It usually takes more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech.

—Mark Twain

This is it! You are almost at the top. This ultimate step, the oral defense of your dissertation, is the culmination of your doctoral journey. You have worked long and hard and, hopefully, have produced a scholarly piece of work of which you can be proud. Your advisor and committee members also take pride and pleasure in your accomplishment.

This chapter was written to guide your thinking and to relieve some anxiety as you prepare for the oral defense. It explains the oral defense process by describing a typical defense scenario, the roles of the participants, and the pass/fail criteria. Helpful hints are included to assist in making your oral defense a pleasant and memorable experience.

This event provides the opportunity to speak publicly about your research study and to defend it. The oral defense is a long-standing tradition in academia. Its major purpose is to demonstrate your ability to advocate for and justify your research problem, methodology, findings, and conclusions. In today’s academic environment, it is usually con-
one institution to another, but generally they include your advisor and
other committee members, an outside reader representing the dean, and
other interested academic community members and friends.

You should schedule your oral defense only when you, your advi-
sor, and the committee are satisfied that your work is substantially com-
plete and reflects the standards of high-quality research. Remember, not
only your reputation is on the line but also that of your advisor, who has
been the principal guide and evaluator of your work. It is important that
you present to committee members the best possible final draft of your
dissertation—free of grammatical and typographical errors. Allow at
least two weeks for committee members to review the final copy of your
dissertation.

In collaboration with your committee, arrange for the date, time,
and place of the defense. The defense date should allow sufficient time
(three weeks minimum) for the required procedures and approvals.

A Defense Scenario

What does an oral defense look like? Although the format and roles may
vary from institution to institution and from advisor to advisor, most
follow common procedures. Here is a scenario that represents a typical
oral defense.

1. You arrive about 30 minutes early to arrange the room properly.

2. Your advisor facilitates the meeting, usually opening with intro-
ductions. He or she introduces the committee members, guests,
and the outside reader. You then introduce any family or friends
who are present.

3. Your advisor explains the purpose of the oral defense and the pro-
cedures to be followed in conducting the defense. Keep in mind
your advisor is an ally to you and is in your corner at the defense.

4. You are asked to provide a brief overview of your study—not
more than 5 to 15 minutes. The overview should include the
following:

   a. The purpose of your study and the research questions
   b. What literature you found particularly helpful
   c. The methodology used (Include the population and sample,
      your instruments, and your process for data collection and
      analysis. Also include the rationale for selecting your sample
      and the validity of your selection process.)
   d. What was your major finding(s) and its implications
   e. The contributions of your study and its applications
   f. Any questions you might have for the committee

5. The committee members may ask questions about your study.

6. The committee members will vote on whether your work is
sufficiently complete to merit the degree. If they recommend
acceptance, they will not reveal their vote.

7. If your oral defense is successful, you will receive a letter of
acceptance at a later date.

8. If your oral defense is not successful, you will receive a letter
of rejection at a later date.

9. The committee will give you specific feedback on what you did
good and what you need to improve on.

10. You will have an opportunity to respond to the committee's
comments.

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30. You will have an opportunity to respond to the committee's
comments.
d. Major findings and conclusions from the findings  

e. Recommendations you would make for action and further research  

It’s a good idea to present this summary without numerous notes. If PowerPoint presentations are used, keep the number of slides to a minimum. Just talk to the committee about your study.

5. Who asks the first question is a matter of advisor preference. Members of the committee ask their questions either randomly or systematically, chapter by chapter. Committee members should limit their discussion to matters of substance and special concerns rather than those relating to editorial issues. These may be provided at the end of the defense.

6. When committee members have finished with their questions, it is appropriate that visitors are invited to ask questions if they desire. This is a public oral defense. When there are no further questions, you and all visitors exit the room to allow time for the committee to deliberate and decide if you successfully defended and if your dissertation document is acceptable. A unanimous vote of all committee members is usually required to pass the oral defense.

