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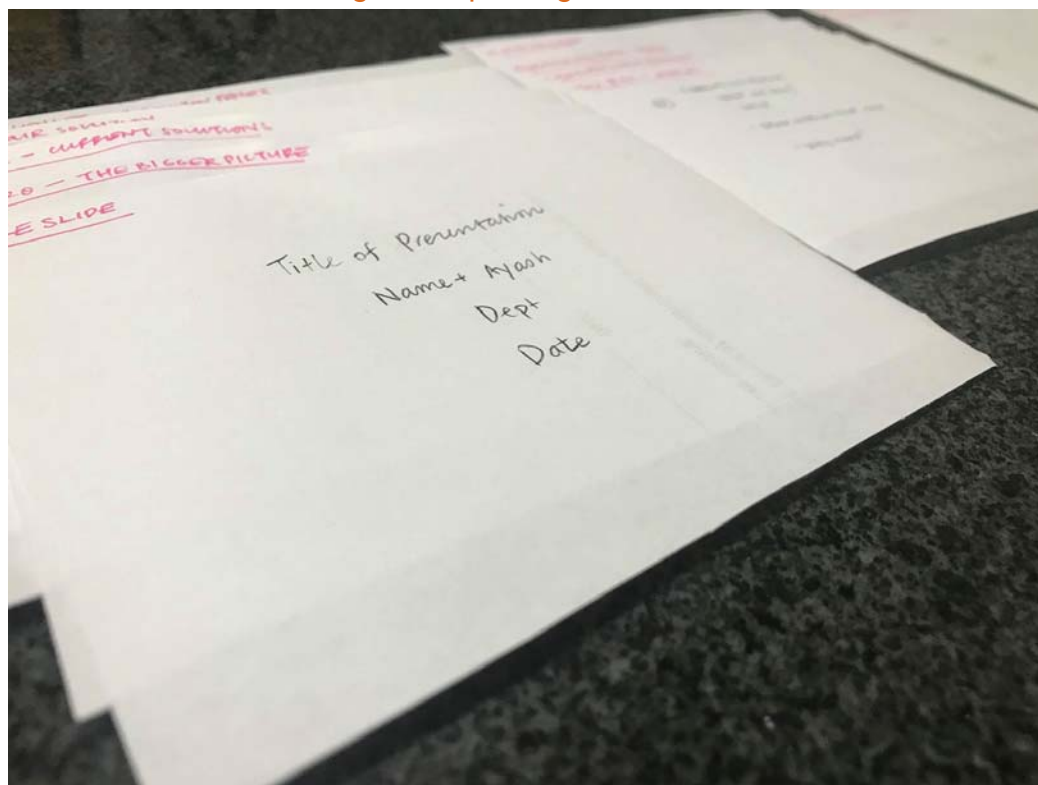
Preparing the Thesis Proposal Defense

Submitted by Ingrid Paredes on April 11, 2019 - 9:06pm

Blog: [GradHacker](#) [1]

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In my program, we have four major milestones towards graduation: the qualifying exam, which is based on a critique of a peer-reviewed publication; the thesis proposal defense; the data defense; and finally, the dissertation defense. At the end of this month, I'll check #2 off of my list. The defense requires the preparation of a report and delivery of a presentation detailing

what I plan to do for the last two years of my PhD. Since [defenses](#) ^[3] are often set up similarly, I've compiled a roundup of my own tips on how to prepare.

Create a Plan and Compile Your Resources

As soon as you schedule your proposal defense, create a plan for what tasks you need to accomplish. [Megan's checklist](#) ^[4] is a great place to start. Talk to other graduate students in your department who have defended recently, especially students who share committee members with you. Talk to your adviser to ensure that your timeline works.

Productivity

At Megan's [suggestion](#) ^[5], I also included non-thesis daily tasks into my schedule, including commute time, leisure time, and food plans in my own timeline. I'm usually flexible with these, but having them on my calendar for the weeks leading up to my defense has helped me budget my time properly. I am also very religious with my [writing](#) ^[6] time – even if I hit a block with my proposal, I try to work on other projects (like this blog post!) or journal to keep momentum. To avoid distractions, I usually set a timer for 20 to 30 minute intervals where I focus just on writing, and then I take a break for a few minutes.

Storyboarding

Before I write a paper or start a slide deck, I write on a stack of index cards with each of the topics I'd like to discuss to storyboard my research. This process works because it removes the distractions that come with working on a computer. Like, when I'm writing in Word, I often get so caught up with formatting and inserting references after each sentence that I write that it distracts me from actually writing.

For my proposal, I've organized my cards into three sections that I laid out on the floor: the introduction, the proposal plan, and my conclusions. Each index card has a title and a few bullet points and/or sketches of the material I plan to discuss. I laid these out in separate columns in front of me, which allowed me to easily visualize how much time I was dedicating to teach topic as well as the flow of my talk. I've run through this deck of cards a few times now, reciting

a very rough version of my talk and reorganizing them as I've seen fit. It's only once I feel confident about the logic of the presentation that I'll actually finish writing and create my Powerpoint slides.

Backup Slides

My weak point in presentations is taking questions –I'm usually so nervous that I freeze. Having backup slides has been a safety blanket for me. Whenever I make a slide on a topic and feel like I need to provide more information, I chuck all of that information into a separate slide deck. That way the information is on hand for me to pull up on the screen in case any questions call for it. Preparing these is studying for the exam in and of itself!

Time Yourself

I speak really quickly when I'm nervous. To avoid finishing a 30 minute presentation in 10 minutes, I run through my presentations a few times with a timer on, even timing pauses and slots for questions. These pauses allow me to catch a break as well as for my listeners to do likewise.

Ask for Specific Feedback

When I first started preparing my for my defense, my adviser told me to pretend like I'm a lawyer. Make my presentation tight, from logic to design. I suggest practicing with your lab group and peers as well as with groups that aren't familiar with your work. I have a few friends who are used to this by now, and I'll go to them asking for feedback on specific aspects of my talk, like grammar, the number of "um's" or "likes" I say, or slide design. Friends outside of my field have also been helpful in asking me about the basics of my research, helping me tighten my arguments.

I try to practice in front of the same crowd twice, first for an initial run, and then in the second go. Afterwards, I have a set of questions that I like to ask:

- What stood out to you in the talk?
- Which part of the talk was most boring?
- At which point if any did I seem the most nervous/unsure?
- Did you notice any body language—hand gestures, looking away from the audience?

My presentation is 30 minutes long, which is a little over the length of a sitcom. While I know I won't be as funny as an episode of *Fresh off the Boat*, I can plan to be as engaging as possible, and the best way to do that is to ask the audience themselves for feedback!

Editing

For writing, I've recorded an audio version to see how the words sound off the page. I'll stick with a sentence until they sound right for me to say out loud. For presentations, I go back and make revisions right after a rehearsal while they're fresh on my mind.

Day Of

While I'm not there yet, I do have a day-of ritual for any exam or presentations! I eat my favorite meal, I go through my presentation no more than twice, and I wear an outfit I've planned a few days in advance and practiced my talk in. Most importantly, I make sure to buy a bottle of champagne to celebrate immediately after.

What tips do you have for preparing for your quals?

[Image courtesy of the author.]

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