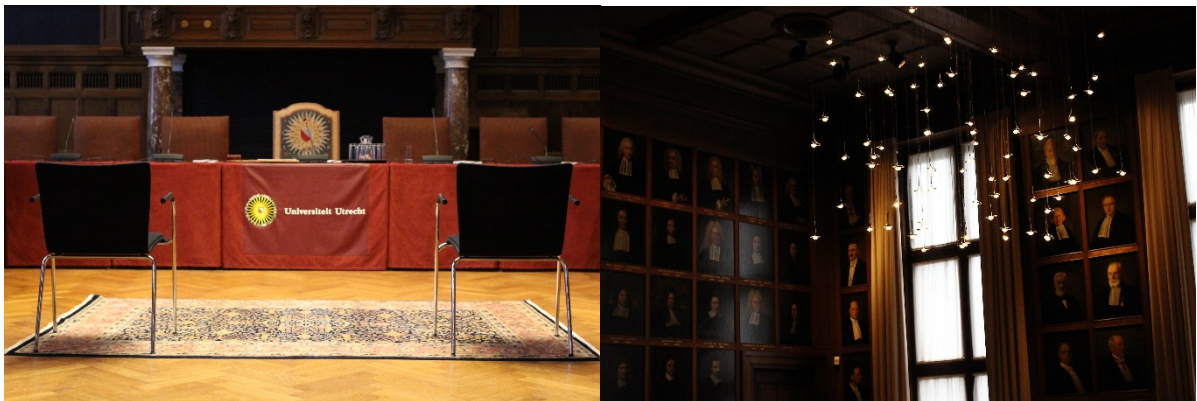


How to prepare for your PhD defense?

Carole-Anne Sénit, PhD.

This post is part of the “How to...” series of articles of the ESG early career newsletter.

After four years of a demanding, often lonely, yet great learning adventure, I defended my PhD thesis at Utrecht University, back in November 2017. I was overly stressed compared to what the PhD defense really is: a rite of passage. No matter how much I prepared, I was still very much intimidated by the scenery and the seven professors dressed in medieval-fancy black togas. Plus, I was surrounded by the (judgmental) portraits of all the deans of Utrecht University since its foundation in 1636.



Utrecht University's Senaatszaal

Photo credits: Ina Möller

Now that my PhD is behind me, I'm happy to share some tips about my defense preparation.

1. Don't overstress. I know this is an easy thing to say but if you got there, it means that the job is done. Try to enjoy a peer-to-peer discussion with professors you admire and who have dedicated time to the reading of your work (this is rare!).

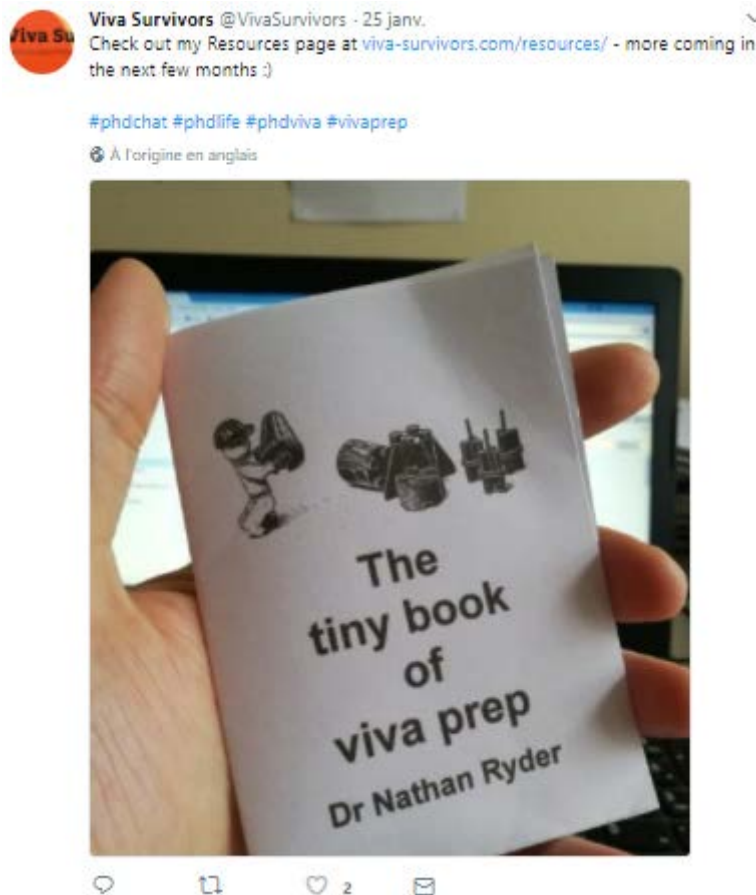
2. Adjust your preparation to the format of the defense. There is no one-size-fits-all way of preparing your defense; it mainly depends on the format. PhD defenses in France or Sweden can take hours (best of luck for my French and Swedish comrades!). Mine took 45 minutes. It also depends on whether you have to present your work or not. I didn't have to. What I did is, though I'm not sure it has proven to be useful, that I re-read my entire thesis and tried to spot parts of my research on which the committee members could ask me to elaborate. Then, I thought about ways to further justify my methodological and empirical decisions, my theoretical position, and so on.

3. Read your committee members' most recent research. When I asked my promotor for advice on how I should prepare for my defense, he answered me the following: take a glass of wine and try to put yourself in the shoes of the members of your committee.¹ You should take some time to read the most recent papers of your committee members, and you obviously should know their theoretical position and empirical focus like the back of your hand. See what they are interested in and how this connects to your own work. Then, you'll be able to anticipate their questions better.

¹ This may require more than a glass of wine.

4. Have a mock defense. Whether or not you have to do a presentation, a mock defense will be useful on various levels: it allows you to practice your talk if you have to present your research, and even if you can never prejudge what the questions will be, it allows you to practice answering difficult questions.

5. Check on useful resources. While preparing for my PhD, a young doctor, also a friend of mine, recommended me to read some of the blog posts of [Viva Survivors](#). This website will both comfort you and provide you with interesting tips about how to prepare for your defense – which apparently is called Viva in the UK. For instance, I used a [top 40](#) potential viva questions in my preparation.



If you entirely read this note, it means that you're almost done with your PhD, congrats and good luck! If not, it means that you're procrastinating, go back to writing!