

## The viva process: a personal experience

To a certain extent, preparation for the viva is something that you do throughout your PhD: whether it's speaking to other people about your research or simply deciding on an order for your chapters, we're working towards the viva from day one. Nevertheless, there are some specific things that you can do between the thesis hand-in and the viva itself. As I was preparing for my own viva, I kept a diary during the process; read on for an insight into what happens once you make the step to submission ...

### - - - BEFORE THE VIVA - - -

#### **Sunday 2nd August**

I submitted my PhD today! To be honest, it was slightly anticlimactic, as coronavirus meant that there was no trip to the SID desk, and my email to the PGR administration team was met with an out-of-office autoreply. I did have a minor panic at the moment of submission, and was terrified of having overlooked something, but playing Dungeons and Dragons with friends immediately afterwards did help. (And yes, I had indeed been aiming to submit my thesis before D&D started. It was a surprisingly effective strategy.)

#### **Monday 3rd August**

Confirmation email received from the admin team! Just a couple of minor admin points to sort out, mostly concerning supervisors signing off.

#### **Tuesday 4th August**

I received a somewhat terrifying email today, with 'final confirmation of full submission', and telling me that your thesis will now be shared with your examiners' ... Over the next few weeks, I'm going to be working on my summer job, and won't have all that much time to reread the thesis, but a few weeks off will definitely help me to come back to it with fresh eyes.

## **Wednesday 19th August**

Email from my internal examiner, asking for suggested dates in 'early October'. After liaising with my supervisor (who wants to attend the viva), I suggest a few dates.

## **Tuesday 25th August**

The internal examiner gets back to me with a suggested date – 5th October, at 2:30pm. I accept! We're on.

## **Saturday 29th August**

Having moved back to Exeter on Thursday, I finally go to get my thesis draft bound! After popping into Rymans, I spend about 30 minutes just marking up the essentials – main chapter divisions, basically. And taking lots of photos. I also dip my toe into the world of discovering other people's experiences of the viva, listening to the first part a podcast that I vaguely remember from a few years back.

## **Thursday 10th September**

The past few weeks have been pretty quiet in terms of preparing for the viva itself: with the start of the new academic year, I've been focusing quite intently on other concerns. I'm brought back to earth, though, with a meeting that I've arranged with my supervisor, where we have a frank discussion about the nerves I'm beginning to experience. He points out that the upgrade process was a real learning experience for me, and that I'm in a much better position to articulate some of the principal lines of argument than I was a couple of years ago. Over the following days, I open up my copy of the thesis again, and begin to mark it up.

## **Thursday 24th September**

Had a really useful meeting with an early-career colleague in Modern Languages today, which I felt dovetailed nicely with everything my supervisor had been saying. She introduced me to the idea of the 'nightmare sheet': essentially, thinking through answers to the questions that I really don't want to be asked, and compressing these answers onto a single sheet of A4.

## **Thursday 1st October**

The last week has been spent (re-)reading and thinking, as I continue the process of going through the thesis with a fine-tooth comb and picking out points for clarification and development. I'm a little behind, and will likely end up doing more of this over the weekend, but I'm definitely becoming more at-ease with my ability to summarise and defend my arguments.

## **Friday 2nd October**

Another day of preparation, save for the technical test that we have set up at 2:30pm. Happily, everything works as it should, and while seeing the examiners for the first time doesn't exactly extinguish all of my nerves, it certainly does help me to situate myself ahead of the viva.

# **- - - DURING THE VIVA - - -**

## **Monday 5th October (morning)**

Viva day. I spend the morning frantically rereading bits of my thesis, and putting the finishing touches to my 'nightmare sheet', before going back to Ryman's to print it off. My viva's scheduled for 2pm, so I gobble down some lunch before meeting with my supervisor - virtually, of course. He's kindly agreed to put me 'on the spot' for 30 minutes or so prior to the start of the viva, and seems pretty pleased with how I acquit myself in the 'warm-up'. The viva itself starts on-time; after the standard introductions, I'm given an indication that I have 'passed'. I decide to treat this as meaning I've provisionally got major corrections, and need to convince the examiners to award me minor corrections over the next few hours. My first question is a harsh one, based on my writing style: my internal examiner suggests that I have a tendency to set up binaries in my writing, extending to accommodating theories that have perhaps already been dismissed. I recognise this as a broader question that takes into account my thesis structure, and acknowledge the potential flaw in the structure while making a case for the validity of my answer itself. And so it begins.

### **Monday 5th October (afternoon)**

4pm, and it's rapidly becoming clear that this viva will go on for a while: possibly until 6pm, the maximum amount of time that a viva can last for (four hours).

The Non-Examining Independent Chair steps in at this point, reminding us all that the candidate is entitled to a break at this point. I take it, and stretch my legs, feeling very grateful that my makeshift door-sign ('please don't disturb: PhD final exam taking place inside!') has done its job so far. During the second part of my viva, the examiners will make increasing reference to the fact that they'll be suggesting two types of corrections: one set for action following the viva, and another for consideration prior to the thesis' eventual publication in book form. Which leads to ...

### **Monday 5th October (evening)**

Minor corrections! I'm both delighted and absolutely shattered. After calling all the relevant people, I take a breath and consider the fact that I've actually passed my viva. Now to prepare for my next thing -- as luck would have it, I'm teaching in the morning.

## **- - - AFTER THE VIVA - - -**

### **Tuesday 6th October**

After a morning spent teaching, I finally take a moment to let everything sink in. Thinking about the coming months, I realise that I'll likely have to submit my final (revised) thesis in around January; for now, though, all I can do is sit tight and wait for the Examiners' Report.

### **Tuesday 20th October**

Another email, this time from the PGR Administration team: 'Your examiners' report is due to be submitted to me shortly once approved within your College and will then be passed to the Dean of Faculty for approval. Once approved by the Dean, a copy of the report and formal notification of the outcome of the viva will be sent to you by email.'

## **Tuesday 27th October**

Email received: 'MyPGR - Award subject to Minor Corrections'. I open the attached Examiners' Report, which is a 29-page PDF: ominous as this might sound, I soon realise that the corrections are indeed fairly minor, with a deadline of 20th January for their submission. The document offers a range of feedback, split into 'comment' (for future publication' and the more focused corrections required by mid-January), as well as a list of typos (some of which I'd already spotted). A week later, I meet with my supervisor to discuss the corrections in more detail, and he agrees that they're achievable within a couple of months.

## **Wednesday 13th January**

Over the past few weeks, I've been working through my corrections, with the aim of getting them completed before teaching starts for the term. As it happens, I receive a reminder email from the PGR administration team on the same day as I send my corrections off to my supervisor for review! I submit them the following day, and a period of slightly nervous waiting begins.

## **Thursday 11th February**

Email from the administration team: 'Pre-Award Notification!' Hooray! My corrections have been accepted, and I proceed to upload a copy of the thesis to Open Research Exeter (as per University guidelines).

## **Tuesday 16th February**

The award notification comes through: 'Dear Dr. Mills' ... I'm done! Four-and-a-bit years of work later, and I'm officially a Doctor. Happily, I'm not at a loss for what to do with myself, as I fully intend to celebrate the occasion. Plus, I've got teaching in the morning.