

Strategies for a successful PhD oral defence

- **The prodean** is the (neutral) chair, not from your field and often from a different faculty.
- **Other committee members** (n=5 or more) are: the external member (someone from another dept at McGill with sufficient expertise), the dept chair (or deputy), your supervisor, the internal examiner (from your dept), and at least one other member of the dept. You do not get to choose the oral defense committee (although you do have a veto).
- **External examiners** (not the same as the **external member**) aren't usually present but they submit questions which one committee member will ask (usually the supervisor).
- The external examiner is chosen in advance, with you and your supervisor agreeing on a name. In other words, you will know in advance who your external examiner is (unlike the practice in the past) but you will not get the examiner's report or questions until after the defence.
- Only the external and the internal examiners write a **written report** on the thesis. These reports are available to the oral defence committee but not to you until after the defence.
- In general, **preparation** is the best strategy for a successful and enjoyable defence.
- **Order of questions.** Find out what the practice is in your dept – this will allow you to assess when the most technical questions are likely to come up. (In my dept, the external member usually goes first; supervisor asks the external examiner's questions and asks them last.)
- **You are the expert** in your thesis topic and will know more about it than any of the committee. So prepare your presentation in such a way that it is understandable to an audience that is not totally expert in your field.
- Ask your supervisor for advice on **what to present and how**. Remember you only have 20 minutes or so. You cannot get the whole of your thesis across, so determine which are the most important aspects of it and summarize these. Defences where candidates try to squeeze everything in are very frustrating for all concerned!
- Go to **other defenses in your dept**, to give moral support to your fellow students and to understand how the process works in your dept.
- **Practice your presentation**, before fellow students and/or your supervisor and/or as a (modified) conference presentation. In particular, **get people to ask you**

questions after the presentation, so that you can practice answering things that are not always what you expect.

- Attempt to answer all questions but don't be afraid of the **occasional** 'I don't know' – also OK to give tentative answers. And don't be afraid to say that certain things require further research.
- Committee members will often be looking to see whether you have **thought beyond the actual thesis** itself, so think about applications and implications.
- Your external examiner or members of the committee might not agree with you. **Don't be afraid of disagreeing with them** – the issue is whether you can **martial arguments/evidence in support of your position**, not whether you all have exactly the same perspective on an issue.
- Pro-deans almost always come from a totally different field. Some of them ask questions, sometimes of a very different nature from what you might be expecting. Answer seriously, even if you think the question is weird or the answer obvious – it won't be obvious to an outsider.
- In many departments, the defense is open to others and they are permitted to ask questions (but they usually don't).
- **Failure at a defence is very unusual.** If either of the examiners (internal or external) have failed the thesis, no defence is permitted until any necessary changes have been made to the thesis and passed by the examiners.
- **Enjoy your defence.** It can be stimulating and fun. Don't see it as a horrible hurdle that has to be crossed.