

Preparing for your Viva – a guide for PhD Students

What is a viva?

The viva can appear obscure, but it's best understood as an oral examination. This can take various forms in different countries, ranging from ceremonial defence of a doctoral thesis to an actual examination which can be passed or failed. UK VIVAs are closer to the latter: it is a rigorous yet supportive conversation about your research. It is also your opportunity to:

- Showcase your expertise and defend your ideas.
- Clarify areas of uncertainty.
- Discuss future potential, such as publications or research impact.

Most social science vivas last three to four hours, including the examiners' deliberations. This guide outlines ways to prepare effectively.

Before you submit your thesis:

The key starting point to passing your PhD viva examination is a robust and well-written thesis.

- Make sure you understand the criteria at your institution. Practice differs across institutions and criteria may include that the thesis should:
 - Make an original contribution to knowledge
 - Be well written and argued
 - Demonstrate a satisfactory understanding of your field.
- Ahead of submitting your thesis organise a mock viva which focusses on areas you have found more challenging. This will help you identify gaps and improve clarity of your thesis.
- Get and action feedback on your work throughout your PhD including from your supervisors, by presenting at seminars and conferences, at internal review points and through discussions with your peers.

Between submission and viva:

After submission give yourself a couple of weeks break from PhD focussed activities to create distance between yourself and your thesis, and then begin preparation using some of these tips:

- Write a 1-page abstract of each of your chapters or a one sentence summary of each page.
- Prepare and get feedback on a five-minute overview of your research.
- Re-read key papers and annotate your thesis bibliography.
- Engage with your examiners' work to help anticipate their questions.
- Reflect on key research decisions and be prepared to justify them.
- Develop and get feedback on general questions which you may get asked.
 - What is original about your research?
 - Why did you choose this methodology?
 - How does your work contribute to the field?
 - What are the strengths and weaknesses of your thesis?
 - What would you do differently if starting again?
- Identify potential weak spots and formulate responses.
- Have a mock viva with supervisors or peers. This could be focussed on the whole thesis or individual chapters.
- If you haven't published yet, prepare a plan for publication including proposed working titles of potential publications.
- Look after yourself and rest, eat well, and manage stress.

It's entirely normal to be nervous, so think about strategies for managing your nerves. It can help to talk them through with other people including your supervisors.

During the viva

- There will be a minimum of two people (external examiner, internal examiner) and a maximum of four people (external examiner, internal examiner, chair, supervisor) at your viva, depending on the regulations of your institution. You may request that your supervisor is not present. If you want them to be present, you may need to be explicit about that, too.
- Don't expect to be told that you have passed at the start of the viva as examiners are not supposed to do this.
- The examiners should give you an explanation of the viva process at the start of the viva.
- Be ready to give a brief overview of your work at the start. This is intended to help settle you into the exam, so make sure you are properly prepared for this. However, if no opportunity is offered to do so, do not be disheartened, you can use the preparation elsewhere in the viva.
- The examiners are likely to either examine your thesis through exploration of key themes, following the process of your research, or page by page (most likely in more scientific subjects).
- When answering questions:
 - Take your time to pause and think before answering.
 - Think about what evidence you will want to share in answering the question from your work and/or the literature.
 - Remember that you are the expert on the work you have done.
- At the end of the viva, you will be told an outcome (which at some institutions will be subject to approval but is rarely changed). Institutional rules differ, but the typical outcomes are:
 - Pass with no corrections.
 - Pass with editorial corrections
 - Pass with minor corrections (small edits, adding additional content).
 - Pass with major revisions (larger changes often requiring additional substantive research and with 12 months to complete) with/without another viva.
 - Award of a lower degree.
 - No award.

The last two are very rare and only occur in cases of plagiarism, research misconduct and where the student has not taken on board supervisor feedback through the PhD programme leading to a very poor-quality thesis. The first (no corrections) is also very rare. The three middle options are most common.

After the viva:

- If you have corrections to undertake, make sure you are clear what these are. If you have major corrections:
 - Organise a meeting between yourself and your supervisor(s) to clarify corrections.
 - Draw a plan with your supervisors, which includes timeframes for undertaking the corrections.
 - Create a commentary document (essentially a letter to examiners) which explains how you have taken on board the corrections within your thesis, e.g., a table clearly outlining the examiners' recommendations, how they have been addressed, the location of the changes within the thesis (chapter, paragraph, page).
- Make sure you undertake any requirements for final submission (e.g. depositing your thesis with the library) promptly after formal notification of the outcome.