

Thesis Submission and Defense

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After successfully presenting your thesis proposal, the journey towards completing your PhD often enters its most intense and focused stage. The proposal marks not the end of uncertainty but the beginning of synthesis — a time when your ideas mature, your papers solidify, and your confidence as an independent researcher begins to take shape. From this point on, the focus shifts from exploring possibilities to consolidating contributions and preparing for your final defense.

Continuing Work on Paper 3

At this stage, Paper 3 usually becomes the cornerstone of your remaining research effort.

Research and Publication: Continue to refine, experiment, and strengthen your work with the goal of submitting Paper 3 to a reputable peer-reviewed conference or journal within the next six months. The feedback from reviewers will not only help improve the technical quality of your research but will also sharpen your writing and reasoning. Treat reviewer comments as part of your research dialogue — sometimes painful, but almost always constructive in the long run.

Integration into the Thesis:

Once Paper 3 is either accepted or at least under review, begin integrating it into your thesis. Replace any “ongoing work” sections with a complete chapter that systematically presents the problem statement, methodology, results, and impact. Make sure the story flows logically from your earlier chapters — your thesis should read as a coherent narrative, not a collection of disconnected papers.

Addressing Committee Feedback

Beyond paper writing, another key milestone after the thesis proposal is addressing the feedback provided by your committee members during the proposal defense. These comments often reflect thoughtful concerns about your approach, methodology, or broader vision. You should not ignore them. In fact, how you respond to them demonstrates your maturity as a researcher.

There are two main ways to handle this:

1. **Directly address the comments** — implement the suggestions, test additional hypotheses, or refine your analysis if feasible.
2. **Acknowledge and plan for future work** — if certain suggestions are outside the current thesis scope, note them as promising directions for future research.

Either way, the key is to show that you took the feedback seriously. I strongly encourage you to include one or two slides in your next committee presentation summarizing how you have addressed the main recommendations from your proposal. You don't have to cover every minor comment; focus on the major points that shape your thesis direction. This will leave a positive impression and build goodwill — after all, your committee wants to see that you are responsive and reflective, not defensive.

Planning for Graduation and Timing

A frequently overlooked but very practical issue is **deciding the right time to graduate**. In Singapore, for instance, once you have passed your oral defense (viva), your *Student Pass* will be cancelled quite soon — typically within a month. This has significant implications for your residency status. If you intend to stay in Singapore for postdoctoral work or employment, you should plan carefully.

For example, obtaining an *Employment Pass (EP)* often takes around two months to process. Therefore, you need to coordinate the timing of your defense, thesis submission, and job application to avoid a gap that could result in overstaying or violating immigration policies. It may seem like a bureaucratic detail, but good planning here prevents unnecessary stress during what should be a celebratory period.

Readiness for Graduation — Becoming an Independent Researcher

Finally, beyond administrative requirements, ask yourself whether you are truly ready to graduate — not just in terms of paperwork, but in terms of research independence. A PhD degree should signify that you can stand on your own as a scholar. By this stage, you should ideally have several completed works in hand, including at least one where you have led the project from idea conception to publication in a top-tier venue.

This final piece — a paper that you designed, executed, and wrote largely on your own — is often what signals your readiness to become an independent researcher. It shows that you have internalized the full research cycle and can now identify, formulate, and solve meaningful problems without constant supervision.

When you reach that point — when your papers begin to form a coherent body of work, when you can see the thread connecting your thesis to a larger research agenda, and when your confidence is built on substance rather than hope — you will know that you are ready to defend. That is the moment when your PhD is not merely a certificate, but a reflection of your intellectual maturity.

A Sample Timeline for Thesis Submission and Defense

When the dust settles after your proposal, the most decisive act is deceptively simple: sit down with your supervisor and **fix a thesis submission date (D1)**. I've learned that once D1 is on the calendar, everything else snaps into focus. Your energy, meetings, and writing all begin to orbit that date.

