

Mémoire defence – RF notes

Usually the defence lasts around 1.5 hours. It is chaired by the supervisor.

You can invite friends and family to attend if you wish, since the defence is officially a public event.

At the beginning of the defence, the supervisor will usually give the candidate an idea about how the examiners felt about the memoire. They will not say whether it passes or fails, at this point.

The candidate presents his or her mémoire, in a presentation of c. 15 min.

The expert (external examiner) will ask the candidate questions about the thesis, both in general and in detail. This usually takes up to one hour.

What kinds of questions might the expert ask?

1. How did you come to choose this topic?
2. Justify your methodology (why did you choose these texts, and not others? Why did you organise your chapters in this particular order? Why did you choose to frame your reading according to this particular theory? Why do you fail to take into account that other literary theorist who might have been just as interesting?)
3. Defend your analysis (on p. X, you read your chosen text in this way, but I think it means something else entirely; can you explain how you came up with that reading, or can you respond to my reading instead?)
4. Defend your conclusions (you say X and Y, and you conclude Z, but this doesn't follow at all. Can you explain how you arrived at your argument; I disagree with your conclusion on p. X, and I think you would have done better to argue this other thing – how do you respond to that?)

The supervisor asks questions either at the end, or in between the expert's questions. The supervisor's questions are normally topics you have already covered in supervisions, unless he or she is responding to something new, raised by the expert examiner.

The supervisor invites questions from the candidate, and from the audience. You can ask the expert to explain an idea further, or ask how they might have done something differently, but most usually, there is just an awkward silence at this point.

If the candidate hasn't been told at the beginning of the defence already, s/he is asked to leave the room at the end, or a few minutes while the experts discuss the performance at the viva, and the overall result.

The candidate is called back into the room, and the supervisor gives the result which will be one of the following:

Pass with no corrections.

Pass, but with typos and small errors to correct before final submission.

Recommendation to re-submit (usually in a year's time).

The memoire is given a numerical grade, but this is not discussed publically at the defence. The candidate will hear about the grade through the Faculty Office.

Preparation:

1. Read and re-read your memoire, and be sure you understand the structure, the general argument, and reasons for your choosing to present the material in a particular way.
2. Prepare a 15-min. introduction to your memoire.
This should include:
 - A. Background explanation of how you came to choose the topic, what the subject means to you, what your aims were, etc.
 - B. Brief summary of the thesis, chapter by chapter. Start with an explanation and defence of your methodology, and choice of material. Proceed to say what each chapter covers, and why you divided the material as you did.
 - C. Your thoughts on the result; what are its strengths; what might have been done better; where you might have developed the research if given more time.
 - D. It doesn't matter if your presentation doesn't cover all the points above, as the experts will ask questions about anything they want to know. Certainly, don't speak for much more than 15 min, and it's a good idea to practice this aloud, at least twice.
 - E. You can prepare a Powerpoint presentation if you really want to, but I wouldn't recommend it, and it is not expected. It's more important to be clear and concise in your language, with as few mistakes as possible.
3. Try to anticipate what questions or criticisms of the memoire might come up, and practice answering these (aloud if possible)
4. On the night before, get a good night's sleep.
5. On the day:

Dress comfortably but appropriately for the defence (i.e. not as if you're going to a party, but as if you're a serious student, about to give an important class presentation. You don't have to dress up as if for a job interview either, unless it helps your confidence).

Bring a copy of your thesis, and perhaps some bottled water, and a pen and paper for jotting down the expert's questions, in case they are long-winded and you forget what they're saying before they finish.

During the defence, relax and enjoy the discussion. Don't be afraid to ask the expert to repeat the question if you didn't understand it. Be open to criticism, but also stand your ground when you think you're right.

Afterwards: it's nice to have someone to meet you at the door (if they haven't been in the audience anyway), so you can go and celebrate or drown your sorrows, whichever is appropriate.