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How to prepare for your Viva Voce exam

**Introduction**

This guide is designed to explain the purpose of the viva examination, outline what to anticipate during the process, and provide strategies for effective preparation to ensure confident communication during this oral assessment. In compiling this guide, we have incorporated insights and recommendations from former PhD candidates and seasoned viva examiners from the University of Liverpool.

Each postgraduate researcher will have a unique approach to preparing for the viva examination, and it is essential to identify what methods work best for you. This guide offers a range of suggestions to consider as part of your preparation.

**What is the viva voce exam?**

The viva voce, commonly referred to as the viva, is an oral examination in which you are required to defend your thesis, with the quality of your research being rigorously evaluated. Typically scheduled within three months of thesis submission, the viva is a mandatory examination for the attainment of a postgraduate research degree. The [PGR](https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/aqsd/academic-codes-of-practice/pgr-code-of-practice/) Code of Practice delineates the requirements and expectations for thesis preparation and assessment and should be consulted alongside your PGR Programme Handbook.

**The Viva exam aims to establish**

That you completed the work and authored the thesis yourself!

* Originality and Contribution: Does the thesis represent original work that significantly advances knowledge or understanding in the field of study?
* Knowledge Demonstration: Does the thesis exhibit comprehensive knowledge of the field of study and relevant literature?
* Critical Judgment: Does the thesis reflect critical judgment regarding both the s work and that of other scholars in the same field?
* Presentation and Style: Is the thesis presented in a satisfactory manner with appropriate style?
* Oral presentation: that you can talk about your research convincingly and in a professional manner

Your viva examination will typically involve two examiners: an internal examiner from the University of Liverpool and an external examiner who is an expert in your research field. In the event of resubmission or the internal examiner being new to the viva examination process, then a third examiner from the University of Liverpool staff will also be present. This is to ensure correct procedures are followed.

For more information on the appointment of examiners see the [PGR code of practice here](https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/tqsd/code-of-practice-on-assessment/appendix-8-PGR-CoP.pdf)

The viva generally lasts between two to four hours, though it can extend up to six hours or more. The duration of the viva is not indicative of your performance; rather, it reflects the time required to thoroughly review the thesis and the depth of discussion desired by the examiners.

**The purpose of the Viva exam**

The viva voce, often referred to as the viva, is essentially a defence of your research. During this oral examination, you will have the opportunity to elaborate on and discuss your thesis with your examiners, demonstrating that your work is original, independently conducted, and contributes significantly to the field, thereby justifying the award of a PhD. Although it is a formal examination, it is also a critical discussion of your work, on which you are the expert, so you should be confident in your ability to defend your thesis successfully.

The examiners will be looking for evidence that you have conducted the research yourself and possess the ability to explain your rationale, methodology, and findings. Additionally, you should be able to demonstrate an understanding of the significance of your work and its broader context within the current research field. Remember, you are the one who carried out the research and performed the critical analysis that culminated in your thesis. Therefore, you should be able to speak authoritatively about your work and its contribution to your subject area.

[Policy on Research Degree Examinations and Examiners](https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/tqsd/code-of-practice-on-assessment/appendix-8-PGR-CoP.pdf)

**Preparing for your viva exam**

**What are the arrangements?**

After submitting your thesis, it is essential to prepare for your viva. Establish the date and location as early as possible to allow sufficient time for preparation, typically between three weeks to two months before the examination. While your supervisor will generally handle these arrangements, it is your responsibility to ensure you are informed of the details.

You should be aware of the identity of your examiners; typically, this will include one internal examiner and one external examiner. Additionally, other staff members may be present during your viva, but they will not participate in the assessment of your work. A third examiner will only be present in the event of a resubmission requiring a second viva exam or, in the event of the internal examiner from the University of Liverpool being new to the viva examination process.

