



# Defending the Thesis: Proposal and Final Defense Guide

Guide for Thesis and Dissertation Students and Public Speaking  
Developed by TAMIU Graduate Writing Consultant, Franco Zamora  
Advanced Research and Curriculum  
TAMIU Graduate School  
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# Note:

- None of these elements, behaviors, attitudes, or activities are required for the TAMIU Final Thesis/Dissertation Defense or the Proposal defense (except for the section on paperwork in the final slides). However, there is no shame in being nervous about an **extremely** important public speaking event or wanting to improve on your existing communication skills.
- Recognize the importance of your Defense Day but acknowledge your existing skills! By the time you've made it to this day, you've given many presentations in coursework before. The Defense is a culmination of that work, and most the skills that have carried you this far can be used again.

# What to Expect Before, During, and After the Defense:

1. Your Pre-Preparations
2. Set-Up and Start-Up
3. Giving the Presentation
4. Post-Defense Committee Questions
5. Revisions/Paperwork

# 1. Prep Beforehand

- **Make cue cards** – Even if you don't use them. It's better to have the card (or to have at least known the material well enough to **make** the card) and not need it than to want it and not have it.
- **Have a Roadmap** – Decide on your order ahead of time.
- **Write it in a familiar form** – Most conference-style presentations, which are similar to thesis and dissertation defenses, are presentations of a condensed “research paper” version of the full text. However, use a form that you are most comfortable with – bullet points, list, images, etc.
- **Have a visual aid** – Whether detailed slides or a simple backdrop with the title of your manuscript and your name, if you give your audience something to look at other than you, it will help them focus on the material and take some pressure off of you being stared at the entire time.

## 2. Set-Up and Start Up

- Arrive Early – Know the room number. Triple check the day, time, and place. If giving your presentation online or virtually, arrive to the “room” early and make sure all technology is operational.
- Take and print all your materials ahead of time, especially handouts for the committee or notecards for yourself.
- Take a bottle of water **with a cap**.
- Thank the committee for being there **first before starting**.
- Introduce yourself and the title of your work.



# 3. Giving the Presentation

- **Don't Explain Everything** – Focus on major argument and most relevant information. Condense chapters or major sections into “body” points (like body paragraphs in a traditional essay), and then finish with a conclusion that summarizes next steps. Leave something for the text.
- **Use present tense to discuss the project** - Your project is ongoing always. “I discuss” “The data suggests” “This researcher says...” “In this novel...” “This study focuses on...”
- **Be sure** - Have the confidence to *know* what you said in the paper. Avoid “I think” or “I forgot, but I’m pretty sure...”
- **Do. Not. Stray.** - Stick to a specific order! Try not to backtrack! Do not talk about things that do not explicitly appear in the text of your work unless it is to answer a question from the committee.

## 4. After – Committee Questions

- **Don't Interrupt the Committee's Questions!!!** – Not only is it rude to interrupt the expert, doing so will only cause delays. Often, people have the urge to get defensive over their hard-fought material, and it is easy to think that this is the point of the defense. Recall that it is the committee's job to ensure that you know the material thoroughly. Let them get through their entire question or suggestion.
- **Be Courteous** – Thank your committee for each piece of advice or every question that they give to you. Be sure to ask them if you have clarified your point before moving on. Do not assume that because you have explained something once this means that it is obvious to others. At the same time, do not talk down to your committee—they are experts in their fields, and their knowledge in their field is meant to boost your thesis.
- **Thank the committee and the audience at the end.**
- **Be patient** – Most committee deliberations are decided quickly.

# 5. Post-Defense Revisions, Policies, and Paperwork

- For Successful Post-Proposal: Your committee will suggest any necessary revisions. Your committee chair should have you, the committee members, and the deans of the colleges sign the Proposal Cover Sheet. Your committee chair should pass along appropriate material to deans, members, and the appropriate colleges. **Be sure to continuously check your email or check in with your committee chair to ensure that these forms have been delivered and accepted.** Successfully defended Proposals are checked by the College of Arts and Sciences.
- For Successful Post-Final Defense: Your committee will suggest any necessary revisions. Your committee chair should have you, the committee members, and the deans of the colleges sign either the Written Thesis or Written Dissertation Approval Form. Your committee chair should pass along appropriate material to deans, members, and the appropriate colleges. Be sure to continuously **check your email** or check in with your committee chair to ensure that these forms have been delivered and accepted. **Successfully defended Theses and Dissertations are examined for revisions by both the College of Arts and Sciences and the TAMIU Graduate School and require communication between all thesis/dissertation students and TAMIU staff before degrees can be conferred.**
- Find TAMIU's Proposal, Thesis, and Dissertation forms: <https://www.tamiu.edu/gradschool/ThesisForms.shtml>
- See the TAMIU Thesis and Dissertation Manual for details on other Thesis/Dissertation Committee decisions.



# Public Speaking in General

- Practice! Practice by yourself and with a small audience!
- Make eye contact with the committee.
- Minimize fidgeting.
- Minimize stuttering and filler words.
- Dress professionally, but stay comfortable.

# Practice Speaking Tips

There are two main parts of a speech: **What** you want to say and **How** you want to say it. Both come from practice.

## Learn your **Material** (The “What”)

1. The **order** - What goes first, what goes middle, what goes last? Cue-cards can help, just don't forget to maintain eye contact!
2. The **length (time)** – Time yourself. How long is your presentation? Give yourself a hard time limit. Most adults only have an attention span of between 11 and 20 minutes. **You probably want to have about 10 minutes minimum or 15 minutes maximum of prepared material.**
3. The **meaning** – You need to fully understand what you are saying, in case you accidentally get lost or one of your audience members interrupts with a question or has a question later. It is not enough to simply memorize the material—you need to know how it all fits together, and what it means outside the space of your presentation.

## Learn your **Delivery** (The “How”)

1. The **volume** – What is the loudest you can speak and still be clear and comfortable? What is the softest you can speak and still be heard in the back of a large room? Practice your speech in empty auditorium classrooms to get this feel. Project using **big breaths** pretend you are talking to a friend across a very crowded café. **If you are speaking digitally, make sure you have a working microphone setup with headphones to minimize audio feedback.**
2. The **tone** - Friendly and approachable is usually preferred, but sometimes, speeches require a range of emotions to evoke the proper audience response. Sympathetic, energetic, enraged, frightened—each has its place in the public speaking world! Knowing the kind of reaction you want from your audience and the purpose of your speech can help when practicing what tone you want to use in your delivery.
3. The **pace** – Just like with timing, be conscious of how fast you are going. Generally, you want to deliver your words at the same, conversational pace. **But if you are struggling with a big word or with an idea that you wish to emphasize, slowing down will help keep you calm and keep the meaning clear.** Likewise, speeding up over material that you have already covered or that you wish to deemphasize can cut down on time—just don't speed through the whole thing!