Ph.D. Viva and Oral Defence Preparation

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Objectives

- To view viva as a performance event – an oral examination
- To understand the principles of viva
- To explore ways to prepare for this type of exam
- To practise writing and answering questions
Introductions

• Please turn to the person next to you

• Introduce yourself – name, discipline, what you are studying and one other fact about yourself

• Introduce your partner to the group
Performance Event

• PhD is an examination – a performance event
• As is an oral transfer examination

• How do you prepare for any performance?
  – Preparation and Practice
  – Skills development and performance rehearsal
A PhD is about….

– Knowing your field thoroughly
– Evaluating your subject
– Making a useful contribution
– Mastering appropriate techniques & knowing their limitation
– Communicating in a professional way
Purpose of viva

• Ascertain it is your own work
• Make sure you understand what you did
• Contribution to knowledge – worthy of PhD
Reframe Event

The Viva . . . An Opportunity

• To discuss your work with experts
• To improve your arguments and thesis
• To consider where to publish – get free consultancy!
The Viva ... the Examiners

Friendly & Interested
Examiners will make you feel at ease. They will want you to explain your research.

From Twigg (1997)

Adversarial
Some examiners will challenge your views, in order to hear your argument.

Detailed
Some examiners inspect every word and phrase.
“On page 32, you say ... please explain.”

From Twigg (1997)
The Viva ... Stay Calm & Confident

- You are most probably now the world’s expert on your thesis topic.
- Argue each point with confidence.
- Demonstrate your depth/breadth of knowledge.
Preparation

• Revision and Summaries
  – Re-read critically
  – Review each chapter and summarise in points
  – Defence of research
• Know limitations
• Emotional preparation
Preparation

• Questions
  – Anticipate questions and prepare sample answers
  – Easy and hard questions
  – Open, closed, probing, applied, general, specific questions

• Develop skills and techniques
Viva strategies & skills

• Defining
  – Define & illustrate
  – Define & defend

Question: Why did you not do more detailed analysis of …?

Defend: I did not do that because . . .

Define-defend: What I did was . . . My reasons for doing that were…I could have…by… But I decided not to do that because …

Viva strategies & skills

• Defining
• Being specific
• Being explicit
• Elaborating
• Highlights
• Deflecting criticism

Practice

• Answering questions
  – With different people: students, staff, friends
  – Using viva strategies and defence language
  – Mental practice

• Discuss research with peers
Key questions

• Why did you choose this topic?

• Spend 1 minute writing why you chose this topic
Key questions

• Can you describe the different steps involved in your research?

• Spend 1 minute writing out a response to this question
Key questions

• What is your “USP”? What is new and different about your topic?

• You must narrow this down to one or two ideas/comments.

• Discuss with your partner and report back to group (5 minutes)
Practice - Rehearsal

- Mock viva rehearsal with peer or fellow student
- Mock viva rehearsal with supervisor
- Visualise viva
Dealing with nerves!
Pair work

• Pick a possible viva question or create a possible question
• Exchange it with your partner
• Take turns to practise your answer keeping in mind what has been covered with regard to effective presentations and tips for surviving your viva
On the day

• Be early
• Be careful what you wear
• Bring a drink
• Bring a pad and pen (although don’t expect to take many notes)
• Expect to be nervous but try to deal with it positively/constructively
On the day

- Check list:
  - List of corrections
  - Pen and paper
  - Tissues
  - Drink
  - Copy of your thesis, especially your summary and abstract
## How long does it last?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of viva</th>
<th>Natural and applied sciences (%)</th>
<th>Arts, humanities and social sciences (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Up to 1 hour</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 hours</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 hours</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3+ hours</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Final Advice

• Expect to be nervous
• Practice your answers beforehand
• Don’t agree with everything they say but don’t be arrogant
• Expect some corrections
• Make sure you are clear about important dates
• Good luck!
Planning

Take one minute to make a list of the things you need to do to prepare for your viva as a result of attending this workshop.


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