

# Preparing to Defend Your Thesis from Home

Garth A. Fowler, PhD, APA

Hideko Sera, PsyD, University of Redlands

Alvin Akibar, PhD, Recent Doctoral Recipient – University of North Texas

---

APA Office of Graduate and Postgraduate Education and Training (GPET)

---

April 30th, 2020 | Staying On Track During a Pandemic Webinar Series

# Take more time to plan ahead

- Many institutions and programs realize these are unusual times and have updated policies and procedures to support remote defenses. Take the time to review changes and read through any recommendations.
- Be sure to understand what are options and what are requirements.
  - Specific platforms that must be used
  - Open to non-committee members

# Take more time to plan ahead

- Have a committee member or Chair be the meeting organizer or host.
  - Some institutions are requiring this
  - Can add students as a presenter or co-host
- Schedule a test-run in advance
  - Go over roles and expectations and practice using the platform with your Chair
  - Set up a practice run and invite your friends to act as committee members, audience, etc.

# Take more time to plan ahead

- Have a plan for the different components of your defense
  - Confidential Committee Deliberations
  - Inviting and managing guests/audience
  - Closed Q&A
- Have 'rules of engagement' for the audience
  - Committee member on video or not?
  - Audience on mute?
  - How are questions submitted and answered?

# Take more time to plan ahead

- Ask all attendees to control local internet
  - Ask your roommates and/or family not binge Netflix, play World of Warcraft
  - Ask committee members if they can do the same
  - Tell audience if they have issues, turn off video
- Bomb proof you Zoom (or whatever!)
  - Check your institution IT help, Program/Graduate School resources
  - Find platform help site or FAQ

# Take more time to plan ahead

- Have a Plan B!
  - Even best made plans oft' go awry
  - Have low-tech solutions if something stops working mid-way through
  - Decide ahead of time (with Chair/committee members) under what circumstances you move to Plan B.

# Its Go Time!

- Be Expressive
  - For votes etc, ask for verbal responses
  - Subtle non-verbal communication gets minimized in video, so some adjustment (by everyone) is okay. Remember: Don't over do it, just don't assume what you do in-person or on a one-on-one video suffices
- Dress up
  - It is your ONLY Defense and introduction to the professional world. Treat it like that.
  - And yes – wear pants! You never know when you might need to stand to close a blind, etc.

# Its Go Time!

- Add an extra 15 – 20 minutes
  - Make sure technology is working for everyone as expected
  - Take time to share with attendees how the defense will proceed
    - › What is the same?
    - › What is different?
- Check Your Tech
  - Reboot your computer, update programs you need (ahead of time) and turn off auto-updates for those you don't
  - Put new batteries in your mouse, headphones, etc.
  - Turn off applications or programs you won't be using so you don't get pop-ups and they won't drain your CPU



# All About Your Setup

- Set Your Space
  - Set camera at eye-level
  - Use a computer & camera (as opposed to phone or tablet)
  - Lighting should come from behind your computer/camera, or to the side. Never from behind you.
  - Sit against a plain wall (no corners, no windows)
  - Some platforms let you 'blur out' backgrounds. Test this out and use it if it looks good.





THE BEST THESIS DEFENSE IS A GOOD THESIS OFFENSE.

From XKCD, A Webcomic of Romance, Sarcasm, Math and Language.  
<https://xkcd.com/1403/>

# Panelists' Thoughts & Questions

- Alvin P. Akibar, PhD
  - Recent Doctoral Recipient, University of North Texas
- Hideko Sera, PsyD
  - Associate Dean, University of Redlands School of Education
- Audience Questions
  - Submit through the Questions box

# Dr. Sera's Comments

1. Psychological impacts of role reversal: For most faculty, the switch to technologically-enhanced modules was met with great challenges to learn new skills. This means that, during thesis/dissertation defense, faculty may be the novice and students are the expert. Faculty/administrators need to remain mindful of this role reversal and be humble.

# Dr. Sera's Comments

2. The importance of grit: Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) published a comprehensive study on grit. Of the eight major traits that make up grit, two of them specifically stand out as key components of what the 2020 cohort faces; (1) consistency of interest and passion, and (2) perseverance of effort. Faculty/administrators need to acknowledge that their students now face this additional component of having grit.

# Dr. Sera's Comments

3. Important diversity issues: Some of the most prominent Zoom bombing have been racially motivated, and other marginalized populations have been also targeted. If, in unfortunate event, these hacking incidents occur faculty/administrators cannot simply ignore the impact of such incidents on students and act as if nothing happened (even after the student's defense). Equally important is the issue of digital inequity. Faculty/administrators should not assume that all students have high-quality digital access and other resources and make dissertation defense plans accordingly.

# Dr. Sera's Comments

4. Symbolism of celebration: The 2020 cohort has been deeply impacted by their commencement ceremonies cancelled or postponed. Symbolism of proper celebration to honor students' accomplishments becomes that much more important, and faculty/administrators may identify meaningful ways to communicate celebration (i.e., department newsletter, university-wide blog series, college/school/university social media platforms, etc).

# Staying on Track During a Pandemic

A Webinar Series for Students and ECPs

Join APA for a weekly webinar series on practical strategies and expert advice for students, early career psychologists, and their allies. In these hour-long webinars, we'll discuss topics ranging from completing your dissertation from afar to managing your finances.

[pages.apa.org/staying-on-track](https://pages.apa.org/staying-on-track)