

Succeeding with Your Doctorate

Presenting your Work at the Viva

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Presenting your Work at the Viva

CHAPTER CONTENTS

Many doctoral students, especially those who are ‘researching professionals’, will be experienced at presenting orally during their own working lives. But presenting in the viva situation is likely to be a new experience and to offer a new challenge. For every doctoral candidate the oral examination is an important matter. For some it is a cause of anxiety and concern. As Tinkler and Jackson (2002) put it, the examination by viva voce (live voice) is of critical importance for two reasons: first, it is a site of decision-making and, second, the viva experience has an important influence on students’ perceptions of academia. Research reported later on the viva show that it is not always a positive experience for students, even when they are successful. This chapter reports on the purposes and conduct of the oral examination, and discusses some of the contentious issues that surround it, from different perspectives. We also present some of the general questions that are likely to be posed in a viva, and offer suggestions for preparing for them and answering them in the ‘live’ situation.

The purposes of the viva

Written regulations from universities should state the purpose of the viva. Common statements include: to test the candidate’s knowledge of his or her research and subject area; to allow examiners to clarify any queries that may have arisen when reading the thesis; to judge whether the candidate has developed research skills appropriate to doctoral level; to give the candidate the opportunity to ‘defend’ the thesis in person; to establish whether candidates fully understand the implications of their work. Some university regulations state explicitly that one of the main purposes is to ascertain whether the work is the candidate’s own.

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Many regulations inform us (that is, the student, the supervisor and the examiners) that the viva is an integral part of the examination of the degree - in other words, the oral is actually part of the examining process, not (say) a confirmation of any predetermined judgement. It is not a rubber-stamping exercise. Students, supervisors and examiners perhaps need to remind themselves of this - the examination as a whole involves more than just a judgement of the written work, that is, the written and oral elements of the examination for a doctorate complement each other. For many universities, the written thesis is only 'part fulfilment' of the requirements for a doctorate.

From a more negative perspective, if a thesis does not meet the necessary criteria, some university regulations state that one purpose of the oral is to ascertain reasons why a student's work is *not deemed to* attain doctoral standard. This might lead to questions about supervision, research training, resources or any mitigating personal circumstances.

Conduct

Normally, the oral examination or viva should be arranged within a set time period from receipt of the thesis by the examiners. This might be 10 weeks or even 12 weeks - regulations should be checked for this. The internal examiner or the supervisor (regulations vary) will have responsibility for arranging the date of the oral with the external - this date should then be confirmed with the student, at the very least two weeks prior to the suggested date. A suitable venue is arranged, usually on the campus of the awarding university.

Both examiners should normally complete a preliminary report on the thesis independently and then arrange to confer prior to the oral. This liaison or meeting should be used to exchange and discuss their preliminary reports (these reports are not seen by the student or supervisor). The two examiners should also decide on the procedure and content of the viva, that is, what will be asked, who will be asking what and in what order. A good oral should have some sort of structure with prearranged questions and issues, and a predetermined order. However, an oral should be viewed rather like a semi-structured interview - the discussion, if it is a good one, may lead on to other questions and sub-questions, and deviate from the plan (see later).

In many universities, the external examiner will be expected and invited to chair the oral. However, it is still the internal examiner's responsibility to check that procedures are followed correctly. In some cases (described as 'exceptional' in some university [p. 181 ↓] regulations) the supervisor may be present at the oral - but he or she should certainly not play a part in the actual discussion. Our view is that the student should confer with the supervisor on this issue and make the request between them. For example, one student might feel that the supervisor's presence could give them support and confidence. A supervisor's presence may also be valuable when it comes to making notes, especially if revisions are ultimately required. Another might feel that the supervisor could be a distraction or an impediment to a full discussion. In all cases, if the supervisor is present, eye contact between student and supervisor seems best avoided (a suitable arrangement of chairs could ensure this).

Issues and concerns

There are numerous issues around the viva, its conduct and its purpose:

We raise and discuss some of those here, and give pointers to some very useful and insightful further reading on this issue.

