

DPhil Viva Preparation and Practice Workshop

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Programme

- Introductions and course objectives
- How can you prepare?
- A student's perspective
- An examiner's perspective
- Lunch (12:00 – 12:45)
- Action session: a mini viva (optional)

Close (14:30)

General concerns?

Introduce yourself and your research

In groups of 4, take it in turns to:

- Introduce yourself
- Summarize your DPhil
- Say what you're hoping to get from this session.

You have 4 minutes each.

Nominate a time-keeper.

How could you prepare?

Practical

Psychological

Technique-based

Intellectual

Administration

- Process for organizing the viva?
- Exam Regulations for university and department?
- Who will you suggest as examiners?
- What happens after the viva?
- What are the possible outcomes?
- Submit electronic and hardbound copies of thesis (if registered after 1/10/07).

Logistics

- Can you find your subfusc?
- Where will you wait just before you go in?
- What will you take in?
 - Thesis!
 - Pens? Paper? Laptop? Lab book? List of own corrections? Recent journal papers? Water? Snack? Tissues?
- Do you want your supervisor to be there?
- Do you want to give a short presentation at the start?
- How will you celebrate?

Confidence

- Feel proud of what you've achieved.
- Be clear about the “significant contribution” your work makes.
- Realise that you know more about your thesis (and probably your subject) than anyone else.
- Every piece of research raises new questions that may make it seem incomplete. Are your concerns about “serious flaws” realistic?

Stress

- Are you likely to get very stressed?
- What strategies can you use to help stay calm?
 - Deep breaths?
 - Regular exercise?
 - Motivational music?
 - Rescue Remedy?

Question Types

- May find it helpful to think about the *types* of questions that might be asked, for example:
 general, specific, open, closed, summarising, probing...
- Unlikely to predict specific questions, but questions with a similar focus often occur (see handout):
 motivation, contribution, methodology, literature,
 limitations, strengths...

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Answer Structures

- May find it helpful to think about ways of structuring your answers:
 - Pros → Cons (show both sides of an argument)
 - General → Specific (demonstrate knowledge)
 - Define → Illustrate (use examples to strengthen your point)
 - **DEFINE → DEFEND** (avoid defensiveness & demonstrate knowledge)

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Define – Defend in action

Examiner: “Why didn’t you use... to...?”

Candidate: “I didn’t do that because...”

or

Candidate: “What I did was...
My reasons for this were...
I could have...
by...
but I decided not to do that because...”

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Other Strategies

- How could you create ‘thinking space’ when tackling a question?
 - Pause.
 - Ask for time to think.
 - Make notes.
 - Ask them to repeat question.
 - Sip some water.
- What could you do if you don’t understand the question?
 - Write down key words.
 - Paraphrase what you think was asked.
 - Answer part that you have understood.
 - Ask to repeat.
 - Ask yourself how the question relates to your thesis.
- Can you use your body language to make you feel and appear more confident?
 - Eye contact.
 - Firm hand shake.
 - Smiling.
 - Open, relaxed posture.

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“Intellectual” Preparation

= **Thesis-based** preparation to ensure that you are ready to:

- Discuss and explain your research
- Demonstrate your knowledge
- Show that your work is of the required standard.

What do you think you could do to
prepare “intellectually”?

- **Re-read** thesis (after having a break from it).
- Make a list of the **corrections** you've found. Take it to the viva?
- **Summarise:**
 - Write a few points for each **chapter/section**, practice summarising them verbally.
 - Practice explaining what your **whole thesis** is about and the **contribution** that it's made to your field in a couple of minutes.
 - What did you do? How? Why? What are the implications?
- **Reflect** on key turning points (when questions were raised and decisions made). Think over discussions with your supervisor and feedback received from talks or poster presentations.

- Identify the “**highlights**” (strongest parts) of your thesis.
 - Learn where they are or mark them with post-it notes.
 - Make a convincing case for why they are highlights.
 - Practice finding links between them and the types of question that examiners may ask – create opportunities to talk about the strengths of your work, but don’t digress from the question!
- Identify any **topics that you would like to discuss** and look for links that you can use to introduce them.
- **Revise**
 - Any gaps in your knowledge that you were aware of during writing (keep a list whilst writing your thesis).
 - Key people in your field – learn names and details of their work.
 - Publications which have most influenced your work – learn details.

- **Practice questions**
 - Compose questions that you think will be of interest to examiners.
 - Practice answering them aloud.
 - Get other people to ask you them. Could ask them to adopt different questioning styles (encouraging, unresponsive, challenging...).
 - Ask supervisor/Peers for **Mock viva**.
 - Get **feedback**.
- **Check examiners' publications**
 - Do they indicate areas that they're likely to be interested in?
 - If you've referenced their work, did you understand it properly?

- **Talk to supervisor**
 - What are their thoughts on the viva process?
 - About the limitations of your research and aspects of your thesis that you are concerned may be particularly weak. Address how you could deal with them in the viva.
- **Up-date** (if necessary) – significant findings published since? Could take copies of recent articles into the viva.
- If not yet at the viva stage, take opportunities to **present and discuss** your work.
- Some people find that giving a departmental seminar shortly before the viva is helpful.

HEALTH WARNING!

You can't do it all, and it's probably a bad idea to try.
Be selective and prioritise.

Can't predict, but can prepare.

Lunch

You might like to think of a few questions specific to your thesis for your 'examiner' to ask during the viva practice exercise.

Action Session: A Mini Viva

1. In groups of 3, allocate people A, B, C.
2. For 10 minutes: **A** takes on the role of the **candidate**, **B** takes on the role of the **examiner**, **C observes** A and keeps time. Afterwards, C has 2 minutes to give feedback.
3. Swap roles. For 10 minutes: **B** takes on the role of the **candidate**, **C** takes on the role of the **examiner**, **A observes** B and keeps time. Afterwards, A has 2 minutes to give feedback.
4. Swap roles. For 10 minutes: **C** takes on the role of the **candidate**, **A** takes on the role of the **examiner**, **B observes** C and keeps time. Afterwards, B has 2 minutes to give feedback.

The examiner can use questions from the list provided, make up their own, or use thesis-specific ones requested by the candidate.

Try to use a variety of question types (general, specific, open, closed, summarising, probing...) and a variety of focuses (motivation, contribution, methodology, limitations, future work...).

If you are further from completing your DPhil, you may find it easier to be asked questions in terms of what you hope or expect to have done by the time you finish.