

Blog: My Viva preparation and experience.

I passed my viva-voce with minor corrections in mid-summer 2015. Despite the many horror stories that I had heard and read or even worse imagined, it was a surprisingly pleasant experience. If you are preparing for your viva and have just rolled your eyes or thought (insert expletives as necessary), “Easy for you to say!” then you are in good company. This piece describes the steps I took to prepare for my PhD oral examination. Before submitting the thesis all the administration had been completed including title approved, external and internal examiners and chairperson arranged. I was so anxious that I did not forget any item I produced a list of the various administration tasks and ticked them off as each was completed. I constantly emailed supervisors, admin staff and people who had just gone through the process checking everything was in order. I was a pain.

After over 4 years of PhD roller coaster and slog, I submitted my thesis for examination on a sunny spring morning in late March 2015. What a feeling – at that point the biggest high/low emotional loop-the-loop of the whole process. A few days after submitting my thesis, I received details of my exam – Monday June 15th at 2pm. Following the advice of supervisors, trainers, peers, books and blogs I took a complete break from my project. I did not look at the hard copy of my thesis for 10 days but spent the time getting back into some sort of normal social/eating/sleeping routine. At the end of that period, it was time to face the final hurdle – one that I had avoided looking at directly for most of my PhD.

At that point, I visualised the viva-voce processes as a ship I had built. I had decided what its function was, designed how it was going to work, constructed the keel, built the supporting structures, completed the superstructure, fitted it out, and launched it. Having completed the sea-trials my ship and I were waiting to be examined by the best shipwrights in the land. Standing inside that vessel, I thought I could see light streaming in through the gaps in my knowledge and the weak points in my design and artisanship. What I could not judge was how the examiners would view the vessel. Therefore, I had to draw on those skills developed through the PhD to help manage me the process.

I had regularly attended courses on how to manage the stages of a PhD provided by Keele University. The last one I attended was solely on what to expect in a Viva. I would suggest all these types of course are good and the last especially so at reducing anxiety and providing recommendations for how to prepare for the big day. I would add look at any books you have concerning completing or writing a PhD. The ones I used all had some material on what to expect and how to prepare for the viva. Murray's (2009) book 'How to Survive Your Viva' contains much very good advice. I asked people who had recently had their viva

about their experience and accessed online material. I also purchased a set of VivaCards to help me keep grounded in the areas questions are based on. This was to keep at bay intrusive thoughts and nightmare daydreams. Advice that I followed:

A: Read your thesis.

The process of writing a PhD can often mean that authors focus on different sections and chapters in chronological order and not in numeric order. The last chapter I wrote was the Introduction. However, I found that in just re-reading my thesis I became distracted. For example, "Was that reference correct?" "Did I really write that?" "Perhaps I should have written more about this?"

I found two ways to help overcome this.

1. I used a system drawn from Phillips and Pugh (1987: p.165-166) where I made a detailed summary of my thesis. For each relevant chapter I page-numbered each line a sheet of A4 paper and wrote a summary of each page. This took a couple of week to complete but I found it very useful as it enabled me to time-manage effectively. As Phillips and Pugh (1987: p.165-166) highlight revision can be done from those summary sheets in addition to the main thesis. Moreover, you can take those sheets into the viva with your thesis and use them as a quick reference rather than thumb through the thesis.
2. Similarly, I also produced a one-side A4 summary of each chapter. I placed each on in my copy of my 'viva' thesis. Again, this is another useful revision tool. Murray (2009: p.57, p.141) suggests a one-line chapter summary.

B: Ask others to ask you questions.

I contacted (usually by email) academics that had expressed an interest in my research and asked them if they would not mind giving me viva questions to consider. Everyone was very generous with his or her time and responses. Some asked for an abstract or summary to help formulate their questions. A former supervisor agreed to focus on Methodology questions. All theoretical approaches and methods have advantages and disadvantages: these are bound to be raised. Some sent their own list of general preparation questions. This exercise was useful because it gave me experience of viva-type of questions. As a result, my anxiety was lessened.

C: Mock viva.

