



How to prepare for your *viva voce*:

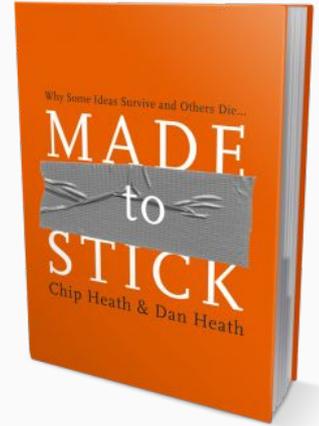
Passing the oral defence of your PhD thesis

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12 tips for passing your *viva voce*

Objective

This presentation offers constructive advice to aid you to prepare for your *viva voce* exam so that you may pass this examination.



Preliminary reading

Trafford, V., & Leshem, S. (2008). *Stepping stones to achieving your doctorate: By focusing on your viva from the start: Focusing on your viva from the start*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

263 pages quality textbook.

Available via Google Scholar (free)

Watch some successful *viva voce* presentations on Youtube



12 Points

Recommendations

1. Expert frame-of-mind
2. Health and wellbeing
3. Practice your presentation
4. Research your examiners
5. Structure your presentation
6. Anticipate difficult questions
7. Revisit supervisor's feedback
8. Consult with your supervisors and others
9. Regulations and mandatory requirements
10. Revisit your thesis with a deeply critical mindset

Optional

11. Digital presentation
12. Dress for success

Retrieve your feedback chapters

Revisit the feedback provided by your supervisors on your draft chapters.

Some of the comments provided by your supervisors may be years old.

It is possible that you have forgotten the limitations that are inherent in your work.

This feedback is important. It has been provided by your peers who know the most about your thesis.

Reassess these comments even if you have overcome the limitations and if you have a convincing explanation about how you have neutered these.

These are the sorts of critical questions your examiners are likely to pose.

Health **and** wellbeing

Tip 1

Make sure you get plenty of rest prior to your examination, especially the night before.

Take annual leave from work for a few days if you require this time to prepare.

Tip 2

Do not let stress interfere with the preparation of your *viva voce* or the delivery of this examination.

Consult with your university's health service if stress is an issue.

Tip 3

Aim to arrive at your examination early so that you can inspect the audio visual equipment, and be sure you are in the right seminar room.

Do everything in your power to make sure you do not arrive late. If you arrive in a timely manner, then you should feel relaxed when presenting.

Structure

It is important that your presentation has a logical structure, even if this requirement is not stipulated as being mandatory.

A random structure may come across to your examiners as an incoherent argument.

Inquire if the exam committee is permitted to ask questions throughout the exam. If the choice is yours, consider whether you prefer to take questions only at the conclusion.

Limiting questions to the end enables your presentation to be smoother as there is no interruption. However, delayed questions out of context may be more difficult to answer.

Suggested format (1 hour presentation)

1. Introduction (5 minutes)

Abstract, objective, scope, research question, contribution to knowledge, grand conclusion.

2. Body (25 minutes)

If you follow the order of your data chapters, you should constantly make reference to the interconnectivity of the grand body of work. Do not treat each chapter as an isolated idea.

3. Conclusion (5 minutes)

Rearticulate your thesis in a fresh way.

Questions from examiners (25 minutes)

Conclude: thank your committee and audience.

'Tricky' questions

It is likely that at least one examiner will ask you at least one question that may come across complex, tricky, unfair or hostile.

This is not uncommon. You should not let this upset you in the exam if it happens.

The examinations process is fair. Each panel member has one vote and they must act in accordance with university regulations.

It is possible that the person asking a tricky question has already concluded that your written dissertation component is excellent.

If you have prepared for your *viva voce* in a diligent manner you should remain confident.

No doctoral thesis is perfect

If you consult with experienced academics, you might concur with my argument that there is a consensus among academics that no doctoral thesis can be perfect.

