

Committee Meetings

A discussion of Committee Meeting Etiquette and Presentation Tips

Congratulations. If you're reading this, it's a sign that you have passed the major milestones of the INP. Dr. Reba Rabenstein and Bilal Haider help ensure that the rest of our journey goes smoothly. The committee meeting "gauges how close you are to defending," according to Dr. Reba Rabenstein. The advice in this section will help us reach that ultimate milestone.

Committee Meeting Etiquette:

It is a good idea to keep the members of your committee happy – you don't want an angry or irritated committee deciding if or when you can graduate! The following are a few tips on proper etiquette when scheduling and having committee meetings (and no, we're not Emily Post).

1. Email your committee members at least a month in advance to **plan your meeting**.
2. Your **committee members are busy people**. Trying to find a time that everyone can attend can be difficult so make sure you give them plenty of options and notice. Remember, you also have to give your final time to Carol so that she can schedule a room (unless you have access to a room in your department). Once you have a date set, send a reminder e-mail a few days in advance with your meeting agenda (see #4 below) attached. If not all your committee members can make it to a meeting; don't stress – you only need a majority. If you can't find a time that fits everyone's schedule, schedule it when a majority of your committee can be there (e.g. three out of four members) then meet individually with the member who couldn't make it later. Remember to bring that member up to speed on what was discussed and what the committee concluded in terms of proposed experiments.
3. **Meeting individually** with your committee members outside of formal meetings is a good thing.
4. **Keeping in touch** with your committee is a good thing. Meeting individually more often (around twice a year) can keep your committee members up-to-date. Also, if you have any problems brewing, like the experiment that you just can't get to work, you may get helpful suggestions sooner, and if worst comes to worst, your committee may let you stop doing the experiment sooner.
5. Consider writing a **short, one page summary** of what you've accomplished and what you plan to discuss with your committee and email it to them a few days before your meeting. This is a time-saver. If your committee already has an idea of what you're going to cover, they have a chance to think about what you're going to cover ahead of time. Also see Presentation Tip #1.

6. **Catering** – not necessary, but drinks are nice. This always comes up – is it simply courteous to provide refreshments for your committee or are you bribing them? How much is too much? Snacks are nice, homemade ones add a personal touch (but be careful not to accidentally poison your committee!), and drinks are always appreciated. Full course meals generally go to waste. If your spread is compared to Trimalchio's Feast you've gone way too far.
7. Keep in mind, your thesis prospectus is a "**living document.**" The experiments you are expected to complete for your dissertation can change - many times to your benefit. Your thesis prospectus is not a legally binding document – no notaries are involved. Therefore, in discussions with your committee the experiments you carefully planned out in your prospectus may change. The good thing is that if you absolutely cannot get an experiment to work your committee may say you no longer have to do it. (For instance, I once spent several months designing and cloning a number of in situ hybridization probes for a transcript – none of which demonstrated specific binding; at one point my committee said to simply drop it.)
8. When it's over, type up a **summary** of the meeting to keep a "paper" record of what happened. This is not only to collect your thoughts and ideas resulting from the meeting, but also to make a record of what was discussed at the meeting and who discussed it. In many cases, a committee member may suggest (at a subsequent meeting) doing something which you have already done; this is your way of keeping track of all of those suggestions. Have your advisor look it over so that you are both on the same page as you move forward.

Presentation tips:

The main goal of any committee meeting is to update your committee on your research progress and, let's be completely honest, gauge how close you are to defending. How you organize your presentation can greatly impact how your committee views your progress and "defense-readiness". Below are several suggestions that might assist you in preparing an effective presentation for your committee meeting. Remember, each committee is different, therefore you should tailor your presentation style to your committee and what they think is most important. Keep in mind that you can (and should) be talking to your committee members informally as well, so asking for feedback on your presentation and style is always useful.

1. Keep the **background short**. Your committee members are smart, and they probably know most of the background that you intend to cover. Also, you have limited opportunities with your committee members all assembled (and hopefully awake) in one place– use that time wisely and focus on your own data! If you are unsure whether or not to include some background information, go ahead and make a slide for it, but put it after the end of your presentation. If a question comes up about it, you can always jump to that slide; if none arise you haven't

wasted any time. It may also be useful to include a quick summary slide of what you covered in your last meeting, and what you intended to accomplish from that last meeting forward. This way, when you start off with your results, everyone will be on the same footing to judge your progress in that amount of time.

2. Present your **most polished data first** – save works in progress for the end. Organizing your presentation in this manner will ensure that you are able to show all your data. Works in progress necessarily engender discussion and you don't want to get stuck on one experiment and be unable to show all your data because of time constraints. Many people organize their presentations following the specific aims outlined in their prospectus; consider using this layout twice – first go through the completed experiments in each of your aims, then go through the works in progress for each aim.
3. Put slides from **non-working experiments** after the end of your presentation, just in case you are asked about them. We all have experiments that don't work for one reason or another; many times these experiments have been done at the request of your committee. You should include the slides in the committee meeting following the one in which you were requested to do the experiment; however, from then on put the slides after the end of your presentation. A good rule of thumb is not to highlight non-working experiments – focus your committee on all the great data that you have! Your committee members may forget that they asked you to do a specific experiment. If they suggest doing the same experiment again, you can always jump to the slide at the end of your presentation and explain why it didn't work, but if they don't ask, don't share.
4. **Summary slides** for each aim are great – but maybe not for your committee meeting. Summary slides for each of your specific aims are great during talks; they make sure that everyone is on the same page before you switch topics or focus. However, these slides are less useful and take up time from your committee meeting. More important for your committee is the inclusion of future directions. This slide (or slides) should be at the end of your talk - just prior to the conclusions slide - that builds on your current work in progress.
5. Include a **“Publications” slide** at the end for any and all publications that you have. Let's face it, the axiom “publish or perish” pretty much sums up an important part of an academic career. Highlighting your publication record is a definite plus when you're asking your committee if you can defend. For those first few committee meetings, you may still be teaching, auditing classes, applying for fellowships, working on revisions for papers, etc., so this is also a good place to include other aspects of your academic progress aside from the purely experimental. These other activities can take up a lot of time, and it is useful to emphasize this, especially if your experimental progress has been less than you expected.

6. Use your last meeting(s) before defending to also talk to your committee about **your future plans**, i.e. post-docs, non-academic careers, etc. Your committee is not only there to mentor your scientific skills and development, but also to guide you in your future decisions. Suggestions for post-doc labs, companies, etc. and a discussion with your assembled committee can be quite useful as you move towards the end of your graduate school years and start thinking about life after Yale.