DOCTORAL EXAMINATION GUIDE

GLOBAL OER GRADUATE NETWORK

The GO-GN Guide to Doctoral Examination

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Introduction

At the start of a doctoral degree, the end can seem like another world or even an impossible destination. In some senses, the entire period spent studying for a doctorate is one long examination, but at the end there's the bit which feels like the exam…

The doctoral examination process fulfills many functions. The primary function is assessment: to establish whether the award of a doctoral degree is merited. There is also an aspect of validation: to establish that the candidate is indeed the person who wrote the manuscript.

There's also a significant role the assessment plays in terms of forming the identity of the candidate as they solidify their academic contributions by navigating the boundaries of knowing and not knowing during examiners' questioning, drawing on various knowledge sources to justify their research choices, as the defence functions as a transition that integrated their past, present, and future as scholars (Chen, 2012).

McCulloch et al. (2025) articulates multiple purposes of the viva beyond summative assessment: gatekeeping, empowerment, scholarly dialogue, and enculturation into research communities as examiners use the viva to elicit mastery of subject matter, support candidate confidence and intellectual engagement, and reinforce disciplinary norms. Wagner, Porto and Tsvetkova (2023) suggest that the defence itself is regarded less as a high-risk assessment and more as a celebratory academic event, particularly when the written thesis has already met the required standard.

The idea of a doctoral defence being a celebration can seem a bit alien to those who find the process extremely stressful, or who are from a country whose academic tradition very much sees the viva as the decision point about a candidate's work rather than a formality. As we will note, doctoral examination processes vary considerably, but they share a common tradition. This Guide is intended to offer general support for those participating in doctoral examinations, and we'll also think about the growing role of things like openness and AI along the way.

A Brief History of Doctoral Examination

The doctorate emerged in medieval European universities (notably Bologna, Paris, and Oxford) as a licence to teach (licentia docendi) rather than a research qualification. Examination was primarily oral, public, and performative. Candidates demonstrated mastery of authoritative texts through disputation: formal debates before senior scholars. Assessment focused on rhetorical competence, doctrinal fidelity, and the capacity to defend "orthodoxy:" the established disciplinary assumptions, methods, and theoretical positions that are regarded as authoritative within a field, and which doctoral candidates are traditionally expected to uphold and defend.

Authority resided in the examining faculty, and the process was as much about social recognition as intellectual merit. As universities became more regulated by church and state, doctoral examinations grew more ceremonial and perhaps less an intellectual test of the candidate on the day because the outcome was predetermined. Written theses existed but were often short, derivative, and sometimes prepared by supervisors. Examinations remained oral but increasingly ritualised. The doctorate functioned primarily as a status credential, particularly in theology, law, and medicine, rather than as evidence of original knowledge production.

A decisive shift occurred with the German (Humboldtian) model, especially at the University of Berlin in the 19th century (Anderson, 2020; Farrow et al., 2024). The doctorate was reconceived as an autonomous (though supported) research degree, requiring:

- An original written dissertation or thesis reflecting academic freedom
- Independent scholarly contribution
- Evaluation by disciplinary experts

In this approach, examination combined written assessment of the thesis with an oral defence (*disputation* or *rigorosum*) (BHT, 2025). This model institutionalised originality, methodological rigour, and disciplinary contribution as core criteria and strongly influenced doctoral systems across Europe and North America. Central to the Humboldtian model is the principle of academic freedom: the idea that scholars should be free to pursue inquiry, teach, and conduct research without external interference. This ethos reshaped the doctorate into a space for independent, curiosity-driven knowledge creation. As a terminal degree, a doctorate is primarily research focused.

The post-war expansion of higher education led to rapid growth in the number of candidates being examined for doctorates. Examination processes became increasingly codified and bureaucratised, with:

- Explicit assessment criteria
- Written examiner reports
- Institutional regulations and appeals processes

Over time, the doctorate shifted from elite formation to professional qualification, and examination came to balance scholarly judgement with procedural fairness and accountability. The completion of the doctorate also came to symbolise formal entry into the research community, marking the candidate's recognition as an independent scholar with the authority and ability to contribute to knowledge.

Types of Doctoral Degree

There are two main types of doctoral studies: academic research doctorates and professional doctorates oriented around practice. If you're working in the field of open education, it's most likely to be for a PhD or professional doctorate in education.

The following table, adapted from a resource published by The Quality Assurance Agency for UK Higher Education, illustrates the differences.

Full title (Abbreviation)	Description
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD / Ph.D) (Adding punctuation is more common in North America -— as in Dr vs Dr.)	PhD is the most common award title at doctoral level.It is used for the vast majority of subject specialist doctorates (including integrated doctorates) and doctorates achieved by publication, and for some professional and practice-based doctorates. In the case of subject specialist doctorates, and integrated doctorates, the title is likely to have the title of the thesis attached. A very small number have apost-fix title,e.g. 'in Musical Composition.' Integrated doctorates which include a Master's degree may feature the term'integrated' in the title (for example, Integrated PhD or PhD by or with integrated study).

	The title could also be accompanied by 'by publication'or 'by published work' for doctorates achieved by publication.
Doctor of Philosophy (DPhil)	The title DPhil is used for subject specialist doctorates at a small number of providers, as an alternative to the title PhD.In the case of subject specialist doctorates, and integrated doctorates, the title is likely to have the title of the thesis attached. A very small number may have a post-fix title, for example 'in Musical Composition'. Integrated doctorates will usually feature the term 'integrated' in the title.The title can also be used to refer to doctorates by publication.
Professional Doctorate (ProfDoc)	ProfDoc is a generic title used for professional doctorates. An alternative but less common abbreviation of the title is DProf.
Doctor of [*subject*] (D[*subject*]or [*subject*]D)	A wide range of doctoral award titles are used, which include specific subject names.This approach is especially common for professional and practice-based doctorates, and includes examples such as • Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) • Doctor of Computer Science (DCS) • Doctor of Dental Surgery (DDS) • Doctor of Education (EdD) • Doctor of Educational Psychology (DEdPsy) • Doctor of Social Science (DSocSci) • Doctor of Theology (ThD) • Juris Doctor (Doctor of Law) (JD) Research may be a smaller component of practice-based degrees but there is still usually an oral examination as the final evaluation of doctoral research.

Table 1. Examples of doctoral awards (Adapted from QAA, 2020)

Note that there are post-doctoral 'higher' degrees which may be awarded on the basis of a body of work. These include the Habilitationsschrift (or Habilitation thesis) in Europe (Kamusella, 2024) and awards like Doctor of Science (DSc), Doctor of Letters (DLitt), Doctor of Law (LLD), Doctor of Music (DMus) and Doctor of Divinity (DD) in the UK (Barnes, 2013). These don't usually have examinations in the way a doctoral degree does but there could be a ceremonial 'defence.

Differences in National Tradition

As doctoral education expanded internationally, distinct examination traditions emerged. Some illustrative examples of the differences are provided in Table 2.

Country	Doctoral Defence Style
Australia	Oral defence is largely absent; evaluation is conducted entirely in writing by two to three external examiners, making it one of the few systems where the thesis alone usually determines the outcome.
Chile	A dialogical defence in which the candidate debates their thesis against three PhD-holding examiners who have prior familiarity with the chosen research area, emphasising intellectual exchange over formality.
Finland	A highly ceremonial public defence in which an external examiner serves as a formal opponent, critically engaging the candidate in structured scholarly debate before an audience.
France	Known as a *soutenance*, the defence is framed as support for the thesis rather than challenge to it. The defence is conducted as a public ceremony before a jury and examiners produce a formal written report used in subsequent academic job applications.
Germany	Faculty-led assessment with graded outcomes, placing greater emphasis on institutional evaluation than on a single high-stakes public event.
Greece	The examination is a public defence where the candidate presents their work and answers questions from a seven-member committee. It combines presentation and viva, with decisions made collectively by the panel.
Italy	A public examination in which the candidate presents and discusses their research before a committee of experts. Upon award, the new doctor traditionally dons a fresh laurel wreath "crown" known as a *corona d'alloro*.
Kenya	Coursework is examined and must be passed before the candidate may proceed to the thesis stage. At least two supervisors are then assigned. The completed thesis is submitted to both internal and external examiners, and candidates who attain the minimum required score are invited to proceed to an oral defence.

Morocco	A formal, public, and high-stakes academic event typically lasting around two hours, in which the candidate presents their research to a specialised jury in a structured ceremonial setting.
Nepal	A highly formal defence that extends beyond the examining panel to include senior university leaders (e.g., Deans), research committee members, supervisors, and invited guests reflecting the prestige and public significance associated with earning a doctorate.
Netherlands	The defence is largely ceremonial; members of the assessment committee examine the thesis independently and, upon approval, each makes a formal individual recommendation to proceed to the public defence stage.
Spain	The defence functions primarily as a celebratory public event. As the committee approves the work in advance, the occasion is rarely characterised by rigorous critical questioning, and the candidate is expected to present rather than justify.
Türkiye	Known as a Savunma (literally "defence"), this is a formal process in which candidates defend their research before a committee typically convened by the supervisor. While it may be open to the public, it is most commonly conducted as a closed or semi-open academic event with a strong emphasis on rigorous questioning.
United Kingdom	Defined by the introduction of the external examiner to ensure independence and cross-institutional comparability. The viva voce — a private oral examination — became the central and distinctive feature of the British system.
United States of America	In the USA the process is structured around coursework and qualifying examinations preceding the dissertation defence. Authority is often distributed across a supervisory committee rather than vested in any single individual, and the defence itself is typically semi-public.

Table 2. Examples of National Variation in Doctoral Examination

Despite these variations, there's a lot of overlap in the ideas behind doctoral examination traditions. All of them share core ideas about written work being evaluated by a discipline expert who can offer judgement about the quality and relevance of the work. There might not even be a viva in some systems. In Australia, for instance, the examination is usually of the manuscript and there is no viva - though this is perhaps changing. McCulloch et al. (2025) provide a narrative on this as well as an excellent summary of research literature on both the experience and quality of doctoral examination.

MS PENGUIN
MRS PENGUIN
MR PENGUIN
DR PENGUIN
STARTED
SUBMITTED
VIVA SURVIVED
RE-SUBMITTED
DR.
VISUAL THINKERY

Doctoral Examination as Assessment of Written Work

At the core of doctoral examination lies the assessment of written work, most commonly the doctoral thesis or dissertation. This written submission is the primary and enduring artefact through which a candidate demonstrates their capacity to conduct independent, original, and rigorous research. While oral examinations (commonly "viva" or "defence") and ancillary materials may complement the process, the written work remains the principal basis on which the award of a doctorate is justified.

The doctoral thesis is typically assessed as a coherent scholarly argument, rather than a collection of discrete studies or outputs (though there are exceptions to this, such as doctorates awarded for a body of work or certain types of PhD by publication). Examiners evaluate whether the document articulates a clear research problem, situates that problem within the relevant literature, and advances a defensible contribution to knowledge through appropriate methods and analysis. Attention is paid not only to what is claimed, but also to how claims are constructed, evidenced, and contextualised across the text as a whole.

The assessment of a written dissertation or thesis allows examiners to scrutinise the candidate's intellectual independence. Through sustained engagement with the thesis, examiners assess the candidate's capacity to design and execute a research programme, make informed methodological and theoretical choices, and exercise scholarly judgement over an extended period. The quality of synthesis, critical engagement, and reflexivity evident in the writing is taken as an indicator of doctoral-level thinking.

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VISUAL THINKERY

The written work also functions as a test of research integrity and academic practice. Examiners assess clarity of attribution, ethical reporting of methods and data, transparency of analytical decisions, and adherence to disciplinary conventions. In this sense, the thesis is not only a research output but a record of scholarly conduct, subject to scrutiny for coherence, consistency, and trustworthiness.

Importantly, assessment of written work foregrounds durability and public accountability. Unlike oral performance, the thesis persists beyond the examination event and becomes part of the scholarly record, increasingly through open-access repositories. Examiners therefore judge the work with an eye to how it will stand up to future readership, critique, and reuse within the field and how it contributes new disciplinary knowledge.

Note that not all submissions are textual. In some cases, candidates submit materials that are not text-based as part of their submission. This could include examples of audio or visual evidence, performance, or other artefacts. These are often archived along with the thesis, for instance on a CD-ROM or storage drive. These supplement rather than replace the written work.

The centrality of, and reliance on, written work introduces recognised challenges. Writing conventions are discipline-specific and culturally situated, and strong research may be unevenly represented in text. Examiners must therefore distinguish between substantive intellectual shortcomings and issues of presentation or expression that can be remedied through revision. Common institutional practices such as permitting corrections or eventual resubmission of the thesis reflect this distinction.

In summary, doctoral examination as assessment of written work is both evaluative and constitutive. It evaluates whether a contribution meets established standards, while simultaneously constituting the thesis as a legitimate entry into the body of disciplinary knowledge. The authority of the doctorate rests on this judgement that the written work can stand as a credible and defensible scholarly contribution in its own right.

Assessment of a Doctorate by Publication

This is an alternative route to a doctoral degree, recognised in various forms across many national systems, in which the candidate submits a portfolio of already-published scholarly work rather than a single monograph written during the period of candidacy. The route goes by different names (doctorate by published works, PhD by publication, article-based doctorate, etc.) and its conventions vary considerably depending on where and by whom it is being undertaken.

The core idea is that a body of peer-reviewed publications, typically journal articles or book chapters, is brought together and framed by a single overarching piece of writing. This framing document (which is variously called the critical overview, synthesis, commentary, or linking narrative depending on the institution) is the intellectual centre of the submission. Its purpose is not to summarise the publications but to argue that they constitute, taken together, a coherent and original contribution to knowledge. This is harder to do well than it sounds, because it requires a kind of retrospective intellectual architecture: demonstrating a golden thread of theoretical concern or methodological commitment running through work that may have been produced across many years and in response to quite different immediate questions.

In Scandinavia, the article-based doctorate has long been the dominant model in many disciplines, particularly the sciences and social sciences, and is treated as entirely equivalent to the conventional monograph thesis. A public defence is standard. In Australia, the route is well established and growing in use, though the examination process does not always include an oral defence: written reports from examiners are sometimes considered sufficient. In the United Kingdom, an oral examination, the *viva voce*, is generally expected, following broadly the same conventions as for a conventional PhD: an internal and external examiner, both of whom will have read the publications and the framing document, question the candidate on the coherence of the work, the originality of the contribution, and the arguments advanced in the overview. In the USA, the route is rarely formalised though some institutions make provision for it in the case of senior academics.

Eligibility requirements also vary. Many universities, particularly in the UK, have historically restricted the route to members of their own academic or academic-related staff, sometimes requiring a minimum period of employment. Some institutions extend eligibility to external candidates or alumni; others are beginning to offer hybrid routes to current doctoral students who have published substantially during their candidacy. Across all systems, the expectation is generally that the portfolio will include somewhere between four and eight substantial peer-reviewed works, though disciplinary norms vary regarding what these will be.

