

Tips for virtual defenses

To the Committee:

Decide on someone on the defense committee as the Meeting Host to set up the Zoom (or other system) connection early (15+ minutes) and ask the committee to show up early to check everything is working. This is helpful to the student, as they are under a lot of additional stress, having to convert this occasion to a remote presentation. Have one or more backups including something as simple as a phone based conference call.

For the presentation either ask all participants to mute themselves at the start or have whoever is managing the call mute them all centrally. If there are bandwidth issues you may want to have the audience stop their video. Since the presenter often can't tell if there are connection issues the committee member managing the call should manage this via chat to avoid interrupting the presenter if possible.

Have a plan for how to have the student "step out of the room". The best solution (if using Zoom) is to use a breakout room for the committee to talk and then return to the main room when done (above recommendation for committee member setting up Zoom supports this). Another option for having the student "step out of the room" is to put them "on hold."

Committee Members - Definitely use your video if possible during the private portion of the defense. This is an inherently stressful activity and a lot of the usual positive encouraging social cues get lost with voice only communication. That said, if you're freezing when asking questions it's probably because of your local wireless/upload bandwidth and so you can probably help this by turning off your video so that you can communicate clearly.

Be kind and supportive. Frankly you should always be doing this, but it's even more important now because everyone is under extra stress. This doesn't mean you can't probe the work, just do it in a positive way focused on helping the student.

Minimize required changes for the thesis itself. Most of us aren't focusing well right now and revisions are often due on a tight timeline. Clearly distinguish recommendations for changes prior to submitting papers from changes required for the thesis.

Communicate your excitement at a student passing clearly/effusively. This is a big deal even if we're all stressed and can't celebrate it in the usual ways.

To the Presentation audience

Leave your video on (barring bandwidth issues). If you've ever given a remote talk the lack of normal audience engagement is really challenging - live video faces really helps. Consider exaggerating your positive responses. With lots of folks everyone is small so clear head nods, thumbs ups, big smiles, can all help mimic normal positive audience feedback.

To the Presenter

A 2 monitor/computer setup will let you see folks attending the talk plus your slides and notes. Of course if it's easier for you to not see the audience, then definitely take the opportunity of defending remotely to not have to see them. When sharing your screen you'll only be able to see ~5 other

participants. If they all have their video on that can still be really helpful for helping it feel like an in-person talk, but if you want to see more people you can screen share from one computer and join the call from another computer to see all the participants.

New MS/PhDs - This may not be how you envisioned the conclusion of years' work happening, but that doesn't change that it's a huge accomplishment. Celebrate in whatever (publicly responsible) way you can. E.g., Have a video-based lab celebration Party