



RESEARCH ARTICLE

PHD VIVA VOCE: TECHNIQUES TO WIN YOUR 'ULTIMATE BATTLE'

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ABSTRACT

The Viva (oral examination of PhD thesis or dissertation) seems to be the Fear No. 1 of not only of PhD researchers in general but even that of scholars of PhD in English in India. When the expectations from the PhD scholars undertaking the Viva are unusually high, the competence of these researchers is pushed to the edge. To their astonishment, the scholar finds that a different or perhaps a better preparation is required. As this new experience may turn out thrilling or chilling depending on the preparedness of the candidate, the scholar must undertake a strategy to face the Viva. This paper explores various challenging aspects of the Viva Voce and offers insights as to how to shine through this most feared academic examination, the ultimate battle.

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INTRODUCTION

Practically speaking, for a PhD scholar the Viva Voce (more commonly known as the Viva, Defense, etc.) appears to be the "fat lady" of the proverb "Nothing is really over until the fat lady sings." In policy and practice, the Viva or oral examination of PhD thesis or dissertation is not only the last leg of your research (PhD) journey but also the final (*real*) test of your research acumen and intellectual resilience. The Viva is followed by the written examination and is examined by the same examiner(s) who earlier examined your PhD thesis or dissertation. The PhD scholar has to *convince* the examiner(s), who are hard nuts to crack, that his or her PhD thesis or dissertation has made a significant contribution to the field of knowledge in the area of research and is thus entitled to the doctoral degree.

The University of Leicester observes about the PhD 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. (<http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/presentations/viva>)

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However, it is not that easy. When most scholars tend to regard the Viva (or "defence") as a *necessary evil* (an intellectual rape by outsiders whereas your own guide remains a mute spectator or a co-victim or a co-perpetrator), some scholars consider it to be an *opportunity* (a day of reckoning --- to talk about their research work or achievement done over years) Whatever may be the perception of the PhD scholar --- a forthcoming fun or an impending horror show (!), the Viva Voce happens to be the single most important occasion to perform or perish. It is for the researcher to demonstrate his or her right to earn a PhD degree under rigorous scrutiny. While recognizing the fact that the Viva Voce has been universally accepted as the Fear No. 1 of not only of PhD researchers in general but also that of PhD scholars of English in India, this paper explores various challenging aspects of the Viva Voce and offers insights as to how to shine through this most feared academic examination (i.e., the Viva) using your soft skills, which is a synonym for "people skills."

The Viva: Its Nature, Scope, and Function

The Viva is usually a lengthy oral *examination* to verify the PhD scholar's claim of having made some 'unique' and 'original', at any rate significant, contribution to the field of knowledge reported in his or her PhD thesis or dissertation. The researcher must highlight orally his or her original contribution to the field of knowledge in terms of concept, methodology, interpretation, or analysis.

Although the 'viva voce' (Latin for 'by live voice') or oral examination is taken much after the PhD scholar has submitted his or her thesis and called upon to defend the doctoral thesis evaluated by external examiners, it means different things for different types of researchers relating to their standard or preparedness. In this context, Penny Tinkler and Carolyn Jackson, in their book *The Doctoral Examination process: A Handbook for Students, Examiners and Supervisors* (2001: 360), observe:

A number of academics suggested that the viva serves different purposes depending upon the quality of the candidate and her/his work . . . In terms of the successful candidates . . . the viva should provide them with experience and information . . . For weaker candidates, the viva was often described as a forum within which examiners could provide constructive feedback and guidance . . . For borderline candidates . . . the viva allowed the candidate to 'defend' her/his work. (Quoted in *How to Survive Your Viva*)