The framing document is where some candidates find the real intellectual challenge. The commentary must situate the body of work in its scholarly field, trace the development of the candidate's thinking, reflect honestly on methodology and limitations, and articulate what the work has contributed that would not otherwise exist. Examiners want to see synthetic, integrative thinking that operates at a meta-level above any individual publication. Where work is co-authored the candidate must be explicit about their own contribution to each piece.

What distinguishes this route from the conventional doctorate is less a difference in standard than a difference in the nature of the intellectual task. The conventional doctoral candidate begins largely from scratch and must generate, execute, and write up a substantial research project over several years in a single monograph. The candidate submitting by publication has already done much of that work, and the challenge becomes one of retrospective coherence: showing that a career's worth of thinking adds up to something more than the sum of its parts. The advantage is a doctorate grounded in work that has already survived peer scrutiny and hence is pre-validated.

What is a 'Viva'?

The *viva voce* (Latin for "by the living voice"), commonly abbreviated as the *viva*, is the oral examination that forms a central component of doctoral assessment in many higher education systems, particularly in the United Kingdom and jurisdictions influenced by UK academic traditions. Its defining feature is a structured, face-to-face constructive interrogation of the candidate by expert examiners, focused on the doctoral thesis and the intellectual work it represents. This is a chance for an in-depth conversation with experts in the field about the thesis and its main claims. In many places the viva is called a 'defence' or 'oral defence' of the thesis. (We'll use the terms interchangeably from now on, but be aware that there are lots of variations in how these processes work even if the core idea is the same.)

A viva is usually scheduled around 3-4 months after submission of the completed thesis, depending on examiner availability. The questions asked are agreed in advance by examiners who have independently read and reported on the manuscript submitted by the student.

The viva is both an examination of a text that has been produced and also an examination of the researcher as a thinking, reasoning, and accountable scholarly subject. In practical terms, a viva typically involves one or more examiners - often including an external examiner to ensure independence - questioning the candidate over a sustained period. Questions may range from detailed scrutiny of specific

arguments or methods to broader discussion of the thesis's positioning within the literature, its limitations, and its implications for future research, policy and practice.

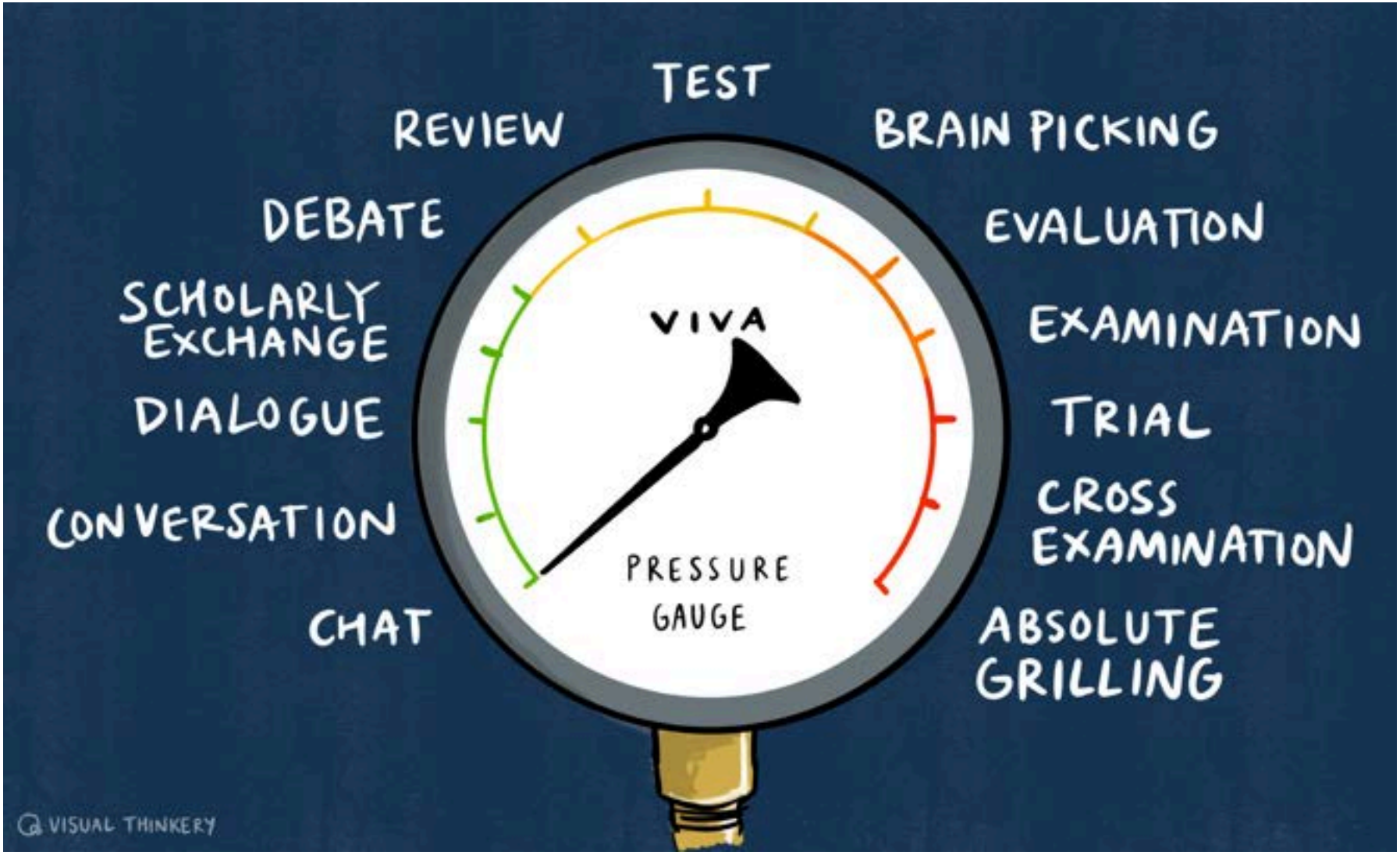
To complement written assessment, the viva emphasises responsiveness, judgement under scrutiny, and the ability to engage in critical scholarly dialogue in real time. This sense of interrogation is perhaps one of the most intimidating aspects of doctoral examination, and some people handle this aspect better than others as a result of personality or practice. Most candidates find the experience of perhaps the most in-depth conversation they will have about the finer points of their research to be supportive and rewarding. However, it's important to note that examiners are there to do a job on behalf of the university and they will take this extremely seriously…

At its core, the viva serves three interrelated purposes.

- First, it functions as a mechanism of scholarly verification, allowing examiners to assess whether the thesis constitutes an original and coherent contribution to knowledge and whether the candidate can adequately explain, justify, and defend their methodological and theoretical choices.

- Second, it operates as a test of intellectual ownership, establishing that the work submitted is genuinely the candidate's own and that they possess sufficient mastery of the field to be recognised as an independent researcher. (In some cases, the oral defence of the thesis is a public event which again reinforces the idea that the researcher is being tested on their ability to communicate their research to different audiences and show its relevance to society more widely.)

- Third, it performs a symbolic, ritualistic and social role, marking the candidate's transition from supervised doctoral student to peer within a disciplinary community. While modern vivas are usually conducted in private and governed by institutional regulations, they often retain a performative lineage which reflects the medieval origins of the practice. Sometimes this symbolism is made explicit, with viva ceremonies that involve props like swords and robes, perhaps taking place in public as a kind of academic theatre. The specific protocols of a viva are usually defined by local or national tradition. At the very least you get to wear a fancy costume at the end.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EXAMINATION
VIVA
DIALOGUE
TRIAL
CONVERSATION
CROSS EXAMINATION
PRESSURE GAUGE
CHAT
ABSOLUTE GRILLING
VISUAL THINKERY

The Role(s) of Doctoral Examiners

A doctoral examiner is responsible for exercising expert academic judgement on whether a candidate's work meets the standards required for the award of a doctorate. While specific duties vary by country and institution, the role is broadly consistent across systems and combines evaluative, interpretive, and procedural responsibilities. In most contexts, examiners will themselves hold a doctoral degree and they have experienced being on the other side of the table.

Evaluating the Thesis as a Scholarly Contribution

The examiner's primary task is to assess the doctoral thesis as a substantial, original, and coherent contribution to knowledge. This involves close reading of the text to judge:

- Originality and significance of the research question or problem
- Appropriateness and rigour of methodology
- Engagement with relevant literature and theory
- Quality of analysis, argumentation, and conclusions
- Ethical conduct and research integrity
- Contribution to the relevant disciplinary field(s)

Examiners are expected to apply disciplinary standards rather than personal preference, situating the work within the norms and debates of the field. Additionally, there could be national assessment frameworks that are applied. A doctoral degree is aligned with level 8 of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED, 2026) and European Qualification Framework (EQF, 2025) as well as national frameworks such as the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) in the UK (QAA, 2020). This mapping allows doctoral degrees from different countries to be compared, though it should be noted that there can still be some national differences and each institution will have its own rules and regulations.

For example, the EQF describes doctoral research as "the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields" which develops "the most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice" and "substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes." It's the examiner's job to ensure that these standards are met.

Preparing a Formal Examiner Report

Before the oral examination, examiners typically produce a report which:

- Summarises the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis
- Identifies points requiring clarification, correction, or further development
- Recommends an outcome (see Table 3)

This report serves both as an internal quality assurance record and as structured feedback to the candidate. Often examiners will share their independent reports with one another prior to their pre-viva meeting so that they can compare their impressions of the work and arrive at a shared understanding of the questions to be raised with the candidate. Usually examiners work separately until the viva.

The process of independent completion and exchange of reports prior to oral defence is typically determined by institutional regulations. These are designed to ensure fairness and consistency, and will also usually require examiners to declare any potential conflict of interests. After sharing their initial reports, examiners will meet to discuss and agree upon the lines of questioning and clarification they would like to explore. In some systems, the decision on the outcome will be made before an oral defence and won't change because of it. In others, the oral examination is the moment where the final outcome of the examination is established.

Conducting the Oral Examination

In systems that include a viva, the examiners play an active role in questioning the candidate. Effective examiners balance critical scrutiny with fairness, maintaining a professional tone and creating conditions for meaningful scholarly dialogue. The process might seem adversarial since the examiners essentially play the role of the 'devil's advocate' but the underlying purpose is diagnostic and confirmatory:

- Testing the candidate's understanding of their own work
- Probing methodological and theoretical decisions
- Exploring the scope, limitations, and implications of the research
- Confirming the candidate's intellectual ownership and independence

Though the examiners will have determined a set of questions in advance, these only serve as a guide and it's likely the conversation will explore many aspects of the thesis and also the answers provided to the questions posed by the examiners. For more on this, see What Happens During a Viva below.

Deliberating and Reaching a Recommendation

Following the viva, examiners meet (typically privately) to deliberate and reach a joint recommendation on the examination outcome. This requires:

- Weighing written and oral evidence together
- Distinguishing between correctable weaknesses and fundamental flaws
- Reaching consensus, or documenting reasoned disagreement where required
- Agreeing that the work meets the standard required and can be mapped to relevant learning and research outcomes

The examiners' judgement should be defensible, proportionate, and consistent with institutional regulations. The outcome of this discussion is then shared with the candidate and next steps, including timelines for completing any requested corrections, are discussed. In a face-to-face viva defence, the candidate will be recalled into the room to hear the outcome from the examiners.

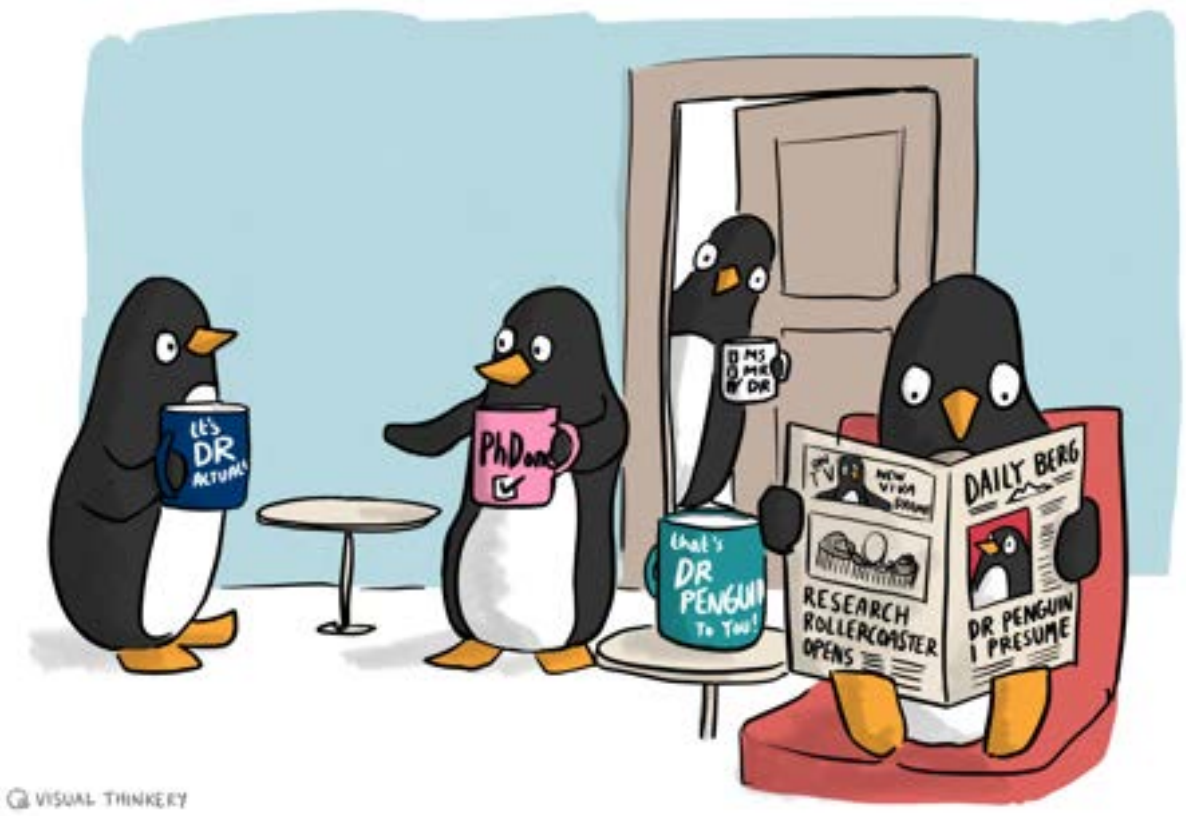
Safeguarding Standards and Fairness

Beyond assessing an individual candidate, doctoral examiners act as custodians of academic standards. External examiners in particular are charged with ensuring that the award is comparable to those made at other institutions. This includes:

- Declaring and managing conflicts of interest
- Adhering to institutional and disciplinary codes of practice
- Minimising and mitigating bias and ensuring equitable treatment

Many (though not all) institutions appoint a chair for the viva process. The role of an examination chair (or sometimes president of a thesis tribunal) is to ensure that the appropriate regulations are applied consistently and fairly. This role extends throughout the entire process, and viva chairs are often responsible for dealing with administrative and regulatory aspects of examination on behalf of their university.

