How To Escape At The Last Minute

After all their research is finished and a dissertation is written, some Ph.D. candidates get cold feet. They realize that a life of angels dancing on Turing machines simply isn't exciting. For those students, we offer a way out: simply make a mess of the oral final exam.

Unfortunately, Ph.D. candidates often rehearse answers to questions about their research for many years; flubbing an oral will require practice. For those students, we offer a simple study guide. Here are techniques that can be used to confuse the panel and guarantee a life without research:

1. Provide an incorrect answer. This is perhaps the cardinal sin. Don't overuse the technique or the panel will think you are joking.

2. Give a long-winded exposition on another topic unrelated to the question. This is the ‘‘show what you know’’ approach. The panel will assume you cannot answer the real question and are directing their attention elsewhere.

3. Redefine basic terminology or define new, absurd terminology. For example, say "During this examination, the term ‘‘yes’’ will sometimes mean ‘‘no’’, ‘‘maybe’’ will sometimes mean ‘‘never’’, and ‘‘no’’ will sometimes mean ‘‘maybe’’. When the astounded panel asks, "are you serious?" stare at them with a deadpan expression and answer "yes." Let them try to decide what it means.

4. Talk about yourself and your experiences instead of the subject at hand. Tell what you did instead of what you learned. Give detail as if the story will eventually have some relationship to the question. To move to personal experience, use a segue such as, "That reminds me -- late one night Tuesday night when we were studying this topic, a power failure and a stray dog caused some real excitement..."

5. Argue with the examiners. It helps if you can slander each of them independently. At the very least, question their credentials: "who do you people think you are, anyway?"

6. Listen carefully to the questions, and take advantage of the wording. If an examiner asks, "Can you outline for us the exact procedures used in your research, and note any exceptional or unusual techniques?" Simply mutter, "yes" and wait. When the examiners become impatient, point out that they have no grounds for being upset because you have correctly answered the question that was asked. Indeed, they only asked whether you can do something; they did not ask you to do it.

7. Revert to meta-answers and avoid the question completely. For example, suppose someone asks a direct question such as, "what percentage of your experiments succeeded?" Begin by saying, "that is a difficult question to answer." Go on to explain why the question is difficult (i.e., there are many ways to define success and calculate the percentage. One needs to think about being precise and insuring that all percentages sum to 100. Here's a good opportunity to bring up that power failure again, and its effect on success.

8. Talk forever without really giving an answer. Interrupt yourself and diverge into seemingly related topics. Keep wandering back onto the question from time to time. Babble on until they, or you, fall asleep.

9. Stick to the subject at hand, but give as many low-level technical details as possible. Get down to the bits and stay there. Avoid all concepts and summaries. Give detailed facts instead of describing their significance. Use tables of numbers instead of graphs. If possible, introduce long, complex equations without balanced parentheses.

10. Restate the question, but change it slightly to make it easier. Use it as an excuse to introduce a whole new topic of discussion, and avoid answering the original question. Later, when the examiners realize what you did, they will be furious!

11. Add a dozen caveats to each answer. Begin by saying, "of course, my answer depends on the communication system available in the country, the supplier used for spare computer parts, a local power company can provide uninterrupted electric power, the probability that cosmic rays from outer space strike anyone or anything involved, the number of days lost because someone is sick, and the stability of world economic markets..." The beauty is that most of what you say is true. If the panel asserts that you don't need to worry about all that, ask them, "You mean you don't care about a stable world economy? What kind of human beings are you, anyway?"

12. Be judgemental. Look directly at the committee and say, "I don't think your questions are worthy of an answer, and if you can't come up with anything better, I think we should terminate this examination." The examiners will agree with you, and the exam will end.

If the panel happens to be in a good mood, they will try to give you the benefit of the doubt. To fail outright, you must be careful to avoid giving them any grounds for passing. Thus, you should eschew the following techniques, all of which tend to help your presentation and increase your chances of passing:

1. Define terminology so that everyone in the audience can understand the the question and the answer. For example, the introductory statement, "when you ask about foobars, I assume you mean the variety sold in hardware stores and used around homes," clarifies which foobars you will be discussing.

2. Restate the question so everyone can hear it, especially if the question is asked by someone near the front of the room.

3. Reformulate the question into a form that is more general or emphasizes concepts. For example, "When you ask about the price of one hundred foobars, you probably want to know about the relationship between the quantity purchased and the discount available."

4. Answer the question directly by giving a typical or ‘‘average’’ case, and don't worry about all possible exceptions until someone asks for more detail (e.g., "Foobars usually cost around five dollars.").

5. Defer questions that will be covered later in your presentation by saying, "I will talk about that topic in ten minutes; if you can hold your question until then, we'll have a much better context for the discussion.

6. Compliment the person who asks a question (e.g., "That's a good question because it cuts to the heart of the matter.")

7. Don't be afraid to take irrelevant questions off-line (e.g., "A detailed answer to your question may require as long as thirty minutes and isn't germane to the rest of the discussion -- can we meet afterward in private to discuss it?") You can supply a short answer and defer detail (e.g., "The quick answer is: although what you ask is *possible*, it isn't practical -- I can tell you more in private if you are interested").

8. Remember not to overestimate the audience. Even a Ph.D. may not have all the terminology in his or her head. When in doubt, or when discussing an esoteric point, try to work a simple reminder into the first part of your answer.

9. Remain calm and relaxed. Looking tense or worried makes you appear to be unsure.

10. Don't take yourself too seriously. After all, you can always drop out and go to work for a behemoth software house. Thus, the worst case is that you will make more money.