**Preparing for your viva**

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Study guide

This guide addresses the period between the submission of your thesis and the day of your viva. It offers ideas to help you perform calmly and confidently in your oral examination.

**Introduction**

So far you may have focussed primarily on writing your thesis: making sure it was in good shape before submitting it. Handing in your finished thesis is a massive achievement, and is the first step in the concluding stage of the PhD process.

Attention now turns to the viva. Most students are concerned about whether they will be able to perform well. Although it may feel like a completely new challenge, you will already have done more preparation than you realise. You may have presented some work at a conference or an in-house seminar, and been asked challenging questions. A neighbour, relative, or friend may have asked what research are you doing at the moment? And why?

This guide aims to take the mystery and fear away from the viva process, and to support you in preparing methodically so that you can look forward to a positive experience.

**What is a viva?**

The viva has its own ceremony and tradition. It can be considered part of a rite of passage in your academic apprenticeship, a trial to be addressed confidently, and the gateway to joining the academic community as an independent teacher or researcher.  It may be more helpful to think of it simply as the verbal counterpart to your written thesis.

The **viva voce**, shortened to the word **‘viva’**, is:

**‘an oral examination, typically for an academic qualification’, derived from the Latin: ‘with the living voice’** (Ask Oxford 2006).

http://www.askoxford.com/

Your thesis demonstrates your skill relating to the written presentation of your research. In the viva you will demonstrate your ability to participate in academic discussion with research colleagues: ‘with the living voice’.

Its purpose is to:

* confirm that the thesis is your own work;
* confirm that you understand what you have written;
* investigate your awareness of where your original work sits in relation to the wider research field;
* provide a developmental opportunity for considering future publication and research options.

This guide takes you through six stages of preparation for the viva and its outcome:

Stage 1: You have submitted your thesis

Stage 2: Stepping back from the detail

Stage 3: Returning to the detail

Stage 4: The last few days

Stage 5: Within the viva

Stage 6: The outcome of the viva

**Stage 1: You have submitted your thesis**

This is the culmination of all your effort so far. How are you going to celebrate? You may now have time to catch up with people you have neglected, and with activities you have neglected, preferably enjoyable ones, not just the housework!

It may then be helpful to assess your time commitments over the next few months so that you can build in adequate time to prepare for your viva.

* Aim to establish the date for your viva as soon as you can. This may be a few weeks away, but is more likely to be several months hence. You also need to know the time and the venue. The Graduate Office may be able to advise you on this: www.le.ac.uk/graduateoffice
* Confirm who has been appointed as examiners. There will usually be one internal and one external examiner, but there may well be more. This may be due to the relative inexperience of the chosen examiners, or because your area is interdisciplinary and more than two examiners are required to form an academic judgement.
* Work out a timetable for viva preparation. You need to remain engaged with your thesis, but this is a time to step back from the detail.
* Talk to your supervisors about whether it would be useful for you if one of them was to be present at your viva. A supervisor may be present but would not usually participate.
* You may want to use some of the time to work on articles or conference papers from your research.

**Stage 2: Stepping back from the detail**

Examiners are likely to ask you to comment on the wider implications of your work, so take time to think more broadly about your research. You may wish to use the following questions to help you prepare for discussing these issues in your viva.

* Which overarching philosophical or theoretical assumptions have you been working within? Why? How did it work out?
* If you were given a block of new funding now, how would you like to follow up your work?
* Thinking about your examiners: what links their work with your own research? Have you got hold of some of their published work to get a feel for how they work and how they discuss research?
* What would you do differently if you were starting again?
* What has been happening in your field since you did your research? Is a further literature review necessary? How does your research fit into this updated context?

**Stage 3: Returning to the detail**

Your aim is to know your thesis very well and to be calm and confident as you begin your viva. Remember that most students who reach this stage do succeed in gaining their PhD. Here are some ideas to help you regain and retain familiarity with the detail:

* re-read your thesis carefully. If you notice any mistakes, don’t panic. Make a note of them so that it won’t be a surprise to you if they are mentioned in the viva, and so that you can address them when you are making your final corrections following the viva;
* as you read, make summary notes on the main points on each page;
* print out the contents pages with plenty of spacing, and write very brief summaries of the content under each heading;
* practise telling the story of the whole research in 2 minutes;
* practise telling the story of different chapters, each in 2 minutes;
* identify areas of weakness and make notes on each;
* identify the elements of originality in your thesis;
* identify your contribution to knowledge;
* identify the theoretical, research, and practical implications of your findings.