**Know your examiners and their approaches to research**

It is crucial to familiarise yourself with your examiners' research areas by reviewing some of their recent publications. This is particularly important if you are not already acquainted with their work. Understanding their research interests, approaches, models and methodologies can provide valuable insights into the types of questions they may pose during the viva.

**Take a step back**

Consider taking a few weeks away from your work before beginning to review your thesis again. This break can offer a fresh perspective, potentially highlighting aspects you may have previously overlooked. It is also advisable to create a plan that divides your preparation into manageable segments. For example, you might aim to thoroughly review one section of your thesis each day, which can help distribute the workload effectively.

**Focus on the details**

Re-read your thesis meticulously, avoiding the temptation to skim. Take the time to read word-by-word, noting both strengths and weaknesses. Critically evaluate whether any sections could be better explained or are lacking in detail. Document these observations and consider how you would address any concerns if questioned during the viva. Demonstrating an ability to identify and critically analyse your own work will show the examiners that you have thoroughly engaged with your research.

Reflect on alternative approaches you could have taken in your research and the potential impact these might have had on your outcomes. Could different methodologies have yielded different results? The key is to understand and articulate the rationale behind your chosen methods. If you employed a specific technique, why did you select it over others? Is there a more widely accepted approach in your field, and if so, why did you not use it? What questions remain unanswered?

These are common inquiries during a viva examination.

**Re visit the wider research context of your work**

A viva examination will not only focus on your thesis but also on your ability to contextualize your research within the broader academic landscape. Examiners will be interested in how your ideas have evolved from earlier studies and how you plan to further develop your research.

Therefore, you should anticipate questions that may challenge you to consider the future direction of your research and how you could continue to make a contribution to your field.

Your examiners will probably ask you questions on fundamental knowledge around the topic of your research, as well as your specialist area, so you will want to make sure you go over this in your preparation. In addition, they will also expect you to be able to discuss the impact of your research and its relation to other fields. So be sure not only are you aware of your research field but also its impact on wider context.

**Use the University for Support**

**Speak to your supervisors and research group colleagues**

Your supervisors will have experienced a viva exam themselves and have examined theses both internally and externally, making them valuable resources for your preparation. It is essential to consult with them, especially if you have any uncertainties. They can provide insights into what to expect during the viva, the types of questions examiners may ask, and effective ways to respond.

Your supervisor is often familiar with the work of both your examiners and can highlight relevant research that may relate to your thesis, particularly if it has not already been referenced. This knowledge can help you focus your preparation on understanding the examiners' research and approach, potentially indicating the direction of their questions.

Most importantly, your supervisors can offer additional feedback on your thesis, helping you identify areas of strength and weakness that might be discussed during the oral examination.

**The Academy Viva preparation PGR development sessions**

The Academy offers PGR development sessions to help Postgraduate researchers prepare for their viva exam. These sessions are specific to each faculty (Science and Engineering, Health and Life Science and Humanities and Social Sciences). An expert from your faculty will attend to offer a 30-minute Q and A at the end of the session to answer any subject specific questions you many have.

You can find further details below.

[PGR Development Programme Viva Preparation workshops: prepare for you viva with confidence](https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/researcher/pgr-development/programme/)

Ask your supervisors what resources are available in your school, institute or department.

**Practice and preparation can help you prepare with confidence and professionalism**

**Preparing your thesis (annotated thesis and 2-minute summary)**

Preparing your thesis using colour coded labels or sticky notes according to key findings, chapters, or methods can make it easy to reference in your viva and will help you navigate quickly and efficiently in terms of addressing questions from your examiners.

Examiners usually will open the viva with a broad invitation for you to tell them about your research.

You can prepare this by writing and rehearsing a two-minute summary of your thesis.

Covering the following

• What you did

• Why you did it

• What you found out

• Your contribution to knowledge

Having this prepared can really help reduce your nerves on the day and it gives you a few minutes to compose yourself and relax as you tell them about your research.