Knowledge is contested. The number of research paradigms on offer to students who pursue similar thesis questions supports this argument.

I suggest that you read this text prior to preparing for your *viva voce*. It might reassure you of this argument.

See Trafford & Lesham (2008, pp. 46 & 56).

Read the regulations and guidelines carefully

Most institutions impose one or more mandatory requirements on the *viva voce*.

Consult the current policy document that governs your *viva voce*.

Examples of mandatory requirements may include:

1. Preparing a visual presentation
2. A minimum and/or maximum time limit on the presentation
3. Answering a minimum number of questions from examiners
4. Providing your audience with briefing notes (e.g. PowerPoint summary slides)
5. Presenting a specific structure (e.g. introduction, body, conclusion)
6. Providing evidence that you are the author or co-author of one or more peer-reviewed publications that discuss aspects of your research findings.

Attend your exam in an expert frame-of-mind

It is imperative that you invest a great amount of time and effort in preparing for your *viva voce*, even if the written component of the dissertation has been passed.

Your examiners are seeking evidence that you are THE expert in a narrowly defined sub-field that you have chosen to research.

It is not acceptable to go into the oral examination with a mindset along the lines of “I wrote this dissertation over four years and finished it six months ago, I can remember most of what it is about for the oral exam next week”.

Re-read your dissertation in full again about one week before the oral examination, and read it as many times as needed to feel like you have expert mastery of this text.

Not all examiners are the same. Examiners may differ personally or professionally because of factors such as their:

- Country of origin/residence
- Academic rank and total years of experience
- The sub-field/s in which they publish.

These variations do not always occur, but it is a fact of life that people are not the same. Some examiners are often labelled by others as 'demanding' whereas others are mostly labelled as 'fair'.

Perform for your audience

To some degree, it might be wise to prepare your *viva voce* with the composition of your assessment Committee in mind. This is not manipulative behaviour so long as you work hard and prepare for your examination in a professional manner.

Within the bounds of ethical and lawful behaviour, try to find out as much detail as you can about your examination committee members in advance of your *viva voce*. You might be able to gauge this unobtrusively by watching YouTube presentations of examinations that they have conducted and by reading their website and publications.

For example, if examiner 'Professor Jane Doe' has a long history of asking detailed questions about the research paradigm, it might be wise to spend extra time on this issue. Of course, this is a topic you should be prepared to answer for any assessment committee.

On an emotional level, you might attend your *viva voce* feeling more relaxed if you have some knowledge about your examiners.

Practice your *viva voce*

Practice your *viva voce* at least once before the presentation.

Take this presentation seriously. For example:

- Arrive with a full set of notes
- Print the slideshow notes you plan to distribute to your Committee/audience
- Aim to arrive on early
- Check that the audio-visual equipment works and that it is compatible with your hardware such as your USB or DVD
- Arrive with a lesson plan that shows your structure and maps the planned timing of each section to a time limit range
- Record your trial run and watch this at home prior to the real examination
- Invite an audience to watch

Your mock audience

- Invite a mock audience that has the qualifications and experience to assist you to prepare for the final oral exam. Try to marshal enough volunteers to form a full examination Committee panel and a public audience.
- Provide this support audience with a full copy of your dissertation (e.g. a digital copy), an abstract and other documents (e.g. publications) at least one week prior to your mock exam.
- Encourage your audience to arrive with critical questions that are thoughtful.
- Treat this audience with the same amount of respect and formalities that you will treat your official committee.

Consult your supervisors and others

| Do not underestimate how much quality support you can receive from faculty and others prior to your *viva voce*.

It is likely that your doctoral supervisors have passed a *viva voce* and attended oral examination committees as observers and as examiners.

If you have any questions about the requirements of the *viva voce* exam you should feel comfortable to ask in advance.

Try to do as much research as you can prior to asking any questions and make this background investigation clear to those whom you seek help from.

People are more likely to offer you support if you have done the groundwork and you are not just looking to take short-cuts or have an easy exam.

