

The Honors Thesis Defense

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One of the final steps in an independently contracted thesis is an **oral defense**. This handout explains the purpose and format of the defense and provides advice about how to complete this step.

Purpose

The oral defense serves several purposes:

- developing presenting skills that you will use later in life
- receiving feedback from your committee in a collaborative, dynamic setting
- enabling you and your committee to discuss future applications of your research
- giving your committee a final chance to check that your work merits honors status

Format

An oral defense typically consists of a meeting between you and your committee that lasts between 45 and 90 minutes. Your adviser will chair the meeting, managing time and the flow of the process.

You and your committee may develop a protocol together, so long as it involves an oral presentation and feedback from the committee. You may, however, follow the traditional format outlined below.

A typical defense will include the following elements:

- Call to order by the chair.
- Presentation by the thesis student (usually 10-15 minutes), which may include slides or other audiovisual elements

- Questions from the committee, typically beginning with the second committee member, and lasting about 20 to 40 minutes
- Private deliberation (during which the student leaves the room) between the committee members about whether to pass the thesis as is, to request revisions, or to fail the thesis
- Delivering the committee's decision to the student
- Feedback from each committee member, about 5 minutes each

Scheduling

Scheduling a thesis defense is your responsibility. You should schedule the defense by the end of the last *full* month of the semester in which you will complete the thesis (so a Spring completion should have a defense scheduled before the end of April). Provide your committee members with *many* different windows at least a month in advance during which a defense can be scheduled. Once a date and time have been chosen, ask your chair to reserve a room for the defense.

Draft Submission

You should aim to provide your committee with a draft of the thesis *at least* two weeks in advance and no less than one week in advance (at the absolute discretion of the thesis committee). Reading a thesis and providing comments takes a substantial amount of time, so your committee members will need as

long as feasible to do so (although you should also take the time you need to make your draft as good as possible).

Presentation

Take this seriously! Practice your presentation with a timer to become comfortable with the material and time limit. Prepare notes that cover the most important points of your talk. Do *not* read your thesis or even a summary of a thesis.

In general, your presentation should address the critical points of your thesis. Keep your presentation simple. Introduce your topic and then immediately state your findings. Then discuss how you arrived at your conclusion. Finally, explain why your conclusion should be preferred to alternative arguments. Consult your committee about their expectations, as your committee may want specific points addressed or skipped.

Revisions

Most theses require *some* revisions after the defense. This is fine and normal. Ensure that you know exactly what the committee wants you to do by taking good notes and emailing after the defense to double-check your list of revisions. Complete these quickly and submit your revised thesis according to the procedure outlined on the Commonwealth Honors College Web site (this changes occasionally, so make sure you're using the most recent version).