

A paper originally
presented at the
Warwick Business School
Doctoral Programme.
University of Warwick.

February 1997

Revised Version 1.4

July 2003

A set of Powerpoint®
slides (phdviva.ppt) is also
available to accompany
this paper.

**Preparing for the
PhD *Viva Voce*
- a personal reflection**

by

David Twigg

About the author

For further details about the author and his research, contact him at: d.twigg@sussex.ac.uk

David Twigg has an MPhil in Economics & Management, and a PhD in Operations Management. He studied for his doctoral degree at Warwick Business School, and was awarded his doctorate in June 1996.

This paper has been written to assist prepare students for the defence of an MPhil or PhD, drawing upon the advice of his supervisor, Professor Nigel Slack, and others at Warwick.

David Twigg is Lecturer at SPRU – Science and Technology Policy Research, The University of Sussex (UK).

This paper and accompanying Powerpoint® slideshow may be distributed so long as no charge is made

Introduction

Congratulations ... you
have submitted your
thesis!

So what's next?

... the *viva voce*.

The submission of a PhD is like climbing to the top of a mountain. You spend a long time preparing and planning, then undertake a sustained effort to reach the summit. Once there, you have a brief opportunity to look over the horizon. Then, you have to continue your journey.

Think about your own route through the PhD process. YOU have reached the summit. You have researched, written and analysed a topic. However, others don't know about your achievement yet. The summit is not the end of the journey. You need to descend the mountain, otherwise, only YOU will know that you were there.

It is this journey back that also needs preparation. *This journey is the Viva Voce.*

So, how can you prepare yourself?

First, have a seat and pat yourself on the back: not everyone submits. Relax and enjoy the view for a few minutes.

Next ... consider the descent, and getting home safely. Only then can you claim to have conquered the PhD mountain.

... focused preparation calms any nerves and makes for a confident defence

Prior to the defence of my own PhD thesis, I tried to determine how best to approach my preparation. I consulted my doctoral handbook¹ but found it frugal in offering advice on ... 'how to defend your PhD' or ... 'thoughts on your viva'.

For the record, Chapter 10 (pp. 126-9), 'The formal procedures', of Phillips and Pugh does offer two sections concerning the viva and the possible results of the examination. It is very important to know what could happen: there is more to a viva than a straight pass or fail. However, I found no information on how to prepare myself. There was an assumption that if you got as far as submitting your thesis you'd be OK. However, focused preparation calms any nerves and makes for a confident defence.

The second edition of Phillips and Pugh (pp. 140-42) has gone part way to addressing this deficiency, offering a systematic approach to summarising the thesis. It is useful, but serves mainly as an index.

This paper aims to shed light on this final stage of the PhD process - the defence of the thesis - and is based on the collective experience of some of those who have gone before.

I wish you all success in your studies. I hope that as others defend their theses or learn of good sources of information, that they will share their experience with others. I'd like to hear from you too.

¹ Phillips, E.M. and D.S. Pugh, 'How to get a PhD' Open University Press: Buckingham, 1987

Gaining professional status

Fulfil all six characteristics and you are probably ready for your viva.

A useful starting point as preparation for the PhD viva can be found in Phillips and Pugh (1987, p.18), where they refer to the holder of a doctorate as someone who becomes a full professional in their own field.

They list six characteristics to be achieved:

1. You have something to say that your peers want to listen to.
2. You must have a command of what is happening in your subject so that you can evaluate the worth of what others are doing.
3. You must have the astuteness to discover where you can make a useful contribution.
4. You must have mastery of appropriate techniques that are currently being used, and also be aware of their limitations.
5. You must be able to communicate your results effectively in the professional arena.
6. You must have a global awareness of what is being published, argued, written and discovered in the academic community.

These are useful characteristics to consider for your viva.

If you can fulfil all six characteristics, then you are probably ready for your viva.

The *Viva Voce*

So what is this Viva?

And, what should I expect?

A viva provides you with an opportunity ...

- to discuss your work with an expert;
- to improve your arguments;
- to consider where to publish your work.

Above all else, **it is an examination of your work.**

A Personal Stocktake

Prepare some bullet points ...

- I did this ...
- ... because ...
- ... using ...
- ... the result was ...
- ... which means ...

The following ideas were originally suggested to me by my supervisor, Professor Nigel Slack. I found them invaluable, and would recommend others to reflect on them. There are undoubtedly other ways to prepare yourself, but this is what I did.

First.

Don't try to think of the exact questions the examiners will ask you. It is better to prepare yourself for anything. Hence, summarise your thesis into smaller blocks.

Consider:

1. What have you done?
2. Why have you done it?
3. How did you do it?
4. What have you found?
5. What are the implications of these?