I arranged with my supervisor to have a mock viva about four weeks before the actual event. Although we could not replicate the actual viva conditions, I did have the material that I intended to take into the viva proper. The outcome was a positive one with me dealing with most of the questions well. The experience

highlighted a few areas that I had not anticipated. I was able to revise those areas. I follow a number of authors who suggest the mock should attempt to replicate the actual event as much as possible. So try to use the same room, time of day, and number of people. However, the important thing is to have a mock viva. This can be with an 'examiner' who has an in-depth knowledge of your work or someone you trust to fill the examiner role (you can supply them with a list of questions or the VivaCards).

D: Keep up with the latest literature.

In the two weeks before my viva, I started to look at the most recent literature in my field. I made a table of the most relevant with a brief summary of each study. Again, I took this into the viva itself. I also checked that my external had not released any new papers and their latest research via their University website.

E: Acknowledge your weak areas.

See A, B, and C above. However, it is OK to say in your viva that you had doubts about certain elements of your research. For example, your experience of a particular intervention may not have been as useful as the others had reported. You could possibly frame this as a learning outcome from reflecting on the finished thesis.

F: Timetable your preparation.

This is crucial in helping you stay focussed and, for me, not to be overwhelmed. Rowena Murray's (2009: p.56-63) book deals with this subject covering from the time just after submission to the day itself.

My viva was 2pm on a Monday. I live 50 miles away from Keele University and the commute involves a journey along a very busy motorway. I decided to go down the day before and stay in the University conference centre. That night I ate at a local pub and took part in the pub quiz – a good distraction. The morning of the viva, I had planned a pedicure, manicure and back massage at a local spa. I would recommend this form of distraction without hesitation. I then met up with some other PhD candidates for a quick chat – one gave me a luck charm to carry with me. I then changed into my suit, shirt, tie and best shoes. Knowing you are dressed well and comfortably helps bolster your confidence. I arrived a few minutes early just in case there had been a last minute change of room.

G: Things to take into the viva.

I took a soft-bound copy of my submitted thesis with the detailed and shorter summaries and my notes on the latest literature, bottle of water, pens, pencils, clipboard and my own note form. This form can be found on my website and it is based on advice from Rowena Murray's (2009) book. The idea was to write down any difficult question as a way of giving time to collect thoughts and then

note key words, phrases, authors etc., as a guide to frame the response. Under title was the advice to: 'BREATHE' 'PAUSE' 'THINK' 'DRINK' 'HIGHLIGHT THE POSITIVES.' After which the sheet was divided into three columns marked from left to right 'QUESTION' 'KEY WORDS' 'STRATEGIES'. This last column had the following reminders:

DEFINE:

*I MEAN,
WHAT I DID,
MY UNDERSTANDING*

DEFINE - ILLUSTRATE:

I DID THIS & AN EXAMPLE IS

DEFINE – DEFEND

WHAT I DID, MY REASONS WERE, I COULD HAVE, I DID NOT BECAUSE

DEFINE – JUSTIFY

I DID THAT BECAUSE

GENERAL TO SPECIFIC

ELABORATE

KEY IDEA

KEY WORK

CON'S - PRO'S

SUMMARISE

Although I hardly used the sheet after the first few questions seeing those words at the top of the sheet helped me to relax. The form was also useful for noting the minor corrections the examiners wanted completing. As a result, I was able to have the corrected version of my thesis ready when I received the official notification.

I hope that you have an enjoyable and successful viva.

Books:

Murray, R. (2009). *How to Survive Your Viva. Defending a thesis in an oral examination* (Second ed.). Open University Press: Maidenhead

Phillips, E. M. & Pugh, D. S. (1987). *How To Get a PhD* (Fifth ed.). Open University Press: Maidenhead
Gilbert, N. (Ed.). (2006). *From Postgraduate to Social Scientist: A Guide to Key Skills*. SAGE: London.
Murray, R. (2002). *How to write a Thesis* (Second ed.). Open University Press: Maidenhead
Dunleavy, P. (2003). *Authoring a PhD. How to Plan, Draft, Write and Finish a Doctoral Thesis or Dissertation*. Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke
Lee, N-J. (2008). *Achieving your professional doctorate: a handbook*. Open University Press: Maidenhead

Websites:

Vitae

<https://www.vitae.ac.uk>

Patter

<http://patthomson.net>

The Thesis Whisperer

<http://thesiswhisperer.com>

Top 40 Potential Viva Questions

<http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/ResearchEssentials/?p=156>

Vivacards

<http://vivacards.co.uk>