**Remote defenses**

**University of Iowa**: I [didn’t see any university-wide guidelines](https://grad.uiowa.edu/sites/grad.uiowa.edu/files/2021-01/Remote%20Exam%20Pro-Tips_2.pdf) on this topic but they did have [tips from April 2020](https://grad.uiowa.edu/sites/grad.uiowa.edu/files/2021-01/Remote%20Exam%20Pro-Tips_2.pdf).

**Peer land-grant universities**

**University of California – Davis:** [returning to in-person defenses](https://gradstudies.sf.ucdavis.edu/return-person-qualifying-examinations), allowing for 1 committee member to “apply” to be remote (with restrictions such that they cannot be withing driving distance and must have student approval to be remote). In-person defenses require masks.

**University of Illinois-Urbana**: in their [2021-22 Handbook](https://grad.illinois.edu/sites/grad.illinois.edu/files/pdfs/handbook.pdf#masters-degree-requirements), they are allowing remote defenses for students.

* Excerpted from page 44: “Remote participation. Synchronous remote participation of the student or committee member(s) is permitted on preliminary and final examination committees under the following conditions: (1) Technology must allow all participants to communicate throughout the examination and to access all materials presented. Video technology is encouraged for remote committee members and required for a student participating remotely. (2) The chair (or co-chair) is responsible for coordinating the use of any technology, for recessing the examination if technical problems prevent full participation, and for making arrangements to resume the examination promptly.” Tips are also presented on this [webpage](https://grad.illinois.edu/thesis/tips-conducting-exams-remotely).

**Michigan State University**: could not find university-wide guidelines on this subject

**University of Minnesota**: in their [Doctoral Degree: Completion website](https://policy.umn.edu/education/doctoralcompletion), they are allowing remote defenses for students. Excerpted from section I: “The doctoral final oral committee must consist of at least four members, including the advisor(s). All members of the committee and the candidate must participate in the final oral examination. Committee members and/or the student may participate remotely as long as all conditions for remote participation in the examination are met.” Conditions are listed on the site following this statement. (The website also states: “This policy applies to all students admitted after January 1, 2013.”) Tips are also presented on this [webpage](https://policy.umn.edu/education/doctoralperformance-appa).

**North Carolina State University:** [allows committee members](http://catalog.ncsu.edu/graduate/graduate-handbook/comprehensive-examinations/#text) to participate remotely (Section D)

**Ohio State University:** the [Graduate Handbook](https://gradsch.osu.edu/handbook/all#7-5) allows remote defenses (e.g., Section 7.2) as long as they fulfill the [Graduate School guidelines](https://gradsch.osu.edu/handbook/b-1-video-conferencing-exams-guidelines-video-conferencing-relating-to-masters-and-doctoral) which include:

* “Graduate programs must adhere to the following if a master’s oral examination, the oral portion of the doctoral candidacy examination, or the final oral examination involves video conferencing. Facilities and Support Requirements: (1) At minimum, the video communications facilities must be such that the candidate and all members of the examination committee can see and hear one another during the entire examination. (2) There must be adequate provision for the transmission of any text, graphics, photographs, or writing referred to or generated during the examination. (3) The use of audio-only communications is not permitted. (4) All participants should confirm in advance that the video communications facilities are satisfactory. The student must agree in writing in advance to the conduct of the examination by video communications. Immediately prior to the examination, the student may cancel the examination without prejudice if the facilities differ significantly from those previously inspected. (5) Any technical support staff required to operate equipment is bound by university policy to observe strict confidentiality. (6) The oral examination must be scheduled for a two-and-one-half-hour time period to allow for any delays resulting from video communications use. (7) In the event of a technical failure, the advisor in consultation with the other committee members will decide whether to cancel the examination without prejudice to the student. … (9) Graduate students, committee members, and/or GFRs may be physically present for examinations. (10) Programs must ensure that students are well advised about videoconference procedures and guidelines related to an examination. And (11) Students in dual degree programs with international institutions can defend remotely at the foreign institutions. However the student must register for 3 graduate credits at Ohio State during the semester of the candidacy exam, final defense, and graduation. If the student defends at the foreign institution, they will need to set up the video conference arrangements for the Ohio State committee members and the assigned GFR.”

