MassURC: The Snake-Fighting Portion of Your Defense

I’m psyched about participating the Massachusetts Undergraduate Research Conference - it’s really the best opportunity on campus to get out and share your work. And I love making (scripted) public presentations, so this was an event I’ve been looking forward to for a long time.

Honestly, the best advice I can give re: oral presentations is from McSweeny’s “The Snake-Fighting Portion of Your Thesis Defense.” TL;DR: Everyone fights the snake. Not everyone’s snake is the same. The best way to prepare for the snake fight is to write a great thesis.

Not so helpful? (Okay, no metaphors.) What I get from it is that it’s hard to prepare for an oral defense, because it’s subjective. You’ve been preparing to do this all along - you’ve worked with your committee, you’ve written the amazing paper, you’ve talked through your work. Sure, the typed 75 pages you’re handing in is important too, but what the thesis has trained you to do is make and present great research. You never know what you’re getting that day. But if you’ve done the hard work up until then, you should be fine. Other things to think about.

- I wouldn’t recommend reading your paper word-for-word (you only have 10 minutes!) but definitely have an outline with great quotes. I like this structure presented by University of Virginia. Visual aids are up to you - just don’t go overboard.

- Dress professionally and comfortably. You’ll already be super nervous and jumpy (if you’re like me.) Clothes that make you look and feel good will help ease the tension.

- In addition to the above, do everything possible to make you less nervous for the day of your presentation. Print your notes out early. Triple-check the date
with your advisors. Bring a bottle of water.

- In addition to the details of your thesis, know the answers to the following questions: “So what?” “What’s next?” “Why is this relevant?” You just spent a year doing this - what was it all for?

Best of luck to all you presenting this Friday - I’m sure I’ll see you around!

Blog Column:
A Moral Voyage

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