You are not expected to memorise your thesis. You can take it into the viva with you, and it is acceptable to refer to it to remind yourself of specific details. However, it will not impress the examiners if you flick forwards and backwards trying to find what you are looking for. Some people choose to use small ‘post-it notes’ to attach to the top of pages they think they might want to refer to so that they can locate them quickly and easily if needed.

**Mini viva**

You need to practise answering viva questions. A list of typical questions is provided towards the end of this guide, and you can add to this yourself. Make sure you include the difficult questions so that you have a chance to practise how you might answer them.

Some form of mini viva is essential, but there are various ways of conducting this: from the formal to the informal, from public to private, depending on what you would find most useful. The important thing is to answer out loud not just in your thoughts. This can be done in a formal setting with an audience of your supervisor or colleagues, but can also be done in private while walking round a garden or park, or in your room. In speaking aloud you force yourself to put your responses, clarifications, and deliberations into words. Initially this can feel embarrassing, stressful, and difficult, but it is invaluable preparation for arguing your case coherently on the day.

**Stage 4: The last few days**

This is the time to address practical details.

* How will you get to the viva in good time?
* When/what will you eat and drink, both before and after?
* What will you wear? Ideally something that allows you to feel both smart and comfortable.
* What will you take into the room with you?
* Have you sorted out some calming activities to dispel nervousness? The Study Guide on [Stress Management for Presentations and Interviews[[1]](#footnote-1)](http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/presentation/stress-mgt) has useful suggestions for techniques to cope with pre-viva anxiety.

Think positively. You may now be:

* anticipating a potentially interesting discussion;
* ready to engage in debate;
* confident in your preparation;
* eager to get on with it;
* relieved at being there at last;
* excited at the challenge ahead;
* looking forward to completing the process.

**Stage 5: Within the viva**

**How will my examiners behave?**

Your study will have strengths and weaknesses, and the examiners will want to discuss these. It is considered positive, indeed essential, that you can discuss both strengths and weaknesses. You could think of these weaknesses as an opportunity to demonstrate your skill at critical appraisal. Examiners will seek to find and discuss weaknesses in all theses. You should not interpret criticism as an indication that you will not get a positive outcome.

Examiners have different personalities, styles, and levels of experience. Sometimes a candidate may feel that a challenge has been made in a confrontational way. Experienced and effective examiners will not be inappropriately confrontational, but some personalities are more prone to such approaches. It is important that you do not take offence. A relaxed, thoughtful, and non-confrontational response from you will help re-balance the discussion.

Murray (2003:105) suggests how *not* to respond to a challenge of a weakness in your research. She suggests that you do not:

* give a general, resigned declaration that ‘this happens in every study’;
* blame your supervisor for the weakness;
* blame your data;
* say ‘that was beyond the scope of my study’, without giving a cogent argument to support the statement;
* dismiss what is identified as a weakness as unimportant.

A better approach is to:

* take time to consider before replying;
* remember to breathe and to speak reasonably slowly;
* don’t take criticism personally;
* don’t take offence;
* don’t get angry;
* enjoy the opportunity to talk about your research.

The questions that crop up in vivas can be grouped under four basic headings.

* What’s it about?
* What did you do?
* What did you find?
* Why does that matter?

Practising answering these four questions will take you a long way in your preparation. The questions below all fall within these four, but are more specific, and are arranged following the order of a typical thesis.

**General questions**

* Why did you decide on this particular research question?
* What have you found the most interesting aspect of your research?
* How did your thinking about this topic develop as you went through this research process?
* Now that you have finished the research, which part of the process would you say you enjoyed the most, and why?
* Were there any surprises along the way?
* How did doing this research change you as a researcher?

**Context**

* You refer to … as a key influence on your research. Can you summarise the particular relevance of their work?
* What developments have there been in this field since you began your PhD? How has this changed the research context in which you are working?
* You make only passing reference to the field of . . . why do you think that field is less relevant than the others you give more space to?
* You don’t say much about the . . .  theory in your thesis. Can you explain why you have not focussed more on that?