Key Factors in a PhD Viva Voce

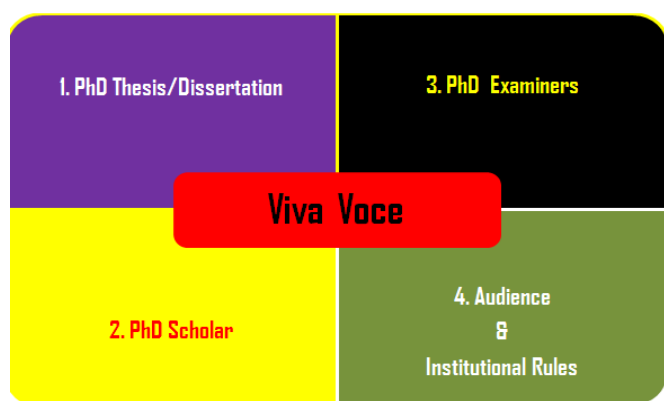


Figure 1. Key Factors in a PhD Viva Voce

Understand Your PhD Thesis/Dissertation Well

In *How to Write a Thesis*, Murray (2006) writes

While the focus of the examination is the work you did, as demonstrated in your thesis, you might get – and should be ready for – both product and process questions, i.e. questions about your thesis and questions about your learning and your experiences in conducting your research and writing your thesis. (“What is a Viva?”, p 257) Research scholars who get panicky about their PhD viva voce are usually the ones who have done either a patch work or a mere compilation or a rewriting of things in others’ domain. If this is not the case and a genuine PhD scholar is panicky about the PhD viva, then he or she must be a victim of information overload or information loss, or simply nervousness. Whatever the situation, you must prepare yourself to defend *your* PhD thesis. The overall quality of a PhD thesis depends more on the presentation of the thesis than on anything else. As an academic reporter, you have got to give a professional look to your PhD thesis. The main elements of a PhD thesis are as given below:

- A. Structure
- B. Content
- C. Style
- D. Format
- E. Research methodology

The Structure and Format of Your PhD Thesis: The word ‘structure’ means the “mode of building, construction, or organization; arrangement of parts, elements, or constituents” as well as “a complex system considered from the point of view of the whole rather than of any single part”. So, the ‘structure of the PhD thesis’ refers to the overall organization of the thesis, wherein the parts follow a pattern and become subservient to the whole with a design and purpose. All the parts of your thesis need to flow logically from one to the next with ideas in proper sequence. Needless to say, the conclusion is supposed to comprehensively summarize the main points of the thesis. *The Contents of Your PhD Thesis:* As you have written your thesis, you are supposed to know your work much better than any other person save your research guide. The introduction should have made the background clear or you have to defend why your introduction is what it is and why you did not do in a different manner. The introduction, it goes without saying, sets the context clear. If your thesis has effectively used persuasive strategies to convince the readers, especially by explaining the ideas fully and reinforcing with supporting details, it is your strong point. But if there is a bias or hastily drawn conclusion, you will have a hard time with the viva voce examiners. The Literature Review section holds the nerves of your thesis. You must account for the selection of works put in this section/chapter. You have to clarify the omissions and commissions, if any, in this chapter. If you are not fully up-to-date with the recent literature in your field, it may be your Waterloo. You need to have a discussion with your research supervisor regarding this. Sometimes it may have so happened that some breakthrough might have happened during gap between your thesis submission and your Viva voce. Be prepared whatever may be the situation. Don’t bluff no matter what happens.

The Style of Your PhD Thesis: Your style of writing and the presentation of the matter must be fool-proof. An academic writing style in conformity with the Style Guide (e.g., the *MLA Handbook*) is required and any lapses, mistakes, errors are regrettable. Since the research guide has “discretion power” in matters of style, he/she can come to your rescue. However prepare yourself for any hammering by your external examiners and defend your choice coolly and rationally. Be politically correct if you really do not want to lose your battle. *Research Methodology:* You must convince the reader that your research methods are sound and productive. You have to explain why your research design, method, approach, and tools are effective and the best that you could choose. Overall, you see, you have to prepare yourself to face any question related to Structure, Format, Contents, Style, and Research methodology questions.