Variability in the conduct and content of vivas is widely acknowledged (Cryer, 2000; Tinkler and Jackson, 2002; and many others). This variability is discussed shortly, but it is worth noting that the 'variations in vivas' (Morley et al., 2002) makes it difficult and dangerous to attempt to provide definitive guidelines and 'tips' to students. It also implies that a mock or practice viva should be treated with care - no guarantee can be made that it prepares or predicts with any success.

Several aspects of variability in policy and practice should be highlighted. Some useful research by Jackson and Tinkler (2001) showed that even institutional policy and written regulations showed great variation. In a sample of 20 universities they found that seven did not require examiners to produce independent reports prior to the viva. At the other extreme, one university actually stipulated that examiners should make a definite recommendation prior to the viva, implying that the oral is not really an integral part of the examination process.

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The general view of recent research is that there is a great lack of clarity and transparency in the conduct and content of the actual viva. This is especially true in the UK where the oral is conducted behind closed doors, between consenting adults. One author has called the viva the 'best kept secret in higher education' (Burnham, 1994), while Morley et al. (2002) talk of variation and 'mystification'. The response to this lack of clarity has been interesting. One extreme suggestion has been to argue for the abolition of the viva, for example Noble (1994, p. 67) described it as 'an anachronism that can be traced back to the middle ages'. More commonly, calls have been made for the oral to be more public (similar to the situation in the USA and Scandinavia). In the past, the viva has been subject to very little regulation, accountability and quality assurance, in sharp contrast to other aspects of higher education. Calls have been made for transparency, clear guidelines and even nationally agreed standards (Morley et al., 2002).

Jackson and Tinkler (2001) argue that the essential step required, before such guidelines and recommendations can be made, is to clarify the purposes of the viva. Their research concluded that there is 'no consensus regarding the roles of the viva in the PhD examination process' (p. 364). This lack of agreed role and purpose may also apply to the 'professional doctorate', although there is a shortage of reported research in this area. The academics (supervisors and examiners) responding to their survey mentioned a range of roles for the viva that included: ensuring authenticity; checking the student's understanding and research ability; clarifying areas of weakness; testing knowledge of the literature; assessing oral skills; and checking that students can defend their thesis. Perhaps the most important finding is that for many academics, the purpose of the viva varies according to the quality of the written thesis that examiners read before the viva. Thus some academics view the viva following a strong thesis as a way of discussing and developing ideas with that student, and even offering advice on publication. For a weaker or borderline thesis, the viva might be used as a forum for giving constructive feedback and guidance - though some respondents saw it as an opportunity for the student to defend her or his work. In extreme cases of a weaker thesis, some academics commented that little could be done in a viva for the student to redeem himself or herself, describing it as a 'painful ritual' (p. 360).

One finding from Jackson and Tinkler's sample of academics is that 74 per cent of their respondents felt that the viva merely confirmed the examiner's prior opinion. One remarked that in over 50 vivas he or she did not know of an examiner changing his or her mind about the result (p. 361). This resonates with another surprising finding from the survey that 47 per cent of candidates in the arts, humanities and social sciences were informed of the examiners' decision at the start of the viva (c.f. only [p. 183 ↓] 15 per cent in the natural sciences). This seems astonishing, given that many university regulations explicitly forbid this and argue that the viva is an integral part of the examination. The above finding would suggest either that many examiners in this survey were not reading regulations or that they were ignoring them.

Students' perspectives and experiences

A number of interesting, if occasionally worrying, studies have been conducted on the student's view of the viva. Again, the focus has been largely on the PhD experience rather than the professional doctorate. Prior to the viva, most studies unsurprisingly report that students vary from being confident to anxious to extremely anxious (Hartley and Jory, 2000), in some cases saying they feel 'sick' or 'terrified'.

