

# Approaching the PhD thesis and viva: Clarifying expectations and enhancing preparations

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**Keywords:** *PhD thesis; PhD viva; thesis preparation; viva expectations.*

**R**ESearch involves iteratively learning to use certain academic skills with increased proficiency, such as searching the literature, conducting statistical analyses, and clearly communicating ideas in scientific writing. However, the ultimate expression of these skills is only carried out once – the PhD thesis and viva. While this last step is designed to be the perfect mixture of these underlying skills, it nonetheless stands as a final obstacle. Current PhD students can and should look at theses of previous students as examples, but it can sometimes be difficult to perceive the underlying generalisations to draw from these. Universities provide quality manuals or similar guidance of the thesis and viva process and expectations, but these are often too abstract. Recent PhD graduates, those that have just completed this process, are ushered out shortly after completion and there may be only a few postdoctoral fellows in a department (who may also be newly arrived to a department and not yet established social connections with current PhD students), providing minimal opportunity for those that have recently completed the hurdle to share insights with those fast approaching it. However, this is all not to say that there is no general guidance available for current PhD students to use to improve their preparation and confidence. Here I outline four particularly beneficial resources that current PhD students can read to clarify

their expectations and enhance their preparations.

In the first resource, Barrett et al. (2021) provide clear, concise, and concrete guidance for ‘producing a successful PhD thesis.’ At only two pages, this article outlines the key characteristics a PhD thesis should demonstrate, as well as drawing attention to common issues, such as a lack of coherence or insufficient presentation of the literature or motivation for methods used. Some topics may benefit from further discussion between student and supervisor but using this paper as a guide for that discussion will likely prove fruitful as it helps students think about their understanding of the thesis expectations more concretely.

Second, Mullins and Kiley (2002) interviewed PhD examiners across a variety of disciplines and discusses how examiners see the purpose of the thesis and examination. The title of the paper itself helps contextualise the work: ‘*It’s a PhD, not a Nobel Prize.*’ The framing helps to focus the purpose of the thesis and provides a different perspective for a PhD student to consider, helping to shift away from the view of the PhD thesis as a magnum opus and issues of perfectionism. As this is a research study, here it may be more useful to skip to the results section to find the takeaways, though readers are able to refer to the methods if curious as to how these findings were ascertained.

Several questions that the examiners have in mind when evaluating a thesis are listed. Two examples are ‘Do the conclusions follow on from the introduction?’ and ‘What is the intellectual depth and rigour of the thesis?’ The additional comparisons across disciplines also provides a learning experience in itself, as PhD students in psychology are also likely to have peers in other disciplines where PhD expectations may vary, allowing this article to help clarify these disciplinary differences.

Third, Golding et al. (2014) looked across several papers with the goal of determining ‘what thesis students should know,’ again a focus stated outright in the article’s title. The authors summarise their findings in 11 generalisations. ‘Thesis examiners tend to: (1) be broadly consistent; (2) expect a thesis to pass; (3) judge a thesis by the end of the first or second chapter; (4) read a thesis as an academic reader and as a normal reader; (5) be irritated and distracted by presentation errors; (6) favour a coherent thesis; (7) favour a thesis that engages with the literature; (8) favour a thesis with a convincing approach; (9) favour a thesis that engages with the findings; (10) require a thesis to be publishable; (11) give summative and formative feedback.’ Each generalisation is discussed in-turn through the article. In a follow-up paper, Golding (2017) re-iterate these 11 generalisations, framed more directly as advice on what a PhD student should do in their own thesis based on the prior findings.

In the final resource, National University of Ireland Galway (2012) have developed a helpful PhD viva guide. This provides a broad overview of the viva process in a clean and straightforward manner. While this guide is helpful in many ways, perhaps

its most useful section is the appendix of 49 ‘questions typically asked in a viva.’ These questions are compiled from many sources, and I admit I have used questions from here on several occasions when I have served as an external examiner myself. Three of my favourite questions from this list are: ‘What are some reasons you chose to research this topic?’, ‘What would you consider was the most significant aspect of the work you’ve done?’, and ‘What kinds of problems have you had in your research?’

As a related topic – as supervisors, we are often not formally trained in supervision, but I implore supervisors to themselves look into the literature on supervision, PhD examinations, and related topics. I recently wrote a short primer on topics related to PhD supervision (Madan, 2021a) and otherwise also recommend supervisors to discuss both academic and non-academic career paths (see Madan, 2021b) as the PhD nears completion, if not earlier.

While there are many resources available to help with thesis preparation, I have found these to be particularly clear and constructive. I have used each of these in my own supervision and I suggest that students and supervisors use them to facilitate discussions leading up to the viva. With clearer expectations and enhanced preparation, PhD students can more confidently complete their theses and vivas and advance forward in their careers.

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