Rough Guidelines for Masters Defense Preparation and Presentation

Shan Barkataki
Computer Science Dept, CSUN
shan@csun.edu

1. Ready with the Demonstration

This guideline is applicable to defenses involving project work, it is not intended to be used in defenses involving pure research. For a project, it is essential that your software is ready for demonstration before the defense. Failure to demonstrate is embarrassing to all. As a committee chair there is little support I can offer on your behalf if the demonstration fails; in most cases this will result in an unsuccessful defense.

2. Thesis Distribution to Committee Members

By the time you submit a thesis to the committee it must be complete and free of grammatical and spelling errors. You should submit a thesis to the committee only after I have approved it for distribution.

Most faculty members will accept a softcopy in MS word; some prefer pdf format; and some accept only printed copies. Email each member to ask what works for him/her.

It is quite common for the committee members to give comments only after the defense and some of these comments may require a good deal of rework. It is essential that you prepare well for the defense and make sure that demonstrations, etc. go smoothly; failure to do so will certainly delay graduation.

3. Email Committee Asking for Date and Time of Defense

A few days after sending the thesis, email members asking for availability of date and time for the defense. Liaise with all concerned.

4. Announcement and Room Booking

Room reservation for the defense is done by the CS dept office and must go through the chair of the committee. Do not try to book a room directly.

1. Download the MS word version of the Announcement form from the URL below. http://python.ecs.csun.edu/compsci/forms/index.html
2. Complete the thesis announcement form. Ignore the underlines; you can delete these. Leave the room number blank; it will be filled-in by the CS dept office.
3. Send the completed form back to me and I will forward it to the CS dept office.

4. I will ask the CS Dept office to book a room and post an announcement for your defense.   I will advise you of the date, time, and place.

5. Presentation

1. Total time.
    a. Defense with a demo (most common) about 50 minutes, about 35 slides max.
    b. Defense without a demo (very rare), about 75 minutes.
2. Introduction part 1:
    a. Start by summarizing what was the problem you solved and what you have done. Even a project must incorporate an element of research and literature search. Address these issues in the introduction.
3. Introduction part 2
    a. Then set the scene by describing the importance or motivation for the work. Set the context. However, do not make this into a literature search result- that appears in the thesis, not in the presentation. (5 minutes max)
    b. Restate the objective of your work (1 minute, for projects, for research 5 minutes)
4. Describe your work. (15 to 20 minutes)
    a. Defense should summarize your work; you do not have to touch every point. An overview is OK.
    b. Not too much text in the slides. Use key words and diagrams, pictures, graphs. Do not plan on reading your slides. If you need to then you can use index cards.
    c. Focus on anything interesting, unique or technically challenging.
    d. If you made certain critical decisions describe those and give reasons for your choice.
    e. Any problems you faced that resulted in a change in direction or objectives or some interesting solutions.
    f. Significant benefit from using new tools or methods.
    g. Describe how the work was tested. If a second part was involved in the testing/verification then provide their comments/experience.
    h. Important finds if any- what have you learned from this experience?

6. Demonstration for Projects Work (10 to 15 minutes)

1. Make sure that everything works. Nothing is more embarrassing than a failed demo.
2. Arrive on a good time to set up. If you're using a laptop make sure that you can access the Internet with it at CSUN.

7. Conclusions for Research (10 minutes)

1. Describe the main issues you discovered.
2. Lessons learned
3. Future trends, when applicable.

8. **Questions** (15 to 20 minutes)

1. It is customary for the committee members to ask questions during the presentation; you can't defer these to the end.
2. When answering questions do not beat about the bush. Address what is being asked and make eye contact with all committee members, not just the one who asked the question.
3. If you do not know the answer but can make an intelligent guess, then you can admit that you are making a guess and state your opinion- you might get lucky and give the right answer! If you have no idea, then say so politely (with humor if possible/appropriate) and move on.
4. If the question is out of scope, then say so politely- typically I will support you in that.
5. Not all committee members may have read all the thesis from cover to cover. In answering questions you may have to describe some of the work you have done.
6. It is best not to argue with a committee member but provide information s/he seeks, if you know it. You probably know more on your thesis topic than anyone else in the room, but don't be arrogant about it.

9. General Points

1. Include other issues and points that wish to present, in addition to what I have suggested here. You are the expert in your research/project work, and you will probably have issues that are quite interesting and significant.
2. Your thesis defense is your chance to shine. No doubt you will be nervous, but you will remember it for the rest of your life. So prepare for it and enjoy it.
3. Take comfort that the committee is not there to fail you. They are interested in learning what you have done. They want you to succeed, but you have to earn that success.
4. It sees obvious, but do spell check and proofread your slides.
5. Make sure that your slides are numbered.
6. Make sure that the font is large enough (minimum 16 point) and that the figures are clear. Cite sources for all images copied from the Internet, or elsewhere. Do not use blurry drawings, or photographs.
7. You must practice several times with the slides in front of friends or by yourself. At first, your practice sessions may not go well. It is common to mess up during practice sessions; the adrenaline is not there! Amazingly, practice will make perfect. You will be OK during the actual presentation that is how it works!
8. Golden rule no more than 35 slides! You can plan some backup slides in anticipation of questions.
9. Bring a clean copy of the signature page. If you ace the defense then the committee will sign this on the day, and it will save you a lot of time in gathering signatures later. This page must be ready for submission to the grad studies with the correct font and format.
10. Generally, the total time, including presentation, demo, Q&A, and committee deliberations lasts nearly 2 hours.
11. Send me a copy of your PowerPoint slides at least a day before the defense.

10.   V-forms

The grad coordinator asks for V forms after the defense. You should have V-forms from two defenses you attended previously. Please bring these with you to the defense and hand them over to me.

11.   Signature Page

Bring a printed copy of the signature page and a black pen. You will need to obtain signatures of all committee members and submit a scanned copy of the signature page to Grad studies via ETD. If the committee asks for changes, then the chair will not sign until after the changes have been completed and approved. Do keep in mind that many students have to do extensive rewrites after the defense.

12.   Grad Studies Approval & Thesis Submission

The ETD system is used for both thesis approval and thesis submission. See the Help section in http://etd.csun.edu

Grad studies do not look at the technical contents; they are concerned only about the format.   Therefore, you might consider starting the process as you are getting ready for the defense and get a preliminary approval of the thesis, even if you have to put some final touches after the defense.

When the thesis has been approved and signed by all committee members, submit a pdf copy of the thesis along with the signature page to the grad studies via the ETD system.

13.   Enjoy

Now you are really done. Many employers give a raise upon completion of a master's degree.   Pending graduation, you can request a letter from the Grad Coordinator stating that you have completed all requirements for the degree. Enjoy the graduation.

14.   Check Solar

Once the defense has been successfully completed your committee chair will the RP grade in COMP698 to a letter grade. This is a manual process and often takes several days. It would not hurt for you to check SOLAR to make sure that the grade changes have taken effect, if not then contact your committee chair.