Following the viva, reported student experiences vary (predictably) according to the outcome. Thus the successful students in Hartley and Jory's study of psychology graduates (the passers) were most likely to report a boost in their morale and self-esteem, although one passer felt that his self-esteem had been reduced. The majority, whether passing or otherwise, seemed to find the experience 'draining'. The time allotted to the vivas experienced in this study ranged from 45 minutes to 4.25 hours. The vast majority of the students surveyed felt that the viva had been fair, especially the passers. In response to an open question about ideas for improvement to the viva, a significant number suggested the need for standardisation (for example, on length and guidelines) and less variability. The research by Jackson and Tinkler (2001) reported more negative experiences than Hartley and Jory, even amongst the passers. Some of the responses spoke of 'misery and humiliation, harassment and suffering' (p. 362). From 88 respondents, 20 per cent described the tone of their viva as 'hostile', 'sarcastic' or 'insulting' - although 60 per cent were more positive using adjectives such as 'relaxed', 'friendly' and 'enjoyable'. One of the interesting points to note is

that an important number of candidates reported that their perceptions of 'academic competence' had decreased as a result of the viva, as had their desire to work within academia (even one-tenth of the passers expressed this negative view).

THE VIVA IN THE PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE

Again, it must be emphasised that this research did not cover the professional doctorate, where the desire to enter academia may be less relevant. It should also be noted that there is a high probability that the examiners and supervisors of doctorates [p. 184 ↓] (whether professional or otherwise) do not themselves have a professional doctorate. There is a dearth of research on the assessment process, especially the viva, in the professional doctorate. It seems likely that the variability, inconsistency, unpredictability, privacy and lack of transparency will be as prevalent here as in the traditional PhD context.

One of the criteria for the assessment of a professional doctorate as opposed to a traditional PhD relates to our discussion earlier in this book, on the nature of different doctorates. The former can be seen (rather glibly) as producing 'researching professionals', with the latter aiming to prepare 'professional researchers' and some sort of entry or initiation into academia following 'live' peer review (though some might term it vivisection). These different conceptions should be reflected in the viva in the different contexts, though in reality this may not always happen and the actual event will depend (as always) on the two examiners and the way they work together.

Content

The 'content' of an oral examination will inevitably vary from one thesis to another, one field to another and between disciplines. However, there are certain general procedures for 'good practice' that are likely to be followed, and indeed many University regulations insist that they are followed. We outline some of these shortly. Later, we list questions that we know have been, and still are, actually used in vivas.

GOOD PRACTICE

Students should expect certain aspects of ‘good practice’ to be followed for the viva, although reality may fall short in some respects. The responsibility for ensuring good practice should fall on both the internal and external examiners. The venue for the viva may be someone's office or it could be a seminar or meetings room. The room for the viva should be suitably laid out with seating organised so that eye contact can be made between student and examiners (if the supervisor is present, he or she should literally take more of a back seat). The viva should start with polite introductions all round, led by the external examiner if he or she is the chair. The chair should explain what the viva is for, that is, a focused discussion (not an interrogation), with others who know the field, which gives the student a chance to ‘defend’ the thesis. Most regulations do not permit examiners to tell students whether they have passed or failed at the start of the viva - this seems perfectly logical given that the viva is an integral part [p. 185 ↓] of the examination. No specific recommendations (regarding pass, fail, minor amendments, re-submission) should be made at all during the course of the viva - they should be conveyed clearly after the examiners have conferred when the viva has finished. However, it seems civilised and conducive to a good discussion, to put the student at ease with a comment such as ‘we have enjoyed reading your thesis, we found it very interesting and it raises some important issues’.

For most candidates, this will be their first viva (and possibly the last) so examiners should explain the process and procedures to them (in brief) - again with the aim of making them less nervous. It would seem to be good practice to start with a relatively easy, ‘warm-up’ question: ‘tell us in brief what your thesis is about’; ‘why did you choose this topic to research? What surprised you most in doing this study?’ Specific questions will then follow, not all of which should have been pre-planned.

QUESTIONS THAT MIGHT BE ASKED IN A VIVA FOR A DOCTORATE (THOUGH PROBABLY NOT IN THIS ORDER)

General

Motivation: what made you do this piece of research? Why did you choose this topic? Why do think it is important?

Position: what is your own position (professional or personal) in relation to this field and these research questions? What prior conceptions and/or experiences did you bring to this study? How did your own position/background/bias affect your data analysis and your data collection?

Contribution: please could you summarise your thesis? What are the main findings of your research? What would somebody from this field learn from reading your thesis that they did not know before? What did you learn from doing it? What original contribution to knowledge do you feel that you have made?

