

The oral defence of a Sociology MA thesis or research essay – what it involves and how to survive it!

Procedures

Both the thesis and research essay are orally examined, although the defence of the thesis is more formal and lengthy than the defence of the research essay.

The oral defence of the **research essay** will be about an hour in duration. In attendance will be the candidate, the second reader and the supervisor who will chair the proceedings. The defence begins with a short statement by the candidate (5 minutes) followed by a round of questions from the two examiners. When the question period is completed, the candidate will be asked to step out the room so that the two examiners can discuss and agree on a letter grade for the essay. The candidate will then be asked to return to the exam room to hear their results.

The oral defence of the **thesis** will last about 1 ½ to 2 hours and will be chaired by the Sociology Graduate Co-ordinator (or his/her designate). Also in attendance will be the candidate, the supervisor, the committee member, and the external examiner. To start the proceedings the chair will ask the candidate to withdraw from the examining room so that the examining board can have a short check-in concerning the examination procedures. On returning to the examination room, the candidate will be reminded by the chair of the formal examination procedures.

The defence itself begins with a statement by the candidate (10 minutes max). This is followed by a formal round of questions posed by each examiner in turn, beginning with the external examiner. During this round, the conversation is between the student and one examiner at a time. There is a second more informal round of questioning. Each examiner has the opportunity to pose further questions, beginning with the external examiner. In this round, however, conversation is open to the entire examining board, and often this round feels more like a seminar discussion. At the end of the second round of questions, the candidate will be asked if s/he would like to make any final remarks. This is not obligatory, and often this is a moment when the candidate simply says thank you to the examining board.

The candidate is asked to leave the examining room for the second time – and while absent from the room, the examination board will evaluate a successful thesis as satisfactory or with distinction. They will also note if any revisions to the thesis manuscript are required (see Outcomes for further details about levels of revision). The candidate will be called back into the examining room and informed of the board's decisions.

According to University regulations, any faculty member may attend the thesis defence as an observer. It is possible to have friends and relatives at the defence as observers – provided they have your permission and permission of the chair of the examination board. Observers are not permitted to ask questions during the examination or participate in any other way and may not leave the

examination without permission of the chair. They will need to leave the examining room when you do, and on the second occasion are not allowed back into the room until after you have been informed of the decisions made by the examination board.

Preparation

Believe it or not, students often find the defence of their thesis or research essay to be an enjoyable and rewarding experience! That said, everyone has some nerves before and possibly also during their defence. Being well prepared is key to being able to make the most of the event. Obviously there is some intellectual preparation to be done. However, being well prepared for the defence also means looking after yourself, and making sure you show up clear-headed and energized.

Make sure you get enough sleep the night before. Fuel your body with a good breakfast and an invigorating walk. Drink lots of water and limit your coffee consumption. Don't forget to go to the bathroom immediately before the defence!

Bring into the examination room your copy of the essay or thesis. It is also a good idea to bring something to drink (water, juice) and to have lozenges for your throat. Turn off your phone. My advice is to keep things simple – there is no need to bring in your laptop, unless you wish to present some visual material during your defence. Bring a pen and paper to jot down keywords for questions and answers during the rounds of questions.

This an important occasion and you want to show up looking smart and well turned out. But, do plan to wear clothes that you are comfortable in. The idea is to minimize distractions so that you can keep focused on the main agenda.

The Opening Presentation

This is the main thing you need to prepare for the defence. People have somewhat different views about the appropriate content of the presentation. Take what is set out below as advice from one perspective, and check with your supervisor to see what they recommend. In all cases, however, make sure you stick to the time allotted. Fancy power points are not required. Focus on content - not high tech delivery.

Your presentation should NOT be a summary of the thesis/essay. Remember that everyone (except possibly the chair) has read your manuscript and knows very well what is in it. Think, instead, that this is an opportunity for you to speak more personally about your experience of doing the thesis/essay, the questions that informed and have been raised by your work, and your sense of its contribution. Think about how your presentation might generate a good discussion at the defence. You could organize the presentation in three parts:

1. what interested you about the research question, and how does it fit into your intellectual biography?
2. what are the main contributions of the thesis/essay? -why are these contributions important?

