much, depending on how well written the document is and how much of the document the committee has already seen. This is the way academic publishing works for everyone – we produce our best work, submit it to peer review, and make changes to satisfy the reviewers (who represent the values of the field) until the work is deemed finished. The same principle holds for you and your dissertation.

By submitting the advisor-approved dissertation draft to your committee two months before your defense, both you and your committee will experience a productive (and enjoyable) defense that focuses on your ideas, research, process, and significance, rather than dwelling on structure, confusion, and errors. Plus, you will have that month before the defense to incorporate their comments, which means less work for you after the defense.

Defense

A good starting point for thinking about the defense is the Graduate School's own guidelines, which are attached to this document, and which may also be found online: <http://www.depts.ttu.edu/gradschool/docs/current/DefenseGuidelines.pdf>

As you can see from this document, the oral defense is an examination, and you should arrive prepared to discuss your dissertation, methods, findings, and significance. The defense is a thorough interrogation of your methods, theories, and findings, and it calls for serious deliberation and a vote by the committee at the end of the exam.

In order to proceed to the examination, we request that you keep your initial remarks brief. In the past, some students have consumed more than 45 minutes, and this length makes it impossible for faculty to participate fully in a thorough exam. Different committees have different expectations, but 15-20 minutes is more than enough time to both refresh the committee's memory and also to introduce the visitors in the room to the exigence of the problem, your research question, your approach, and your findings. In other words, these "introductory remarks" are not a comprehensive lecture, but rather contextualizing remarks to kick off the exam. Please restrict yourself to a short presentation, then sit down for the defense.

You must bring the printed defense copy of your dissertation with you. It should be the same copy the committee received 8 weeks previous, so that the committee can ask you questions about specific sections and pages. When asked a question about your method for generating the figure on page 145, for example, you will be able to turn to that page and answer specific questions.

Finally, it is up to you to bring the signature form for your committee to sign. All relevant forms are available at the Graduate School's website: <http://www.depts.ttu.edu/gradschool/current/DocHowTo.php>

DOCTORAL DEGREE GUIDELINES FOR THE FINAL ORAL EXAMINATION

Scheduling and Announcement

The final oral examination is required of all candidates for doctoral degrees. Scheduling must be:

- at least four months after the student has been admitted to candidacy
- at a suitable time after the dissertation (not necessarily the final version) has been read by the advisory committee.

The examination is a formal public affair and as such, the examination:

- must be held during weekday business hours, not during academic break periods.
- must begin no later than 4:30 p.m. in the afternoon.
- must be held in a university room so it can be attended by faculty and students.

For the examination, the student is required to:

- submit the signed Notification Form and the Defense Abstract **no later than three weeks** before the date of the examination
- provide a copy of the dissertation to the dean's representative **at least a week** before the defense.

Graduate Dean's Representative

- must be a member of the Graduate Faculty appointed by the Graduate School
- observes and reports on the conduct of the final examination
- has access to the dissertation and may participate in questioning the candidate.
- is chosen from an area related to the student's program.

Conduct of the Examination

1. The chairperson of the advisory committee convenes the examination and introduces the candidate, his/her background, and indicates the general format of the proceedings to follow, (departmental procedures may vary).
2. The candidate gives an overview of his/her study for the benefit of those who have not read the dissertation (15 to 30 minutes).
3. The candidate (guided by the chairperson) is questioned by members of the committee, the representative, and other audience members.
4. A copy of the dissertation (not necessarily in final form) must be available for reference during the examination.
5. Sufficient opportunity is given for discussion then the non-doctoral committee members are excused
6. The committee and the representative ask further, more detailed, questions about both the dissertation and its research procedures.
7. The candidate is then dismissed from the room while the committee comes to a decision concerning the results of the examination.
8. The chairperson informs the candidate of the outcome and forwards a short report of the examination to the Dissertation Supervisor for the record.

Committee Approval

All members of the dissertation committee must approve and sign the document before it is submitted to the Graduate School for the approval of the Graduate Dean.

The Dissertation Supervisor and the Dean's representative should be notified as soon as possible if a doctoral examination must be postponed.

If a majority of the members of a student's examining committee vote to pass the student's examination, but there is a dissenting vote:

1. The members may all agree on appropriate changes in the final form of the dissertation that resolve the objections of the dissenting member.
2. The dissenting member may accept the majority vote as a committee decision and agree to sign the dissertation.
3. A member voting against approval, and refusing to sign the dissertation as a matter of principle, may resign from the committee, in which case another member may be appointed as a replacement (if needed to make the minimum of three), and the dissertation may be approved. The chairperson must notify the Graduate Dean by letter of the replacement member, who must be approved by the Dean.
4. The dissenting member may refuse to sign the dissertation and not be willing to resign. In such a case, the matter should be referred to the Graduate School.

It is stressed that occasions when committee members vote against approval rarely occur when all of the committee members work closely with the student throughout the preparation of his or her dissertation.