Many universities also allow doctoral supervisors to sit in on the viva process as a silent observer who is unable to influence the proceedings directly and is often asked to be seated at the back of the room. This can be helpful in supporting candidates through presence but also as preparation for the subsequent debriefing discussion with the candidate.



Contributing to the Candidate's Development

Although the examination is summative, examiners also play a formative role. Their feedback often shapes the final version of the thesis and can influence the candidate's future research trajectory. In this sense, examiners contribute to the ongoing formation of a scholar. Some examiners may take the occasion of a successful defence as a chance to informally welcome the candidate to the research community.

Oral Examination Formats

Van der Heide et al. (2016) frame the doctoral dissertation defence as a culturally and institutionally ambiguous event that straddles both ceremony and assessment. The panel defence represents perhaps the most widespread model globally, though the composition, powers, and procedures of the panel differ substantially from one context to another. At its core, the model involves a formally constituted group of academics who have read the thesis and who collectively question the candidate, deliberate, and reach a verdict — but the way these functions are distributed among panel members varies enormously.

Viva: Internal and External Examiners

In the UK model, the viva typically involves a small panel — usually just two examiners — one internal (from the candidate's own institution) and one external (from another university). This relatively intimate format usually takes place in a small room with no audience whatsoever apart from possibly a chair or an observing supervisor. In the absence of a chair, the internal examiner may serve primarily as a procedural facilitator, with the external examiner carrying the greater evaluative weight. In some instances, an additional external examiner may be added to cover a disciplinary gap or because of institutional rules requiring examiner expertise across an interdisciplinary doctorate. Sometimes there are other rules that come into play. For example, if a doctoral candidate works in the university that is conducting the examination they may use only external examiners.

Panel Defence

In the USA and Canada, the arrangement typically differs in that a full doctoral committee — often four to five members drawn from the candidate's department and occasionally from outside it — conducts both the ongoing supervision and the final oral examination, which concludes with a closed deliberation session after a public presentation. Such panels tend to be more deeply embedded in the candidate's ongoing intellectual formation. Committee members will typically have shaped the project over several years through qualifying examinations, prospectus defences, and chapter feedback, so by the time the final defence arrives, the panel already has a rich and layered relationship with both the candidate and the work. This familiarity can make the final oral examination feel less like a tribunal and more like a culminating scholarly conversation — though it also raises questions about whether such committees can exercise genuinely independent judgement. Some institutions partially address this by requiring at least one member from outside the department whose role is explicitly to safeguard procedural fairness and bring a fresh perspective unconditioned by involvement with the project.

Public Defence

Continental European traditions tend to favour more ceremonial, publicly staged defences. In the Netherlands and Scandinavia, the doctoral defence (called a *disputas* in Norway and *disputation* in Sweden) is a formal public event, sometimes conducted in academic regalia, before an appointed committee (*opponent* system) in which one or more designated opponents — often external scholars of some standing — engage the candidate in structured, sometimes adversarial debate. The committee may include both internal and external members, but the public character of the event is central: audiences of colleagues, students, and family are expected and welcomed. In France and Belgium, the *soutenance de thèse* similarly takes place before a jury (*jury de thèse*) of typically five to eight members, including a *rapporteur* from outside the institution who has reviewed the thesis in advance and whose written report plays a formal role in the evaluation. Germany, by contrast, has considerable variation across its *Länder* and institutions: some universities require a public colloquium or *Disputation*, while others conduct a more informal oral examination (*Rigorosum*), and the thesis itself is traditionally required to be formally published before the doctorate is officially conferred.

In systems influenced by German academic traditions — including parts of Central and Eastern Europe — the panel may include a *Gutachter* (reviewer) whose written *Gutachten* (expert opinion) is a substantial document in its own right, carrying significant institutional weight. The oral component in such traditions has sometimes been seen as secondary to the written evaluation, though this varies. Meanwhile, in some East Asian university systems, particularly those that have hybridised Western doctoral models with local institutional cultures, panels can be larger with complex internal hierarchies reflecting both academic seniority and disciplinary representation, and with norms about who speaks first, who delivers the final verdict, and how disagreement among panel members is handled.

However, the decision to award a doctoral degree is often already made on the basis of the written dissertation, prior to the defence itself. This formal context renders the defence a performance in which participants must negotiate the dual logics of celebration and evaluation, despite institutional practices that foreground assessment outcomes. For them, the defence contributes to reinforcing the university's authority and academic reputation while serving as a rite of passage into academic community membership.

Selection of Examiners

The process of selecting doctoral examiners varies considerably across institutions and national systems, but it typically begins with the supervisory team proposing candidates who hold relevant expertise in the thesis topic. In some universities, a formal nomination form is submitted to a postgraduate research office or equivalent body, which checks for conflicts of interest, verifies examiner eligibility, and secures institutional approval before any invitation is extended. Other systems vest greater discretion in the faculty or department, with the selection remaining largely an internal academic matter subject to lighter administrative oversight. The dissertation committee itself often performs the examining function, meaning the selection of examiners is effectively made much earlier in the doctoral journey when the committee is first constituted. Across all systems, the guiding principle is the same: examiners must be sufficiently expert to assess the work rigorously, and sufficiently independent to do so without bias.

Disciplinary culture shapes examiner selection in less visible but equally important ways. In the sciences, where research is often embedded within collaborative networks and co-authored publications, finding a genuinely independent examiner can be challenging, and institutions typically maintain explicit rules about prior collaboration or co-authorship disqualifying a potential examiner. In interdisciplinary research, the challenge is compounded further, often requiring either a panel of examiners spanning multiple fields or a single examiner with unusually broad expertise.

Practical Tips for Making a Good Choice of Examiner(s)

Depending on your country and context, you may or may not have a chance to influence who your examiners are. However, if you are in a position to propose possible examiners, here are some suggestions for things to think about…

- *Start early.* Examiner availability is frequently underestimated as a logistical challenge. Senior academics are often booked months in advance, and leaving the search too late risks delays to submission or defence scheduling.

- *Read the regulations carefully.* Rules on examiner eligibility — covering seniority thresholds, co-authorship history, prior supervision relationships, and institutional affiliation — vary significantly. Appointing someone who later fails an eligibility check can cause serious delays.

- *Match expertise to the thesis, not just the field.* A leading figure in a broad discipline may be less useful than a mid-career specialist whose recent work directly engages with the candidate's core arguments. Precision of fit and compatibility often matters more than prestige.

- *Consider the examiner's examining style.* Where possible, seek informal intelligence from colleagues or recent doctoral graduates about how a prospective examiner approaches the viva or defence. Some examiners are known for constructive rigour; others for a more adversarial style. Neither is necessarily wrong, but try to get a sense of what to expect and whether it's a good match for you.

- *Be realistic.* You may like the idea of having the most famous Professor in a field as your examiner because it will feel like the ultimate endorsement of your work; or because you think it might help you to get an academic job. Both of these things are possible, but many high-profile academics are extremely busy and some don't accept invitations to examine. Even those that do may not be available, or might give you a harder time than you would expect. It's likely there will be some compromises, but this is no bad thing.

- *Think about the intellectual dynamic*. The best examining panels tend to include perspectives that are complementary rather than identical. An internal examiner with close knowledge of the institutional context paired with an external examiner who brings a different theoretical orientation can generate a richer and fairer assessment. A bit of intellectual friction can enhance a debate, but as a candidate you will be expected to hold your own in the discussion.

- *Disclose any borderline relationships proactively*. When in doubt about whether a connection constitutes a conflict of interest, raise it with the postgraduate research office before proceeding. Undisclosed relationships that surface later can jeopardise the validity of the examination.

- *Discuss with your supervisor the examiners who have been appointed and why*. Candidates who understand the examiners' backgrounds and areas of interest are better placed to prepare effectively. Transparency about the choice is both respectful and practically beneficial.

COUNTDOWN

VIVA

Counting Down to the Viva

This section is based on Chapter 4 of Murray's (2005) *How to Survive Your Viva.* Murray's key framing is that the viva rewards preparation that's spread out and repeated, not crammed. Mock vivas done early enough to actually act on the feedback matter more than one done in the final week.

3 Months Out

- *Read your institution's viva procedures and criteria*
- *Relate the criteria to your thesis*
- *Understand exactly what paperwork needs to be completed when and by whom*
- *Ensure you have faculty and university approval for internal and external examiners*
- *Make sure your examiners have been sent a copy of the thesis*

1 Month Out

- *Re-read your thesis, writing a one sentence summary of each chapter*
- *Revise the names and key works of 4-5 key academics working in your own area - establish which of their publications have had the most influence on your work*
- *Make direct connections between the thesis and topics you would like to introduce in the viva discussion*
- *Identify the highlights of your thesis, and develop a system for finding them quickly (e.g. memorise page numbers or use highlighters; practice talking about these highlights until you develop fluency*
- *Check the thesis for typographical errors, cross references, labelling of tables and charts - any mistakes here will become corrections in the exam*
- *Consider making your own "list of corrections" as an exercise to anticipate what might be raised - but refrain from sharing this with your examiners*
- *Think about your doctoral experience as a whole - how would you describe your journey? What decisions might you now make differently? Where have you made the most progress?*
- *Read some recent literature in your field*
- *Write sample viva questions, and rehearse answers with different people*
- *Practise with a mock viva (see below)*
- *Put together a 'viva kit' (e.g. thesis manuscript, blank paper, pens, laptop, bottled water, etc.)*
- *Think about stress management and relaxation techniques that work for you and consider how you will manage the stress of the examination.*

1 Week Out

- *Practise oral summaries (long and short)*
- *Practise oral debate*
- *Visit the room where your viva will be held*
- *Decide where you will prepare and wait before the viva*
- *Assemble your 'viva kit'*
- *Think about what you will wear and do laundry if you need to*
- *Relax, exercise and sleep well*
- *Negotiate temporary, unconditional support from friends, family and peers for one week*
- *Consider cancelling or postponing duties and commitments until the viva is over*

Day Before

- *Avoid triggers that might make you anxious or irritated*
- *Avoid people who you find intimidating*
- *Spend time with positive and supportive people*
- *Focus on the strengths of your research and writing*

Day of the Viva

- *Follow your best wake-up routine*
- *Decide whether you want company/conversation or would prefer to be alone*
- *Avoid reading any new academic work*
- *Consider your transport options and whether it might be worth the cost of a taxi rather than relying on public transport*
- *Eat a good breakfast and/or take food with you*
- *Check you have everything you need*
- *Arrive early*

Thirty Minutes Before the Viva

- *Relax, breathe, drink water, think positively*
- *Focus on the task ahead and note your strengths*
- *Wait until you are called*
- *Only converse with people if it suits you*
- *Avoid phone calls, email and other distractions*

During the Viva

- *Keep breathing*
- *Slow down your speech and answer questions*
- *Look at the examiners as you answer their questions*
- *Write down the questions that are asked and note your answers*
- *Talk about your thesis and the work you did*
- *Nod, smile, look at your notes*
- *Breathe!*

Should You Have a "Mock" Viva?

One common strategy in preparing for a thesis defence is to have a "mock" or pretend viva. A mock viva is a rehearsal of your thesis defence. Someone (often a supervisor, a colleague in your department or a fellow doctoral researcher) reads all or part of your thesis and questions you on it as an examiner would. The purpose is to let you practise talking about your research out loud, under some pressure, before the event that counts, and get a sense of questions that could be asked in the real thing. Lantsoght (2021) found that the mock viva was the most effective form of preparation for an oral defence.

Most doctoral researchers have never been examined orally on a piece of work this size. You may have written about your research for years without ever defending it aloud for two hours. (Some systems have an upgrade viva at the end of year one to "upgrade" students from an MPhil to a PhD, for instance, but this will be on a smaller scale.)

So, what are the potential benefits of this exercise?

- *Hearing yourself answer.* Explaining your contribution, your methodology or your choice of theoretical framework in speech is a different skill from writing about it. Can you communicate your work? A mock viva may show you where your spoken answers ramble, stall or contradict the thesis.
- *Finding the weak spots.* A reader new to your project will ask the questions you stopped asking yourself. Gaps in the literature review, under-explained sampling decisions and claims that outrun your data tend to surface quickly. A mock viva can help you understand things an examiner might want to explore.
- *Reducing anxiety.* Knowing roughly how the conversation will feel can make the real event less intimidating. This perhaps matters more for researchers who experience anxiety, are neurodivergent, or are being examined in a second or third language.
- *Reconnecting with the thesis.* There is often a gap of several months between submission and the viva. Preparing for a mock requires you to reread the whole document and see it with fresh eyes.
- *Practising the "open" questions.* Researchers in open education are often asked about their own positionality, the ethics of working with openly available data, or whether their outputs are themselves open. A mock is a safe place to rehearse answers to such questions.

A good time to have a mock viva is perhaps two to six weeks before the real thing. If you have a fixed viva date, consider working backwards from it and book your mock examiners early, as academic diaries fill quickly. Your supervisors know the thesis best, which makes them less useful as surprise questioners. Thomson (2017) reflects on the supervisor's perspective, noting that supervisors often cannot predict specific viva questions and suggesting candidates *"know your stuff"* broadly rather than rehearsing generic anticipated answers, highlighting the unpredictable dialogic nature of oral examination. A second reader can work well: an academic in your department who has examined doctorates, a postdoctoral colleague, or a researcher from another institution. Some researchers ask someone with expertise close to that of their external examiner. (Whoever you ask, they should not be one of your real examiners.)

Be aware that mock examination is a significant commitment. A full reading is ideal but a large favour. If time is short, ask your mock examiner to read the introduction, methodology and conclusion, and to skim the findings. Be clear about what you are asking before they agree. Real vivas commonly last between one and three hours, so a mock of 60 to 90 minutes is reasonable.

Prepare as you would for the real viva, so the mock tests your preparation as well as your thinking. Thomson (2016) describes preparation by anticipating possible examiner questions, discussing research widely, and thoroughly knowing the thesis, resulting in a viva experienced as a professional conversation rather than a combative encounter; she emphasises the value of annotations and confidence in one's work. Bring the same copy of the thesis you plan to take to the viva. It might be worth recording the session if everyone agrees, since it will allow you to focus on the moment instead of trying to remember everything - although be ready for the experience of watching yourself!

A mock viva is not compulsory everywhere, and some researchers choose not to have one. If you find rehearsal increases rather than reduces your stress, a shorter conversation (e.g. with a supervisor) focused on two or three likely questions may suit you better, but it should still feel like a bit of a workout.

What Happens During a Viva?

