Thesis Committees

The thesis committee is there to support and guide the student through dissertation research. They evaluate your progress and help to make sure you are on track to get your dissertation within a reasonable time. Early in your graduate career, their focus will be on making sure you have defined and reasonable goals. Later, they will help you decide when it is time to write your dissertation. Finally, they will be there as you present your thesis seminar and defense. Their support as mentors will likely continue as you move on in your career.

Summary of advice from BMB faculty:

• As you go through your first few committee meetings, bear in mind that it is normal for our students to start out with a relatively long learning period with minimal, or even no, tangible productivity. Do not become discouraged. At some point you will advance to a phase when you will accumulate real results. For most students the majority of your useful data will be attained in the last third of your time as a graduate student.

• Seek advice from your committee members between committee meetings. This is strongly recommended, almost to the point that we should make it mandatory.

• A thesis committee meeting should not feel like an exam. The outcome should be productive advice. After your committee meeting, if you do not have a clear picture of your goals for the next six months, you should follow up with your advisor and/or thesis committee chair.

• Take advantage of the opportunity to discuss science with your committee members, whether at your formal thesis committee meetings or in the elevators.

• Scheduling can be difficult. Do suggest one of two specific times rather than asking committee to provide their availability over the next month - chances are you will get no responses with the later approach. If you are having trouble finding a time, try doodle or some other online scheduling application.

• Send out a reminder email before your meeting with time and location.

• Talk to your advisor about what you will present. Get input on your one page summary before sending out to your committee, and if possible go over your presentation with you advisor - don’t spring new data on your advisor at the meeting.

• You should think about what you want to get out of the thesis committee meeting and prepare accordingly.

• During your thesis committee meeting, you should focus on the current problems rather than background. Only spend as much time on background as is relevant to what you will be talking about. Similarly, there is no need to spend much time on completed and published projects.

Thesis Committee Meetings – Practical Stuff

• The Working Thesis Committee
  • 4 faculty, 3, including the chair, must be members of BMB
  • Your advisor is not a member of your working thesis committee but will attend your committee meetings

• Selecting your committee
  • In the fall of 3rd year
  • Discuss with your advisor
  • Select for breadth as well as expertise in your planned area of thesis research
    • It is your job to decide who will be chair of your thesis committee.
• Thesis committee approval form must be signed by chair of BMB

• Setting up your 1st committee meeting
  • Must occur before end of fall semester of your third year
  • It is your job to find a time that all of your committee can attend - this can the toughest part of the process
    ▪ Try to first find dates that work for both your thesis advisor and committee chair
    ▪ Don’t overwhelm faculty with too many choices
    ▪ It might take several tries to find a suitable date, so start early!
  • Try to make sure you have a minimum of a 1 1/2 hour commitment (preferably 2 hours) from all committee members - it may not take this long but it is not ideal to have to rushed because someone needs to leave.
  • Once you find a time, it is your responsibility to find a room. Angie can help with rooms if necessary. Be considerate of committee members when choosing a location away from PSOM

• Additional committee meeting
  • Every 6 months (or more frequently if deemed necessary by the committee)
  • Committee may elect to waive the 6 month meeting, but all students must have at least one committee meeting annually

• Preparing for your committee meeting
  • A one-page summary of progress and plans should be prepared by the student and submitted to the committee at least 2 days prior to the meeting
    ▪ Make sure that you have gone over this summary with your advisor
    ▪ When submitting the summary, also remind the committee members of time and location of the meeting
  • If you have any manuscripts published or accepted send your committee a pdf reprint or preprint
  • You should prepare a presentation (no more than 20 minutes without interruption) that includes brief background, covers your progress and details your immediate and long term goals
    ▪ At your first committee meeting, you will present an outline of your plan for your dissertation research - which may be quite different from what you proposed in your prelim. But remember, it’s not a seminar - no more than 20 minutes.
    ▪ At subsequent meetings you should present a brief introduction (one or two slides) to remind the committee of your research area - don’t expect them to recall everything from last meeting, but no need to go into great detail. Aim to put your project in context.
    ▪ No need to present details of any published work. Provide a reprint or preprint, preferably ahead of the meeting.
    ▪ Give a time line of your plans. What are you going to do in the lab tomorrow, and over the next month, and what do you hope to accomplish before your next meeting in the next six months time.
    ▪ Have additional slides (from group meetings or other presentations) at the ready in case you are called upon to go into some detail that you did not include in your prepared presentation - you can include slides that you think are important but do not have time to cover at the end of your presentation
    ▪ Make sure you are comfortable moving back and forth among your slides