Two Months Before D1 — Line Up Your Examiners

Discuss and nominate examiners.

Before you sink back into writing, meet your supervisor and identify **at least two examiners** for your thesis evaluation committee. In many programs these are the same faculty who evaluated your proposal—continuity helps. **Official nominations** must go through your department for approval, so don't leave this to the last minute.

Please send one page PDF to your supervisor, with title and abstract of your thesis to start this process. Normally, the supervisor (not the student) will send a quick pre-nomination email introducing your thesis scope and expected contributions helps potential examiners say “yes” faster.

Two Months to One Month Before D1 — Update the Thesis Content

This is the “make it coherent” phase—where scattered results become a thesis.

Point-to-point response to proposal feedback.

Revisit the reviewers' and committee's comments from your proposal. Prepare a **cover letter** with a **point-to-point response**: what you changed, what new experiments or analyses you added, and what remains future work (with reasons). This is not just bureaucracy; it is how you demonstrate scholarly maturity and responsiveness.

Future Work modifications.

Update the **Future Work** section to reflect the completion of **Paper 3**. Instead of generic ideas, articulate **specific next steps** that logically extend your findings (e.g., scaling to different datasets, relaxing assumptions, or exploring performance–robustness trade-offs). Tie these to concrete hypotheses where possible.

Living literature review.

Refresh the **Literature Review** with the latest papers. If recent work now supersedes parts of your early results, acknowledge it transparently and explain how your thesis **still contributes**—e.g., by different constraints, better efficiency, cleaner theory, or stronger ablations. A thesis that is aware of the moving frontier reads as credible and current.

Integration mindset.

Ensure **Paper 3** is now a full thesis chapter: problem → method → results → limitations →

implications. Smooth transitions matter. Your thesis should read like a **single narrative**, not a stapled anthology.

Tip: Add **one slide** (later used in the defense) titled “How We Addressed Proposal Feedback,” summarizing **major** items only.

Thesis Writing and Submission — The Push

Writing cadence.

If your research is complete and your chapters exist in some form (from proposal + published papers), transforming the proposal into a full thesis can be fast.

- **Your rule of thumb (preserved):** We typically spend **less than two days** of focused writing to assemble a thesis from **2–3 existing publications plus the proposal**.
- **Another framing:** Many students finish the text in **about a week** of dedicated work once figures/tables/results are final.

If you're taking far longer, pause and ask: are we **writing**, or are we **still researching**? If it's the latter, explicitly renegotiate D1.

One Month Before D1 — Supervisor Review + Plagiarism Check

Submit the **full draft** to your supervisor **together with the university plagiarism-check report**. Revise promptly based on feedback.

Plagiarism caution (preserved): Avoid any sentence that is more than 50% identical to existing sources. Rewrite in your own voice, cite generously, and when reusing your own published text, check your university's self-plagiarism policy and the publishers' copyright rules.

Mini-checklist (Submission readiness):

- All figures/tables numbered and referenced.
- All cross-references resolved (no “Error! Reference source not found”, and search “??” in your thesis).
- Consistent notation across chapters.
- Data/code availability statement (even if private, state conditions).
- Ethics/IRB and reproducibility statements (where relevant).
- Plagiarism report attached as required.

D1 — Submission and the Waiting Window

Submission & review period.

Once you submit, expect **~2–3 months** for reviews. Use this time wisely.

Funding and affiliation reality check.

Be aware that **scholarships or certain financial supports may end upon submission**. Whenever possible, **stay affiliated** with your university until your defense is done (access to labs, email, and library makes life simpler).

Personal note: I advise students to keep weekly momentum: rehearse your talk, organize artifact release plans, and prepare a “minor-revisions kit” (LaTeX/Word project clean-up, figure source files, updated scripts).

2–3 Months After D1 — Reviews Arrive; Fix a Defense Date (D2)

If you haven't heard back by then, **follow up**—politely—with your graduate office and your supervisor; they can **remind examiners**.