**Pennsylvania State University**: I [couldn’t access the answer to this question](https://gradschool.psu.edu/covid19/frequently-asked-questions-related-to-covid-19/) but it seems that they may not be allowing remote defenses.

* Here’s an excerpt I could access: “Penn State is planning for a full on-campus learning environment for fall 2021, and the fall semester will more closely resemble Penn State’s typical in-person instructional experience. With a return to in-person instruction, the Graduate School has reassessed the guidance documents it released during the pandemic to determine which, if any, of the temporary adjustments should continue in FA21.   After careful consideration, the Graduate School has [updated its guidance on policy exceptions for FA21](https://nam10.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fpennstateoffice365.sharepoint.com%2F%3Ab%3A%2Fs%2FACUEACGEDAACOVID-19Response%2FEfydNlVB_y5BmUyl6tVnSHIBnRkqna8dn_DSY4rvs7moFw%3Fe%3DfF73a5&data=04%7C01%7Cl-acge%40lists.psu.edu%7C8e6469b21cbd4cc9c3b008d946173208%7C7cf48d453ddb4389a9c1c115526eb52e%7C0%7C0%7C637617888039820646%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=KaEGH9y9zHj5J%2BeQDbotM%2BY5iFw10pFqEWnOyY0eheY%3D&reserved=0).”

**Purdue University-Main Campus**: I could not find a university-wide policy, but the Elmore School of Electrical and Computer Engineering allowed for remote defenses in their [Handbook](https://engineering.purdue.edu/ECE/Academics/Graduates/PHD/handbook?_ga=2.176326437.162916946.1630687309-769204898.1630687309), stating:

* At least 3 weeks before the desired date of the final examination, consult with all the members of your advisory committee to find a suitable date and time to hold the examination. Your examination must be held on the West Lafayette Purdue Campus or may, with approval of your advisory committee, be held virtually.”

**Texas A&M University**: could not find university-wide guidelines on this subject

**University of Wisconsin-Madison**: could not find university-wide guidelines on this subject

**Big 12 Schools**

**Baylor University:** could not university-wide guidelines on this subject but they had:

* “As students prepare for online defenses, we have been getting a lot of e-mails on how to complete signatures.” listed on one site – I could not tell when this [page](https://www.baylor.edu/graduate/index.php?id=959239) (section Forms and Signatures for Defense) was last updated, however.

**Kansas State University:** does not permit remote defenses (section [L. Final Exam](https://www.k-state.edu/grad/student-success/graduate-handbook/chapter3.html#Preliminary%20Examination)).

**Oklahoma State University**: does not permit remote defenses (section [Dissertation Defense – Attendance](https://gradcollege.okstate.edu/resources/best-practices-advisory-defenses.pdf))

**Texas Christian University**: could not find university-wide guidelines on this subject

**Texas Tech University**: could not find university-wide guidelines on this subject

**University of Kansas**: is [temporarily allowing remote defenses](https://graduate.ku.edu/grading) (though the information seems like it hasn’t been updated).

