



## **Guidelines for an external PhD opponent**

Below is a description of the procedures for PhD examinations at the Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts at University of Gothenburg, Sweden. The description follows, to a large extent, traditional academic proceedings. However, since the thesis and part of thesis can be presented in many different ways within artistic disciplines, the significance of the artistic work in relation to the written statement may influence the proceedings and special guidelines will be given where necessary.

### **Introduction**

The term “opponent” is not the same as the English term “external examiner”. The “opponent” should limit his/her examination, i.e. questions, discussion points etc., to a scrutiny of the scholarly and artistic work presented in the thesis and the publications included therein. The doctoral student will have already been examined on his/her knowledge of the subject in connection with compulsory courses during his/her PhD studies.

Below is a short vocabulary list including the translation of the Swedish terms used in PhD examination proceedings:

Avhandling	Thesis
Betygsnämnd	Examination board / evaluation committee
Disputation	The act of defending the thesis (Public Defence)
Doktorand	PhD student / doctoral student
Försvar	Defence
Handledare	Supervisor
Opponent (fakultets-)	Opponent (appointed by the Faculty)
Opposition	Opposition of the thesis
Respondent	Respondent (the PhD student defending the thesis)

### **Audience**

The defence is open to the public and is usually held in a lecture hall with plenty of space for the audience. There are usually a significant number of department members, other researchers, students, friends and family also present.

### **The defence of the thesis**

The chairperson begins the proceedings by introducing the respondent, opponent, and examination board. He/she also explains a few formalities.

After this the respondent is given the opportunity to point out printing errors etc. in the thesis.

To put the research in question into perspective, the defence starts with a review of the work presented in the thesis with particular emphasis on its relation to the overall research field. This is done by the opponent. It should take 15-20 minutes and be of a general nature so that it can at least be understood by other members of the faculty. This review should relate to other work in the field and also include a discussion about the relevance and possible contribution the respondent has made to the particular field in question as a result of him/her completing his/her thesis.

If agreed to beforehand, the respondent may then provide a brief overview of particular aspects of his/her thesis or otherwise summarise the work contained therein. This should take 15-20 minutes. If the nature of the thesis involves artistic expression of various kinds, this may also be given a place within the defence proceedings.

After these preliminaries, the defence of the thesis takes place. The opponent asks questions about, or criticises the thesis, and the respondent answers and defends his/her work. If there are several authors, the opposition should primarily concentrate on the part/s the respondent is responsible for. Normally, this should be clear from the summary of the thesis. If not, the opponent should consult the respondent's supervisor. This part of the defence usually takes approximately one hour (this is a recommendation and not a rule).

The opponent's questions should aim to highlight the relevance of the work, and its key contributions, while also pointing out possible misconceptions and erroneous results on the part of the respondent.

The questions may be general or more detailed in nature. It is also appropriate to bring up questions concerning the relevance of the assumptions that the author (respondent) makes. One way for the opponent to proceed is by asking fairly brief questions concerning the arguments, statements and references presented in the thesis. The respondent should then be given the opportunity to demonstrate his/her understanding of the research questions they have sought to address. At the end of the dialogue, the opponent is expected to sum up his/her impressions.

If appropriate, the opponent usually congratulates the respondent on his/her work. When the opponent is ready, the chairperson gives the examination board the opportunity to ask questions. Each member of the board usually asks a few questions each. The audience is then given the opportunity to oppose *ex auditorio*. After this, the chairperson closes the defence.

The time constraints applied to this process are flexible. The entire defence usually lasts approximately two hours.

After the defence the examination board meets.

Below is a brief summary of the proceedings outlined above:

1. The chairperson, who has been appointed by the faculty, introduces the respondent and the opponent.
2. The respondent is given the opportunity to point out printing errors etc. in the thesis.
3. Introduction (optional) by the opponent.
4. Introduction (optional) by the respondent.
5. The main discussion and defence of the thesis.
6. Questions and comments from the examination board.
7. Questions and comments from the audience.
8. The chairperson closes the proceedings.
9. The examination board meets.

If the thesis involves means of communication/presentations other than written text, for example, music, theatre, works of art etc., the order and structure of the defence is adjusted to the nature of the particular thesis/dissertation in question. The opponent is asked to take this into consideration when formulating and directing his/her criticism.

### **Grades**

No grades are awarded; the respondent either passes or fails. The decision reached is based on both the thesis per se and the defence of the thesis.

If, prior to the defence, the opponent or a member of the examination board comes to the conclusion that the quality of the thesis is suspect, he/she is asked to communicate this to the chairperson/supervisor. This notification should occur, at the latest, one week in advance of the defence. This allows for the defence to be postponed so that changes can be made for the improvement of the thesis.

### **The examination board**

An examination board, consisting of three or five people, is appointed for each PhD defence.

After the defence, the meeting of the examination board, which is also attended by the opponent and the respondent's supervisor, takes place. Although the latter are invited to give their opinions, they do not take part in any decisions made.

This meeting starts with the board members appointing a chairperson from amongst themselves.

Occasionally, the chairperson of the board may also ask the opponent if he/she has any additional remarks or comments that were not presented at the public defence. The opponent may also reiterate the strengths and weaknesses of the work presented. The chairperson then asks the supervisor about the respondent's contribution to papers co-authored by others, about the respondent's working methods and anything else of importance to the final decision.

The members of the board then proceed to give their opinions with regard to their particular areas of expertise. This should be followed by a discussion. When the chairperson feels that the members are ready to vote, each of the members of the examination board is then asked to submit their respective votes. Each must vote "pass" or "fail". The decision of the majority prevails. The decision is stated in pre-prepared minutes brought to the meeting by the supervisor in order to be signed by the members of the board. No record is kept of the discussions at this meeting.

After the meeting, the respondent is generally informed of the decision by the chairperson of the examination board.

**General information**

There is no dress code at a PhD defence. Formal dress is recommended.

Further questions about the facilities available in the lecture hall or the procedures in general should be addressed to the chairperson of the defence.

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