

PREPARING FOR THE VIVA

A Guide for **Doctoral Candidates**

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UK Council for
Graduate Education

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Viva Voce, Oral Examination Or Defence/Defense

'Surviving the viva depends fundamentally on preparation and students' ability to demystify the examination procedure'

Burnham (1994, p.34)

Examination arrangements

These vary by institution (university) and by discipline/department.

3-6 months before submission (maybe earlier) begin to discuss your examiners with your supervisor(s). Who decides? You and your supervisor discuss and agree the most suitable examiners. Neither examiner should know you well, or have advised you on your work prior to the examination. A brief meeting at a conference, however, does not prevent you asking that someone should be invited as your external examiner.

Once you have chosen both internal and external examiners and they have accepted the invitation, a viva date can be arranged. This is normally managed by the internal examiner, who will also make practical arrangements for the viva. It is important you do not try to contact the examiners yourself.

Style and format of the thesis: your university will have clear guidance as to requirements for style and format of the thesis: please follow this (font size, spacing, margins, paper quality etc.).

Many universities have moved to online thesis submission but you may also be asked to submit one or more hard copies. Again, your university will provide guidance. Do make sure that the pagination of your copy of the thesis is the same as the copy received by the examiners, to avoid any confusion during the viva.

The time between submission of your thesis (or equivalent) and the viva date is normally around 3 months. Check the guidance at your university concerning dates and time periods.

An excellent thesis

The best preparation for the oral examination is an excellent thesis. This is an extract from the examination regulations at one UK university which advises examiners on what they should expect of your thesis:

'Examiners shall bear in mind that their judgement of the substantial significance of the work should take into account what may be reasonable expected of a capable and diligent student'

after three or at most four years of full-time study' (that is, not a Nobel prize – see Mullins and Kiley (2002))

Aim for an 'excellent thesis' both in terms of scholarly quality (your research, your argument or 'thesis', the 'golden thread' which goes through the text, and the overall coherence) and presentation (try to avoid typos, make sure that there is a 1:1 correspondence between references in the text and those listed in the references/bibliography). Try to ensure that your thesis is a pleasure for the examiners to read.

Presentations

During the course of your three-four year doctoral programme (or equivalent part-time), you should have had opportunities to present your work to different audiences e.g. internal seminars, departmental seminars, possible internal or external conferences. These should have given you confidence in presenting your work, and answering questions on your research – good practice for the viva.

Publication

You may also have made the opportunity to publish from your research during the course of your programme (this depends on your field of study/discipline, your own research and your university's regulations). Depending on your subject and university, the main part of your thesis may consist of two or three published papers, reflecting international trends in some fields.

In the 2-3 weeks before the viva (oral examination)

There are various ways of revising your work (and certainly no 'correct' way). The most important thing is to find a way that suits you.

As one example, Phillips and Pugh (2010) suggest:

Take three sheets of faint ruled A4 paper. Draw a vertical line down the centre so that each half line represents one page of your thesis. This means about 70 lines x 3 (number the lines). Write on every half line the main idea contained on the corresponding page of the thesis.

This strategy helps you a) to revise your thesis and b) to find your way around the thesis.

OR

As another example, Murray (2009) suggests that you write a one-sentence summary of each chapter. Again this helps you to gain a clear overview of your thesis.

It is a good idea to revise, for example, the four or five key people in your field, their names and details of their work (make sure that you can talk about their work in some detail). Do make sure that you

continue to read the literature right up to the time of your viva: familiarity with the field and key authors is important.

Use highlights/post-it markers to mark up key pages of your thesis (you can keep these in your copy during the viva)

In the week before the viva, re-read your thesis

- * Practise oral summaries and oral debate (use your colleagues and supervisor).
- * Go through some generic questions.
- * Make a list of questions that frighten you most and try to compose answers.
- * Skim through a couple of papers by your examiners, if appropriate.
- * Prepare a publication plan for your research.
- * Look after practical arrangements, relax, exercise, eat and sleep well.

Try to arrange a 'mock viva'

- * Are you good at giving oral presentations?
- * What are your strengths?
- * Do you have any weaknesses?
- * Do you find it easy/difficult to understand questions about your work?
- * Do you think you have answered them well in the past?
- * Have you had any feedback on your performances?
- * Have you performed well under pressure?
- * Have you performed well in the face of negative or aggressive questioning?