Read your thesis one more time. Adopt a mindset that is deeply suspicious and critical of your own work.

Reconsider the opposite argument of your thesis and why you reject this view.
Could you answer these general questions if they were put to you in an exam?

Do you believe that your doctoral thesis provides a substantially original contribution to scholarly knowledge, and if so, why do you hold this opinion?

What are the major limitations of this study?

How have you adapted your methodological design in order to maximise the quality of your data collection and data analysis?

Is this the only suitable paradigm that you might have selected to pursue your research objective?

For a “No” answer consider this follow-up question?

What was the other paradigm/s and why did you not choose this one/these?

Dress for success: this advice is optional

For some, first impressions count. Dress for your oral exam the same way that you would dress for a professional job interview. Visualise yourself as a guest lecturer at a respected college. An ethical examiner cannot fail your *viva voce* because you look untidy.

However, it is strongly advised that you look polished and professional. These are two core attributes about your work that you wish to convey to your examiners.

Dressing like a successful businessperson will not result in you passing your *viva voce* if your work has no substance and you are not well prepared.

Take note of what other scholars have worn at successful defences.

Elika <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWJyFvXhyC0>

Sultan <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XxDaeX0Ao44>

Rana <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hzvn4jCphmo>

Digital presentation

You should consider preparing a professional digital quality presentation even if this is not a mandatory requirement.

The 21st Century is the digital communication age. Some examiners may show less interest in your presentation if you do not use training aids in a way that makes your presentation attractive and easy to follow.

Consider using simple technologies such as PowerPoint and simple motion videos such as those shown on YouTube lecture presentations.

For example see Min's presentation at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ai6_toVw4c



A few final comments

A main difference between the written dissertation and the *viva voce*, is that the oral exam subjects you to questions in real-time. Rarely do doctoral examiners seek written clarification from the candidate whilst they are examining the thesis. If you cannot answer a question or you make a mistake during your *viva voce*, it is essential that you do not allow this to undermine your confidence during the remainder of the presentation. Examiners understand that diligent scholars may not be able to recall some facts when they are on the stage before an audience. If you cannot answer a question but later feel confident about answering that question, do not hesitate to revisit that conversation and provide the answer at a later time during the presentation. It is normally acceptable to say "I had a mental blank when you asked a question 10 minutes ago, but I am clear about my answer now."

A few final comments ... continued

During your candidature you should try to attend a few *viva voce* exams that are open to the public as well as invitation only events. As a doctoral candidate, you should expand your network of associates and so it should not be difficult to receive at least one invite from a colleague, friend or acquaintance. The *viva voce* exam is less daunting if you have witnessed one in real life. It is not uncommon to witness the primary supervisor introducing their PhD candidate with passion and enthusiasm. Some examiners make flattering comments about the thesis and presentation to the open room. If you cannot attend a public *viva voce*, there are numerous positive examples of real oral exams on YouTube. I suggest that you use the “PhD *viva voce*” search string.

Free peer to-peer-tutor support from research students and PhD qualified academic staff:

<http://chat.thefreeschool.education>

<http://chat.thefreeschool.education/forum55.html>



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<http://thefreeschool.education>

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Further reading

This website has several sub-pages. The advice about structure and format are typical of the *viva voce* exam process conducted by most universities. Most universities annex the requirements for their *viva voce* online.

University of Leicester (2016), The viva exam - What to expect and how to prepare, <<http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/eresources/study-guides/viva>>. Accessed 9 July 2016.

Trafford, V., and Leshem, S. (2008), *Stepping stones to achieving your doctorate: By focusing on your viva from the start*, London, England: McGraw-Hill Education.

<http://www.academia.edu/download/29694538/Stepping_Stones_to_Achieving_your_Doctorate.pdf>. Accessed 9 July 2016. This is a 263 page quality digital open-access textbook. I suggest that you access it now before it disappears as an open access resource.

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