

Tips for your PhD defense

Preparation:

- Read your PhD thesis from start to end in the week(s) before your defense.
- Practice your presentation in front of an audience, get their feedback and check whether your presentation fits within the time limit.
- Practice your defense together with colleagues and ask for their feedback.
- Think about the most important finding/implication of your thesis that you want to get across during your defense.
- Think about the most important follow-up research that is now needed (which research questions and which design should be used).
- Think about questions that your opponents might ask during the defense (based on their profile/publications or comments from the reading committee) and prepare your answers.
- You can also look back at reviewer comments that you got on the papers in your thesis and practice with them (answering them 'on the spot' without first reading back the replies that you formulated).
- Visit a couple of PhD defenses of other people from your university or watch them back online. Also read the regulations of PhD defenses at your university.
- Make sure that you also relax enough in the days/week before your defense.

During the defense:

- Before you say anything, take your time to write down the question (if that works for you) and think about how you will respond (if you need some time). It is better to take some time before you start talking than that you start talking without having an idea about what you want to say.
- After an opponent has asked a question, you address them with the right title:
 - Professors: hooggeleerde opponent (in Dutch) or highly esteemed opponent.
 - Doctors/others: zeergeleerde opponent (in Dutch) or esteemed opponent.
- If the opponent has given you compliments, you thank them for their compliments and their question (note: at some universities it is not allowed to thank opponents).
- If you are not sure if you have understood the question correctly, reformulate it in your own words and ask whether this is what the opponent meant to ask.
- Never judge the question that the opponent asks (e.g. 'good question!').

- If the word goes back and forth between you and the opponents, you do not address them again with their title (e.g. esteemed opponent), you just answer their questions directly.
- Stay close to who you are as a person during your PhD defense. E.g. try not to talk faster or slower than what you are used to. Don't feel pressured into behaving differently than how you would behave normally.
- Try not to answer too shortly, but also not too elaborately. It is not your problem that the time needs to be filled. It is up to the opponents to keep asking questions and have discussions with you until the time is up.
- In your responses to questions, it is often useful to start answering from your own PhD research. How can you answer the question based on what you have found in your PhD research? After that, you could answer based on other literature and/or speculation or you could explain how this could be examined in future research.
- Remember that the opponent has only read your thesis once and may not have read the whole thing or remembered each part of it. So feel free to explain/repeat things that are already in the thesis. You are more of an expert on your thesis than the opponent is.
- If the opponent identifies a problem with your study or how you have written about it, try to find a balance between defending your choices and immediately agreeing with the opponent. First explain why you did it the way that you did it (practical limitations are valid reasons too) and then explain how you would approach things if you could do it again.
- If you really do not know the answer to a question, you should not stay silent or only say 'I don't know'. Try to say a bit more, for example speculating about what could be the answer or how it could be examined in future research.
- Try to enjoy the moment! It is a very special day that you will later look back on with pride.