Publication: which elements of your work do you feel are worthy of publication and/or presentation at a conference? What plans do you have for publication and dissemination? Has any of the work been published or presented already? (Note that the practice of disseminating some of the work via [say] a conference presentation or a journal paper is within the regulations of most universities - check your regulations on this.)

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Theories and theoretical frameworks

Please talk us through the main research questions that you were trying to address in your work. What was the origin of these questions?

What theories/theoretical frameworks/perspectives have you drawn upon in your research?

Which theories did your study illuminate, if any?

Literature review

What shaped or guided your literature review? Why did it cover the areas that it did? (And not others?) Why did you/did you not include the work of X in your study?

On methodology and analysis of data

Methodology: why did you employ the methods you used? Why not others, for example X? What informed your choice of methods? What would you do differently, with hindsight?

The sample: why did you select this sample? Can you see any problems with it? If it is a small-scale study, can you justify why so few were involved? (Note that these questions would only apply with certain types of research.)

Data analysis: did anything surprise you in the data ('hit you in the face')? Any anomalies? How did you analyse your data? How did you categorise/filter the data? Did themes emerge from your data (a posteriori) or did you 'bring them to the data' (a priori)? Why did you analyse it in this way? Could it have been done in another way?

Further work: which aspects of the work could be taken further? How?

Generalisability and key messages

How far do think you can generalise from your work? What lessons can be learnt from it by practitioners/ policy-makers/ other researchers? The 'so what' question: what are its key messages and implications?

Open forum

Reflections on the thesis: what are its strengths? And its limitations or weaknesses (with hindsight)? Is there anything else you would like to say or discuss that we have not asked you about?

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GOOD PRACTICE IN ASKING QUESTIONS

Some university regulations actually give general guidance on good practice in asking questions. The University of Newcastle Handbook for Examiners of Research Degrees (2001) is particularly helpful here. The bullet points below are adapted from that handbook (pp. 7-8). Examiners should:

Some of these points are particularly important when English is an additional language for the student. The candidate may be far more adept with written English than with oral situations. The onus is on examiners to speak clearly, to pose questions that are brief, clear and actually make sense, and to give students time to answer - indeed, this is good practice whatever the student's first language.

BAD PRACTICE AND STRANGE BEHAVIOUR IN THE CONDUCT OF VIVAS

We have personally witnessed, and heard many malicious rumours about, some of the poor practice and unusual behaviours that can take place in an oral examination. Fortunately, our estimate is that these happen very rarely.

Some examiners seem to arrive with a bee, or several bees, in their bonnets. They have rigid views on what or whose writing should be included in a thesis. Very often, such people will expect the student to have cited this examiner's own work or to have read their latest book or web page. Others will 'show off' in the viva, in an attempt to impress the student, the internal examiner and the supervisor, if the latter is present. They will spend more time talking about themselves and their own work than the [p. 188 ↓] student's. Some will come with, to use the vernacular, a 'set of baggage' or a life story that they carry with them. Others, and fortunately this breed seems to be nearing extinction, seem intent on giving the student a 'hard time' during the viva. It is seen as something to be endured, not enjoyed. Their attitude is reminiscent of the advocates of caning and flogging - 'well, it never did me any harm'. Such examiners present the student with a series of hoops and obstacles to be jumped through, possibly because it gives them a sense of power ('I'll take this student down a peg or two'), or perhaps they may want the student to struggle or suffer a little; but commonly it is a case of 'it happened to me in my viva, so I'll make sure that it happens to you'. This is perhaps more likely to happen when the viva is the external examiner's first.

There may even be cases where the internal examiner behaves in some of these strange ways, and the external examiner is perfectly civilised.

An excellent summary of poor practice in oral examinations was given by Partington et al. (1993, p. 78). They gave labels to certain types, for example:

The inquisitor: this person acts like a hostile television interviewer, firing questions from the hip, often interrupting and scoring points. This can lead to anger and confrontation as opposed to reasoned discussion. The student is intimidated rather than engaged.

The committee person: the examiner takes the thesis page by page, questioning each point as it arises, thereby avoiding the important, key questions about the contribution of the thesis and its main messages.