* “Remote work will necessarily change our approach to master’s and doctoral exams. Existing rules requiring in-person attendance at milestone exams (e.g., thesis and dissertation defenses) are suspended and milestone exams may be conducted remotely through the end of the fall 2020 semester. During Kansas’ stay-at-home order, no participants should attend an exam in person—all individuals should participate using mediated means (video-conferencing). Once the state deems it safe to lift the stay-at-home order, students should work with their committee and all should use their discretion in evaluating whether some or all individuals should participate in the exam remotely. In cases where the student prefers for all committee members to be physically present, the student's preference shall be honored. However, this preference may require rescheduling and therefore delay progress to degree. If students are living in Lawrence, KU Libraries has made a private room available in which students can conduct their exams, including a whiteboard and stable WIFI. … All participants in an exam involving remote participation must be fully aware of what is transpiring and fully able to participate in all components of the discussion with the student and each other. Any material presented during the examinations orally or in writing must be seen and heard by all participants. Oral examinations that do not meet these participation requirements are not valid. A student's milestone outcome will not be influenced by any proceedings that take place without the full engagement of all participants. If a committee member has not arrived, the exam may not begin; if a committee member leaves, the exam may not proceed. When conducting exams remotely, it is very important to adjust Zoom settings for all participants to prevent Zoom bombing.” [Guidelines](https://graduate.ku.edu/sites/graduate.ku.edu/files/docs/Updated%20Zoom%20Guide%20to%20Final%20Defenses.pdf) are also provided.

**University of Oklahoma**: is [temporarily allowing remote defenses](https://www.ou.edu/gradcollege/about/coronavirus-faq).

* “In summer 2021, non-thesis exams, qualifying exams, general exams, prospectus defenses, annual evaluations, thesis/dissertation defenses, or other similar milestone events maybe conducted remotely. **Zoom** should be used for events that involve oral discussion. The normal Graduate College approval for remote participation will not be required. These events may be conducted in person as long as in-person courses are being held, and as long as **all applicable university policies**, including those related to room capacity, masking, and physical distancing, are adhered to. During any period when in-person courses are suspended, exams, defenses, and related milestones **must** be conducted remotely. … Defenses should be public. Even for in-person events, a Zoom component may facilitate broader participation and help to manage room capacity. The Zoom meeting information can be shared with faculty and graduate students in the academic unit as well as other interested parties such as the candidate’s family and friends.”

**University of Texas at Austin**: allows remote defenses and states:

* “It is expected that all members of the committee attend the defense. The Graduate School does not distinguish between physical attendance or electronic/virtual attendance of the defense. One non-supervisory committee member may be absent from the defense in if necessary, but all members must read the dissertation and, when satisfied, sign the Report of Dissertation Committee form.”

**West Virginia University:** could not find university-wide guidelines on this subject

**Benefits**

Online platforms still allow for existing defense structures (e.g., Intro, Presentation, Q&A, Deliberation, and Committee Decision) while providing new benefits.

* Remote defenses are inclusive. Many more people can attend than would for an in-person defense. This can be particularly meaningful given that the defense is an accumulation of a student’s work for five or six years and some students may benefit from having a community of peers, family, etc. there.
* That more people can attend a defense is also important given the nature of defenses which are to present an examination of everything that is known about the subject *today* and advances to the field.
* Students experience less stress and fewer distractions because students have greater control over their environments and thereby fewer distractions/greater focus on their presentation
* Remote work (e.g., jobs, education) is here to stay. Remote defenses give students opportunity to gain remote presentation experience which is likely to become a more necessary skillset.
* Remote defenses can give greater flexibility to students who cannot attend in person (e.g., have already started a job).
* Remote defenses can benefit both students and committee members by allowing more committee members to attend even if they are traveling, attend different universities, etc. (Students can get the faculty expertise on their committee if not limited to faculty at their own university; students can defend when they need to because they are not limited by their faculty’s in-person schedule.)
* The discussion quality among committee members or between committee members and students has not been found to be significantly diminished by remote defenses. (This is further supported by the fact that remote meetings are generally becoming more common which means everyone is becoming increasingly more adept at handling and accounting for minor technological glitches/hiccups when they do occur.)