In the case of the viva defence, the oral examination is a structured academic conversation between you and your examiners, designed to assess your understanding of your research and the originality and contribution of your work. Although the tone is formal, most oral examinations aim to be constructive and supportive, offering you the opportunity to show the student's expertise. If the viva is face-to-face it will likely take place on campus, in a meeting room or office usually within or near to your department, faculty or school. The room will be set-up with a table and chairs, so that you can sit comfortably across from your examiners. There will be space in the room for an observer, and/or viva chair, if required. It's also possible that the viva will take place in a room with audio-visual facilities if anyone is participating online.

The session usually begins with a brief introduction, and a chance to ask any questions. Sometimes candidates are required to offer a short presentation of their doctoral work. Even when this is not required, some candidates prefer to start this way to set out the key ideas again. This is then followed by a series of open questions about your thesis. Usually, some general open questions are included at the beginning to calm the student, such as summarising the research or explaining key findings. The questions are usually focused on aspects such as defending the methodology, reflecting on limitations and future directions. Examiners may also challenge certain assumptions or ask you to clarify specific points in the writing. That is why it is important to bring a printed (or digital) copy where you can easily access the pages, and you can also point out examiners where to find the information they may be requesting. Alternatively, and if your regulations allow, bringing a digital copy could make it easier to quickly find passages by searching - but bear in mind that technology can fail at the worst possible moments!

A good list of likely generic questions can be found in Torres (n.d.) which synthesises a number of publications. These include:

- What is original about your research? What are the questions underpinning the research?
- What prompted you to undertake this research? Why did you choose that particular problem?
- What exactly were you trying to find out?
- What are the major theoretical strands in this area: what are the crucial ideas and who are the main contributors?
- Your review of the literature seems to omit these important contributions. Can you explain why these works and their findings do not appear in your review?
- Since you wrote your literature review, have you noticed any new work published?
- What are the relevant conceptual frameworks drawn from the literature?
- What are the relative advantages and limitations of the methods of enquiry you employed?
- Why did you choose that particular method? Why did you not instead use this other method?
- What specifically was your relationship to the context and subjects of the study?
- Can you clarify for me what procedures you followed to ensure your research observed canons of the profession with regard to ethical procedures?
- I am unclear as to what that table means. Can you interpret it for me?
- I am not persuaded that your conclusions are supported by your findings. Could you explain specifically to me how this conclusion derives from the results of the study?
- Your recommendations or your discussion of the implications of the study seem too sweeping to me. Can you explain specifically how you arrived at this particular recommendation?
- What were the surprises for you in conducting this research? Any disappointments?
- What kinds of problems have you had in your research? How did you deal with and overcome any problems?
- What is your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of your study?
- What did you learn about the subject area? About yourself?
- What is your publication plan for the material in your thesis?
- What are your plans for continuing your research in this area?
- What haven't I asked you that I should have done, and what would your answer have been?

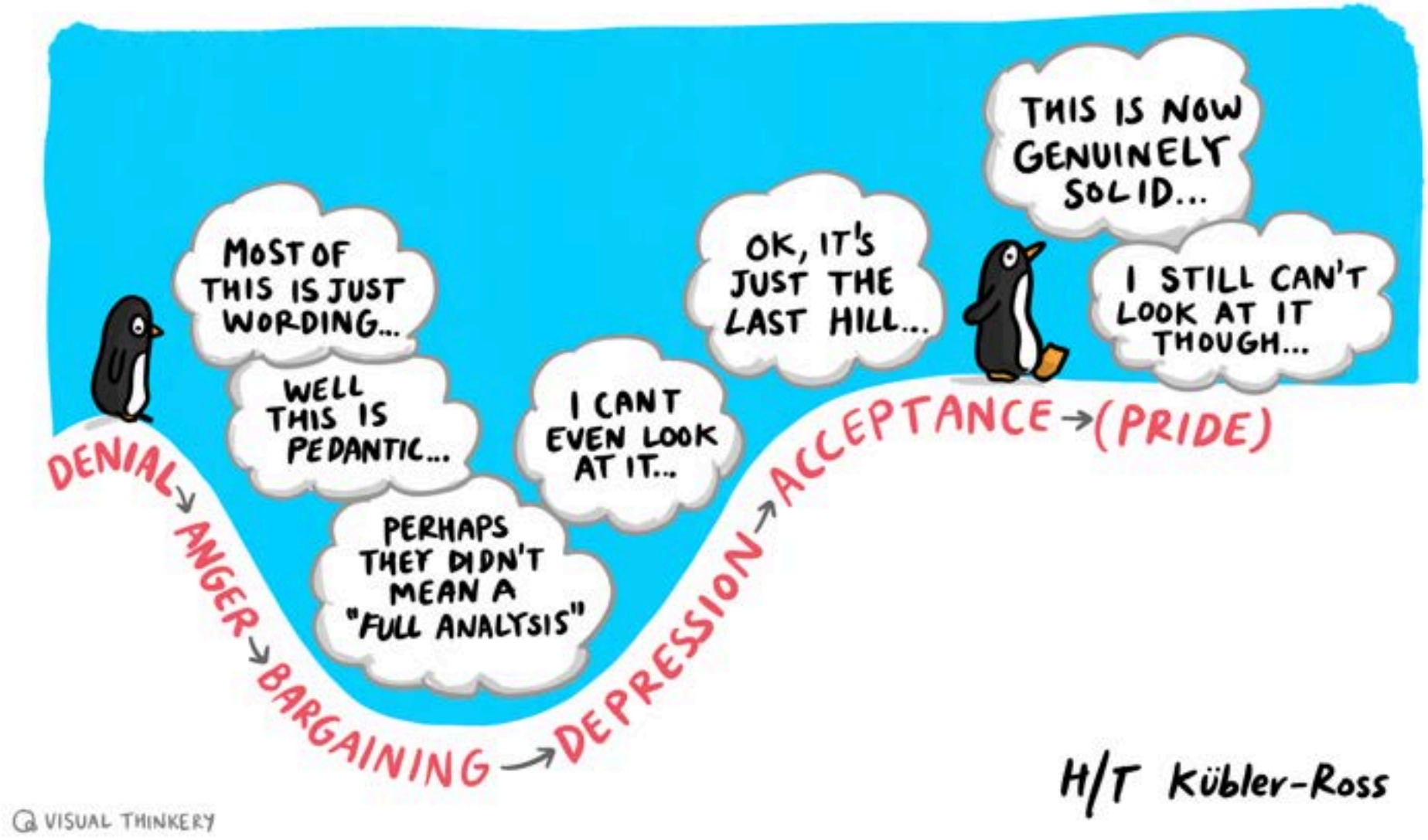
Questions like these will of course be supplemented by thesis-specific inquiry. Professional doctorates may include more questions about your own development. You can find more questions to practice from materials in the Further Reading.

During the examination, you might be tempted to reach for the "perfect" answers to the questions being asked, but examiners are not necessarily expecting such things. Instead, they want to see that you have a strong grasp of your research, that you own it, can defend the choices you made, and can reflect critically on your results. Their questions are part of a normal academic evaluation, not an indication that something is wrong. Often, they are simply interested in understanding your thought process and how clearly you can explain the rationale behind your decisions. Having a perfect recall of everything in the thesis is not expected!

Remaining calm during the process is important because it helps you think clearly, communicate confidently, and respond thoughtfully to questions. Anxiety can make even well-prepared candidates overlook obvious points or interpret questions as confrontational rather than exploratory (Sikes, 2017). Drinking some water or slowing your breathing may help. If you need further time to reflect, or you didn't understand a question, then ask your examiners for more time or to repeat what was asked.

Another thing to be aware of is resisting the tendency to be too defensive about critical questioning of your work. Yes, you are there to defend what you have done, but this need not mean you would do everything the same way as you did it this time. In a lot of cases decisions about method and data collection and analysis may have been taken several years before the examination. Maybe you now have a slightly different preferred way of presenting your argument. There's nothing wrong with identifying and acknowledging imperfections or things you would do differently if you were to undertake the research again. This kind of reflection may even be desirable in that it is evidence of your own learning and shows an appreciation of the conditions under which research takes place and the compromises involved.

Transparency during the process is advisable. If you are unsure about a particular detail, it is far better to acknowledge it honestly and explain how you could address the issue than to guess or become defensive. Recognising your work's limitations reflects maturity as a researcher, and also reflects the limits of the doctoral thesis. However, note that any major issues you concede can be interpreted as potential corrections, so you should feel free to (gently and reasonably) push back against examiners if you feel they've misunderstood something.



H/T Kübler-Ross

Possible Outcomes from a Viva

When the questioning ends, you will usually be asked to leave the room (or the online meeting) while your examiners agree upon their recommendation. This can take anything from ten minutes to an hour. You are then invited back and told the outcome, often with a brief explanation of any corrections.

Outcome	What it means	Typical time allowed	Who checks the changes?
Pass with no corrections	The thesis is accepted as submitted.	None	No one
Pass with minor corrections	Typographical errors, small clarifications, a few added references or paragraphs.	1 to 6 months (often 3)	Usually the internal examiner
Pass with major corrections	Substantial rewriting of sections or chapters, further analysis, or restructuring, without a new examination.	6 to 12 months	One or both examiners
Revise and resubmit	The thesis does not yet meet the standard but could. A revised version is examined again, sometimes with a second viva.	12 to 18 months	Both examiners, formally
Award of a lower degree	The work meets the standard for a master's by research (such as an MPhil) but not a doctorate. May be offered with or without corrections.	Varies, but explained in outcome	Varies, but explained in outcome
Fail	No degree is awarded.	Not applicable	Not applicable

Table 3. Doctoral Examination Outcomes

Note that the exact categories and terminology vary by country and institution, and even within each category a range of possibilities are covered (van Teijlingen et al., 2022). For systems (e.g. France, Germany, Netherlands, Nordic countries) that hold the defence as a public ceremony, the thesis has usually already been vetted and approved by examiners beforehand. By the time the defence happens, failure is nearly unheard of, being closer to a ritual confirmation, sometimes with a grade attached (but the real evaluation happened earlier).

Candidates should check institutional regulations and talk to their doctoral supervisor(s) about the possible range of outcomes. You should understand the different parts of the administrative process and how long things are supposed to take.

What Happens Next?

Most institutions follow a similar sequence, though the committee names and deadlines differ.

1. *Examiners' report.* The examiners complete a joint report (and sometimes separate independent reports written before the viva) stating their recommendation and listing required corrections.

2. *Approval/Ratification.* A research degrees committee or examinations board reviews the report and confirms the outcome. Until then, the result is provisional.

3. *Formal notification.* You receive a letter or email from the doctoral college confirming the outcome, the list of corrections and your deadline. The deadline usually runs from the date of this letter, not from the viva.

4. *Corrections.* You make the changes, often with your supervisors' help. Many candidates submit a table listing each correction, where it was made and how. Ask your examiners to clarify anything ambiguous early, through your supervisor or the doctoral college if regulations require it.

5. *Checking*. The nominated examiner confirms the corrections are satisfactory. If not, they may ask for further changes within a set period.

6. *Final deposit.* You submit the final version, typically to the institutional repository. Many institutions now expect open access deposits, with an embargo available if you plan to publish or have commercial or ethical reasons to delay. For researchers in open education this is a chance to choose an open licence for your thesis.

7. *Award and graduation.* The degree is conferred, usually at the next board meeting. Your title of doctor applies from the date of award, not the viva or graduation ceremony.

If you believe the examination was not conducted according to the regulations (for example, a procedural irregularity, bias, or circumstances you could not disclose earlier), you can usually appeal. Appeals rarely succeed when they dispute the examiners' academic judgement. Check the deadline (which is often short) and seek clarification on the process before submitting an appeal.

Feelings After the Examination

Candidates often expect elation and are surprised by what they feel instead. Many experience several emotions at once or in quick succession.

The first is often relief, followed closely by exhaustion. After months of preparation the adrenaline drops fast, and some people sleep for a day while others cannot sleep at all. The viva itself can feel like an anticlimax. The moment you have worked towards for years may pass in a few minutes of conversation, and being told "congratulations, subject to corrections" does not always feel like an ending.

Corrections bring their own reactions. Even minor ones can feel like criticism if you hoped for a clean pass, and major corrections or a resubmission can bring shame, anger or a sense of failure, even though both are recognised routes to the degree. Many candidates also replay the viva in their heads, going over answers they wish they had given. This rumination is normal and usually fades within a few weeks.

Longer-lasting feelings can follow. The thesis may have organised your life for years, and without it some people feel unanchored, unsure of their next step, or low in mood: what Flemming (2015) terms post-PhD blues. Lantsoght (2023) has some tips for dealing with this.

Being called "Doctor" can feel undeserved, particularly for first-generation academics, people from groups under-represented in higher education, and those who studied part-time alongside work or caring responsibilities. Other people's reactions can complicate this (Pervez et al., 2020). Family and friends may not understand what corrections mean, or may celebrate before you feel ready, while colleagues may move on quickly while you are still processing. Some people simply won't care at all!

Talking to people who have been through it makes a difference. Recent graduates and fellow doctoral researchers will recognise what you are feeling, especially within GO-GN. If low mood persists, or your sleep, appetite or motivation are affected for more than a couple of weeks, contact your institution's wellbeing or counselling service or your medical practitioner.

Consider taking some time off before working through the corrections list in detail, (unless something needs clarifying with your examiners, which may be easier while the conversation is fresh). Celebrate passing the viva whatever the corrections; if you wait for the final award to acknowledge the achievement, you may go months without any sense of completion.

When you return to the work, turn the corrections into a table of discrete tasks, estimate the time each will take and agree a plan with your supervisors. Large corrections become manageable once they are specific. It helps to read the examiners' report as expert feedback on your work, given free, which is how it will look in a year's time. Use the table to collect and present the actions you have taken to address each correction in detail.

Another dynamic to consider here is that a doctorate dominates most people's lives for many years and becomes an overarching goal which helps define us. If and when we actually get there and receive the award, this can be accompanied by a sense that some new goal needs to be set.

A big next step might be trying to get an academic job (if you don't already have one). This is important, but takes us beyond the boundaries of this guide…

Doctoral Examination: Open and Inclusive Practice

Openness as Access and Equity

Doctoral study has always carried assumptions about who a scholar was: someone with the time and money to study for years without pay, the social connections to find patronage, and the cultural background to feel at home in elite institutions. Medieval universities awarded doctorates in theology, law and medicine as licences to teach, and the people who received them were almost all men with Church connections or family wealth. The modern doctorate came out of the German universities of the nineteenth century, following the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810. It spread to the United States, where Yale awarded the first American PhD in 1861, and reached Britain later, with Oxford introducing the DPhil in 1917 (Bogle, 2018). The apprenticeship model made progress depend on one supervisor's patronage, examinations took place behind closed doors, and finished theses sat in single bound copies in university libraries, where few people outside the institution could read them.