The kite flyer: this examiner has a predetermined view of what the thesis is about and what it is linked to. The examiner explores this link at length, effectively examining a thesis that the student did not write or ever want to write.

The reminiscer: this person bores those present at the viva with stories of his or her own past research and publications, leaving no time for an exploration of the student's work.

The hobby-horse rider: this examiner is rather like the person above with a bee in the bonnet. They keep coming back to one theme or question, ad nauseam, often with prejudices about certain areas or research studies.

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The proofreader: worse than the committee person, the examiner takes the student through the thesis line by line, pointing out minor errors and grammatical mistakes.

A university department with strong experience of selecting examiners will usually have good knowledge of whom to avoid and whom to choose. As a result, the viva should be a positive yet demanding experience for a student. The other important decision for a department is to select the right combination of internal and external examiners. There can sometimes be power struggles in this relationship - one should not dominate the other; they should be seen as equal partners in the process, whatever their status. Ideally, an external should be chosen who knows the field, will explore all aspects of the thesis fully, will engage the candidate in a fair and demanding discussion but will not intimidate, confront or attempt to impress those present (including the internal examiner).

Preparing for the viva

From the discussions earlier about the viva, its conduct and its perceived purposes it can be concluded that the key variables affecting the nature of a student's oral examination are likely to be:

The first two are relatively clear, at least in the sense that they are written documents, in a way in the public domain. However, the manner in which they have been read and interpreted, alongside the variability in examiners and their personal characteristics, are certainly not clear and are undoubtedly difficult to predict. For those reasons it can be said that every viva is different - however, that is not a logical justification for not preparing for a viva. Preparation is vital. From our own experience, and from a reading of the literature in this area, we would make several general suggestions as a means of preparing for a viva:

This is probably the best general advice that can be given. On a more specific level, it is worth considering the list of possible questions above. There is a small possibility that none of those will be asked but a high probability that some of them will.

Several authors have given useful advice on the viva and how to prepare for it (Cryer, 2000; Phillips and Pugh, 2000, for example). It is worth reading at least some of their advice, although it does relate to our own. Murray (2003), for example, gives useful practical advice on 'how to survive the viva', arguing that students should not simply accept the viva as something with 'mystique' and just wait to see what happens. She suggests a range of 'don'ts' that include: don't be defensive, don't get angry, don't throw questions back at examiners and don't show reluctance to engage in debate. Murray also gives a range of ideas for preparing for the viva: practise answering difficult questions, including the 'two-minute answer'; practise the oral skills with different people, such as fellow students and colleagues; 'highlight the highlights' in the thesis and commit these to memory.

Giving answers: the 'oral thesis'

By preparing for the viva, students can actually improve the quality of their answers. Students can then communicate and convey their thesis orally as well as in writing.

The written thesis should act as the foundation and source of your oral answers (Murray, 2003, p. 89) so you should have it to hand and look for your answers 'therein'. But good answers can clarify and extend points made in writing and can therefore often reduce the requirement for amendments after the viva. Equally, however, our experience is that in some viva situations students actually explain things or express things more clearly than they did in writing - furthermore, they may even add or extend new important points, arguments or messages that did not appear fully in writing at all. This is perhaps one of the ironies in a good viva performance - the oral communication may extend and enhance the written thesis, and therefore lead to a request that this enrichment be added to the written thesis.

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Preparing for the viva, and of course writing the thesis, means learning the language. As Murray (2003, p. 90) puts it, you should be able 'to speak the language of your discipline fluently'. As with any language acquisition, this needs prior practice. It involves learning the key terms in your field and being able to define and explain them. If you are using words like 'epistemology', 'ontology', constructivism or paradigm, then be prepared to explain them. Do not throw them in (via writing or in speech) if you cannot explain their meaning in your context. Equally, the best and most testing way to find out if someone really knows the meaning of an abstract term or an item of jargon is to ask them to give concrete examples, illustrations or instances. Be prepared for this.

Another useful tip is to be specific when answering, partly (as Murray, 2003, p. 92, puts it) to show off. If you mention an item of literature, give the detailed reference, right down to the author, date and page.

In answering the inevitable question about your 'original contribution', be upbeat without being arrogant. Rather than claiming world-shattering originality or paradigm revolution,

you might lay claim to a 'fresh approach', a new perspective, different interpretation, modified theory or alternative model.

