



'Into the groove', Rebecca Watts.
Graduate School Research Images Competition 2012

The Graduate School guide to...

Surviving the viva

You have submitted your thesis and now all you have to do is to get through the viva. You have known from the start of your Doctorate that you will be assessed by a *viva voce* examination, but what actually is involved? What will happen on the day and how can you best prepare for it?

The viva is often described as the defining moment in the doctoral experience. It is the final assessment of the thesis, the research and the student. It is certainly one of the few opportunities you will have to talk in depth about your thesis with people who are knowledgeable and interested in it.

The aim of this guide is to provide you with a greater understanding of the process and to answer some of the many questions you will no doubt have. The guide starts with the selection and appointment of examiners and takes you through the process that both they and you will go through leading up to, and during, the viva.

The vast majority of research students in Reading are studying for PhD degrees, so the guide will inevitably focus on the PhD viva. However, many of the points are generic and will apply to the examination of all research theses. Where appropriate, specific reference will be made to any key differences (e.g. in terms of assessment criteria) in relation to other research programmes.

This guide is part of a series produced by the Graduate School, which address in an informal way a number of the areas and processes central to your doctoral research studies. These guides are complementary to - and should be read in conjunction with - the University's formal policies and procedures, as listed on the Graduate School website.¹

Contents

1. Selection and appointment of examiners	3
2. The examination process	4
3. How your thesis will be assessed	5
4. Assessment during the viva itself	6
5. Answering questions	8
6. Preparing in advance	8
7. Feedback and corrections	9
8. Appeals	10
9. Post viva	10

¹ <http://www.reading.ac.uk/graduateschool/currentstudents/gs-policies-and-procedures.aspx>

1. Selection and appointment of examiners

Once you have completed your 'Intention to submit' form and sent it to the Doctoral Examinations Officer in the Graduate School, he will contact your School to ask them to nominate examiners.² The examination team can vary across institutions. In Reading, it normally consists simply of one external and one internal examiner. The external comes from another University or research based organisation and the internal is a member of Reading staff (usually from your own School or Department). Very occasionally, there might be two external examiners (for example, if the candidate is a member of staff themselves), in which case an independent chair (an experienced member of Reading staff) will be appointed to oversee the process. Independent chairs may also be appointed if the internal examiner is performing the role for the first time, or if the viva is a second examination following an appeal.

Who chooses my examiners?

The formal answer is your Head of School/Department but, in practice, the Head usually takes advice from the supervisor(s) and the School/Department Director of PGR Studies. In coming up with potential names to put forward, most supervisors usually consult the student in question (particularly in relation to choice of external examiner).

When thinking about possible *external examiners*, it is important to bear in mind that the examiner:

- should have sufficient expertise of the subject area to be able to judge the quality of the research and the thesis;
- should not be a recent or current collaborator of the supervisor or student;
- should not have examined three or more theses in Reading in the past five years.

The *internal examiner* should have broad knowledge of the subject area and should not have been involved in supervision of the research. In practice, the selection will also depend on individual availability and workloads.

Choosing an appropriate external examiner is not just a matter of finding the person with the most expertise in your subject area. Other factors to take into account are their standing in the field, their level of experience, and whether they have a reputation for being a fair examiner.

What are their main roles and responsibilities?

The primary responsibilities of the examiners are to:

- judge whether the work is of an appropriate amount and standard;
- check that it is presented and discussed appropriately in the thesis;
- reassure themselves that the thesis is the student's own work, and that the student can defend it appropriately.

In addition, the external examiner will judge whether the work is of an appropriate standard compared with that found in other UK universities, and the internal examiner will ensure that the process is conducted in line with Reading's rules and regulations.