The doctorate opened up gradually and unevenly. Elena Cornaro Piscopia became the first woman known to receive a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Padua in 1678 (Università di Padova, n.d.), after which Padua barred women from graduating. Almost two centuries passed before universities such as Zurich began admitting women. Lydia Sesemann received a doctorate in chemistry there in 1874 (Boeck, 2024), and Stefania Wolicka became the first woman to receive a Doctorate of Philosophy at Zurich in 1875 (Kiejzik, 2023). Anton Wilhelm Amo, born in present-day Ghana and taken to Germany as a child, defended his doctoral dissertation at Wittenberg in 1734 (Lewis, 2018). In the United States, Edward Alexander Bouchet became the first African American to earn a PhD in 1876 (Yale Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, n.d.). It was 1921 before Georgiana Simpson, Sadie T. M. Alexander and Eva B. Dykes became the first African American women to do so (Witynski, 2021). These dates show how long the research community (at least in the West) remained closed to almost everyone except white men.

Expanding higher education and public research funding in the second half of the twentieth century brought in people who could not have paid their own way. Part-time and distance routes made doctoral study possible alongside work and caring responsibilities. Professional doctorates (the EdD began at Harvard in the 1920s and spread widely from the 1990s) recognised that knowledge produced in practice could count as doctoral research. PhDs by publication gave established practitioners another way in.

However, opening access is a different thing from achieving equity. Doctoral education still favours those who can afford reduced or no income for several years. Black and minority ethnic researchers remain underrepresented in doctoral study and academic posts in many countries. English dominates academic publishing, and so do the theoretical frameworks of the Global North. The opening up of the doctorate has largely been won by people who were once excluded, often against institutional resistance, and continuing it depends on those now inside the system.

Open Educational Practices

Applying open approaches or open educational practices (OEP) to doctoral examination involves rethinking assessment as a transparent, participatory, and educational process embedded within a wider scholarly commons. While doctoral examination has traditionally been private and opaque, open approaches seek to align assessment with broader commitments to openness in research, education, and academic integrity.

One area of application concerns transparency of criteria and processes. Open practices can make explicit the standards by which doctoral work is judged, for example through publicly available examination criteria, annotated exemplars of examiner reports, or open guidance on what constitutes originality, contribution, and doctoral-level quality. Such measures potentially demystify the viva and reduce asymmetries of tacit knowledge, particularly for first-generation and international doctoral candidates.

A second dimension relates to openness of scholarly outputs. Open doctoral examination can be connected to open research practices by requiring or encouraging theses, data, code, and methodological documentation to be openly licensed and publicly accessible prior to or following examination. In this model, the viva becomes part of a wider process of community scrutiny, where examiners' judgements are situated within, rather than isolated from, the broader research ecosystem (Witthaus, 2022; 2023).

More radically, open approaches may challenge the closed nature of examiner deliberation. Experimental models include publishing examiner reports alongside the thesis, recording or live-streaming the viva, or allowing additional scholarly observers to participate in a limited capacity. These practices foreground accountability and collegiality, while also reframing the viva as a pedagogical event that contributes to collective learning.

Here's an excerpt from Wikipedia on the Open Thesis - and GO-GN gets a mention!

> An individual's decision to create an open thesis is generally made in consultation with a supervisor, committee members, and collaboration in networks of learning such as the Global OER Graduate Network (GO-GN). The process for completing a thesis in the open is individual and context-specific; it is up to the author how much of the process they want to share openly. For example, Doug Belshaw shared the process (Belshaw, 2010), the first draft (Belshaw, 2011), and the final thesis document (Belshaw, 2012); Bonnie Stewart shared her processes openly via her blog (Stewart, 2014), her challenges via Twitter, and her outputs (Stewart, 2016) openly; and Chrissi Nerantzi blogged throughout her PhD, sharing the process and outputs as she went along (Nerantzi, 2018).

If your supervisor/institution allows this (and why wouldn't they?) you may blog reflectively throughout the process of your thesis, not placing actual text from your thesis on a blog, per se, but blogging your thinking processes. You may also use that space to think aloud and ask questions and get feedback from your followers. This can help you get used to having your ideas discussed and responding. This can be a good practice for when you are asked reflective questions by an examiner.

Open approaches reframe doctoral examination as part of an open scholarly practice. By emphasising transparency, dialogue, and shared responsibility for knowledge production, this approach to doctoral examination has the potential to strengthen trust, equity, and educational value. Open educational practices can also support candidate agency and reflexivity. Candidates may be invited to submit reflective statements on their learning journey, positionality, or ethical decision-making, or to respond openly to examiner comments as part of a documented scholarly dialogue.

In theory, open examination of theses allows broader academic and public communities to engage with the research, thereby enhancing quality and accountability, as public scrutiny pressures candidates and supervisors to maintain higher scholarly standards. However, institutional frameworks rarely offer such possibilities, perhaps wishing to draw their legitimacy from continuity with the past. As a result, open doctoral examination remains relatively rare (and under-researched).

Online Vivas

An online viva is an oral thesis defence conducted through a digital platform such as Zoom, MS Teams, or similar video-conferencing tools. The structure is the same as an in-person viva: you present and defend your research before one or more examiners, who ask questions to assess your understanding, methods, and contributions. Online vivas can be helpful for students who have accessibility needs. They are also an alternative to expensive travel arrangements and allow you to pick from a wider pool of potential examiners. If an online option is not permitted, students may still require adaptations to ensure that the viva is fair.

Hybrid Vivas

Hybrid vivas combine face-to-face and remote participation. Remote participation commonly takes place through a video-conferencing platform, but a telephone connection is also possible. The most common scenario here might see an examiner join the viva via video-conference whilst the candidate and the internal examiner are in a room together on campus.

Accessibility Needs

An inclusive approach could involve adjusting the format of a viva to meet accessibility or neurocognitive needs. Universities have a legal and ethical duty to make reasonable adjustments so that all candidates can demonstrate their academic ability on equitable terms. Those can include (1) detailing any physical adjustment required in the room, (2) allowing the student to pause or take breaks, (3) using a quiet and familiar environment, and (4) offering the student the chance to raise concerns beforehand. The University of Cambridge (n.d.) offers a useful guide to accessibility considerations in a viva.

What about AI?

Generative AI is a tool increasingly used in research, including doctoral projects. Writing a thesis is how most doctoral researchers find out what they think. Drafting a chapter requires authorial decisions about which literature matters, how an argument is ordered and what the data can bear. The careful process of drafting and redrafting sharpens those judgements and their presentation. The finished thesis is the visible product of years of that work, and examiners read it as evidence that you did the thinking yourself.

Use of generative AI tools can unsettle that assumption. Chatbots such as Generative Pre-trained Transformers (GPT) produce fluent, plausible academic prose in seconds, and they can summarise literature, suggest structures and rephrase paragraphs on request. A polished written text is no longer strong evidence on its own that its author understands what it says. This disrupts assessment across higher education, and doctoral examination is not exempt. Perhaps we will see in-person oral examinations becoming even more important forms of assessment in the future…

Using AI tools to write, develop and edit your thesis might be an approach that works for you, but, in an oral examination, you explain why you made a methodological choice, respond to challenges you may not have anticipated, and perhaps extend your thinking beyond what is on the page. The viva has always tested whether the candidate owns the work; generative AI makes this its most important function, and makes an examination conducted face to face (in person, or online) harder to replace with any written alternative. Expect examiners to probe the reasoning behind your writing as well as its content: how you arrived at your framework, what you rejected and why, how a particular paragraph came to say what it says.

Openness brings another angle to these considerations. Transparency about method is central to open practice, and declaring how you used AI (for transcription, translation, proofreading or idea generation) is consistent with this. Researchers in this field also have good reason to ask whether uploading participant data to a commercial tool breaches their ethics approval, whose knowledge large language models reproduce and whose they leave out, and how AI tools can widen access for disabled or multilingual researchers while also concentrating power in a few companies. Your examiners may ask what you think about these kinds of dynamics.

Additionally, you need to be fully mindful of your institutional rules around AI use and make sure you comply with them. If you use AI tools, consider declaring their use with a framework such as proposed by Bozkurt (2024).

Risks and Mitigations

While AI can be a genuinely useful preparation tool, it is worth being clear about its limitations and the risks of relying on it too heavily.

The most significant risk is that AI-generated questioning, however sophisticated, is not the same as being questioned by an expert in your field. A real examiner brings deep domain knowledge, a carefully formed view of your thesis, and the ability to follow a thread of argument across several exchanges in ways that expose genuine conceptual weaknesses. An AI may miss the most important problems with your work precisely because identifying them requires the kind of specialist insight it does not have. If your practice sessions consist mainly of AI interaction, you may arrive at the defence feeling more confident than the quality of your preparation warrants. There is no substitute for mock examinations conducted with real academics — ideally people who have not been closely involved in supervising the thesis and who will question you without protective instincts.

A related risk is that AI systems can be — and by default tend to be — somewhat too agreeable, even to the point of sycophancy. Unless you push back explicitly and repeatedly, they will often accept your framing, validate your reasoning, and move on rather than sustaining the kind of relentless, probing challenge a determined examiner might mount. This means you need to actively instruct the AI to be critical and adversarial, to refuse to accept your first answer, and to press you when your response is evasive or incomplete. Even then, treat its apparent satisfaction with your answers with some scepticism.

You should also be aware that AI can be confidently wrong. If you use it to refresh your knowledge of the literature, to check a methodological claim, or to explore how a particular theoretical tradition would approach your work, it may generate plausible-sounding but inaccurate information. Any substantive claims it makes about specific texts, debates, or scholarly positions need to be verified independently. Using AI-generated content as a direct basis for what you say in the defence without checking it carries real reputational risk.

Finally, there is a more subtle psychological risk. Repeated AI practice sessions can create a false sense of fluency: a feeling of having answered questions well in a low-stakes environment that does not fully transfer to the pressured, embodied experience of a real examination. Make sure your preparation also includes practice that carries some genuine discomfort: presenting to an audience, being questioned in real time by someone whose opinion of you matters, and sitting with the uncertainty of not knowing how well you are doing. Those experiences build a different and equally necessary kind of readiness.

With these caveats in hand, let's consider ways of using AI.

Ten Suggestions for Using Generative AI to Prepare

1. *Ask AI to question you.* Put an AI tool in the role of examiner and have it question you. Give it your abstract, introduction and a summary of your findings, then ask it to challenge your methodology, your theoretical choices, your claims to originality and how you have dealt with counterarguments. Repeat this several times and ask it to become more adversarial each round. You can also give it a persona, for example: "Question me as a quantitative methodologist who is sceptical of my sampling strategy." Uncomfortable practice sessions are usually the most useful ones.

2. *Ask it to find weak spots*. After years with a thesis, it is hard to read it as a stranger would. Give an AI tool substantial sections and ask it to point out inconsistencies, tensions you have not explored and claims that look underexamined or unsupported. Look closely at what it says about your discussion and conclusion chapters, since examiners often find candidates overreaching in their interpretations there.

3. *Practise stating your contribution.* You will almost certainly be asked what your original contribution is, and you need to answer clearly and without jargon. Use AI to help you compress your argument: first into a paragraph, then three sentences, then one. Ask it to tell you when your answer is vague. It takes several attempts, but you will end up with a version you can say confidently at the start of your defence.

4. *Test your methodology.* Your methodological choices will probably get close scrutiny, particularly if your examiners work in a different tradition from your supervisor. Describe your research design in detail and ask the AI to question your sample size, analytical procedures, validity claims and choice of approach. Push it to keep going when its first objections are easy to answer. You want to arrive at the viva able to say plainly what your methodology can and cannot do, and why you chose it.

5. *Refresh your knowledge of the literature.* The reading you did in your first year can feel distant by the time of your defence, and examiners sometimes probe this. Use AI to help you revisit the wider field. Think too about significant work published since you submitted (the gap may be several months or more), because an examiner may raise it. AI can help you work out whether a recent study challenges your argument or fits alongside it. Check any reference it gives you against the original source since AI can "hallucinate" these.

6. *Rehearse your opening.* Many formats give you a few minutes to introduce your thesis before the questions start. Prepare this. Try out different versions with an AI tool (one more narrative, one more argumentative, one centred on methodology) and ask whether each is clear, sets up the examination well and sounds like someone who knows their material.

7. *Consider who your examiners are.* If you know who your examiners will be, read some of their published work and note their theoretical and methodological positions. Then ask an AI tool to help you think through how someone with those positions might read your thesis: where they might agree, where they might be sceptical and what they are likely to ask. The aim is to see your work from another perspective, which is different from trying to please them.

8. *Practise difficult moments.* Some moments in a viva are hard because of how they feel. Examples include not knowing an answer, disagreeing with how an examiner has described your argument, asking for clarification without sounding evasive, and regaining composure after a tough exchange. You can role-play these with AI. It may feel artificial, but rehearsing them makes them less likely to throw you on the day.

9. *Explain your work to a non-specialist.* Whether or not your defence is public, you should be able to explain your research and why it matters to someone outside your field. Ask an AI tool to act as an intelligent non-expert and explain your argument, methods and findings to it. Notice where you fall back on jargon, where your explanation goes in circles and where an example or analogy would help. Explaining your work simply often clarifies your own thinking.

10. *Debrief after practice sessions.* After any mock defence, whether with peers, your supervisor or an AI tool, tell the AI how it went: which questions surprised you, which answers felt weak and where you lost your thread. Use it to work out better answers and to find what those gaps say about your understanding. Then make a plan for the time you have left, so each practice session leads to specific improvements.

(Note that suggestions 2 and 4 involve uploading unpublished work, and possibly participant data, to commercial tools. Check that such use is consistent with your ethics approval and/or institutional policy before doing this…)

GO-GN Stories, Case Studies & Tips

Stanislaus Litsalia Agava: Supervision = Mentorship + Care

My Choice

When the time came for me to register for doctoral studies, the expected path, at least for many Kenyan scholars in library and information science, would have been to pursue this journey within Kenya. I chose otherwise. My decision to undertake my PhD by research at the University of Pretoria in South Africa, rather than at home, was shaped less by academic considerations than by a quiet apprehension. I had, over the years, listened to the experiences of colleagues and friends who had gone through doctoral supervision locally, and not all of these accounts were encouraging. Stories of long silences, of supervisors who were difficult to reach, and of candidates left to navigate the solitary terrain of research with minimal guidance had left an impression on me. I did not want my own doctoral journey to be defined by that kind of uncertainty. I wanted, instead, a relationship with my supervisors that would sustain rather than strain me. It was this consideration, more than any ranking or reputation, that ultimately drew me across the border to Pretoria.

My supervisors

I was fortunate to be supervised by Dr. Martie van Deventer and Prof. Theo J. D. Bothma, both of the Department of Information Science at the University of Pretoria. Both were, by the time I joined them, deeply experienced in the discipline and in the practice of doctoral supervision itself. Prof. Bothma, in particular, carried the weight of decades in the profession, while Dr. Van Deventer brought a similarly seasoned, practice-oriented perspective drawn from her long career in library and information management. Together, they formed a supervisory team whose experience I have come to regard, in hindsight, as one of the defining strengths of my doctoral experience.