7. The committee decides among the following:
   a. Pass with no revisions
   b. Pass with minor revisions (completed with the advisor’s guidance)
   c. Pass with major revisions (final approval by the committee)
   d. Continue the oral defense
   e. Fail

What is the difference between minor and major revisions? Minor revisions are those changes that require no substantial rewriting. Examples include updating the bibliography, correcting tables, adding more conclusions or recommendations, and correcting typographical and grammatical errors. Most minor revisions can be completed in a weekend, or a week at the most. Major revisions are those involving a substantial rewrite of particular sections. Major errors may be incorrect statistics, inconsistency between the research questions and findings, an outdated literature review, poor instrumentation, or lack of adequate data.

8. You and the visitors return. If you pass the oral defense, you receive hearty congratulations by all. You will remember that
and says, “Congratulations, Dr._____.” As you reflect on your journey’s experiences, you can probably relate to these amusing words: “Being a graduate student is like becoming all of the Seven Dwarves. In the beginning you’re Dopey and Bashful. In the middle, you are usually sick (Sneezy), tired (Sleepy), and irritable (Grumpy). But at the end, they call you Doc, and then you’re Happy” (Azuma, 2002, p. 2).

**REMEMBER**

You may not officially use that title in your professional life, be monetarily rewarded, or have new cards printed until you have completely finalized the dissertation process and the doctorate is posted by the registrar.

9. Discuss the revisions to be made with your advisor, and clarify procedures for final approval and sign-off. The whole process usually takes from one to two hours.

**Helpful Hints: Prior to the Oral Defense**

Following are some helpful hints for you to consider in the days prior to, during, and after the oral defense.

- Read your dissertation carefully so you can respond readily and authoritatively to the questions asked. Play devil’s advocate with yourself and try to identify as many of your study’s weaknesses as possible.
- Bring yourself up to date with recent work published that you may not have had time to read while writing the dissertation. The more familiar you are with the relevant literature in your field, the more you will appear as an expert.
- Try to anticipate what committee members will ask you. List the things you know will be asked, and practice your responses. Also, list questions you would hate being asked and practice answering them.
- Do some deep reflections on the value of your dissertation to the field. Who are the people and groups that might profit from your findings? What additional recommendations would you make to
• Probe yourself further about how your findings relate to the literature—both theoretical and practical.
• Prepare for questions about why you chose one method rather than another or one statistical procedure over another. Be sure you thoroughly understand any statistics used in your study. Even if you consulted a statistician for assistance in crunching the numbers and interpretation, you still are responsible for explaining your rationale and use of the selected statistical procedures.

Here are some typical questions you might think about:
  ○ What were the surprises for you? The disappointments?
  ○ What brought you to explore this particular topic?
  ○ What did you learn about your subject area? About yourself?
  ○ What were your key learnings about research?
  ○ What does your study say to professionals in your field?
  ○ What is your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of your study?
  ○ Were you to start over, would you do anything differently? If so, what?
  ○ What was the most significant aspect of the work you’ve done?
  ○ Since you wrote your literature review, have you noticed any new work published?

• Use the few weeks before your oral defense to continue contemplating your study. As you do this, you will have fresh insights and new “ahas” from time to time. Write them down and bring them to your oral defense to share with the committee.
• Look for errors—you will always find them—either typographical or in the data. Note what they are and bring a list to the defense. Your committee will appreciate your efforts to produce high-quality work.
• Talk to recent graduates and ask about their experiences and the questions they were asked.
• Attend other oral defenses, especially those conducted by your advisor. Seeing the oral defense in action relieves the mystery and angst surrounding it.
• Conduct a mock defense in which a group of your colleagues simulate an oral defense by acting as your committee. You will probably find their questions harder than those posed by the real committee. Be sure to build in time for feedback on your performance.
• Prepare a 5- to 15-minute overview of your dissertation and practice presenting it without notes.
• Practice. Practice. Practice.
• Get a good night’s sleep and visualize your ideal oral defense.