If an *independent chair* is appointed, he or she is responsible for ensuring that:

² Please see the document 'Rules for the Submission of Theses' and the 'Intention to submit thesis' form both available at: <http://www.reading.ac.uk/graduateschool/currentstudents/gs-pgexaminations.aspx>

- the examiners are aware of, and adhere to, the institution's regulations and procedures;
- the assessment is rigorous, fair, reliable and consistent;
- the examiners' questioning is appropriate;
- the candidate has an opportunity to defend the thesis;
- the examiners' reports are completed in line with regulations.

Should I tailor my thesis to my particular examiners?

The short answer is 'no'. Your thesis should be written so that it could be examined by anyone with good knowledge of your field of research. If you know well in advance who your examiners are going to be, you might want to ensure that any relevant research of theirs is referenced and that you are familiar with it, but you should not feel the need to do more than this.

2. The examination process

There is more to the examination process than just the viva. Basically, the process consists of the following:

(a) Thesis is sent to examiners and viva date arranged

The internal examiner is responsible for liaising with the external examiner, student and supervisor to find a suitable date. Within about a month of submitting your thesis, the internal examiner should contact you either to inform you of the proposed date, or to let you know where discussions have got to in terms of arranging this. Most vivas are held within three to four months of the examiners receiving the thesis.

(b) Pre-viva reports preliminary discussion

Having read the thesis, the two examiners write independent reports (usually around one to two pages) outlining their preliminary views of the thesis, and these are exchanged in advance of the viva (if an independent chair is appointed, he or she will also receive copies). In addition, the examiners would normally hold an initial discussion (either by telephone or email) to discuss their initial views and identify any particular concerns.

(c) The viva

- The examiners normally meet in advance of the start of the viva to exchange any updates on their views and to agree on how the viva will be conducted, rough order of questioning etc.
- The viva will normally be held in a quiet room in your School/Department and you will be notified of the location, and where to wait, in advance.
- Supervisors are not normally present during the viva itself but may, exceptionally, be present if all parties agree. Where not present, they are often called in to hear the outcome (see below).
- Most vivas last between two and three hours.
- You should have with you a copy of your thesis, a notepad and pen/pencil, and a list of any typos or other minor errors you have spotted since submitting your thesis. It is quite acceptable to consult your thesis during the viva if you want to refer to a particular point that you made.
- There is no 'academic dress' as such that must be worn for vivas, but most candidates dress relatively smartly as a mark of respect to the examiners.
- Occasionally, students become ill or are subject to some other circumstances that mean that their viva has to be postponed. Don't worry about this. Just let your

School/Department and the Doctoral Examinations Officer know as soon as possible.

(d) Decision making and feeding back to student

- i. Once questioning and discussion has finished, you will probably be asked to leave the room and wait in a nearby location, so that the examiners can discuss what the outcome is going to be. They will try not to spend too long doing this, as they will appreciate that you are likely to be feeling some anxiety.
- ii. You will then be asked to return and the examiners will let you know the outcome. Supervisors are often also invited in at this stage. In Reading, the outcome takes one of four forms:
 - The degree be awarded
 - The degree be awarded subject to minor corrections (to be completed within three months)
 - The student is required to make major amendments (to be completed within 12 months)
 - The student not be awarded the degree for which the thesis was submitted (in some cases the examiners might award an alternative degree).

The outcome for the vast majority of research students in Reading is that the degree is awarded subject to minor corrections being made.
- iii. If revisions are required, these are usually only discussed in outline form as the internal examiner will provide you with a more detailed list within the next day or two.
- iv. The result at this stage is not official. It has to be formally approved by University Senate (or by the Vice-Chancellor on Senate's behalf) before you can graduate. However, this does not stop you celebrating on the day!
- v. There is an appeals process (see section eight below) for students who wish to appeal against the outcome of the examination.

(e) Post-viva reports

Following the viva, the examiners have to complete a final examiners' report, which normally comprises completion of a set of questions, and a joint report of at least 100 words, that is also forwarded to you and your supervisor (normally within three weeks of the viva being held).

