

Supporting Zoom thesis defenses – Support essentials

The University uses Zoom to facilitate thesis defenses for graduate students. As support staff, your role is essential in ensuring that these sessions run smoothly and professionally. This job aid outlines the key technical steps and best practices for supporting zoom-based thesis defenses, from session setup to breakout room management. Whether you are stepping in to assist faculty or ensuring minimal disruptions during critical moments, this guide will help you.

1. Understand the thesis defense flow

Every defense has a few key parts. Knowing how it usually goes will help you stay one step ahead:

- **Before the session:** The meeting is created and shared with the committee and candidates. The support staff ensure the setup is ready and join the meeting, usually about 30mins before the start to make sure everything is working well and troubleshoot any issue ahead of time. The person managing the breakout rooms should not forget to add the committee members to the breakouts, and the use of camera should be limited to the candidates and committee members.
- **At the beginning of the session:** All participants join in the main room. The host (support staff or coordinator) may separate the panel in a breakout room for pre-discussion.
- **Main presentation:** Everyone rejoins the main room for the candidate's defense.
- **Private deliberations:** Once the presentation ends, panelists move into a breakout room to deliberate, without the student. The same breakout should be used as it is saved in meeting. A participant may need to be added again should they get disconnected during the presentation or encounter an issue. The student remains in the main room or is placed in a waiting breakout room.
- **Rejoining and announcement:** Once the decision is made, everyone rejoins the main room for the final announcement.

2. Zoom session Setup (Desktop App)

You should **always use the Zoom desktop App** to create or manage breakout rooms, and not the web version. Before anything else:

- Ensure **Zoom is updated**, and breakout rooms are enabled in setting via the Zoom web portal (this is done from the website under *settings > Meeting > Breakout room*)
- Start or schedule the meeting
- Enable “**Waiting room**” or “**Passcode**” for security.
- Use your uOttawa account when hosting the session

3. Creating and managing breakout rooms

Once the session has started and everyone is present:

- Click on “**Breakout room**” in the Zoom toolbar
- Choose how to assign people:
- Manually (should always be set manually)
- Click “create”, and the rooms will be set up. Once the breakout is created, click on options and uncheck “Allow participants to choose room” and set to move automatically for both start and end of breakout. Check allows participants to return to main session at any time. Finally uncheck both timer countdown features.
- To move people around, click “**assign**” and select who should go where
- When ready, click “**open all rooms**” to send participants in
- You can use “**broadcast feature**” to send a message to all rooms at once (helpful for giving time warning or updates)

Note: If people drop off or reconnect, you might need to reassign them manually. Also, do not end the breakout rooms too early, give 60 seconds of head-up to participants.

4. Ending the session

- When the jury has finished, click “**Close all rooms**”
- Confirm all participants return to the main room, including any disconnected participants
- Exit the meeting only once you are sure that no further support is needed.

5. Best practices for staff support

- Arrive early (at least 30 minutes ahead) to test sound/video
- Rename breakout rooms clearly

- Stay muted unless technical help is requested
- Respect confidentiality and do not enter the deliberation room unless asked
- Be ready to add disconnected participants rooms

6. Troubleshooting – Common issues

Problem	Solution
Can not see breakout rooms.	Depending on the resolution of the user display, the breakout button could be hidden behind the three dots located at the far right of the tool bar.
Audio/video not working	Check permissions or suggest rejoining. Confirming that zoom has permission to access mic/camera. Suggests rejoining the session.
Participant unable to join a breakout	Reassign them manually or remove and recreate the breakout rooms.
Participants disconnected	Advise them to rejoin using the same zoom link. Reassign them to their breakout rooms.
External guest can't access the meeting	In “meeting settings”, make sure that the authentication is not forced to uOttawa domain only.
Waiting room confusion	The waiting room should not be enabled to ensure that participants can join early and without the presence of the host. Some externals will be in different time zones and tend to join the test very early.
Zoom lags or freezes	Check network connection. Suggest stopping video or switching to audio-only (only if really needed)

7. Support and resources

- IT support (Emergency line): ex. 5000
- Zoom walkthrough guide

For the full guide or questions, refer to the detailed Zoom walkthrough document or attend a Q&A session with Educational Technologies.