

**Informal guidelines for the procedure at the defense of a PhD thesis**  
**or**  
**How to be an opponent**

A thesis defense usually attracts a large audience, consisting both of researchers in the field and other fields, and of relatives and friends of the candidate.

**Procedure.**

1. The chairman welcomes those present and introduces the candidate, the opponent, the members of the evaluation committee, and the supervisor(s). Finally he/she makes a short description of the procedure.
2. The chairman asks the candidate whether he or she wants to make any comments. This gives the candidate the opportunity to correct misprints and other errors, and maybe hand out an errata sheet. (A copy of the errata sheet should be sent to the opponent in advance.)
3. Then the thesis is presented. Normally the chairman first calls upon the opponent to sketch the background of the topics treated. If possible, this part should be understandable to most people in related fields. Then the thesis (or some parts of it) is presented in more detail. To give the candidate a more active role, the opponent, the candidate, and the supervisor(s) are advised to agree in advance on a suitable part for the candidate to present. The candidate should take an active part in the presentation. The opponent gives an assessment of the importance and value of the results obtained. After this, the opponent can go into more detail, and also ask the candidate questions, so that a discussion may arise. Errors and unclear points should be pointed out, so that the candidate can correct and explain them. Since technical questions usually are hard to answer without preparation, the opponent may well inform the candidate in advance about some questions he or she will ask. The more dialogue there is between the opponent and the candidate, the better. What is described in item 3 is the main part of the procedure. Usually it lasts for one or at most two hours. That of course means that only some parts of the thesis can be treated in detail.
4. The chairman now asks for questions and/or comments first from the evaluation committee and then from the audience. In the discussion that may follow, the opponent may participate.
5. The chairman thanks the opponent and the candidate and closes the session.
6. After this, the evaluation committee meets. The opponent and the main supervisor will normally be present during their discussion, but must leave the room when the decision is made.

**Comments.** The opponent should not hesitate to speak his/her mind and criticize weak points of the thesis. If the opponent, while reading the thesis, finds serious errors, such as false theorems, he/she should notify the candidate and the thesis supervisor(s) in advance. It would be cruel to tell the candidate about that in front of the audience. Once informed, the candidate can prepare a response. In extreme cases, the defense could even be postponed and the thesis rewritten. Also, if the opponent or committee members have doubts as to whether the thesis is sufficient for a PhD, these should be communicated to the supervisor(s) and/or defense coordinator in advance, no later than seven weeks before the defense.