3. How your thesis will be assessed

In Reading, PhD candidates are expected to demonstrate each of the following:

- the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, to extend the forefront of their discipline, and to merit publication in an appropriate form;
- a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of the discipline or area of professional practice;
- the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and the ability to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems;
- a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship.

This means that when examiners are assessing your thesis they will be considering questions such as the following:

- Is the problem worth addressing?

- Is it being addressed in an appropriate way?
- Is the literature review comprehensive and up to date, and does it show understanding of the theoretical context?
- Does the candidate make explicit links between the review and his or her research question(s) and study design?
- Is there evidence of critical appraisal of the studies that are reviewed?
- If there is empirical work, are the right methods being used, is the sample large enough, are the data presented clearly and analysed and interpreted appropriately, does the discussion illuminate the results, and do the stated conclusions follow from the results?
- If the work is theoretical, is the line of argument coherent, well expressed and does it develop logically?
- Is the work ethical?
- Is the work that of the candidate (i.e. not plagiarised)?

Many of these questions also apply to the assessment of other types of research degree, particularly MPhils. The specific assessment criteria for MPhil degrees are shown below.³ The assessment criteria for Professional Doctorate degrees are the same as those used for PhDs, but an additional fifth criterion is also used; namely, that candidates should be able to demonstrate an understanding of how the research informs professional practice and knowledge.

4. Assessment during the viva itself

During the viva, your examiners will need to reassure themselves that you understand your work in terms of how it fits into the wider literature, what you have found, what is original about it, and what potential impact it might have. They will also want to be sure that you are aware of any potential limitations of your approach and how these might be addressed in the future. This last point is important. They do not expect your work to be perfect in every respect; studying for a PhD, or other research degree, is a learning process and the thesis and your answers during the viva should show evidence of that learning.

The examiners are not going to ask you questions about every detailed aspect of the work presented in your thesis. The usual approach is for them to ask some more general questions in the initial phase of the discussion and then to work through the thesis, often chapter by chapter, picking up on specific points of interest or other queries they might have.

It is important to remember that most vivas take the form of a genuine discussion, as opposed to a series of discrete pre-prepared questions which you answer one by one. Having said this, when preparing for your viva, it is useful to think about specific questions that you might be asked and how you would go about answering them. The section below lists some of the more frequently asked questions that typically come up in vivas.

Most examiners will try to put candidates at ease at the start of their vivas. There is likely to be some initial small talk, partly in an attempt to establish a good level of rapport in order to help you

³ The specific assessment criteria for MPhil degrees are:

- a systematic understanding of knowledge, and a critical awareness of current problems and / or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study or area of professional practice;
- a comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to their own research or advanced scholarship;
- originality in the application of knowledge, together with a practical understanding of how established techniques of research and enquiry are used to create and interpret knowledge in the discipline;
- conceptual understanding that enables the student to do each of the following:
 - to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline;
 - to evaluate methodologies and develop critiques of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.

to perform at your best. The first question often builds on this initial small talk, and is likely to be fairly general in nature.

For example:

- Why did you choose this topic for your doctoral study?
- How did you develop an interest in this topic?
- What motivated you to do research in this area?

Alternatively, some examiners ask students to start the viva with a brief presentation of the main findings of their thesis. Students will normally be informed in advance if they are going to be required to do this.

Other general questions that could come up at any stage during the viva:

- What are the main findings of your thesis?
- What is original about what you have done and found?
- Who are the other researchers in your field whose work influenced you the most?
- What do you think is your most interesting finding?
- Did this experiment turn out as you expected?
- Did you have any difficulties in locating or accessing material in archives?
- What have you learned from your doctoral studies?
- What was the most significant challenge you have faced in this work?
- How do you see the research field developing over the next five to ten years?
- What would you do differently if you started again?
- What are your publication plans?
- What are you going to do next?

