To the opponent - A Guide to the Procedure for the Public Defence of a Doctoral Thesis

Background
The Ph.D. programme corresponds to the third cycle of the Bologna framework, and is preceded by four years of study in the first and second cycles (Bachelor and Master levels). Although a Ph.D. corresponds to four years of full-time study, many Ph.D. students also work part-time as teaching assistants and thus take five years or more to complete their doctorate. The Ph.D programme combines graduate courses with an individual research programme leading to publishable results. Graduate courses normally comprise between 25 and 50 % of the Ph.D. programme. The research programme culminates in the submission of a thesis which is defended in public. The thesis defence is a formal event for which the procedure is outlined below.

The thesis
Theses in the Faculty of Science are normally presented as a number of published papers preceded by a summary: monograph theses are permitted but are very unusual.

The participants
The opponent is a researcher selected to oppose the thesis at the public defence.

The candidate is the author of the thesis. During the defence the candidate (in Swedish "respondent") may be addressed either by his or her first name, or more formally as Mr. X, Ms. X.

The chairman is usually a professor from the candidate’s department.

The examination board is appointed by the Faculty, and consists of three or five members. At least one board member will be from another Faculty of the University of Gothenburg, or from outside the University. Both the opponent and the candidate’s supervisor attend the examination board meeting and take part in its deliberations, but do not have a vote.

Note: There is also a professor responsible for graduate education in the candidate’s research discipline, the examiner, who assesses the graduate courses read by the candidate. The examiner plays no formal role in the thesis defence.

The audience
A Swedish thesis defence is a public event. The audience will include the candidate’s friends, relatives and colleagues, and can be addressed simply as "Ladies and Gentlemen".
Sequence of events
An approximate time schedule for the defence is as follows:
Chairman’s introduction (4-5 min.)
Candidate’s opening remarks (2-3 min.)
Summary of the thesis (20 min.)
Opponent’s questions to the candidate (60-90 min.)
Questions from the audience (0-20 min.)
Meeting of the examination board (15-30 min.)
Chairman’s introduction: the chairman opens the proceedings and introduces the
opponent, the candidate and the examination board.

Candidate’s opening remarks: the candidate is given an opportunity to speak and/or
distribute a list of errata.

Summary of the thesis: this summary sets the scene for the discussion to follow. Traditionally
this summary was presented by the opponent, but nowadays the summary is more commonly
presented by the candidate, or by the opponent and the candidate in combination. In the latter
case, the opponent will normally discuss the value of the thesis in a wider context, while the
candidate will focus on the content of the thesis. As the audience consists partly of laymen it is
appreciated if at least the first part of the summary can be kept at the level of “popular
science”.

Opponent’s questions to the candidate: this is the hardest part for both the opponent and the
candidate. A good opposition will generate a scientific discussion which is both interesting to
the audience and informative for the examination board. While this is often best achieved by
focusing on the scientific principles and concepts applied and on the wider significance of the
work, detailed examination of selected aspects of the thesis can also be very valuable.
Questions relating to other parts of the discipline or adjacent subjects not included in the thesis
are not normally raised. Above all the opponent’s role is to stimulate and maintain a
discussion with the candidate while forcing the candidate to defend the thesis. The opponent
may wish to conclude by thanking the candidate for the discussion and/or offering
congratulations on a good defence, as appropriate. Opponent and candidate will often shake
hands at this stage.

Questions from the audience: when the opponent’s questioning is complete, the chairman
invites questions to the candidate from the examination board and the audience.

Closure of the public session: when the discussion is finished, the chairman formally closes
the public session and the members of the examination board withdraw for their meeting.

The examination board meeting: this meeting is held behind closed doors. The board
discusses the work presented in the thesis and its significance, together with the candidate’s
defence. The candidate’s contribution to multi-author papers in the thesis will be discussed,
usually based on a written contribution report. Although the opponent does not have a vote,
his or her opinion is considered an important contribution to the board’s discussion. The
opponent will often be asked how the standard of the thesis and its defence compare with
those in his or her home country.

It is very rare for a Swedish thesis to be rejected after the formal defence. The content of the
thesis will already have been reviewed internally, and also externally in the case of published
papers. However, if as opponent you find that the thesis is not of the standard required for a Ph.D. degree, please contact the supervisor or examiner well in advance so that the public defence can be called off.

**Practical details**

You can expect to receive all the material in the thesis in manuscript or preprint form at least three weeks before the defence; the final bound version will generally arrive a little later. If you would like slides or overheads of figures in the thesis to use in your opposition please let us know.

You will receive a small fee for your work, and your travel and subsistence expenses will be refunded. We can arrange accommodation in a University guest room or in a hotel according to your preference.

Although there are no formal dress requirements for the defence, if you come from a university with formal academic dress it is appreciated if you wear this since it adds to the sense of the occasion.