For each question, prepare between 3-5 bullet-points in a condensed form - do not use lots of sub-clauses. This exercise is good for summarising your work and reflecting back on it. i.e. "did I really find that out?"

Task.

In 3 minutes, summarise your thesis. Drawing upon the bullet points that you have already made.

Second.

The all important methodology! Key points are how generalizable are your findings, and how valid?

I did a sector study, so I thought about other sectors which someone else could examine with my framework. Are your findings likely to be found in other sectors, for example?

Third.

What do you plan to do next?

How do you plan to disseminate your work?

Fourth.

What is (are) your major contribution(s)?

Again, bullet point them.

Fifth (and finally).

After a few days thinking about these points, spend 30 minutes with your supervisor running through the bullet points, and discussing his/her thoughts on the viva process.

Above all, remember ...

- at this moment in time, you are probably the world's leading expert on the specific topic of your thesis;
- stay calm and relaxed;
- demonstrate the depth and breadth of your knowledge.

Appendix: Comments from supervisors on preparing a PhD defence

The following people kindly provided their comments by e-mail (date indicated):

- Dr. J. Broyles
- Prof. I. Davidson
- Prof. P. Edwards
- Dr. V. Wong
- Dr. D. Arnott

Dr. Jack Broyles, Accounting and Finance, Warwick Business School (January 1997)

Here are some of the things I have advised my students preparing for the viva:

1. Discuss the nature of the contribution with the supervisor.
2. Read the dissertation carefully and write down 30 or 40 corrections and questions that you think will interest the examiners.
Be prepared to answer all these questions. Be able to refer to literature when giving these answers. Discuss them with the supervisor.
3. Discuss the limitations of the research with the supervisor. What slight misgivings do he or she have? What is the best way to defend these if necessary?
4. Read the dissertation from cover to cover again starting a few days before the viva.
5. Bring an annotated copy of the dissertation to the viva.
6. I try to explain to the student the examiners' point of view so that he will know what to expect. Also the student needs to appreciate that probably he or she will be asked to make a number of minor changes, and much of the time in the viva is taken up with these. Expect this and realise it is not the end of the world!
7. I make the student aware of "post doctoral syndrome" - the psychological problems many people experience during the year following a successful viva. If they are aware of this, they may be able to pre-empt some of the damage.

Professor Ian Davidson, Accounting and Finance, Warwick Business School (January 1997)

It is not a bad idea to read some of the work published by your examiners - especially the external(s). In many cases work by the external may already have been reviewed as part of the literature search - if so, it is worth checking that his/her arguments were properly understood.

**Professor Paul Edwards, Industrial Relations,
Warwick Business School (January 1997)**

Among the points I try to make to students are:

1. Procedure: the various conclusions that a viva can reach; the fact that pairs of examiners are laws unto themselves; the need for the student to ask for clarification if points seem obscure (illustrated by a case - at another university - where the student left the viva not knowing whether she had passed or not) - the point here being that if anything other than a straight pass is recommended student and supervisor have the right to expect very clear guidance as to what they have to do.
2. Substance: from what is known about examiners' own views, and from knowledge of the thesis itself, think what the weak points might be and prepare and rehearse a defence. I sometimes act as devil's advocate in pressing a student. This often turns on what general lessons can be drawn, i.e. what has been the contribution to knowledge. George Bain [ex-Chairman of Warwick Business School and ex-Dean of London Business School] used to ask job applicants who had just done a PhD, 'what's the thesis?', i.e. what is the key argument and contribution to knowledge? This can floor people. Especially where a thesis is discursive and historical or theoretical in nature, a prepared defence on this is essential.

It is also essential to know the thesis intimately, since some examiners like to ask, 'on page 192 you say ..., could you explain ...'

**Dr. Veronica Wong, Marketing, Warwick Business
School (January 1997)**

Just a few lines although I do not claim these to be words of wisdom. I usually advise students to listen to the questions posed and take a few seconds to think through his/her response so as to ensure they provide satisfactory and coherent answers.

Another point is to stay cool when criticisms are made of aspects of their work and to handle the objections calmly. At all costs, avoid antagonising the examiners or annoying them. It is never easy to take other people's criticisms of one's work. Invariably there will be limitations in a thesis/research approach/methodology - there is seldom the 'perfect piece of research', so students must acknowledge these weaknesses and attempt to defend these problems as objectively as possible. Don't take the criticisms personally.

**Dr. David Arnott, Marketing & Strategic Management,
Warwick Business School (January 1997)**

I currently second supervise a number of students, the early ones of which are approaching that time when the viva will loom. From my own perspective it is not something that I have given a great deal of thought to since individual questions generally relate to individual fears and expectations.

