Advice for Defending a PhD Remotely

Disclaimer/About the author: Written by Alyssa Frederick, PhD. I conducted my PhD defense via Zoom in November 2019 from my new job. I created this guide to help graduate students and their PI's navigate remote defenses, as we all adjust to our new reality in the days of covid19. Please note, many of these suggestions will increase the overall accessibility of defenses, so consider them long after we've moved back to in-person defenses. I can't promise that this advice will work best in your situation, so pick the pieces that work best and ignore the others. I take no responsibility for any actions resulting from this advice, and I wish you all the very best as you defend!!

My situation: My PI and some of my committee were at my PhD institution, where they broadcasted the defense to a small room of attendees (which may not be applicable to remote defenses for pandemic response purposes). One of my committee members was also remote. I shared the link publicly and my family was also able to watch. In my program, a PhD Defense was composed of a 40–50 minute slide presentation, followed by public questions, then followed by private questions with the committee and PhD candidate only, then deliberation (pass or fail). I cannot speak to other formats of PhD defenses.

Get your Committee Onboard

First and foremost, get your committee members to agree to a remote presentation. This shouldn't be difficult, given current affairs. Check in with your department about paperwork—will you need a notarized signature? Can you e-file a signature? Can your committee members sign digitally? Will this fulfill your department rules? etc. Remember, we're all still adjusting to academia during a pandemic, be patient with your colleagues and admin staff.

Manage Expectations

1. **Set ground rules** for your presentation from the very beginning. In a typical defense, you might dive right into your talk. Instead, take a moment to explain how the tech works (how do people mute/unmute themselves? How can they submit written questions?) Set the rules clearly—this will help audience members understand their role and know when it's ok to speak up. Describe the format and what you audience can expect—how long will you present slides and how long will you leave for q&a.
2. Hope that everything works, but **expect something to go wrong**. Your internet might go out, or a committee member might lose internet. Explain to people in advance how they

can reconnect. Expect to have to redo a few slides, so you don't get flustered if it happens.

3. How will you and your group **celebrate**? My lab was able to still meet (pre-covid19) without me so they had a celebration and I video chatted into that celebration. That may not be our reality anymore. Celebrate with your roommates or family, or a friend or two (social distancing!), however is safe for you and for public health. Plan to celebrate in person with your team when this is all behind us. It won't be the same as if you got to present in person, and that sucks. Feeling grief at the loss of something we worked many years for is OK. Wishing you all strength as we adjust to our new reality.
   a. Great advice from Leehi Yona (Twitter @LeehiYona): "Zoom in with some friends and change your backgrounds to some of the funky virtual ones (e.g. outer space, on the beach, etc.). Gets a laugh and you can all remotely raise a glass!"

4. After the public part is over, either kick everyone else off the video chat for the committee questioning/exam part, or start a separate virtual meeting for the questioning part. My PI managed this part, which was a great way to do it. From my PI: Have a moderator (the PI), and have them choose who gets to ask the next question. They can tell each individual to turn on their mic and ask the question. They can set that up at the beginning or via an announcement ahead of time.

Find a Suitable Space/Tech

I feel like we're all going to be more flexible about random children noises and dog barks in the background of professional digital meetings, but that might stress you out during a high-stakes presentation. Figure out what will fluster you and adjust accordingly. Consider the background behind you, and don't present in front of a window. Will you need a whiteboard or can you draw digitally and share your screen? Will you stand or sit? Is there a quiet space at home? If not, will your university allow you to use a classroom?

On campus, wifi can be more reliable. There may be seminar spaces available with decent webcams and remote presentation equipment. Ask your IT group. **If your university permits you to be on campus** and you can practice social distancing, think about if you still want the room empty or someone or there to help with the tech. Please don't break any covid19-related rules set forth to protect public health.

I used Zoom and my university had already given me a pro license (or whatever that's called) so I could host 40+min meetings. Regular zoom accounts only allow 40 minute meetings. Apparently Webex is another option. I'm sure there are others, and I would defer to your IT staff on what's available to you. Again, be patient—they're working their tails off right now!!

Practice Remotely

Once you have a suitable space designated, **practice using that space** and the exact same technology you will use during your defense. Have your PI or someone else test that they can

hear you and see your slides. Do a practice run—see if your lab members can provide feedback remotely, just as they would watch the live event! Speak slowly and remember to pause frequently—audio and video sometimes take a second to catch up.

Format Slides

Format your slides for easy viewing online—try to eliminate any transitions or animations because, with overloaded video conferencing platforms, they may be glitchy. I saved my slides as a pdf because I knew there would be no animation issues that way. Bigger font, less on each slide—the viewing screen is smaller than a regular talk. Number each slide so it's easy for everyone to navigate to the same one if needed. Distribute slides to your committee in case they have any difficulties seeing your screen share.

These are difficult times. Be kind to yourself and others if it doesn't go perfectly. Congratulations on finishing your degree!

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*I'm disabling comments because I didn't realize people can write anything without my approval (oops) and I don't want anything weird ending up on here. Feel free to message me with additions and I'll happily add and cite you.