Once reviews are in, meet your supervisor and **fix the defense date (D2)**. Backward-plan everything from that date.

Two Weeks Before D2 — Deep Preparation

Send your draft **defense deck** to your supervisor for suggestions. This is the culmination; treat it like a keynote to an expert audience.

Suggested deck structure (around 40 slides for 40 minutes, adapt to rules):

1. **Title & Contributions (1–2 slides)**
2. **Motivation & Problem Statement (4–6)**
3. **Background & Gaps in SOTA (2–3)**
4. **Paper 1—Core Idea, Method, Results (5–7)**
5. **Paper 2—Core Idea, Method, Results (5–7)**
6. **Paper 3—Core Idea, Method, Results (5–7)**
7. **Conclusion (1–2)**
8. **Impact, Open Problems, Future Work (2–3)**
9. **How We Addressed Proposal/Examiner Feedback (1–2)**
10. **Your publication (1–2)**
11. **Acknowledgements (1)**

One Week Before D2 — Rehearsal, Rehearsal, Rehearsal

Do at least **two full rehearsals**: one alone for timing, one with peers for feedback. Record yourself once; painful, but valuable. Prepare a 1-slide “**parking lot**” with backup details (e.g., extra graphs, theorem sketches, engineering diagrams) you can flip to during Q&A.

Q&A prep:

- Why this problem now?
- What truly changed because of your work?
- Strongest limitation and how you would fix it next.
- Reproducibility: data, code, artifacts.
- Threats to validity and how you mitigated them.

D2 — Defense Day

Refreshments & logistics (preserved, with gentle structure):

Per school policy, a brief refreshment is allowed: **budget cap of SGD \$10 per attendee, up to SGD \$200**. Ask **two junior students** to help organize. Order via **Grab** or similar for simplicity. Typical headcount: **four professors** (examiners + chair), **two helpers, you**, plus additional attendees.

Afterwards: clean up the room; email your supervisor the **attendee list** and **receipts** for the claim.

During the talk:

Explicitly include a slide on **your responses to the examiners' major feedback**. This signals respect for their time and demonstrates scholarly growth.

Typical outcome:

Most candidates receive **minor revisions** with a **two-week window**. Major revisions happen but are less common. Either way, stay calm; you're almost there.

Within Two Weeks of D2 — Final Thesis Submission

For most students, the **final thesis** is submitted within **two weeks** of D2. Remember to also send the **final version** to your supervisor along with the **plagiarism check report** (as required by me).

And Then—Doctor.

When the final PDF is uploaded, the forms are signed, and the room is quiet again, take a moment. The title “**Dr. X**” is not just a line before your name; it's the story of your habits: showing up, responding to critique, and finishing well. Congratulations—**you did it**.

Important notes

- Submission of Plagiarism Report: Some institutions require a copy of the plagiarism report to be submitted along with your thesis. Ensure you send the **plagiarism report** to your supervisor before submitting the final version of the thesis. Note that NUS has the plagiarism checker tool available to students. Overlapping percentage is just a rough guideline. See below guidelines for more information:
 - Avoid having a complete sentence that is the same with existing literature. More precisely, not a single sentence with more than half overlap.
 - Avoid copying and pasting other figures (even with references; strictly speaking you need to have the copyright owners' permission in order to avoid plagiarism).
 - You need to avoid plagiarism even for definition.
- Final Submission: After addressing any feedback, submit the final version of your thesis. Approval of this submission will lead to the awarding of your PhD degree.
- Visa and Student Status: Be mindful of your student visa expiration. Often, your student pass or visa may expire shortly after your final thesis submission. Make necessary arrangements to extend your stay if required or transition to another visa status if you plan to remain in the country.
- Career Planning: Start planning your post-PhD career well before completing your degree. Whether you intend to stay in academia, enter industry, or explore other opportunities, early planning can provide a smooth transition.

Feedback?

Please send your comments to Bingsheng He, hebs@comp.nus.edu.sg.