This may sound stupid but looking back I think the most important thing was to be relaxed. There are a number of things going for candidates that should help them achieve that state. Here are some of the things that I think helped me to relax into my viva.

I used an unusual approach. Although students had the right to attend the viva if they wished they almost always respected the candidates wishes and if they preferred not to have any of their colleagues present then the students stayed away.² I did the opposite. I actually sent out personal invitations to all PhD students to come and sit in on my viva. I laid down certain rules (i.e. if they wished to attend then they had to be there before the viva started and stay until it ended, no matter how long that took, etc..) but eight of my compadre's elected to attend along with my supervisor, whom I made sure was able to make the date before it was fixed. This meant that before the examiners showed I was chatting in general about my topic and other elements of my work and so relaxed into the mode of

² In the majority of UK universities, the PhD viva is a closed examination. So this option will not apply.

answering questions. I was thus warmed up before the examiners started.

On the whole I found my viva was not too traumatic, which I put down to a fairly strong document. I was confident that I had done a reasonably good job on my submission (which is where your supervisor is of critical importance in the process) which, together with the relaxation afforded by my colleagues, meant I did not fear any question that I thought they could throw at me. I should perhaps add that my thesis used a quantitative, empiricist approach that I had rigorously justified within the text.

And this leads on to another point: justification. In addition to my central theme and research, I made sure that each stage of my thesis was justified (topic selection, epistemological stance, methodology, sampling procedure, data analysis techniques, etc.). This meant the document gave an impression (and a reality, I have to add) of thoroughness and meant that the examiners focused on the meat of the subject matter and not on the approach/method and since I had just spent three years looking at that subject I was (or at least felt) better informed than my examiners on the literature and writings in the area and certainly better informed on my analysis and interpretation and so felt able to refute any counter arguments that they raised and this added to my relaxation.

My next point is more down to my own personality and a slightly fatalistic view of life: I have never really worried about examinations as long as I felt I had given myself a good chance by putting in the work (unavoidable in a PhD); I thus entered the room with a view that I had done all I could and if that was not good enough then that's life and I would just have to accept and deal with the consequences when they happened rather than worrying about all the possible downside outcomes. Not that I had not thought about them; I simply ignored them at the critical point - during the viva. The biggest fear is of course that someone publishes your thesis just before you finish or viva. It happens, but the chances are slim if you have had a reasonable literature search and note taking strategy and even slimmer that the examiner has read or hear about it. Students should be encouraged to use their quantitative methods

coursework to analyse the probabilities. We have all heard about the disasters but statistically, these are an insignificantly small number (like the numbers of people actually killed in a plane crash versus peoples perceptions of the chances of being killed in a plane crash).

Now I know that every student and topic is different but since the students selected their topics and I assume that they have a (if not burning) at least a deep interest in their subject matter, then they too are likely to be a world expert on their particular knowledge niche, which should give them confidence.

A final couple of points. First, I tried very hard to make sure that the wait for my viva was as short as possible to ensure that everything I had written was as fresh as possible in my mind. And what I did not do was attempt to continue my research during the wait. I reasoned that if I did that then there was a possibility that I might confuse issues in my mind that my thesis made clear. This did not mean that I stopped scanning and reading relevant literature but that I ignored it, other than to make a mental note and bring it up if the need arose in the viva as evidence that I had noted that piece of research but had not yet had time to incorporate it's findings into my particular study. This meant that I remained focused on what I had found and not on possibilities that had yet to be investigated and may not prove of value. If the students need convincing tell them to look at all the papers they had read in their initial literature review and at the number that had eventually proved of use and importance in their research.

What I did do during the wait was to read my thesis through twice. Once in detail to see if I could identify anything missed, overlooked, contradictory, or areas where I thought I had left room for questions (be they on method or substance). The second a quick scan read to reinforce the key points that I was trying to make, the sequence of the argument presented etc.., This was by way of a refresher a couple of days before the viva (not that I felt I needed this given the time I had put in on the work, but was more by way of reassurance). I guess that if I had found something then that might have worried me but at least it would have given me chance to prepare a defence. By this time I was convinced that I knew my work backwards and

so did not try to spot possible questions. As I said I tried to relax and trusted to my knowledge of my research and the inevitable adrenaline burst during the viva to help respond to any questions I might face.

My very last point is to practice defending your point of view as early and as often as possible. Warwick's PhD programme provides students an opportunity to present and discuss their work in front of other students and staff. My recommendation is take every opportunity to do so. I did at Manchester and it again added to my confidence that I had covered all the necessary angles or could argue that points raised were side issues or irrelevant to my thesis.

Now these clearly come from a personal point of view, but that is the sum of my experience of the process to date. I hope these comments help, and should you wish to use any of them then feel free to do so.