Citation: [Virtual Thesis Defense](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/03/27/rise-remote-phd-defense) (Inside Higher Ed article)

**Tips from recent PhDs and other contributors for everyone in the remote defense**

*For planning*

1. Both the **major professor and student should co-host** the meeting (assuming both have enterprise access to the software and this allows for 40min+ meetings).
   1. This allows the student to arrive early to start the meeting, help committee members set up, and have control for muting/unmuting.
   2. This allows the major professor (or the candidate) to create breakout rooms for the student/observers for deliberations.
   3. This allows the student and observers to remain in the room to celebrate after the major professor and committee have left. (Particularly important for calls with people who would otherwise be unable to celebrate with the student.)
2. **When scheduling the virtual meeting** room, select the following options (if possible):
   1. Enable breakout rooms
   2. Mute participants on entry
   3. Allow co-hosts (or “alternate hosts”)
3. **To prevent unwanted guests (e.g., internet trolls, Zoom crashers),** use additional privacy options.
4. Generate meeting ID automatically (instead of using a personal ID)
5. Require meeting a password
6. Require users to authenticate with your university’s account (note: not ideal for public audiences where people may use non-university accounts)
7. Enable waiting room (note: this will automatically disable “join before host”)
8. Remove the setting “allow removed participants to rejoin”
9. Have a **backup option** ready. Pick your video platform and prepare for things to go as planned. However, have an alternative option (e.g., a phone call-in option in case someone can’t connect or reconnect to the video call).
10. When possible, have the major professor handle video call issues (e.g., muting people, creating breakout rooms). This allows the student to focus on their presentation.
11. **Figure out where you will be during the remote defense**. Consider the background behind you, and what you will need to create a non-distracting backdrop. Think about whether you will use your natural environment or a virtual background, stand or sit, present from home or another location?
    1. If it is a remote defense, but you will be on campus, **consider the campus reosurces available to you**. Wifi which may be more reliable than at your home. Use campus spaces (e.g., meeting or seminar rooms) that have video technology set up for you already.
    2. Consider using a **double monitor** so you can view the participants on one screen and you slides on the other screen. Alternatively, call into the meeting using two devices – on one you can share your slides and on the other you can view your audience.
12. Consider using a **webinar function** (rather than a regular video call function) to prevent viewers from accidentally interrupting a presentation (likely more important with larger audiences)

*For students, prior to the defense:*

1. Select a **reliable device** with a working camera and microphone
2. **Check your internet connection** in the room you plan to use for the defense
3. **Select the platform** you are using (e.g., Zoom). Make sure you have a working account and have downloaded the app (unless you can access it online and plan to do that)
4. **Format your slides** for a remote defense. Consider eliminating distracting transitions or animations because, with overloaded video conferencing platforms, they may be glitchy (an alternative to using PowerPoint (or another slide platform) use a PDF document of the slides). Use big font and less content on each slide because the viewing screen in a remote defense is smaller than during regular talk.
   1. Consider whether to **distribute slides to the committee in advance**. This can be helpful if someone gets dropped from the videocall, there are technological glitches, and generally facilitate discussion.
   2. **Number each slide** so it’s easy for everyone to navigate to the same one if needed.
5. Plan to **screen-share rather than project slides** to enhance visual clarity
6. Once you have determined where your defense will take place, **practice in that space** using the same technology you will use during the defense. Do a practice run — with colleagues or friends who can also provide feedback remotely.
7. **Share information about the remote defense in advance**, including what platform you are using, how committee members can access it, and any additional information about what to expect during the remote defense
8. **Enter the remote meeting room** (e.g., Zoom meeting) **early** (recommended 15 minutes) to ensure you can address any technical difficulties if they arise (e.g., your computer needs to restart, the app needs to be updated, the meeting link is broken)

\* *By becoming familiar with the platform and practicing in advance you can avoid or troubleshoot as many day-of issues as possible.*

*For students, during the defense:*

1. This is a formal occasion, so students should **dress the part**!
2. **Establish ground rules** for the presentation at the beginning. Depending on your platform and your audience, it may make sense to take a moment to explain how the tech works (e.g., how and when should people ask questions?). This helps audience members understand their role. Describe the format of the defense (e.g., how long will you present) which may be more important for meetings with guests). You can also use this time to explain to people how they can reconnect if they drop the call.
   1. Because of technology, the student may need to restate a few slides. Expect this is a possibility and don’t try not to get too flustered.
3. **Use microphone and video during the presentation** and Q&A. **Mute your microphone while not speaking** to avoid background noise. Headphones are recommended (especially depending on your location)
4. **Have a moderator** (typically the major professor) who can choose who gets to turn their mic on and ask the next question.