Most people are asked for this at the start of their viva. Sometimes you may be asked to do a powerpoint slide, that would be at the request of the examiners, or you can request this yourself – contact your internal examiner.

**Mock Viva**

It is crucial to practice articulating your thesis and your responses to possible viva style questions to others. One effective method is to arrange a mock viva with your supervisors. They are likely to have a good understanding of the potential questions that may arise during the viva and, being experienced thesis examiners, are familiar with the format. A mock viva provides an excellent opportunity to practice responding to questions and engaging in discussion, rather than solely preparing on paper.

**Practice with others (fellow PGRs or departmental colleagues)**

Additionally, you can ask colleagues (staff or fellow PGRs) to read your thesis or parts of it. If they are reading your thesis for the first time, they may identify sections that are unclear or pose questions you had not anticipated. They might also notice minor errors or provide broader feedback on your research. This input can be invaluable in helping you prepare effectively for your viva.

**Before the viva exam (take care of your wellbeing)**

Try to relax the day before – and stay positive!

To ensure you are well-prepared for your viva, it is crucial to remain calm and maintain a positive mindset in the days leading up to it. Feeling anxious is natural, but prioritizing rest is essential. Engage in relaxing activities, such as spending time with friends and loved ones or pursuing hobbies you enjoy. Additionally, trying to ensure a good night's sleep before the viva can significantly benefit your performance.

While there are many daunting viva stories circulating, it is important to remember that these are often not representative of the typical experience. Avoiding such stories can prevent unnecessary stress. Instead, focus on reading positive and motivational content. Trust in your preparation, and let it bolster your confidence

**Practical advice!**

Ensure you allocate ample time to travel to the venue, especially if it is an unfamiliar location or room. Arriving early will allow you to compose yourself and gather your thoughts, rather than rushing into your viva. These small details can significantly impact your performance.

While there is no formal dress code for the viva examination, dressing appropriately is advisable to make a positive impression and to put yourself in the right mindset. If your viva includes a presentation, aim to look professional. Choose attire that is both comfortable and smart.

Finally, remember to bring a copy of your annotated thesis and some blank note paper. This will be useful for taking notes to aid in your explanations during the discussion.

**The Viva exam itself**

During the viva, examiners will focus on the following aspects of your research:

* What did you do?
* Why did you do it?
* How did you do it?
* What did you find?
* What is the significance of your findings?

Examiners will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of your research and explore any potential areas for improvement. Their goal is not to catch you out but to help you recall relevant knowledge and guide you towards the answers they seek. While the questions may be challenging, they are designed to assess whether your research meets the necessary standards for the degree.

It is important to remember that examiners have different approaches based on their experience and examination style. Some may appear intimidating, but it is crucial not to take criticisms personally and to respond calmly. If you disagree with an examiner, explain your reasoning and remain open to other opinions. Disagreement does not imply that your research is substandard. Continue to engage confidently in the discussion of your work.

The format of a viva can vary between individual PGRs and disciplines. Keep in mind that the viva is not about how many questions you can answer correctly. It is about your approach to answering questions, your critical analysis of your work, and your ability to reflect on yourself as a researcher and identify areas for future improvement.

**How to / not to answer the questions**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Good approach** | **Not so good approach** |
| Take time to consider before you answer, write the question down if necessary. You can ask for clarification e.g. are you asking me x or y? | Rush to answer without fully understanding what they are asking. If you do not understand, ask them to repeat the questions. You can refer to your hard copy thesis to help you |
| Answer concisely but as fully as possible | Try not to waffle or talk for too long – if you’re not sure if you’ve said enough stop and ask the examiners if they need further detail |
| Admit if you do not know the answer, do not try to bluff. | Being defensive when criticized - the purpose of the examination is to critically assess your work. Try to maintain a professional tone. Stop before you answer and give yourself time to compose yourself before you answer. |
| Be open to suggestions the examiners may make about your work | Blame your data or your supervisor |
| Express your own opinions. Remember you are an expert, and you are there to defend your thesis, but your tone should be professional and not aggressive | Consider weaknesses as unimportant or relevant to the exam |

**What happens after the viva exam**

**Outcomes**

You will be promptly informed of the outcome of your viva by the examiners. Typically, they will consider immediately following the viva and convey the result to you without delay. While there are seven potential outcomes, the most common fall into the pass with minor or major modifications.