3. how would you like to see the research taken further? – what are areas for future research?

Prepare your presentation as a script and practice it to make sure it meets the time requirement. Know it well enough that you do not read it – you want to speak it directly and confidently to the examining board. Try for an upbeat and positive tone. You've worked hard for this moment – be proud of what you've accomplished.

FAQ.....In the presentation, should you....

**point out weaknesses in the research?*

I suggest you do not introduce your work in this way – my advice is to start off with your strongest foot. Of course discussions of limitations will come up during the defence – and you will need to acknowledge these and discuss them.

**review the methodology?*

You might consider doing this if there was something unique about your methodology, and you considered it part of the contribution made by the work.

**have hand outs or powerpoint presentations*

These are not expected. If you feel you absolutely must do a powerpoint, you should have no more than 3 brief slides. There may, however, be exceptions to this advice, depending on your topic (e.g. where it has a strong visual component).

The rounds of questions

This is probably the most terrifying aspect of the whole defence – as you have no idea what people are going to ask, and you need to think of brilliant answers off the top of your head!

Well, yes and no. Yes you do not know exactly what the examiners will ask, but your homework for the defence should involve thinking about the questions they are likely to ask (about your theoretical approach, your methodology, other ways you could have approached the research question, policy implications of your work....etc). Once you've worked out this list, work on how you would answer these questions. This will help you to 'think off the top of your head' during the questions period. It is also a good strategy to think about what would be the worst possible question someone could ask you – and then work out a response to it.

Take your time in answering the questions. There is no rush and you may pause briefly to think about what you want to say. Use your pen and paper to jot down phrases from the questions and/or a few keywords that could form the basis of your answer.

Ask for clarification if you are unsure of what the questioner is getting at. You can ask to have the question repeated or rephrased. If you are really stumped, it is okay to say you'd like some time to think about this question further and request that you be able to return to it later in the defence.

Remember that the focus of the defence is the document you have written. If a questioner tries to drag you into a discussion of their pet interests, move the focus back to your research. Having said this, general questions about how your work relates to broader questions and issues are perfectly legitimate, so be prepared for this kind of question as well.

Always take responsibility for your own work. Saying that your supervisor advised you to take a certain course of action is not a good way to defend your work!

Keep in mind that the defence is also a social occasion – be respectful at all times. In the case of a thesis, the chair is there to make sure everyone acts appropriately and that the candidate is treated fairly. If anything untoward goes on, it is the chair's responsibility to address the situation, and to ensure that you are given the best chance to discuss and defend your work.

Finally, know that everyone in the room wants you to do well, and wants to help you make the most of this important occasion.

Outcomes

The outcome for a **research essay** is a grade awarded by your supervisor and the second reader.

If your **thesis** defence has gone ahead, it is because your supervisor, your committee member and the external examiner have all agreed that your thesis was ready for defence. Having gone through the defence, there are four possible outcomes of the thesis examination process:

- 1) the thesis could be passed as is, which means there are no revisions required although there may be some typos, grammar issues etc to correct;
- 2) the thesis could be passed with minor revisions, which means very specific changes are required but they do not affect the overall structure or argument of the thesis – these revisions are overseen by the supervisor;
- 3) the thesis could be passed with major revisions, which means substantial changes are required and the examining committee will decide who is responsible for overseeing these revisions (including possibly the external examiner).
- 4) the thesis could be rejected, but this is an extremely rare occurrence! If it is rejected, there is an opportunity for revision and for a second oral.

Finally

Recognize your achievement. You have worked hard on your research essay or thesis, and have become an expert in the area of your research. Be proud of the contribution your work is making to the ideas and debates within sociology. And, good luck!!

Prepared by Janet Siltanen with Input from the 2013-14 Sociology Graduate Committee