

PLANNING A REMOTE DEFENSE

Many thanks to Dr. Ethan White, Associate Professor in Ecology and Informatics at UF for sharing his experiences via Twitter (<https://twitter.com/ethanwhite/status/1240336385896316928>).

Advice for the Presenter

Presenters should give themselves extra time and have back-up plans in case things do not go as expected. Set up the connection early (15+ minutes) and request committee members connect early to ensure everything is working prior to when the audience is expected (if any).

For the presentation, either ask all participants to mute themselves at the start or have whoever is managing the call mute them all centrally. Participants can easily forget they are not muted and accidentally interrupt the presentation. Use the “hand raise” function for Q&A to avoid voice collisions.

A 2-monitor setup will let the presenter (or committee) see attendees plus slides and notes. Of course, if it is less stressful present without seeing the audience, perhaps take the opportunity of defending remotely to not have to see them. ([View Zoom support for video layouts](#). See “Gallery View” for larger groups.)

Remember, this may not be the ideal conclusion of years of hard work, but that does not change that it is a huge accomplishment. Celebrate in whatever (publicly responsible) way you can (e.g., have a video-based lab celebration).

Advice for the Committee

Have someone on the committee other than the defending student set up and manage (“host”) the Zoom (or other system) call. The student does not need to juggle that on top of presenting and answering questions. Consider designating co-hosts, including the student, when scheduling the meeting so that more than one person can manage.

If there are bandwidth issues, the host may want to have the audience stop their video. Since the presenter often cannot tell if there are connection issues, the committee member managing the call should manage this via chat to avoid interrupting the presenter if possible.

When screen-sharing, only a handful of other participants are visible. If they all have their video on that can still be really helpful for making it feel like an in-person talk. In order to see more people, screen share from one computer and join the call from another computer to see all the participants. (See link for Zoom video layouts under “Advice for Presenter” above.)

Have a plan for how to have the student “step out of the room”. One good solution (if using Zoom) is to use a breakout room for the committee to talk and then return to the main room when done (above recommendation for committee member setting up Zoom supports this). Another option for having the student “step out of the room” is to put them “on hold.”

Advice for the Committee (*continued*)

Definitely use video if possible during the private portion of the defense. This is an inherently stressful activity and a lot of the usual positive/encouraging social cues get lost with voice-only communication. That said, if a committee member is “freezing” during questions, it is probably because of local wireless/upload bandwidth which may be helped by turning off the video.

Be kind and supportive. Frankly committees should always do this, but it is even more important now because everyone is under a ton of extra stress. This doesn't mean committee members cannot probe the work, just do it in a positive way focused on helping the student.

Minimize required changes for the manuscript itself. Many of us are not focusing well right now and revisions are often due on a tight timeline. Clearly distinguish recommendations for changes prior to submitting papers for publication from those required prior to manuscript submission for graduation.

Communicate your excitement at a student passing clearly and effusively. This is a big deal even if everyone is stressed and cannot celebrate in the usual ways.

Advice for the Audience (*if any*)

Audience members should mute themselves immediately.

Audience members should participate with video (barring bandwidth issues). Live video faces can help fill the challenging lack of normal audience engagement during a remote talk. That said, video may need to be turned off in the event of wireless/upload bandwidth issues.

Consider exaggerating positive non-verbal responses. With lots of participants, everyone is small on the screen. Clear head nods, thumbs ups, or big smiles can all help mimic normal positive audience feedback.