You will probably need to answer a call to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses in your work. Reflecting on its strengths will require some sort of claim for originality, as discussed above. We would suggest looking at weaknesses in terms of *limitations*. Everyone's work is limited in some way, even (perhaps especially in some circumstances) well-funded research. All researchers are limited in some way by time, resources, access to research sites and other constraining factors. Also, real-life research is messy and unpredictable - it is often the art of the possible. We suggest that students reflect on the limitations well in advance of the viva (including, of course, a section in the written thesis) and then present them in the viva in a positive light. For example, the need to *focus* on certain aspects of the literature or certain sites for data collection imposes limits. Difficult decisions have to be made in planning research and these lead to limitations and focus. The additional point to make in reflecting on the limits of your own work is that it points clearly to areas and imperatives for further research - and these pointers should be one of the strengths of your own thesis.

Finally, you should be asked whether there are any further points you would like to make that you have not expressed fully thus far in the viva. Be prepared for this, even if you feel that you do not need to speak further in your defence. You may be asked if [p. 192 ↓] you would like to pose any questions to the examiners. Again, be prepared for this. You might, if the viva has gone well, ask for ideas or possible outlets for publication of your research.

Outcomes and action

Each institution will have some variations in the written regulations, but the outcomes are likely to fall into one of the following categories.

PASS

This is the unusual outcome when a thesis is accepted exactly as it stands, without any need for minor changes or corrections to typos. If the examiners have found absolutely no typographical errors then either yours is the 'cleanest' thesis ever presented or they have not read it word for word.

MINOR AMENDMENTS

The thesis is passed, subject to minor amendments. The nature and extent of these can vary - small alterations, correction of typing errors, or making small revisions to sentences or paragraphs without major changes in the thesis underlying the thesis or the substance of the work. Examiners may also specify a *small* quantity of additional material to be added, for example, a strengthening or a more explicit statement of the key messages perhaps, or suggestions for further research. There is often a fine line between this recommendation and the next. Many universities give a time limit of one month (maximum) for this and, indeed, some may define the category of 'minor amendments' as those that can realistically be done in a month. Often, the changes will need to be approved only by the internal examiner.

RE-SUBMISSION

Again, this can vary enormously from relatively minor amounts of rewriting, for example, additions or amendments to the concluding chapter, to fairly major requests, such as changing the data analysis and discussion. In one case in our experience, the external examiner even asked the student to go out and collect further data. The maximum time allowed for a re-submission is usually one year.

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Students can be asked to re-submit without the need for a further viva, provided the revised thesis is seen and approved by (in most cases) both examiners. In exceptional

cases, when the oral has been very unsatisfactory, the recommendation may be for a re-submission followed by another viva. Finally, there may be a requirement for the candidate to undergo another oral examination without modification of the form or content of the written thesis, though this too is unusual.

FAIL

This is a very uncommon decision, which should not occur if the thesis has been carefully supervised and the student has taken and followed advice.

APPROVAL FOR MPhil STATUS

Again, this is unlikely in our experience, but it has happened. The doctorate is not awarded but the examiners recommend that the thesis be accepted at Masters level, subject only to necessary changes to the title and cover.

The most likely outcome is some version of 'pass subject to revisions', in some form or other depending on the exact regulations. Following a viva, most students are asked to wait outside (hopefully in the supervisor's room rather than a corridor) so that examiners can reach an agreed decision. This may take some time, especially if the examiners cannot immediately reach a consensus. For example, they may need to debate whether the thesis requires minor amendments or should be classed as needing a re-submission.

When the feedback and the decision are given, we strongly advise that your supervisor is present (even if she or he was not there during the viva). If amendments are asked for, students should take great care to become crystal clear about the points being made and to clarify exactly what they need to do and to write. It is advisable to take notes, ask your supervisor to take notes and request the examiners to put their suggestions for amendment in writing (this should be their duty anyway, according to most regulations). If you are not clear, ask for clarification on the action you are being asked to take.

By way of summary, Table 10.1 spells out some 'dos and don'ts' that might be helpful in preparing for, and conducting yourself in, the oral examination.