*For the committee, during the defense:*

1. **Use your video** to the extent your internet connection allows. This enables the meeting to be as “face-to-face”/interactive as possible
2. **Mute your microphone unless you are speaking.** This improves audio for everyone by reducing feedback and background noise.

*Tips for the student and committee members:*

1. A**rrange your camera and lighting in advance** (this creates a more professional environment for everyone on the call).
   1. Use the Windows “Camera” or the Apple “Photo Booth” or “FaceTime” to **test your video camera** (if you do not want to log into Zoom).
   2. **Pick a non-distracting background**. Generally, a flat wall is better than the corner of a room. Use a virtual background if you’d like but pick one and use it for the duration of the defense.
   3. **Determine where the camera is located on your device.** The camera should be at or slightly above eye level. If you camera is at the top of your screen, then your gaze should naturally fall about 2 inches below the top edge of the screen; this will make it so you’re looking at people on the call. (You may need to place your computer on some platform (e.g., a desk-raiser, stack of books, etc.).
   4. **Adjust the lighting.** Avoid rooms where natural light or other lighting are visible in the frame and/or are located behind you. Have lighting that is off camera (in front of you, overhead, and/or to the side).
2. **Avoid moving your hands** close to the camera.
3. **Avoid nudging/jostling the table** on which your computer sits.
4. **Use non-verbals** as you would in-person to ensure you are still communicating even if you are muted
5. **To celebrate,** consider takingplanned “screenshots” with the committee / observers after the defense.

*For guest observers:*

1. **Keep your microphone muted** at all times.
2. **Join with your name or a static profile picture** to reduce visual distractions.
3. If you want to join by video and wish to use a virtual background, choose one background at the beginning and keep it the same for the duration of the defense.
4. **Do not use the Chat feature** to send messages to the defending student during the defense.
5. If supported by the student and committee members, turn on your audio/video at the very end so everyone can see you (after the meeting is over).

*\* Consider asking non-committee member guests to keep their videos off (to reduce bandwidth and improve video quality for everyone) and selecting the option to “hide non-video participants.” This hides all observers at once so the student and committee members can focus on each other.*

**Troubleshooting**

1. **If Zoom crashes or has trouble starting up** the meeting more than once, quit Zoom and try turning your computer off and back on again.
2. **If you are experiencing audio or video issues** (i.e., other participants cannot see or hear you), first, try leaving and re-entering the room)
3. **If your internet connection is poor** or video is not working well (freezing, etc.), try:
   1. Moving closer to your wireless router
   2. Turning off your video
   3. Turning off all video except the person questioning the candidate
   4. Only if (a) and (b) don’t work: Ask others on your internet (e.g., roommates, family) to avoid high-bandwidth activities, like Netflix, other video calls, Fortnite, etc. for the duration of your defense
   5. Leaving the room and re-joining via phone
4. **If there is substantial audio feedback / echoes**, mute your microphones when not speaking and/or switch to headphones.

Content adapted from: [Virtual Thesis Defense](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/03/27/rise-remote-phd-defense), [Basic Instructions for Using Zoom](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ktdFVX0gBVErixR1wWZeguPTw6HQmf_zwPEUYVmuVqc/edit), [Advice for Defending a PhD Remotely](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1B9CIlrTOuiDSLOVqYQH292j4MR-oHdpqQbYiYKQxa1w/edit), [Tips for an Effective Remote Defense](https://jabberwocky.weecology.org/2020/03/31/tips-for-an-effective-remote-defense/), [Rice University](https://graduate.rice.edu/news/tips-tricks-virtual-thesis-defense-and-submission), [University of Illinois blog](https://blogs.illinois.edu/view/6397/808052)