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AI-generated content may be incorrect.

**Next steps**

It is important to remember that the viva is not the final step of your PhD journey, unless the examiners have recommended the award with no corrections. You must adhere to the examiners' recommendations before your PhD can be awarded. This may involve making minor changes to your thesis, undertaking a substantial rewrite, conducting additional research, or possibly facing a second viva. It is crucial to understand what is required. If necessary, clarify expectations with the internal examiner and inquire about any available support to meet these requirements with your supervisor.

**Deadlines:** You will be given a deadline for making corrections and submitting your revised thesis. Confirm these deadlines with the Research Degree Administration Team, as they are firm and must be met to obtain your award, even if only minor corrections are needed.

If your examiners have requested more extensive changes before awarding your PhD, consider the following questions:

* Have you consulted with your supervisor to ensure there are resources (e.g., lab space, access to equipment and materials) to support additional data collection or research?
* Are there any financial implications, such as fees for additional research? Can you support yourself financially during this period, or are there funding sources available?
* Have you planned to start (or have started) a new job? How will this impact the time available to complete the examiners' conditions?
* If you are an international student, how will this affect your visa status?
* If substantial changes or additional research are required, are you willing to proceed, or would you prefer to discuss other options, such as submitting a revised thesis for an MPhil?

**Support:** Your supervisor and, in some cases, your internal examiner can provide guidance to ensure you understand the next steps to fulfil the requirements. It is particularly important to discuss with your supervisor how to proceed with significant requirements and clarify the assistance they can offer.

We hope that any changes requested by your examiners are minor and can be addressed without difficulty. However, it is beneficial to be aware of other, less common outcomes to understand what might be involved

**Summary**

Good luck for your viva exam! Remember to be confident and most of all proud of what you have achieved and attained during your research programme. During the exam, you will have the opportunity to discuss your research with two experts in your field and have their utmost attention, it can be a fantastic experience so most of all, try to enjoy it!

**Key Viva preparation resources**

**Online**

A viva checklist (Vitae): [https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/doing-a-doctorate/completing-your-doctorate/your-viva/viva-checklist 8](https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/doing-a-doctorate/completing-your-doctorate/your-viva/viva-checklist%208)

Overview of the viva (Vitae): <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/doing-a-doctorate/completing-your-doctorate/your-viva>

Rowena Murray, Lecturer in Academic Practice, writes in The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2003/sep/16/highereducation.postgraduate>

Possible viva outcomes (Vitae): <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/doing-a-doctorate/completing-your-doctorate/your-viva/thesis-outcomes>

Viva posts on the Thesis Whisperer blog: https://thesiswhisperer.com/tag/viva/

A personal viva story: <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/doing-a-doctorate/completing-your-doctorate/your-viva/i-had-my-doctoral-viva-and-i-enjoyed-it>

Jobs.ac.uk, ‘Your PhD Viva and How to Prepare’: <https://career-advice.jobs.ac.uk/studentship-advice/preparing-for-a-phd-viva/>

Viva Survivors, blog: <http://viva-survivors.com/>

**Publications**

Dunleavy, P. (2003) Authoring a PhD how to plan, draft, write, and finish a doctoral thesis or dissertation. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Murray, R. (2009) How to survive your viva: defending a thesis in an oral examination. 2nd ed. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Open University Press.

Smith, P. (2014) The PhD viva: how to prepare for your oral examination. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Williams, K. et al (2011) Completing your PhD. London: Palgrave Macmillan