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Don't	Do
Be dogmatic	Be thoughtful and reflective
Be defensive	Be honest
Be rude	Direct, but not rude
Be long-winded	Be concise (but do not give one-word answers)
Try to please examiners by contriving to include their work in the references	Carry out some 'homework' on the examiners and their work
Demand certain examiners, for example, for being the 'expert' in your field	Have some involvement in discussing and choosing the examiners
Be 'laid back' and blasé	Be prepared, but not over-prepared, for example, by trying to predict questions
Be apologetic for what you have done	Be confident (but not overconfident)

In summary

One of the key messages of this chapter on the viva is that students should make themselves ready for it - treat it as something that can be 'researched' and prepared for. Do not treat it as a black box.

Our own experience and research indicates that: practice varies across institutions, so your own written regulations should be examined carefully; certain questions do recur, so it is worth preparing for the more general, commonly asked questions; there are guidelines and there is some consensus on 'good practice' for the viva, but not all of these will be followed all of the time. (See Murray, 2003, p. 7, and Tinkler and Jackson, 2004, for recent research on the viva.) Doing a doctorate requires a high level

of written skill and academic literacy - but succeeding in a viva requires an equal level of oral ability and academic oracy. Both need to be practised and prepared for - either in seminar sessions, conference presentations or mock vivas. The viva is an integral part of a doctoral examination, not an add-on or a rubber-stamping exercise. There are two elements to a doctoral thesis: the written and the spoken.

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The viva and the written thesis are important ways of presenting your doctoral work and making them public, especially once the thesis is housed and catalogued in the university library. In the final chapter of the book we present and discuss ways of disseminating your work more widely.

Cameo: Surviving the viva

Maxine Burton

After a sleepless night, the day of the viva has dawned. Getting the thesis completed for submission was hard enough. But this is the leap into the unknown. You have already run through every horror scenario in your head, you have even had viva nightmares, you have endlessly rehearsed all those problem areas you hope they don't pick up on (in my case, I was intent on appearing more knowledgeable than I felt on modernism and postmodernism, structuralism and poststructuralism!).

I dressed carefully in a smart suit, to demonstrate an efficiency I certainly didn't feel. I had already checked where the room was, in case I couldn't cope with navigation in addition to all the other anxieties. I had been told it was a 'very nice room', as if there might be some sympathetic magic in that. My supervisor had arranged to meet me beforehand. He tried to talk me through some possible questions, but one look at my face convinced him that I was beyond help - 'I'm just making it worse, aren't I?' So then he tried to be soothing, telling me I had done a good piece of work, but warning me that you could never tell what the examiners might want in the viva. Enough - I'd read my fill of how the only predictable thing about the viva was its unpredictability!

And suddenly we are outside the 'very nice room'. Doing a runner crosses my mind, but before I can act on this impulse, I am ushered in. Introductions are made, the examiners smile encouragingly and we're off. The first question is a general one, asking me to summarise the importance of my research. I start cautiously, find my voice has degenerated into a feeble croak, take a gulp of water and find my hands are shaking too. The examiners continue to smile and nod. Keep going ... the questions come at me and there's nothing too off-putting yet. I allow myself to relax a little and try to think of it just as a discussion with people who are interested in hearing what I have to say. Before I realise, this is just what it has become, and we're talking about other research in my area, about possibilities for turning my work into [p. 196 ↓] a book. It occurs to me that they like my thesis and it's going to be alright. And then comes the stinker of a question, a question to which I have no idea of possible answers, having totally failed to anticipate it. By now I am confident enough to allow myself the luxury of saying that it's a difficult question, and asking the examiner to clarify what she means. I'm not sure that even then I manage to answer it. But an hour has slipped by, and they decide to put me out of my misery. I'm through - some minor corrections only.

I was told afterwards that I looked 'shell-shocked'. The imaginary scenarios I had run through did include a tentative one in which I 'got through', but it was still hard to believe. I have no idea if it really was a 'very nice room' - but the champagne tasted good afterwards!

In the 'viva literature' there was very little I had read that I found useful preparation, so I will offer some pointers as to what proved helpful for me.

Before:

On the day:

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