



Section 8: Scenarios

SCENARIO 1: Ready to Defend but Supervisor Disagrees

SCENARIO 2: Quality of Supervision is Unsatisfactory

SCENARIO 3: Disability-related Issue

SCENARIO 1

I am ready to defend but my supervisor disagrees and wants me to produce "one more" publication. Can I submit my thesis for examination without my supervisor's approval?

Though the simple answer is "yes," we would strongly advise against this. It is best practice that a student's thesis be approved by the supervisor and supervisory committee as ready to defend. After all, they are responsible for upholding the academic standards of the program, and (should) have been chosen for their expertise and experience. And if you disagree with their advice, you should reflect on the possibility they might be right and that your thesis indeed needs some more work. When was your last committee meeting? Did you have a thorough discussion about whether you had completed sufficient research to go forward to your defence?

Is the disagreement over the *content* of the thesis? Or maybe your supervisor feels that you need enough publications to secure an appropriate post-doctoral position? Sometimes, supervisors may want those publications also to show sufficient productivity during their grant funding period. Though you should ideally have discussed expectations concerning publications and length of program earlier than this, you might want to check around to see what normal expectations are in your graduate unit and

discipline. What is the average time to degree in your unit? What is the average number of publications produced by a doctoral student in your program? Though these data may not be formally collected and available, the graduate office should have a reasonable idea of what they are.

And though you may elect to proceed to examination without the full support of your supervisory committee, remember that committee members also play a role as voting members in your Final Oral Examination. Following the question period of the oral defence, all committee members will be asked to vote on whether your thesis and its defence are acceptable. If there is more than one negative vote or abstention at this point, the thesis examination will be adjourned. Though someone with unreasonable bias should not serve on the examination committee, the onus would be on you to show evidence of such a bias; the default assumption would be that they were doing their job responsibly. So, it is risky to move forward without the full support of your supervisory committee. Keep in mind also that it is in everyone's best interest to see a doctoral candidate succeed. Try to reach mutual agreement with your supervisory committee regarding what changes need to be made before you can defend. Incorporate these changes as best you can, remembering at the same time that this is *your* thesis and that it has to be yours to defend through the examination process. Be aware that your supervisor and committee members are expected to encourage doctoral students to finish up when it would not be in the student's best interests to extend their program of study; at the same time, if the thesis or research needs more work, they should point this out. And if after considering all this, you still feel there is a problem, please do talk to your graduate coordinator or program chair/director, or consult us at SGS, before proceeding.

SCENARIO 2

I am very unhappy with the quality of the supervision I have been receiving. My supervisor seems unwilling to return drafts of my thesis until several months later, and when he/she does the comments often seem to be the opposite of suggestions made earlier. Now the supervisor is insisting that more research needs to be done. It seems I will never be able to finish. What can I do?

First, it would be wise to try and evaluate the situation objectively and dispassionately. The later stages of a PhD program can be stressful and emotionally charged, and criticism and seeming delay can too easily be misinterpreted as hostile and negative. Are you submitting reasonably complete drafts, with prior warning, and at times when your supervisor is not overwhelmed with other responsibilities? Keep in mind that your supervisor has other responsibilities and commitments and may in the same period be reading and providing feedback on work submitted by more than one student. While a two-week turnaround on submitted material is generally considered acceptable, it is important to be aware that this is for chapter-sized drafts when the supervisor is aware in advance that they are coming, has perhaps seen them before so the revisions are not extensive, and is not desperately working on other commitments such as a deadline for a major grant proposal, a book or research article that needs to be submitted, or heavy teaching. If some of the criticism you receive seems arbitrary and inconsistent at first glance, remember that minor changes to prose can sometimes have major impacts on other parts of the text, and may well reverse meaning and change the context so that what may have been alright before is now questionable. And as drafts improve, less important problems often begin to be more noticeable. If you still think the criticism as unreasonable, you might show your draft to other students whose opinion you respect, or ask one of your committee members for their opinion.

Certainly the question of whether a student's research results are sufficient for the thesis requires a value judgement, and supervisors may sometimes err on the side of caution. Remember that the quality of a thesis reflects on the supervisor as well. Check other recent theses in your discipline (they should be readily available on the University's T-Space). Seek the advice of other committee members. The point in a student's program when the research is complete should have been discussed and agreed to at a formal supervisory committee meeting; if this did not occur, or if the issue arises and cannot be resolved when the thesis draft is being read, the student should call a full meeting of the committee to seek their judgement. Occasionally, there is disagreement and lack of resolution even within the committee; in this case, or if you have reasonable grounds to believe committee members or your supervisor are acting in a way that is not in your best interest, you should discuss the matter with the graduate coordinator and/or chair. They could for instance attend a committee meeting, change the committee composition, or add an extra faculty member not previously involved.

SCENARIO 3

I am worried that I might have a disability-related issue, and I am reluctant to talk to my supervisor in case it changes how they feel about me and think about my work. What do I do?

Contact U of T's [Accessibility Services](#) for a consultation. They will maintain confidentiality. This will help determine whether there is an appropriate accommodation that may help your situation. Some accommodations may need your collaboration with people in your graduate unit, such as your supervisor or course instructors; others may not. If accommodations are appropriate, an accessibility counsellor can help discuss them with the necessary people if you agree to this. But you remain in control. You decide what accommodations to seek, if any, but in deciding, you should be aware of potential consequences of your decisions (for instance, could it delay your graduation? Will it affect the type of research project you can pursue?). Remember also that accommodations are negotiated, so not all accommodations requested by you or Accessibility Services may be approved. Your supervisor and graduate unit must ensure that your request does not jeopardize the delivery and essential standards of the program, nor your responsibility toward good academic progress as a graduate student in that program.