A Suggestion to Improve Your Research Proposal and Thesis/Dissertation Defense

In my experience, advisory committees for graduate students share this experience: Student submits document, then presents related material in a department seminar. Advisory committee members meet with the student after the audience has departed and comment that the talk was much better than the document, and that the student should edit the document to reflect their talk.

This common event exists because students first write to submit a document to a committee, and only later really wrestle with how to explain the subject to a larger, relatively uninformed, but intelligent audience. In other words, the writing preceded the most natural mode of explanation. There are two reasons why this is unwise: (1) the two audiences (i.e., committee and fellow grad students) are not necessarily that different, though the above process treated them differently, and (2) the best and most rehearsed explanation is saved for the audience that does not have the task of formally judging you.

So here's an idea:

1. Construct your talk/poster first. Use Powerpoint (or whatever software you use for talks or posters) to lay out the background, questions to be asked, methods to be used, results you expect, etc. If you already did the work then insert past tense above. Presentation software is an outline in disguise, with opportunities for color graphics. Use the bullet lists etc. as an outline, with words naturally pouring out of your mouth to fill in details around each bullet point and graphic. Explain only the details needed to get your points across, the same as you would in front of an audience. Leave unnecessary blarney unstated.
2. Now write the document. Mimic your talk/poster – stick to the outline, and use the same words you would speak around the bullet points and graphics.
3. Edit your conversational, draft document to make it less conversational and more in line with formal scientific writing (but not overly stiff). Insert citations, formatting, etc. Give that to your committee.
4. Revise your talk/poster to update it for changes you thought of while writing the document.

Now you have a document that is more logically composed and tightly organized, and that matches the talk/poster in style and content. Your paper will stick to the main points more efficiently and lead the reader more explicitly through opaque parts. Likewise, your talk is polished to the standards of scientific papers, and has been edited to match your written work.

Try it, and let me know how it works,

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