**Methods**

* How well did the study design work in practice?
* Did you have any problems with the data collection process?
* You used an existing research method and developed it further. Can you tell us why this further development was needed?
* What were the main ethical issues of conducting this research?
* How did you establish the limits around the scope of your data collection?

**Analysis and findings**

* Talk us through your method of analysis.
* Did you encounter any problems with applying this method of analysis?
* Do you think the data you collected were the most appropriate to answer your research question, or are there any other data you would have liked to have collected?
* Can you describe your main findings in a few sentences?

**Discussion**

* If you were starting your research again now, are there any changes in the way you would plan it?
* You interpret these findings as . . .  Do you think there could be an argument for interpreting them as . . . instead?
* You said in your thesis that . . .  Can you expand on that point?
* In what way do you consider your thesis to be original?

**Conclusion/implications**

* What are the research, practice, theoretical implications of your findings?
* How would you hope that this research could be followed up and taken further?

**Stage 6: The outcome of the viva**

Most people who reach the stage of the PhD viva will gain their PhD. However, it is very rare that a thesis will be passed without any changes being required. Almost everybody is asked to make minor or major amendments. Having got this far do not give up: the end is in sight.  The recommendations available to examiners at the University of Southampton are shown in Table 1, below:

NB: If in any doubt contact your supervisor, the internal examiner or Eleanor Quince (Director of Postgraduate Studies (Faculty of Humanities)). Regulations and procedures are also subject to change from time to time, so check that you have the most up to date information.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | What you need to do. |
| the degree of Doctor of Philosophy [PhD] be awarded | Nothing |
| **\*** That the degree of PhD be awarded, subject to certification of **minor** amendments to the thesis and/or abstract by **1** ………………………………………… (to be signed off by the internal examiner) | Make amendments as required and submit to internal examiner by date specified. |
| **\*** That the degree of PhD be awarded, subject to certification of **modest** amendments to the thesis (and abstract if applicable) by**2**………………………….. (to be signed off by both the internal and external examiner) | Make amendments as required and submit to internal AND external examiner by date specified. |
| That the candidate be required to attend for a further oral examination |  |
| That the candidate be permitted to submit **a revised thesis** by**3**……………….for re-examination for the degree of PhD (NB: resubmission fee payable, Fees Office to be advised) | Make the changes necessary to bring the thesis up to the required standard. These are likely to be substantial. |
| That the candidate be permitted to apply within………….months for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy:  without further examination    subject to certification of minor amendments to the thesis    subject to examination of a revised thesis | Make necessary amendments (if necessary) for award of MPhil. |
| That the degree be not awarded, and that re-submission of the thesis be not permitted |  |

Table 1: Possible outcomes of the viva at the University of Southampton

You may well take away from the viva a mix of positive and negative feelings. You may feel positive because you have passed the viva, but you may also feel negative because there is further work to be done on the thesis.

Don’t be surprised if you have some feeling of an anti-climax. Almost all candidates will have further work to do. You can be assured that getting through the viva is in itself something to celebrate.

**Summary**

* Remember to celebrate the submission of your thesis.
* You began preparing for your viva as soon as you started explaining your research to others.
* Find out your viva date and plan backwards from this in stages, with the aim of giving yourself time to think about your overall view of your work, as well as time to review the detail.
* Create a list of viva questions, including tricky ones, and practise answering them aloud, rather than just in your head.
* Aim to feel calm and well-prepared as you begin your viva. Remember not to take offence at any questions that seem confrontational.
* As well as preparing for celebration, be prepared for a feeling of anti-climax, especially as there is likely to be some re-writing to do.
* The vast majority of people who reach their viva will gain their PhD.

**Useful reading**

Murray, R. 2003: *How to survive your viva*. Maidenhead:Open University Press.

Rugg, G. & Petre, M. 2004: *The unwritten rules of PhD research.* Maidenhead:Open University Press.

Tinkler, P. & Jackson, C. 2004: *The doctoral examination process: a handbook for students, examiners and supervisors.* The Society for Research into Higher Education and Maidenhead:Open University Press.

Wellington, J., Bathmaker, A., Hunt, C., McCulloch, G. & Sikes, P. 2005: *Succeeding with your doctorate.* London:Sage.

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1. http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/presentation/stress-mgt [↑](#footnote-ref-1)