Preparing for the PH.D. Viva – An Oral Examination

Dr. Tamara O’Connor
Student Learning Development
toconnor@tcd.ie
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

• How do you prepare for any performance?
  – Preparation and Practice
  – Skills development and performance rehearsal
# 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>

Understand the principles

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

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

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

**Detailed**
Some examiners inspect every word and phrase.

“On page 32, you say ... please explain.”

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
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)
- Bring copy of thesis & corrections
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!
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.