• What to bring to your meeting
  • Copies of your one-page summary to give to the faculty
  • A copy of the thesis committee report to give to the chair at start of meeting
    ▪ Please fill our relevant parts, especially the year you started
  • A copy of any manuscript reprint or preprint
  • All of your laboratory notebooks since the last committee meeting
If you are using an electronic notebook, you should bring a laptop to show your committee or you will need to make alternative arrangements with your chair to view the notebooks.

- **What to expect during the meeting**
  - The chair of your committee will probably first ask you to leave while the committee hear from your advisor on your progress
  - You may request to speak with the committee in your advisors absence before you begin discussion of your progress and plans, otherwise this will more usually occur at the end of the meeting
  - You should expect to be interrupted during your presentation
  - Be ready to present things in a different order depending on questions

- **After the meeting**
  - A written summary of the meeting will be prepared by the chair of the committee
  - You will receive a copy of this, and a copy will be placed in your academic file

- **Other important roles of your thesis committee**
  - You may need them to write letters of recommendation for fellowships or in the future when you are applying for jobs
  - Your committee, in particular the chair, will be available to help if you have a disagreement or other problem with your advisor
  - They are there to give extra advice between formal meetings - maybe you want to change direction or do some experiments that might draw on their expertise, or you might want a different perspective on why you cannot get your experiment to work - you will often find they can spot the problem and save you a great deal of time.

- **What if things are going really badly?**
  - If the committee and/or the Thesis Advisor are not satisfied with the student's productivity, a written report will be prepared by the committee outlining a proposed course of action
  - A copy of the report will be forwarded to the Graduate Group Chair, the student and the Thesis Advisor
  - The student will have the opportunity to reply to the written report of the committee
  - Within 6 months an additional meeting of the thesis committee will take place to determine the progress
  - In the event that the student does not make sufficient progress, he or she will be placed on academic probation
  - If progress is not apparent by the next Committee meeting, the student will be asked to petition for a terminal Master's degree

- **But this will not happen - instead you will soon be ready to finish up**
  - After consultation with your advisor you should have a committee meeting at which you will ask for permission to begin to write the dissertation
  - You will present an outline of the anticipated contents of each chapter of your thesis, and discuss a detailed timeline for completion of outstanding experimental work (it is normal to ask for permission to when there are experiments still to be finished)

- **Once you have permission to write, what further role will your committee play (the topic of how to prepare for your defense should be expanded in a future discussion session)**
  - In discussion with your thesis advisor, you select the remaining two members of the committee to form the full examination committee (one from Penn, one external)
  - You write, your advisor gives input, you edit
  - One month in advance of your planned date of defense, you give each committee member a draft
of your thesis

- If the committee see major deficits in your dissertation, they inform you within one week of receiving the draft. The defense is postponed and you have one month to correct and submit a revised copy.
- You finalize a date/time/location for your defense that works for all your committee
- Following the public seminar, you have a closed session with your committee
- Your committee may ask for additional changes to your thesis so it is important to ensure that you have adequate time following your defense before you need to submit the final copy of your dissertation to the graduate school (more on timing and formal requirements in a future discussion session)

Some student-authored advice on thesis committee meetings is available at http://www.med.upenn.edu/mstp/thesis_student.shtml. This is from combined degree students, and some aspects may not be relevant to our program. Also I want to note that, contrary to what is stated on that webpage, there is no expectation that you provide snacks for your committee.