Checklist on Your PhD Thesis before the Viva

You get a letter or summons from your university/institute that on a certain day you are to take your Viva. As such, you must read and analyze your thesis and come thoroughly prepared to shine through the Viva. (<https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/doing-a-doctorate/completing-your-doctorate/your-viva/viva-checklist>)

Put a Tick mark in the box if you agree

- I know my thesis thoroughly.
- I have written a one-page summary of each chapter.

- I have continued to work with my thesis after submission or have begun to prepare a conference paper or publication.
- I am able to explain how my thesis fits into the big picture.
- I have kept up to date with relevant literature.
- I know what the implications of my research are to both theory and practice.
- I have had a mock viva with my main supervisor.
- I have asked my peers to quiz and challenge me about my thesis.
- I have explained my thesis to friends and family who are not familiar with it.
- I have investigated the backgrounds and publications of my examiners.
- I have looked at my institution's guidelines for viva.
- I have produced a list of likely questions.
- I have identified areas of my thesis that are likely to be challenged.
- I have marked up my thesis to help me refer to it in the viva.

FAQs for the Viva Voce

Take a mock-viva with your guide/colleague/friend for your impending Viva Voce. Here are some general frequently asked questions you need to answer before the D-Day (<https://ddubdrahcir.wordpress.com/.../is-it-a-phd-or-not-a-phd-unpacking-the-viva>)

1. Tell us the gist of your thesis.
2. Does the title fully represent the content? Do you have a second thought on your thesis title?
3. What is your thesis point?
4. Was choosing the topic easy? Why or why not?
5. What is the relevance of your topic in present-day scenario?
6. Do you think another method or approach could have been more fruitful?
7. Who are going to benefit from your research?
8. Is your research work original?
9. What is your contribution to the field of knowledge?
10. What justifies this thesis as a doctorate?
11. What is the basis of your selection of literature in literature review?
12. Is the literature you have reviewed comprehensive in scope and relevant?
13. Is there any gap between your topic and the literature included?
14. Name any one book/research paper/experiment without which you could not carry your research in a meaningful way.
15. Where does your work fit into the literature?
16. Justify your research design.
17. What is innovative about your method.
18. How did you develop your research questions?
19. Where are YOU in this study?
20. What is the theoretical framework in this study?
21. Why did you choose this conceptual framework?
22. Is your thesis 100% free of plagiarism? If yes, how did you achieve this?
23. Describe the findings in more detail.
24. What are the implications of your findings?
25. Could the findings have been interpreted differently?
26. What are the strengths and weakness of your study?

27. How has the context changed since you conducted your research?
28. If you started this study again, what would you do differently?
29. Did you get any surprises during your study?

Know Yourself

As a Viva candidate you must have known your strengths and weaknesses. It is better to study yourself using SWOT analysis – Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Your own personality and the examiners' expectations from you must match, at least during the viva moments. You have to be punctual, sincere, systematic, honest, thorough, caring for details, argumentative (not quarrelsome), emotionally stable, and courteous throughout the period of 'vivisection' (a pun on vivisection).

Know Your Examiners

As a communicator, you must know who your examiners are and what their predilections are; what is their field of specialization and expectations, and how 'hard' they are going to be. Your supervisor is supposed to know your examiners and his/her inputs can help you prepare for the Viva voce better.

Know Your Audience and Institutional Rules

You should find out whether your institution makes your Viva a public defence or an in-house affair. And you should prepare accordingly. You should anticipate your audience and prepare yourself for all kinds of rational and irrational questions if it is going to be a public defence. In public defence the width and the depth, both, matter. If it is a closed door Viva, you get more opportunity to display your erudition and chance to enlighten your audience more.

Know Your Research Guide(s)

You should understand your Research supervisor — whether they are impartial or they are helpful, or they are going to enjoy your discomfort when you have tough moments (!). Prepare yourself to face any kind of situation.

Conclusion

To be successful in a Viva, you must take responsibility for yourself. Understanding the key factors in a viva will make you understand what you should do and what you shouldn't do. Be confident and know for sure that you are not going to rewrite your thesis. So, follow the 4 P's --plan, prepare, practice, and present yourself. This is the recipe to win your ultimate battle to acquire a PhD.

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