

What to expect at your annual committee meeting

This document summarizes advice from the E&E faculty to help you maximize the benefit you receive from your annual committee meeting. Always check with your advisor to discuss expectations specific to your lab and project. Note that this is written with Ph.D. students in mind, but will hopefully still benefit M.S. students. M.S. students are on a faster track and so will have some different annual paperwork requirements.

What to have for your meeting each year: ***check the grad handbook before your meeting!***

In each year, at least one week before the committee meeting, send around your dissertation abstract; a short (1-page or less) summary of your accomplishments in the last year in research, teaching, and service; and your current CV. If your proposal has been approved by the committee, you may want to also include that document as a reminder. Electronic evaluation letters were introduced in 2013 as part of the grad student collective bargaining agreement, and you will receive a copy of your letter for review.

General comments that apply to every year:

- be succinct (the year's summary does not need to be an in-depth narrative like a seminar)
- be organized (this will help you be succinct)
- state the goals for the last year and what you accomplished, with an emphasis on research but mentioning other significant accomplishments (teaching, outreach, service);
- remember this is a meeting and dialogue, not a one-way presentation;
- have all necessary paperwork in hand (this often requires talking to the grad office to be sure);
- use the committee as a resource, not an examining committee or a jury (they are on your committee because of what they can contribute, not just because they are qualified to evaluate), so direct the **conversation** to topics on which you hope to get feedback;
- focus on ideas and concepts more than data and details (the committee can best contribute in this regard);
- include a timeline for next year and completing the degree;
- leave time to discuss plans for next year.

The relative amounts of time spent on each section will vary a lot from year to year (little or none about results in your first meeting, a lot on that in years 3-4, and then a lot on future plans [e.g., post-doc, career goals] in Yrs 5+).

A detailed breakdown by year in the Ph.D. program. M.S. students should expect a subset of these topics crammed into a shorter timeframe, something like 1/2, 3/4, and 5/6

Year 1 – no committee meeting! Be thinking about your project and who would be an appropriate committee member to contribute usefully to what you want to do. Arrange meetings with faculty members to talk about your possible project, and ask people if they are willing to serve on your committee. Deal with housekeeping details like declaring your major advisor before grad reviews roll around. Read the graduate handbook and make sure you understand the hoops that you'll have to jump through to complete the graduate program. Make a plan, and start

jumping! (Pay attention while reading the grad handbook to what you should be bringing to your committee members for people to sign!)

Year 2 – What important question(s) are you going to answer in your thesis or dissertation, and how are you planning to do this project? At this stage, you may have some preliminary data to justify your project idea (or you may not – if not, have a solid plan of how you’re going to start getting that data). Explain the “big picture” justification for your research question first and foremost, including explicit justification of why it is an important and interesting question. Make sure you’ve done your background reading and can explain how your work will fit into the current knowledge in the field. Then lay out how you will be answering that big question (or a specific smaller part of it) in the course of your dissertation. Think about what you will need to know to complete your project, and where you’re going to get that knowledge. If you have a particular type of post-degree career in mind, let the committee know so they can help you plan to gain the skills and experience you will need to be competitive for that type of job. Have a course of studies document for everyone to sign, and get ready to take your prelims by the end of this year.

Year 3 (proposal defense) – What have you done? Again, lead with the big picture. At this point you should absolutely have some preliminary data to give your committee an idea of how it’s going and whether you’ll be able to pull off this project. Give your committee enough information to show that you’re thoroughly addressing your question from several perspectives (i.e. testing multiple hypotheses to provide a well-reasoned and logical breakdown of the problem, not just finding one correlation and calling it a day). Be aware that your committee might suggest that you need more information to address specific points – give them enough info so that they can make that assessment, and be open to suggestions. The best committee meetings I’ve seen are a long-term conversation between the student and their committee that involve exchanges like “last year, I asked for input on how to best figure out if my results were influenced by X; the committee recommended testing Y, so to do that I measured Z vs. X (or ran such-and-such experiment) and this is what I found and how I interpret it.” If you don’t give your committee enough information on what your results are showing until the bitter end, you run the risk of being told that you need additional tests after you would like to think your major fieldwork is done.

Your prelims can substitute for your annual committee meeting, BUT you’re still required to have your proposal approved within 6 months of passing your prelims; so don’t let a year go by without a meeting, use that proposal defense meeting to handle this task of establishing your research plan and making sure your committee is on board.

Year 4 – Results. Explain the overall context of the project BRIEFLY, but then focus on what you’ve found, the progress you’ve made in tackling your questions, and plans for the upcoming year. Focus on recapping your objectives *for the last year* (not for the entire project – there’s not enough time), what you’ve done to meet those objectives, what your objectives are for the next year, and how that fits into the bigger picture of your dissertation. Have a question in mind for which you really do want committee feedback, and structure the discussion to solicit input on that question; do make sure it’s something that you’ve discussed with your advisor just in case the answer is something you should have already covered in one-on-one meetings. Be sure to include a proposed timeline for finishing.

Year 5 – Results, and when are you planning to finish? Same details as year 4. Show what you've done since last year, and how feedback from last year changed your approach, if applicable. This may be your last committee meeting before you're on the job market, which makes it a great time to ask for career strategy advice. Explain the sort of job that you eventually want to have, and your current plan for getting there. Ask for feedback on your CV to make sure that you're competitive when it's time to send out those applications.

Year 6-7 – Should have made substantial progress toward finishing. Otherwise, same details as year 4 and 5. Results and progress are very important in these meetings. Ideally, your committee should have received your chapters and your defense should be scheduled and serve as your annual meeting in your 6th or 7th year.

Year 8 – Everyone's personal schedule is different, and who knows what challenges will pop up during your Ph. D., but if you're still in the program at year 8 you should have taken some cold hard looks at what's going on with your project and your ability to push (or interest in pushing) it toward completion. At this point, the faculty may be reluctant to recommend continued TA support. It is hard to make steady progress toward your goal of a completed PhD and not finish before the end of 8 years. There's always the possibility of extenuating circumstances, so this is not an absolute rule, but at this point you and your committee should be assessing your interest in completing and potential to complete a PhD and the committee may question whether it serves your interests to remain in the program.