What struck me from the outset was not simply their scholarly competence, which was never in question, but the manner in which they made themselves available to me. I recall no instance, across the full duration of my research, when I found myself waiting inordinately long for a response to a query, a draft, or a concern. This is not a small matter for a doctoral candidate. Anyone who has undertaken research by a thesis will recognise the peculiar vulnerability of that season: hours spent working through an idea, a methodology, or a troublesome chapter, all the while uncertain whether one is on the right track. In such moments, timely feedback is not a courtesy; it is oxygen.

Reachability and Care

My supervisors understood this, whether by instinct or by design. Beyond the conventional channel of email, we also communicated through WhatsApp, a small but, in my experience, significant departure from the more formal and occasionally distant modes of academic correspondence. This additional channel meant that a quick clarification did not have to wait for the next scheduled meeting and that the rhythm of supervision felt closer to an ongoing conversation than a series of isolated exchanges. I do not wish to suggest that informality replaced rigour; it did not. Rather, it complemented it, making the working relationship feel human and immediate rather than bureaucratic.

There is a lesson here that I believe is worth setting down for other doctoral candidates, particularly those weighing where and with whom to pursue their research: reachability matters. A supervisor's expertise is of limited value to a candidate who cannot access it when it is needed. My own experience taught me that the accessibility of one's supervisors, communicated not merely through stated office hours but through the lived pattern of how quickly and how warmly they respond, can be as decisive to the doctoral journey as their academic standing.

Supervision and Mentorship

Perhaps the most enduring impression I carry from those years is that Dr. Van Deventer and Prof. Bothma were, to me, mentors and colleagues in addition to being supervisors. The relationship extended beyond the transactional exchange of drafts and comments. I felt genuinely accompanied through the research process, guided by scholars who had themselves walked the path of rigorous inquiry many times before and who were generous enough to share not only their critique but also their experience of the discipline more broadly. This collegial dimension of the relationship softened what can otherwise be an isolating undertaking. It reminded me that doctoral research, however solitary it may appear from the outside, is in truth a deeply relational endeavour.

I say this not to suggest that the process was without its rigours. A doctorate by research demands sustained intellectual labour, and my supervisors held me to exacting standards throughout. But the manner in which that rigour was exercised, patiently, promptly, and with evident respect for me as an emerging scholar, made the demands of the work feel purposeful rather than punitive.

Takeaway

Looking back, I recognise that my decision to study outside Kenya was, in effect, a decision in favour of a particular kind of supervisory relationship, one characterised by responsiveness, warmth, and mutual respect. I would encourage prospective

doctoral candidates, wherever they may be considering registering for their studies, to weigh this dimension carefully. Institutional reputation and academic resources matter, but so too does the human quality of the supervisory relationship one is likely to encounter. Where possible, candidates would do well to speak with current or former students of prospective supervisors, to ask not only about scholarly guidance but also about accessibility, communication style, and the general tenor of the working relationship.

My own doctoral journey at the University of Pretoria, under the supervision of Dr. Martie van Deventer and Prof. Theo J. D. Bothma remains, in my recollection, an exciting and affirming chapter of my academic life. It taught me that examination and supervision, though often discussed in terms of standards and procedures, are ultimately human undertakings and that the quality of the relationship between candidate and supervisor can shape not only the outcome of the research but also the candidate's entire experience of becoming a scholar.

Javiera Atenas: The strange stretch between submission and examination

My PhD by Publications journey was, in truth, intense. It was demanding, certainly — I completed it while working full time — but it was also shaped by generosity, friendship and a deep sense of intellectual companionship.

My supervisor, Maria José modelled a way of supervising that was both rigorous and humane. She asked difficult questions, but always with care. She trusted my judgement, yet never withdrew her guidance. The way she balanced challenge with warmth profoundly shaped my own supervisory and mentoring style; I carry her influence with me in every doctoral conversation I now have.

I was also fortunate in my "partner in crime", Leo — then and now. Having someone alongside you who understands the absurdity, intensity and exhilaration of doctoral work makes all the difference. In the UK, I was surrounded by an extraordinary community of peers. Ale and Maria Paz were completing their PhDs at the same time, and we shared drafts, anxieties, and the strange normality of academic overwork. Meanwhile, in Barcelona, Maria, Bruna and Mercé formed a steady and loving network that grounded me beyond academia. And through it all, I was supported unwaveringly by my partner, Pi, and by my dear friend Leo and a large community of Open Practitioners — the kind of support that is practical, emotional and quietly essential.

My committee, too, was wonderfully kind. The defence itself felt less like a trial and more like a scholarly conversation. The external examiner — a Scot — even spoke Catalan during the defence, a gesture that still makes me smile. It was a lovely event, despite torrential rain that day, the sort that soaks everything and makes umbrellas pointless. Yet, in many ways, the most intense period was not the defence itself but the strange stretch between submission and examination.

Because I had been running on fumes for years — working full time and writing at what felt like 200 kilometres per hour — I did not know how to slow down once I submitted. Instead of resting, I accelerated. I wrote my Senior Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy application almost immediately. I decided the communal areas of my building needed reviving and began planting endless plants and flowers. I deep cleaned my house, reorganised my wardrobe, and built several pieces of IKEA furniture. I wrote another paper. I did countless other things I can barely remember. My stress transmuted into a kind of wild energy. I swam. I walked for hours. I obsessed over the defence. I kept moving, propelled by inertia, unable to stop.

In hindsight, I should have slept and read crime novels, and maybe watched some boxsets. I should have rested and allowed my body to recover. After the defence, I was deeply happy — proud, relieved, grateful — but also utterly exhausted. The journey had been joyful and supported, but it had also been relentless. And perhaps that is the truest summary: a PhD completed at full speed, surrounded by remarkable people, ending not with collapse, but with happiness — and a long-overdue need for rest.

Maha Bali: Open Educational Practices to Support Your Viva Prep - Especially if you are a "remote" student"

I did my PhD remotely at the University of Sheffield in the UK between 2006 and 2013. Back in those days, I did not have a very strong social media presence or network, but it started to grow it in those final few months before my viva, and I think people can benefit from knowing the ways I managed being a "remote student" and how I used social media networks (what I know now can fall under open educational practices!) and other things to help me prepare for my viva. I wrote Almost the Same: Five Ways Remote PhD Students Can Mimic the Residential PhD Experience as soon as I finished my PhD.

Here is an expanded version of the tips, with an eye to supporting your viva.

1. *Network with other researchers.* Connect with other researchers on spaces like LinkedIn, Bluesky, Mastodon, or whatever social media spaces people in your broad discipline use. You can follow senior academics whose work you admire, as well as other PhD students working in similar fields. Find already existing groups and networks, such as GO-GN and join them. See if people are using hashtags. Use those spaces to both listen (what are people posting about) and connect (respond to other people's posts with encouragement or questions). Interestingly, one of the best ways to use such spaces is to ask questions, ask for help - there will likely be people willing to support you, and likely others who have similar questions but did not have the courage to ask. Also, obviously, even if you are a remote student, there may be networks in your local vicinity worth joining, where you can attend talks or meet people of similar interests. To support your viva, ask people who have recently done their viva to share their experiences and how they prepared, what questions they were asked, etc. I've also benefited from asking experienced academics for their tips to prepare. If you form deeper relationships with experienced researchers they may become your mentors, or you can directly ask for mentorship, and some of them will be willing to do a mock viva for you if you ask, after having established a relationship first over time.

2. *Tips for accessing resources.* Some of us live in countries where we don't have access to a library with all the resources we need, even if our university for our graduate studies does offer many digital resources. Sometimes, your networks of researchers can help get you access to sources you can't access locally. You can also sometimes contact a researcher directly (via email, LinkedIn, or like their Academia or ResearchGate account) and ask them to send you their article or book chapter.

3. *Disseminate*. As a remote student back in the day, few people would offer me online opportunities to present my work in university-wide events for graduate students or otherwise, so I found other ways to find conferences and present my work, whether online or in person. Presenting your work-in-progress PhD in front of people other than your supervisor and colleagues give you the opportunity to get their feedback and listen to their questions, which may help prepare you for the viva moment and the questions from external and internal examiners who see your work without being involved in the process from the beginning.

4. *Teach*. This is related, but not directly, to dissemination. If you have opportunities to teach your subject, even if not directly your specific thesis topic, you get opportunities to explain things to people for the first time, which can help you improve at articulating and talking about your discipline more broadly.

5. *Use technology well.* Technology changes a lot, so whatever tips I gave back in 2013 are probably not all valid today. Back in 2013, I came across a podcast called Viva Survivors where the host interviewed people who had just finished their PhD and I benefited a lot from listening to those. I also used Skype back then to ask a mentor to do a "mock viva" for me. I gave different chapters of my thesis to people who would be familiar with the particular topic in that chapter, and asked for feedback, which usually came along with questions which would help me strengthen certain parts and help me prepare for the questions I'd get in the viva.

I suspect some new things people can do to help prepare for the viva with new technology include asking an AI tool to have an interactive conversation with you about your thesis. Try putting your theses into Google Notebook LM and a prompt like this one "You are a PhD examiner conducting a dissertation viva in the UK for this thesis. Ask me 8 questions, and when I say how I would answer them, give me feedback on how well I answered. Give me the feedback one question at a time.". Check privacy options and see if you can do this kind of exercise within an institutional AI platform that won't use your data for training, or use a local model offline. Note: the AI may sometimes make mistakes, like draw from things in your thesis you did not say in your answers, or add feedback that doesn't make sense to you, so make sure you know your thesis well and can look critically at the AI's feedback. You may also ask it to be a particular type of examiner who focuses a lot on methodology or such. I tried to ask it to be a particularly annoying and insistent examiner who keeps pushing my limits (sometimes PhD students don't answer a question directly or deeply enough, which can really irk an examiner. Some examiners will let it go eventually, but some will keep digging until you give them

the depth of response they want). Reflection: https://blog.mahabali.me/digital-literacies/ai-as-phd-viva-examiner-gone-rogue-or-what/

Aras Bozkurt: The Journey of "Tears, Blood, and Dedication": Surviving the "Killer" Jury

Writing a dissertation is rarely just an academic exercise; for many, it is an outcome of immense personal sacrifice. After spending every free moment pouring "tears, blood, and dedication" into my research, I reached the stage of the Savunma (the Turkish term for the doctoral defense). By that day, I felt like a true expert in both my topic and my methodology. I was confident, but I also knew that "knowing" your work is very different from "defending" it in a high-stakes environment.

The defense is a performative "rite of passage" where you have total control over what you wrote, but only partial control over the oral exchange. In my case, I faced a jury of six members, including my supervisor and co-supervisor. As the questioning began, I noticed that the four external jurors fell into distinct personas:

- The Supporter: Encouraging and validating.
- The Helpful: Providing constructive feedback to improve the work.
- The Expert: Focused on deep, technical nuances.
- The Killer: Challenging every assumption with intense, critical grilling.

While the "Supporter" and "Helpful" jurors made the room feel like a scholarly dialogue, and the expert was constructive and raised critical aspects, the "Killer" juror turned the defense into a true test of professional character (kind of nightmarish). I realized quickly that the best way to handle this persona was not through emotional responses, but through the following strategies:

- Maintain Calm: Treating the viva as a professional conversation rather than combat.
- Demonstrate Grounded Expertise: Providing clear, well-grounded, and scientifically backed responses.
- Be Honest and Open: Acknowledging limitations and being open to criticism rather than becoming defensive.
- Stay Focused: Being clear and to the point to avoid giving the juror extra "ammunition."

I learned that day that if you don't "fall" when facing a difficult juror, you prove your readiness for the academic community. The defence (Savunma) is not just about the dissertation itself; it is about identity formation and proving you can hold your own among peers. If you can survive a "Killer" jury with grace and evidence, you are well-prepared for the beginning of your new journey as a PhD.

Saraswati Dawadi: From Fear to Confidence

I faced my PhD viva at The Open University, UK in March 2019. Even now, when I think back to that day, I remember experiencing two very different emotions at the same time. I felt happy because I had finally reached what seemed to be the last milestone of my doctoral studies. After years of work, submitting the thesis and being invited to the viva felt like a significant achievement in itself. At the same time, however, I was extremely nervous because I was not entirely sure whether I would pass.

Part of my anxiety came from my background and previous experiences of examinations. Having completed my earlier education in Nepal, I was used to viewing examinations as highly consequential events often associated with social prestige, personal reputation, and family expectations. Although I understood that the UK PhD viva is intended to be a scholarly discussion about one's research, I still found it difficult to separate myself from these deeply ingrained perceptions of examination culture. Consequently, I perceived the viva as far more challenging than it ultimately proved to be, and this perception heightened my stress and anxiety long before the examination took place.

To prepare myself, I spent considerable time collecting examples of viva questions from books, doctoral forums, and university resources. I practised answering them repeatedly and tried to think carefully about the decisions I had made throughout my research. I also participated in a couple of mock vivas with my supervisors. Although these sessions were challenging, they helped me become more familiar with the format of the examination and the types of questions I might encounter. In addition, I spoke to several doctoral students who had recently passed their vivas. Their advice was invaluable. Many of them reassured me that the viva was not intended to fail candidates but rather to give them an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of their own work.

Despite all this preparation, I was still extremely anxious on the day of the viva. As I entered the room, it felt as though months of preparation had suddenly vanished from my memory. During the opening minutes, my nerves were overwhelming. My hands were shaking, my mouth felt unusually dry, and for a moment my mind went completely blank. Although I had spent weeks rehearsing possible answers, I struggled to recall even some of the most familiar aspects of my work. Looking back, it was not a lack of preparation but simply the intensity of my anxiety that temporarily overshadowed my ability to think clearly.

What made a tremendous difference was the attitude of the examiners. They quickly recognised how nervous I was and responded with warmth, kindness, and professionalism. Instead of making the situation feel intimidating, they created a friendly and supportive atmosphere. Their questions were asked in a thoughtful

way, and I felt that they genuinely wanted to understand my research rather than test or challenge me unnecessarily. Looking back, I am very grateful for the empathy they showed and for how they helped turn what could have been a stressful experience into a constructive and positive academic discussion.

As the discussion progressed, something gradually changed. Once I began talking about my research, I started to relax and regain my confidence. I realised that this was a project I had been thinking about for years. No one knew the study better than I did. The more I spoke, the more confidence I gained. Instead of worrying about whether an answer was correct, I focused on explaining my decisions, discussing my findings, and reflecting on the limitations of the study.

By the middle of the viva, I found myself genuinely enjoying the conversation. What I had imagined would be an intimidating examination increasingly felt like an academic discussion between people who shared an interest in the topic. The confidence I felt then was very different from the confidence I had tried to build through preparation. It came from recognising that I had earned the right to speak as an expert on my own research.