More specific questions for different parts of the thesis:

- Have you seen the recent article by Smith & Jones? What do you think of it?
- Was there any reason for not mentioning the Ziki monograph when discussing the feminist approach?
- Do you feel you were a bit hard on Danielli's work?
- How did you derive that specific hypothesis from your research questions?
- Why did you select that method and reject others?
- What precautions did you take against possible sources of bias?
- Are you sure the size of your sample was adequate to draw the conclusions you have come up with?
- Describe your rationale for selecting the sample of material that you used?
- What means have you used to evaluate the reliability of oral history accounts of the process?
- How have you reconciled conflicting accounts or viewpoints?
- Why did you choose that analysis technique?
- Do you think you adequately addressed potential ethical concerns?
- Can you really draw that conclusion from the findings?
- Do your findings help to determine whether a one-route or two-route model might be more appropriate?
- Could a different study design help to decide between models?

5. Answering questions

The first point might seem obvious, but you cannot answer a question effectively unless you have really listened to it. You need to concentrate on what you are being asked. If you are at all uncertain about what it is you are being asked, or what the examiners are really getting at, then ask them to clarify. This is perfectly acceptable behaviour and much better than you waffling on with an inappropriate response. It is also perfectly acceptable to pause for a few moments whilst thinking about how you should respond. There is no need to jump in with an answer as soon as the examiner stops speaking. A good maxim is 'Think first – Speak second'. The particular form of your answers will clearly depend on the type of question being asked. You may give a short factual response to a question that asks about clarification of a methodological aspect, whereas you would give a longer, more thoughtful, response to a question that asks about your justification for taking a particular type of approach or for your views of the relevance of someone else's work. You should try to give comprehensive answers but try to ensure that you 'stick to the point'. It is not uncommon for anxious students to get lost in their own overly long responses, sometimes forgetting what the original question was when they are part way through responding. So do try to keep the question in mind as you are answering it.

Occasionally a question may strike you as rather strange, not that relevant, overly simplistic, or having been answered in your thesis. However, it is not for you to judge the questions, your task is to respond as best you can. It is important that you maintain an objective stance, do not let yourself get irritated or annoyed by being asked particular questions or by the way in which you feel they are being asked; simply do your best to provide clear and objective responses.

Other questions may highlight, or focus on, what might be seen to be a particular weakness in the thesis. Don't let such questions 'throw you off balance'. Remember, there is no expectation that a thesis, or the research that underlies it, is perfect in every respect. The examiners will want to reassure themselves that you appreciate why something might be a limitation and that you have some thoughts about how such limitations could be overcome in the future. It is not useful, therefore, to try to hide any limitations or potential weaknesses, or dismiss them as being irrelevant or unimportant. Rather, you should reflect on why they might have occurred and suggest what you might do to strengthen that specific aspect of your work in the future. Try not to put the blame on others, such as your supervisor, for why you took a particular approach, or to say that something was simply beyond the scope of your study, without showing evidence of more reflection and forward thinking.

6. Preparing in advance

You can never predict exactly what will happen and what you will be asked during your viva. However, it is useful to do some advanced preparation, and not to leave this to the very last minute. A good way to prepare is to be given a mock viva, where you are questioned by two willing members of staff from your Department. You should ask your supervisor whether this might be possible, bearing in mind that some Departments simply do not have the capacity to do this, particularly if there are large numbers of students. If a mock viva is not appropriate or feasible, you could arrange a supervisory session where you discuss potential areas of questioning and how you should respond to particular questions. If your supervisor is not available for such a session, then you could always set yourself some questions (such as those outlined earlier) and practice answering them. When selecting questions, it is useful to think about whether there are any potential areas of weakness in your research and how you would respond to questions about these.

During the week or two leading up to your viva you should read through your thesis two or three times. You will probably notice some small errors that you have not picked up before. There is no need to worry about this – it is fairly common. Simply make a list that you can take to the viva to show to the examiners, if appropriate. It is good to get familiar with where you discuss particular

concepts or report certain findings in your thesis, so that you can find the relevant section when asked particular questions. It might be helpful to mark key sections with coloured post-its.

