



William & Mary Graduate Arts & Sciences

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

Tips for Online Dissertation/Thesis Defenses & Examinations

This list of tips was originally posted as a Twitter thread by Ethan White, Associate Prof. of Ecology & Informatics at the University of Florida. Edited for clarity; used with permission.

General Tips:

- Assign a committee member or other participant as the designated convener who will serve as the Zoom meeting “host” and manage any issues that come up (e.g., muting noisy participants; asking participants to turn video off, as needed). The defending student should not need to juggle this on top of everything else.
- The meeting host should set things up and test the technology with the key participants about 10-15 minutes early. Ask the committee to check their connections at this time.
- Have at least one back up plan, including something simple such as a phone-based conversation.

For defenses that include a public presentation:

- Ask all participants to mute themselves at the start; the meeting host can manually mute users, as needed.
- For smaller audiences, have the presentation audience leave their video on (if bandwidth allows). The lack of normal audience engagement in a remote talk can be challenging and unnerving for the student defending. Live video faces offering encouraging nods and smiles can really help.
- The meeting host can encourage the presentation audience to consider exaggerating positive responses such as head nods, thumbs up, and smiles. This can help make the impersonal more personal.
- For larger audiences, have the committee members keep their video on (if bandwidth allows).
- If there are bandwidth issues, you may want to have the audience stop their video. The person serving as the meeting host (not the defending student) should monitor this and use the chat feature to communicate with the participants to avoid interrupting the presenter if possible.
- **Student:** consider a 2-monitor setup (which Zoom supports) so that you can see the participants as well as your slides and notes. (Or, if it’s easier for you to present without seeing the audience, then by all means leave them hidden.)
- **Managing the Q&A:** The meeting host should serve as a moderator. Participants in a larger audience can use the “hand raise” function in Zoom to indicate they have a question. This can minimize Q&A voice collisions and confusion.

For all defenses and examinations (quals, comps, etc.)

- **Tips for the committee members:**
 - Use your video if possible during the private portion of the defense. This is an inherently stressful activity and a lot of typically encouraging social cues can get lost with voice-only communication.
 - These are unusual times and everyone is under extra stress. It will help to clearly distinguish recommendations for changes and revisions required for the submission of the dissertation/thesis from those that would be worthwhile to consider for later publication.
 - Have a plan for how to have the student “step out of the room.” If using Zoom, use a “breakout room” for the committee members only. They can have their discussion privately, then return to the main room when done. (The above recommendation to have a committee member set up and “host” the Zoom meeting supports this.) Another option in Zoom is to put the student on “hold.”

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