Looking back, the most important lesson I learned was that my perception of the viva before the examination was far more frightening than the reality. I had spent months imagining worst-case scenarios and convincing myself that the viva would be exceptionally difficult. In reality, the biggest challenge was managing my own anxiety. Once I overcame those initial nerves, I was able to engage in the discussion and even enjoy the experience.

For me, the viva was not simply an examination. It was a moment of transition. I entered the room feeling uncertain and intimidated, but I left with a much stronger sense of confidence in myself as a researcher. The experience taught me that while thorough preparation is important, it is equally important to trust the knowledge, skills, and understanding that you have developed through years of engaging with your research. Sometimes the greatest obstacle is not the examiner sitting across the table, but the doubts we create in our own minds.

Leo Havemann: I'm a sur-viva

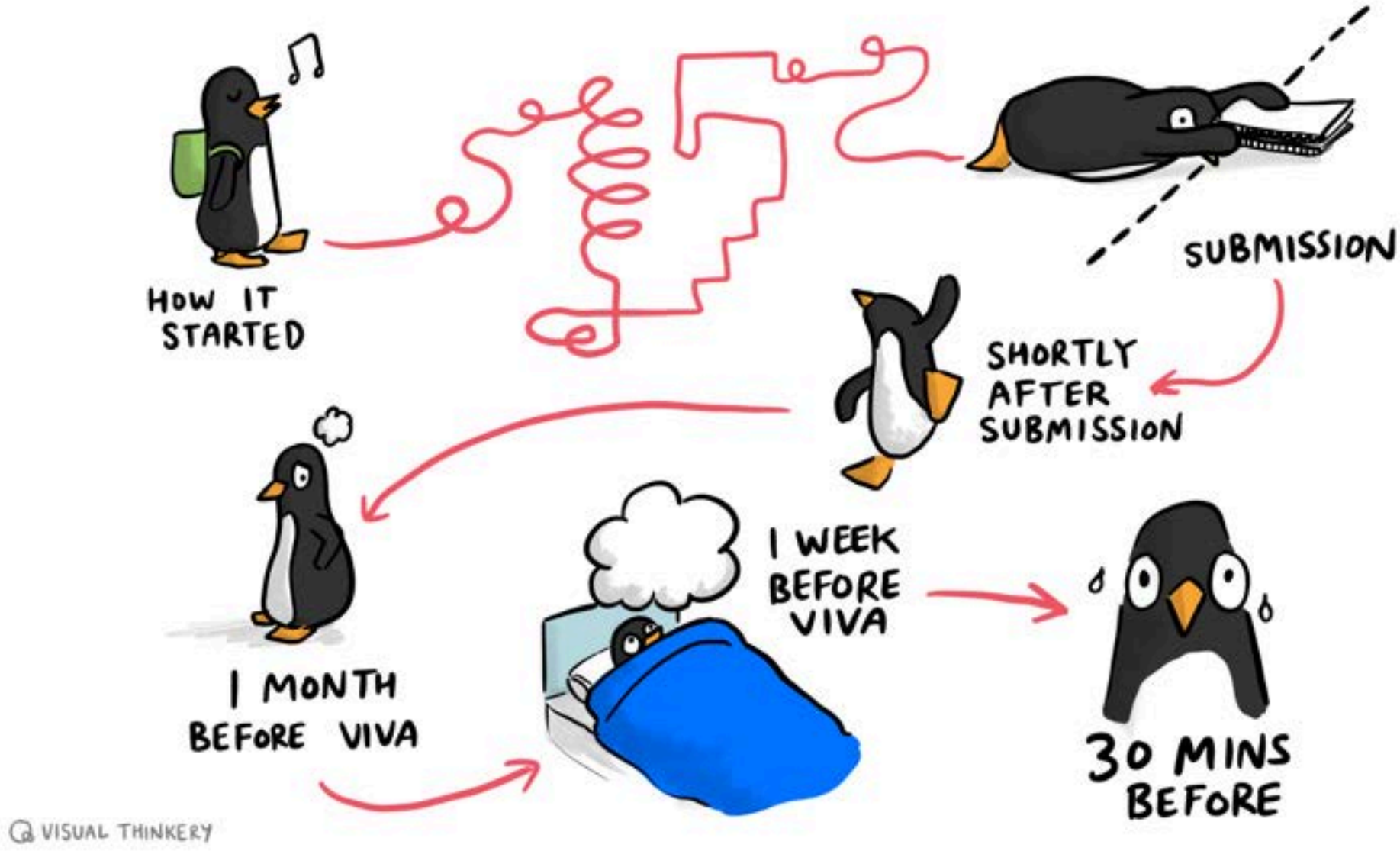
As is not unusual in GO-GN, I was a part time PhD student alongside a busy university role and a perhaps unfortunate habit of getting involved in too many other writing projects simultaneously. A couple of conferences before I finally submitted my thesis, while speaking on a GO-GN panel, I joked (it may have been accurate) that I was now the longest standing member of GO-GN to not yet become an alumnus. Despite my lengthy enrolment, I had to write a lot in the final months and once I had submitted, I was aware of areas of the thesis I would have ideally done some more work on. Consequently, the initial euphoria post-submission quite soon gave way to anxiety about the coming viva. I expected the viva to be a few months away but the news came from the university that it had been arranged much sooner. My faculty offered a session on preparing for the viva around this time; the very good advice to think of the viva as a scholarly conversation about your work, rather than an examination, felt absolutely right and yet difficult to internalise. Reading the regulations and thinking about the possible outcomes of the viva was strangely steadying. Although I knew it was theoretically possible to fail, it was also just one of several possible outcomes, most of which would ultimately enable me to complete the PhD.

I did a rapid mock viva with Chrissi who asked a series of typical viva questions, and advised that I had not done too badly, considering I hadn't prepared for it, and that I had better start preparing! I started trying to think of the viva as a form of peer review, my chance to reassure the examiners that I was capable of resolving any issues they found in the thesis quickly. I did another mock viva with my supervisors, who asked questions about each chapter that might come up in the viva; I didn't feel I had great answers to all of them in the moment, but this meant I was able to give them some more thought before the big day came, which it rather suddenly did.

By this time, I had thought further about the mock viva questions, made some notes, and read the thesis through on paper, highlighting some areas I thought I might refer to. Nonetheless I found myself wishing I had longer. It was very reassuring to have Martin, my lead supervisor, attend the viva although I knew the rules prevented him from speaking or even being in my line of sight during it. When the questions started, I found that it was true after all that it felt more like a scholarly conversation than an 'examination', and indeed, that nobody knows your work better than you do. I tried to keep my answers focused on the question without any side-quests, but I found that in some cases, after answering, the examiners noted I had answered another upcoming question as well. Ultimately at the point where we could have taken a break we had been through all the questions. I felt like it had gone well. Martin and I went to an adjacent room to wait while they discussed the outcome; then they called us back and said I had passed pending minor corrections.

They framed the corrections as small enhancements and particularly stressed that the contributions of the thesis were significant and if anything, I had not stated them boldly enough.

Of course, the nature of the viva experience owes much to the examiners, and I was very fortunate that mine were very supportive, interested and generous. But my suggestions for those yet to have this experience are, first of all, try to believe that this is going to be a scholarly conversation, that your examiners are interested in your work and your success. Second, prepare, but make sure you put some of this energy into thinking about what is good about your work, what your contributions are, as well as aspects you think might not be perfect. It's a chance to celebrate what you've achieved.


HOW IT STARTED
SUBMISSION
SHORTLY AFTER SUBMISSION
1 MONTH BEFORE VIVA
1 WEEK BEFORE VIVA
30 MINS BEFORE
VISUAL THINKERY

Francisco Iniesto: Take it easy, it is all about understanding the steps

I honestly think the most important moment during the PhD, including the examination, is when you submit your thesis. That is when you realise the end of the process is around the corner, and you start to relax a bit.

Then time passes, information about the formality of the viva appears in your email, and stress shows up again. It is about that moment when you print your thesis, start adding comments and post-its, and start doubting whether this or that was the correct decision or if it is in the right place.

In my case, having a mock viva was very helpful for rehearsing the thesis, but it also caused some anxiety because some questions were a bit harsh. Then you need to realise that it is only a test, and people at a mock viva might come from different areas of research, and in the end their questions are only for you to reflect on the best answer to your very own decisions.

My viva took place in June 2019. I was quite nervous, but having my lead supervisor there was key to realising that, in the way it is, it is better to enjoy it than to suffer. I had a long viva, and yes, some questions are quite difficult. Still, you need to understand that it is mostly about explaining your decisions and even acknowledging limitations; that does not mean you need to change what you have done, because there is always scope for improvement. In the end, a thesis is a bit reductionist in the sense that either you have done enough or not. And the usual aspect is that, in general, you have done much more than enough.

I got major corrections, and that was a bit frustrating. It took me several months, considering summer was in between, to be strong enough to address them, and after submitting the final version, it was straightforward to get the final OK and fully become a Doctor.

In general terms, unfortunately, there is quite a lot of personal stress and imposter syndrome; you doubt your possibilities when in reality you are probably the person in the world with greatest expertise in that particular area, more than those who examined your work, those who asked you questions in the mock viva, or your supervisors. Fortunately, mental health is now widely understood and addressed, and your health throughout the doctoral process, particularly during the viva, has to be your key priority. You need to keep in touch with colleagues, share your doubts, and even when you think you have to be locked in your room 100% getting ready for the viva, it is not a bad idea to go for a walk and chat with family and friends, take care you eat and drink properly, and make sure you get your 8 hours of sleep.

Sonja Johnston: Rehearsing the Viva: Learning through Mock Exams

So much of the PhD process, for me, felt like a tension of simple milestones in a tornado of transformative (and feeling uncertain) processes. I was clear from before my admission what the check boxes of milestones would be:

- Assignment of supervisor
- 8 doctoral courses (2 doctoral seminar, 3 methodological, 3 specialization courses)
- Selection of Supervisory Committee
- Field of Study (submission and acceptance by supervisory committee to proceed)
- Research Proposal (submission and acceptance by supervisor committee to proceed)
- Candidacy Exam (receive a "pass" to proceed)
- Submission of ethics application, do the research, complete the dissertation document
- Select examiners and distribute dissertation for review
- If dissertation gets approved, schedule final defence exam (viva)
- Final defence exam and results

But it was the spaces in between the milestones that caused me angst and anxiety. Throughout my journey, students a year or two ahead of me would lead community-based support. In courses, this was reading groups to work through papers and assignments. We shared our field study papers and proposals with each other to seek feedback, inspiration, and process clarity. Many of my colleagues hosted mock candidacy exams where we would read the candidate's proposal, and the experienced students would go around in rotation asking questions as they had experienced in their own candidacy exam. Less experienced students would often serve as the neutral chair so that they could learn from the process. The idea was once a student had successfully passed a stage, they would then be part of the mock committee for the next students progressing through these milestones. Some of us, and I was one of the students, had a thoughtful supervisor that hosted a mock candidacy exam. In my mock, I was able to invite other students I trusted and could be vulnerable with. In my case, I opened with a presentation, and in my mock, realized the approach I was taking didn't land with my committee and allowed me time to make a supported change. We then repeated this process for the mock defence (viva). The difference this time was that I had been through a mock candidacy exam, my candidacy exam, so many mock exams as an examiner that I had lost count, and now my mock for my final defence.

The mock wasn't just about responding to questions (see Martin Weller's advice to avoid over preparation) - it was about responding to all aspects of the exam. I had notes throughout the printed dissertation document in front of me with flags at particular areas that I anticipated questions from. There were positive affirmations around my screen in case I needed a moment to breathe and remain calm. I needed a place for my water bottle and a box of tissues. I had a stack of my most relevant literature studies in case I wanted to reference. I organized my entire space, screens, working surfaces, resource documents, inspirational art, and reference materials in a way that I thought would serve me - and then we put it to the test and I was the subject of the mock defence.

It is interesting how high-stakes it felt, and yet once we got going it was astonishing how quickly two hours of presentation and question rounds flew by. My mock examiners took notes as I found I forgot the questions and my responses in the moment and there were very specific elements of feedback that could be offered in the debrief. Questions that I got stumped on were flagged so that I could return and reflect on a second approach. This was also a space where I could practice asking for clarity on a mock examiner's question, or even repeating and rephrasing to ensure I understood the question. This required practice for me as my mind quickly jumped to responding and I needed to take time to think before composing my response.

Both my candidacy and final defence exams were conducted online. I had experiences to practice, to build confidence, and be able to better focus. What I wasn't prepared for was how hard it was to pace and wait in the digital lobby while my committee of examiners dialogued. I had been advised many times that the duration of deliberation was not an indication of result. I probably left a pacing track in the flooring around my work space! When I re-entered the digital room, each of my examiners had changed their backgrounds to 'congratulations', digital fireworks, and a wonderful 'Welcome back, Dr. Johnston'!

The mock exams helped prepare and anticipate the questions, logistics, planning, and practice. The coaching and support offered from my supervisor and colleagues made for such a collaborative experience - these experiences were independent accomplishments but they did not occur alone or in isolation. I am grateful for the sense of community and support that I felt during a transformative and very challenging journey. The mock experiences didn't take away from the joy and accomplishment, but rather helped me manage nerves, anxiety, and uncertainties.

Igor Lesko: Finishing a Very Long Run: The Day of My Public PhD Defence

I completed my public PhD defence at the Open University of the Netherlands in Heerlen, the Netherlands, in November 2025. The defence was organized in a hybrid format, allowing members of the PhD committee who could not attend in person to participate online. The defence was also livestreamed and open to the public.

Before describing the defence itself, it may be useful to explain how the PhD assessment process worked at my university:

- The university appointed five members of the PhD assessment committee (two internal and three external) who independently examined my submitted manuscript.

- Examiners were required to submit their assessment reports within two months of the manuscript's official submission date.

- At the time of submission, and in consultation with my supervisors, we had to formally request a date for the public defence. This request had to be submitted five months before the intended defence date.

- Once the assessment reports were received and I was informed that my work had passed and could proceed to the public defence stage, the defence date was formally confirmed. Preparations then began, including appointing the Doctoral Committee for the public defence (consisting of members of the assessment committee and a chair), publishing the dissertation, arranging travel, and organizing a reception after the defence.

Several things helped me prepare for the public defence:

- Watching recordings of public PhD defences. Many are available online, and your university may also have recordings that can help you understand how the proceedings are conducted. For me, preparation was less about anticipating specific questions and more about becoming familiar with the defence process, venue, and overall experience. Three months before the defence, I visited the university for the first time since enrolling and met my supervisors. We explored the venue, and they conducted a one-hour mock defence consisting of a short presentation followed by 45 minutes of questioning. Their feedback was insightful and constructive and helped me approach the actual defence with greater confidence. If possible, visit the venue beforehand, familiarize yourself with the room layout, and discuss

logistics with your supervisors. If an in-person visit is not feasible, consider requesting a virtual tour of the premises.