Questions

How you answer questions can make a significant difference. In general:

- * Listen carefully to the question and try to answer that question, not a question you hoped the examiners would ask.
- * Don't hesitate to ask for the question to be repeated if you need to.
- * Try to avoid going off at a tangent or over-long responses.

General questions:

Why did you choose this subject? How did you develop an interest in this subject? Could you tell us a bit about how you came to do this research? Why did you decide to do what you did?

Could you please summarise your thesis for us? The main points of your thesis?

What is the whole thesis about? Does it raise interesting issues, theoretical, methodological, substantive?

Who would you say are the key people in your field today?

Did your study turn out as expected? If not, how and why different? If you were embarking on this research again, (how) would it be different?

How do you see research in this field developing in the next five years?

What is your contribution and what do you feel are the most interesting things to come out of your thesis? Originality?

After general questions, the examiners may proceed to work through the thesis, asking questions on each chapter. They may ask more specific questions on the literature review, methodological issues and the methods that you used, your data analysis and your findings. And the “so-what” question:

What is the significance of your findings, and any implications (for further research, for policy, for practice)?

The examiners will have the thesis at their side and are likely to refer you to certain pages (make sure that the copy that you have with you is identical).

What are your publication plans? (you will need to be as specific as possible, with specific journals)

The process

The examiners have some general responsibilities and goals.

These may include addressing the following questions:

- * Are you the author of the thesis and, in so far as can be ascertained, did you carry out the research? (Candidates have to satisfy the examiners that the thesis is their own work)
- * Are you competent as an independent researcher in the discipline?
- * Have you made a contribution to knowledge in this field?
- * Do you possess a good general knowledge of the field of learning within which the subject of the thesis falls? (Could you teach your subject?)
- * Is the research of publishable quality?

It is generally agreed that the examiners will be examining your thesis (having read it carefully) and also examining you as a researcher. The oral examination can influence the outcome of the whole PhD/DPhil examination.

The examiners must confirm that:

- * *The student possesses a good general knowledge of the field.*
- * *The student has made a significant and substantial contribution in the particular field of learning.*
- * *The thesis is presented in a lucid and scholarly manner.*
- * *In their opinion the thesis merits the doctoral degree.*
- * *The student has presented a satisfactory abstract of the thesis.*

(Extract from one university's regulations)

The formal purpose of the examination is to ascertain the candidate is capable of undertaking research independently: these and similar guidelines help examiners to confirm that.

Murray (p. 19) suggests that:

'the role of the oral examination in your doctoral process is to make you focus on core questions such as: did you do the work yourself? Can you talk about it convincingly? Can you see its strengths and weaknesses? Have you become an expert in the field?'

The formal situation: On the day

Who is present: normally two examiners (an internal from your university an external examiner; if you are a member of staff, there may be two externals). In many universities, supervisors are permitted to attend, but not take an active part in, the viva, with the candidate's permission.

The length of the viva will depend on your discipline. In most cases the oral examination is an extended debate/discussion during which you are given the opportunity to defend your thesis, to explain your work, to demonstrate your competence as a scholar and researcher, your knowledge of the field and your original contribution to scholarship. During the viva you will be asked questions on your thesis (and the field of research, and your research competences).

At the end of the viva, you will be asked to leave the room for a brief period, while the examiners deliberate. Normally they will invite you to come back into the room after their deliberations and give you some indication of the outcome. They are not technically permitted to inform you of the result (though many examiners do).

'For students, the most heartening information is that experienced examiners want them to be awarded the PhD and will go to extraordinary lengths to enable this to happen' (Mullins and Kiley 2002, p. 384).

The outcome

- * Pass
- * Pass with minor corrections, normally within one to three months (you should receive the list of minor corrections soon after the viva)
- * Pass with major corrections, normally within 6 months
- * Referral (this is an option in most universities and may or may not include another viva)
- * Award of a master's degree
- * Fail.

Both of the final two outcomes are extremely rare.

The examiners will tell you at the end of the viva what they are recommending and are required to write a report on the examination, indicating any changes required to your thesis. You should discuss how to respond to the report with your supervisor(s), making it as easy as possible for the examiners to see how you have addressed their recommendations.

GOOD LUCK!

It is worth spending time and thought preparing for the viva so that you can give of your best on the day and defend the excellent work that you have been undertaking through the past 3-4 years (or more if you are part-time).

References

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