As you read through your work, you should think about the wider literature and how your research relates to, and adds to, this. You should also think about your lines of argument, and your selection of particular approaches and methods, and how you would justify these. Consider your findings, particularly any surprising ones, and how you are explaining these. Finally, think about where the research could be taken next, either by you or future researchers.

On the day before your viva, as well as the day itself, make sure you eat appropriately and get some relaxation. Plan any travel on your viva day so that you arrive in plenty of time, and have a few moments to collect your thoughts before meeting with the examiners. Most students will experience some level of anxiety leading up to, and on the day of, their viva. Try to distance yourself from this. Think about the positive aspects of your thesis and parts of it that you particularly like. Remember, when it comes to your thesis, you are the real expert in the room.

7. Feedback and corrections

As outlined in section 2, once questioning and discussion have finished, you will probably be asked to leave the room whilst the examiners discuss the outcome. You will then be called back into the room to hear what they have to say. Supervisors are often also invited in at this stage. Try to listen hard to what the examiners are saying and take notes of their main points. If there is anything that you are unclear about, then it is useful to ask them at this stage. Where you are required to make some corrections, they will probably just outline the main points, and send you a more detailed list over the course of the next day or two.

In Reading, there are two levels of corrections: minor corrections and major amendments. The main difference is the amount of work involved and the length of time it will take you to do what is required. Students normally have up to three months to complete minor corrections and 12 months to complete major amendments (although you can re-submit your work before these time periods if you wish). Students with dyslexia or other special circumstances are entitled to request up to six months in order to complete minor corrections. In exceptional circumstances, the Dean of PGR Studies can also approve extensions for students with major amendments. Minor corrections may range from simply correcting a few typographical errors to being asked to include discussion of one or two additional studies in the literature review, carrying out an additional analysis of some data, increasing the documenting of steps in a procedure, or qualifying one or more conclusions. Major amendments may involve further original research being carried out, the data being analysed in a very different way, or a new theoretical stance being applied.

Once you have received your list of corrections, you should discuss them with your supervisor. If the two of you are not clear about what is required, your supervisor may advise you to ask for clarification from the internal examiner. It is better to get clarification before you start your revisions rather than trying to work it out for yourself.

If you have been asked to make minor corrections, once you have completed these, you should show them to your supervisor to check that he or she thinks you have addressed them appropriately (unless you were simply asked to address typographical and other small errors). Once, this has been done you should hand the revised thesis to the internal examiner, who will check that the requested amendments have been made to his or her satisfaction. It is helpful for them if you highlight in a covering memo where changes have been made to the text.

If you have been asked to make major amendments, you will need to re-submit your thesis to the Doctoral Examinations Officer and he will send it to both examiners, who will check that the

requested amendments have been made to their satisfaction. Depending on the amount and nature of the corrections, a second viva might be held.

When carrying out your corrections, it is worth remembering that they will almost certainly strengthen your thesis, so that it makes a useful contribution to the literature and can be accessed and referred to by others. You have already put a significant amount of work, and of yourself, into your thesis, so it is worth spending a bit of extra time at this stage to get it just right.

8. Appeals

If you feel that what the examiners are requiring you to do is completely inappropriate, and that you have been treated unfairly in your examination, you have a right to appeal. However, you should first check with your supervisor (or some other member of senior staff) whether your grounds for appeal are reasonable and allowable according to the University's formal regulations. The Doctoral Examinations Officer will provide you with details of the appeals process if you do not have them.

9. Post viva

Students often feel a range of emotions after their vivas and/or after their revised thesis has been approved. Some feel positively charged and highly motivated, whereas others feel exhausted or a sense of anti-climax. It is often a good time to take a short break and to re-charge the batteries before moving on to the next stage in your life.

Professor Dianne Berry
Dean of Postgraduate Research Studies

October 2017