- Conducting a mock defence with your supervisors. They typically have extensive experience with examination processes and understand the types of questions that may arise. If this is not possible, consider practicing with academic colleagues or reaching out to GO-GN alumni for support.
- Speaking with the Chair of the Doctoral/Defence Committee one week before the defence. The chair informed me about the organization of the day of the defence and advised me not to try to anticipate every possible question. "There is no way you can think of all possible questions that members of the doctoral committee will ask." That advice helped. If you have completed your work honestly and know your field well, you will be fine. The nerves will still be there, but that is normal. Try to enjoy the conversation.

- Staying in regular contact with my supervisors and discussing anything that was unclear or causing concern. I found those regular conversations immensely helpful.

One thing I wish I had understood sooner was that, at my university, once the formal assessment is complete and the assessment committee recommends proceeding to the defence stage, the defence is largely ceremonial. You are still expected to answer questions about your research and field, and the defence helps demonstrate your ownership of the work. However, knowing this earlier would have reduced a great deal of stress and allowed me to enjoy the preparation process more. It also would have helped if I had read the university regulations more carefully and earlier than one week before the defence.
This reflects the process at my university. Procedures vary across institutions and countries, so it is important to consult your supervisors and university regulations.

The day of my public defence came and went in the blink of an eye. I slept only one hour the night before, as my mind kept returning to different aspects of the thesis.
My defence was scheduled for 4 p.m., so I still had much of the day ahead of me. The head of the department where I was registered offered to take me for a run in the forest. As a triathlete and long-distance runner, I appreciated both the exercise and the last-minute advice he generously shared. It helped calm my nerves before the session.

The support of my family, partner, friends, whether attending in person or online, and my supervisors was invaluable.

The defence began with a short presentation of my work designed for a general audience. This was followed by 45 minutes of questions and discussion between the examiners (referred to as learned or highly learned opponents) and me, the PhD candidate (referred to as the esteemed candidate). We experienced a few technical difficulties connecting online examiners to the room, but the technical support team quickly resolved them.

Before I knew it, the Beadle, the ceremonial officer responsible for managing the proceedings, entered the room and announced *Hora Est*, formally concluding the defence. Twenty minutes later, after the committee's deliberations, I was awarded my PhD degree.

The experience taught me to enjoy both the process and the defence itself. After years of work, it all happens remarkably quickly. What felt like a marathon suddenly became a sprint.

My thesis, *Prepare for the Long Run: Strategies for Affecting Governmental OER Policy Developments by International Organisations*, is openly licensed and available as an eBook: https://proefschriftmaken.nl/ebook/igorlesko. Additional public defence materials, including the presentation, recording, and photographs, are also available online.

Chrissi Nerantzi: I survived Big Friday

See the full version at:
https://chrissinerantzi.wordpress.com/2017/09/09/i-have-survived-big-friday-go_gn/

I remember packing my suitcase on Wednesday and travelling to Edinburgh via Liverpool. I had far too much with me, and while I joked about it, I also knew that my thesis alone took up a lot of space, which felt like a reasonable excuse this time. On the train, I suddenly became convinced that I had forgotten a few small but important things, including the ring Adam had bought me and wanted to wear for the viva. I opened my suitcase to check but couldn't find them. I felt that familiar surge of panic. Toothpaste, of course, is easy to replace, but not something meaningful like that ring. Yet when I arrived and opened my suitcase properly, everything was there. I had simply been worrying.

After a rich and energising day at the ALT conference, surrounded by friends and colleagues, celebrating together and gathering last-minute viva advice, my journey continued early the next morning to Edinburgh. I left feeling anxious. I had notes with me and tried to read through them, but I couldn't focus. Instead, I found myself looking out of the window for most of the journey, watching the changing landscape, the green hills and quiet movement of the clouds, while imagining what might happen in the viva.

The hotel I had booked became a small haven. It felt calm and welcoming, almost like a temporary home. The quiet, the thoughtful details, even something as simple as a long, steady shower, helped me slow down. I think I was trying, in my own way, to prepare myself not just intellectually but emotionally. I stayed connected with a few close people, sharing small moments and thoughts, and that sense of connection grounded me more than I had expected.

The day before the viva passed in gentle, slightly fragmented preparation. I revisited parts of my thesis, but everything began to blur together, as if it had turned into one continuous stream rather than distinct chapters. I checked a few details in the literature, then stepped away again. I went for a walk, revisiting familiar places and small rituals that brought a sense of calm. I ate simply and lightly, almost instinctively choosing what felt steady and nourishing. There was a quiet intention in all of this, even if I didn't fully realise it at the time.

Sleep came unevenly. I woke early, with that mix of anticipation and unease that sits just beneath the surface. In the morning, I tried to create a sense of order. Clothes had been prepared the night before. I chose something simple and comfortable, something that helped me feel like myself. Small decisions, but they seemed to matter. They helped me feel ready, or at least ready enough.

On the way to the university, my thoughts drifted again. For a moment, I felt as though I couldn't remember anything from the last years of work. That feeling was unsettling, but also strangely familiar. I tried to remind myself that this was part of the process. When I arrived, I found a quiet space, had a tea, and waited.

Then I entered the room.

Something shifted almost immediately. It did not feel like an interrogation, as I had perhaps feared, but more like a conversation. The atmosphere was open and human. I felt included rather than opposed. It became "us" rather than "them and me". As the discussion unfolded, I found myself responding naturally, focusing on the work, staying present in the moment. I remembered advice I had been given about keeping focused, and I carried that with me without overthinking it.

There were moments of uncertainty, of course, but they passed. I was able to speak honestly about what I had done, what I understood, and even what I might do differently. At times, I sensed that the examiners were genuinely interested, which helped me relax further into the conversation.

When it ended, I knew there would be some corrections, but I also felt that it had gone well. Sandra and I stepped out and waited. That hour felt long, suspended somehow between effort and outcome. When we were called back in, the result came: PhD awarded subject to minor corrections.

Looking back, I realise how much everything contributed to that moment. Not only the academic preparation, but also the small rituals, the conversations, the pauses, the anxiety and the calm that followed it. All of it came together. And what remains most strongly is not just relief, but a quiet sense of alignment, of body and mind finally working together, and a feeling of deep gratitude and pride.

Judith Pete: The Silent Killer - Let's Acknowledge Post-Viva Transitions…

My doctoral viva took place on 12 September 2019 at Open Universiteit Nederland in Heerlen, a moment that had been anticipated far beyond the formal academic setting. The whole village knew it was time. Preparations were communal, audible, and embodied marked by movement, noise and shared expectation. I packed two suitcases filled to the brim, not only with documents and attire, but with the symbolic weight of years of intellectual labour. I travelled three days early accompanied by seven family members and friends, alongside colleagues from the GO-GN network Catherine Cronin, Caroline Kuhn, and Bea de los Arcos, whose presence affirmed the collective nature of the academic achievement.

The viva itself was embedded within hospitality and care. My supervisor and his wife hosted all of us in their garden, offering not only logistical support but a form of academic kinship that is rarely acknowledged in doctoral handbooks. In that Dutch garden, celebration, collegiality, and scholarly recognition converged, reinforcing the idea that doctoral success is relational, not solitary. I held two celebrations back in Kenya, one in the city of Nairobi and another in the village where I grew up.

However, the return home for me marked a less discussed phase of the doctoral journey: the post-viva identity reconfiguration. My lived experience of the celebrations of the viva also marked the beginning of an unsettled marriage, where traditional Kenyan expectations position the man as the primary intellectual and social authority. While the viva is conventionally framed as an endpoint, my experience revealed it as a threshold. The public validation of scholarly authority did not simply elevate my academic identity; it unsettled my established household

structures. Within the domestic sphere, the doctorate disrupted long-standing gendered expectations, particularly those positioning my husband as the primary intellectual, social, and symbolic authority within marriage.

This transition exposed a critical tension: while institutions celebrate the conferral of the doctoral title, they remain largely silent on how such recognition reverberates within intimate and cultural spaces. This is an especially important tension to acknowledge and requires further research and exploration. In what ways do the academic successes of women PhDs impact relationships and expectations in male-dominated cultures? In my case, the doctorate recalibrated power, voice, and visibility at home. The celebration of academic achievement paradoxically marked the beginning of marital strain, not because of failure, but because of success that challenged traditional hierarchies.

This lived experience may appear uncomfortable or "unscholarly" to name. Yet, drawing on feminist epistemology and reflexive methodology, I argue that it is precisely these moments of discomfort that constitute valid knowledge. Doctoral vivas do not occur in a vacuum; they intersect with gender norms, marital expectations, and cultural scripts. To omit these dimensions is to reproduce an incomplete narrative of doctoral life.

Therefore, this contribution calls for viva guides and doctoral training programmes to acknowledge post-viva transitions, particularly for women scholars in patriarchal and traditional African contexts. Celebrating the viva must also include preparing candidates and their institutions for the social and relational transformations that follow. The doctorate, after all, does not only produce new knowledge; it reshapes and transforms lives.

Martin Weller: 10 Tips from an Examiner

I have examined around 50 PhD vivas, so I thought I'd share my main tips (originally at https://blog.edtechie.net/higher-ed/10-phd-viva-tips-from-an-examiner/)

This relates to the UK viva system, which is usually an open-ended defence, with two examiners discussing the thesis with the candidate. Things vary quite a lot elsewhere. These are obviously just my views, and I'm generally a 'nice' examiner, I want people to enjoy the experience and to pass. Most examiners I've met are the same, but one does hear the occasional horror story. So here are my top ten tips:

- Have a nice opening summary — it's common to start with a friendly, settling question along the lines of "can you summarise your main contributions?" or "why were you interested in doing this research?". See my point below about answering the actual question, but what these are inviting you to do is to give a brief summary of your work. Sometimes a presentation will be allowed or encouraged, it's worth checking. Note here that it is a brief summary. The examiners are likely to work through the thesis chapter by chapter, so you do not need to give the whole thesis in a one hour monologue. Five or ten minutes here, just as an opening.

- Don't over-prepare answers — you may well have a mock viva with your supervisors beforehand and they will identify some questions that may be answered. It's important to remember though that there is no set list of questions to ask from the examiners. They are likely to ask you things you hadn't predicted, and not ask you things you thought would definitely come up. So while it's good to have some ideas as to what you will answer if queried about your methodology choice, say, there is a danger of preparing something akin to a script. You can end up being thrown when different questions are asked, or not answering the actual question. You know your thesis better than anyone, so trust in your ability to be able to respond in the moment.

- Answer the question being asked — sometimes candidates will give a long, detailed answer to something which wasn't really necessary. This may be because they were expecting a certain question, as mentioned above, or they think the examiner is asking something different. So, listen carefully, and answer what is actually being asked, and if you're not sure…

- Ask for clarification if needed — this is obvious but more important than you might think. Sometimes the examiner might be asking a fairly straightforward question to which they just want a yes or no answer, and you think they're after something else and after a 30 minute defence of your methodology

they say "so that's a yes?". Ask if you've understood the question if you're not sure.

- Don't be too defensive — as I said, most examiners are sympathetic, but they are meant to test the robustness of your research. So they're going to pick at bits. What you don't want to do is end up in an argument, so firstly ask for clarification if you think you're being unfairly criticised (I've certainly seen vivas where there has just been a misunderstanding), and don't get too defensive. Sometimes it's best to just say, "yes, I see your point, I'll take that on board."

- Be honest(ish) — I would advise against trying to trick examiners, or hide flaws, they're usually good at digging these out, and don't like to feel as though you were trying to con them. For example, hiding small data samples behind percentages. So be honest — e.g. it's ok to say "I would have explored this more fully, but I didn't have time", or "my methodology was partly influenced by the practical access I had to data". The (ish) part I added there relates to my next tip, some people feel like it's an interrogation and they crack — you don't need to reveal to the examiners that in reality you really didn't understand the conceptual theory you're using and you were crying into your books every night.

- Don't talk yourself out of a pass — some candidates seem determined to talk themselves down. Maybe it's the imposter syndrome kicking in? Most examiners will accommodate this to a degree, but if every question is responded to with a comment along the lines of "I just made it up", "that bit isn't very good", etc, you can get to a stage where you have examiners doubting their judgement about the work.

- Expect some revisions — it's rare, but I've seen some people take the idea of being asked to do revisions as a personal affront. A pass without revisions is very rare. So expect some, and also be very clear exactly what is required (they should provide you with a list of required changes). Don't do more than they suggest, and don't argue about the ones you're asked to do (unless really unreasonable).

- It's an exam to be passed — if you view the viva like a car driving test that is to be passed, rather than some existential rite of passage, it's probably going to be a lot easier. Do what you need to do, get the pass, move on. In a year's time no-one will care (probably including you) that you had to add in an extra page on the examiner's pet topic even though you didn't feel it was necessary. Be pragmatic about the whole thing.

- Enjoy it — I always say this to my students. I know it can be stressful, but by the time you get to the viva, assuming you've done the work, listened to your supervisors and got a decent thesis, then it can be an experience to be enjoyed. You've been doing this research for three or more years. You have bored friends and family about it, no-one knows this subject in more detail than you. And now you get to have a long, detailed conversation with two people who really want to hear about it, you can go into all the detail you want without friends' eyes glazing over. Enjoy that moment.

Just my experience of course, mileage may vary. If you have a doctoral viva coming up, good luck!

Your Preparation Checklist

Know Your Thesis Inside Out	
Reread your entire thesis slowly and take notes or prepare post-its	
Prepare a concise 5-minute summary of your research	
Review your methodology and be ready to justify why you chose it	
Identify limitations and prepare explanations for any gaps	
Anticipate questions and examiners	
Prepare answers to common viva questions. Prepare for conceptual questions about definitions, scope, or assumptions	
Ensure you know who your examiners are and their research areas	
Predict challenging questions and rehearse clear responses (a mock viva can help)	
Be ready to explain how your work fits into the wider literature	
Know the Administrative Details	
Confirm the date, time, and location of the viva	
Check any required documents (ID, thesis copy, forms if needed)	

Prepare Supporting Materials	
Bring an annotated copy of your thesis	
Summary notes of each chapter, a list of key contributions and findings, and a brief script for your opening presentation	
Practical & Technical Preparation	
For in-person vivas, test any tech needed for presentations, bring stationer and dress comfortably but professionally	
For online vivas, test the microphone, camera, and internet connection, check the lighting and ensure a quiet background	
Communication Preparation	
Practice speaking slowly and clearly. Rehearse staying calm when challenged—breathe before answering.	
Prepare phrases for when you need time (e.g., "Let me think about that…")	
Plan to be honest if you don't know something — transparency is better than guessing	
Logistics for the Day	
Sleep well the night before	
Eat something light before the viva. Bring water	

Arrive and be ready in good time	
Try to relax(!)	

Table 4. Your Checklist!

Useful Resources and Further Reading

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