**During the Oral Defense**

• Breathe deeply and stay calm! You want to appear relaxed and confident.
• Maintain eye contact while you are listening to, and answering, questions. Remember to smile occasionally. It has a positive effect on your committee and improves your mindset.
• You can have notes, a PowerPoint presentation, or transparencies—not too many, however. Trust yourself. You are more knowledgeable than anyone about your topic.
• Feel free to consult your dissertation; tabs for important sections may be helpful.
• Really listen to the questions. Don’t jump to the conclusion that you know where the person is going and cut him or her off. Let the committee member state the entire question.
• Be appreciative of any criticisms and suggestions to improve your study. Acknowledge the critic’s contribution.
• Expect to be asked questions that are not completely clear. When a question is asked that you do not completely understand, ask that the question be rephrased or restated.
• If a question is asked not related to your study, you might concede that it is an interesting question and would be an excellent topic for a follow-up study.
• Create some “think time” for yourself by
  ◦ Counting to three before responding
  ◦ Paraphrasing the question before answering (In other words, state the question in your own words. You don’t want to answer the wrong question.)
• Try to formulate sharp, precise answers. It is better to answer the question first and then elaborate more if needed. Don’t ramble, but don’t be too brief either. After an answer, you might say: “Does that answer your question?” or “Would you like me to elaborate?”
• Sometimes a question requires a response that goes beyond the data or findings of your study. Feel free to express an opinion; however, be sure to label your response as such.
If you find yourself in trouble, take a \textit{time out} and go back to the beginning or take time to collect your thoughts. If you don’t know the answer to a question, there is no harm in saying, “I don’t know.” It is better to tell the truth than to fake it. \textit{Remember the proverb “When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging.”} If you get totally flustered or overly emotional, simply ask for a break and get a drink or go to the restroom. This can help you regain your composure.

- The stronger your dissertation, the deeper the committee members may want to explore your findings. They might try to test your convictions about your conclusions and recommendations.
- Feel free to show enthusiasm for your study. After all, you spent tremendous amounts of time, energy, and money in conducting the research and preparing your dissertation.
- Consider bringing a tape recorder or having someone take notes for you. The notes should focus on the specific suggestions and changes that each committee member asks for. Comments should be labeled with the name of the person who requested the change or made a comment. Your advisor is the final arbitrator of changes to be made.
- Be sure to thank those in the room who helped you along this dissertation journey. This includes not only your committee members but also any family members and friends who supported you in this incredible endeavor.

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\hline
\textbf{REMEMBER} \\
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\textbf{Remember These Encouraging Thoughts} \\
1. You know more about your dissertation than anyone else. You are the expert on your topic. Your months of concentrated reading and research contributed to a unique knowledge of your topic that few others possess. \\
2. Everyone involved wants you to succeed. You completed a rigorous piece of research, and you should be proud to discuss it publicly. \\
3. Look forward to being welcomed into the community of scholars! \\
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\textbf{After the Oral Defense}

- If your committee asks for revisions, get right on them. Don’t lose

the issues involved. Be very clear about what needs to be altered. With minor revisions, the committee usually signs off and leaves your advisor with the responsibility to monitor the changes according to the committee's wishes.

- Find out the university's protocol for completion of the dissertation process.
- Celebrate this exhilarating experience with friends, colleagues, and loved ones. By all means, take pictures to record this memorable event.

Summary

The oral defense of your dissertation represents the culmination of your doctoral journey. It provides the opportunity to speak publicly about your research and to defend it. This chapter provided an overview of the process and some helpful hints for prior to, during, and after the oral defense. It can be an exhilarating experience for you, your committee, friends, and family. Now prepare for commencement—that special time when you stand on top of the mountain.

Like all mountain climbs, however, you must eventually descend. The next chapter discusses the let-down experience and ways you can mentor others as they attempt the same journey. This final chapter, titled "The Next Peak," helps you think about ways to disseminate your study's findings to the knowledge base in your field.