

Just before the Viva

I thought I saw you a moment ago. How are you feeling?

Hi. Yes, I'm OK. A bit tired but I'm ready for them.

Is the baby teething?

Oh no. He hasn't reached that stage yet. I was up quite late reminding myself what is in my thesis.

What! And is it today you have your viva?

Yes, I know. But I have been worried about my data analysis after finding that article by Frater and Johnson. I just wanted to rehearse my explanation ~ or perhaps I should say defence. But you know how it is when you start reading; I went on into the rest of that chapter. . . .

But when you finished it you went to bed?

Not quite. I got to the end of that chapter and read the next one that was the Discussion chapter and finally the Conclusions. Then I went to bed.

What time was that?

About two thirty. I think. Of course I couldn't get to sleep for thinking about today and hoping that they wouldn't ask me about something in one chapter.

But you surely didn't need to spend all that time reading what must be so familiar by now and on the night before your viva?

Today I agree, but last night I was in a panic over that chapter. If I had gone to bed as planned by about eleven would I have been able to sleep?

Maybe, maybe not. You'll never know. But, forget all that and have this coffee which I had bought for Joan who won't be here till later.

Thanks. Now it's my turn to say sorry. When will she arrive?

Oh she'll turn up. We don't have much to talk about. Back to you though. What did you finally decide to take into your viva? You were agonizing over how many pens you could carry and how to reduce notes to less than a book!

Come on. It was never as bad as that.

Yes it was. The regulations are clear. Apart from a thesis, candidates may take pens, notes or appropriate illustrative materials into the room. And of course, phones or computers cannot be used. It all seems straightforward. What was there to think about?

Put like that my hesitation would seem strange. If you had a family heirloom pen that has accompanied everyone on special occasions then you would know how difficult it is to explain

OK. Understood. Is it with you today?

Yes.

Well done. Happy?

Of course. But there is something else. Can I ask your opinion?

OK. But what was it you wanted to discuss? Chris is off sick. I'm covering his sessions and I must go to the General Office before 10.00. You are pushing it today aren't you? I have three quick questions.

Fire away!

Here is my first question. In the viva, can I disagree with an examiner's question or ask even ask for the question to be repeated?

Of course you can! Don't forget that examiners are human. Recognize that their roles involve asking you about your thesis so relate to them in a mature manner. Listen carefully to every question. But, if questions are expressed that direct you towards a position you do not accept then think carefully about how you are going to answer. Present your interpretation of the question. Then explain that if that interpretation is correct it contradicts what is argued on page XYZ in your thesis. Make absolutely sure that it is on page XYZ and even open your thesis at that page to emphasise the point.

But what do I do if the examiner tells me that my argument is wrong?

This is part of the process in mature argument isn't it? As the author of your thesis, you should know it inside out. Thus, direct your examiners around the pages from point to point and explain where your argument deals with the issues that are raised. Do that and then ask ~ in a clear and polite manner (of course) ~ what is faulty in that argument. Sit back and look at the examiner. Wait for the reply. If your supervisor has guided you then your arguments should be robust and defensible.

But the examiners may disagree with the positions I have taken. They may not accept the guidance that my supervisors have given me.

That may be so. But, the viva is an opportunity for you to show that you can defend the academic positions, research decisions and conceptual conclusions in your thesis. Defending implies that you can engage with different viewpoints and justify your viewpoints. Maybe the word negotiating comes in here? Examiners want to see that you understand your research. So, some questions may be expressed in a deliberately searching way. If they are don't be upset.

Does that mean that the viva is really just a game? Is it like chess where pieces are moved as each question is asked until there is a winner?

Sadly some vivas may be like that but the majority are not. Examiners want to discover if you understand and can explain the research that has been presented to them. There is no winner but there will be a point when they are satisfied that a candidate does indeed understand what is in their thesis. I'm sure this will happen today for you.

OK. So, losers would be candidates who have presented inferior research, a badly presented thesis or just cannot defend their work?

Exactly. It happens. Not often, but it happens. Your next question?
My second one is very simple. How long will my viva last?

Vivas have no specific duration. They vary due to questioning about the quality of the thesis, the professional interests of examiners, the length of the answers, and so on. Times of trains home can even determine when examiners have to leave for a taxi to the station

OK, I appreciate all of that but isn't there some sort of average?

Well, in the social sciences the average is an hour. Obviously that means some are shorter and others are longer. In the natural sciences vivas go on and on. Many last for hours ~ literally. Some, it is rumoured, have finished after five hours. In the humanities anything between one and three hours can be expected. Vivas are occasions when rich discussions between the participants may obliterate time!!

Thanks. If I need to can I leave the room and go to the toilet?

Of course you can. Your examiners might want to do the same! Just ask and go. Three questions was it? So what is your third one?

This is more delicate. My first supervisor will attend my viva. We have got on quite well over the past three years. But we have disagreed over something that it quite important. We did not fall out, but every time this issue arose we argued vehemently and once I left the room out of sheer frustration. She insisted that I included a paragraph which introduced a view on culture that ~ in my opinion ~ should not be in the thesis. It does not fit and I feel that I can't explain or defend it. If examiners ask about it how should I respond?

Oh dear. I am sorry. As you said it is delicate. Have you discussed the situation with your other supervisor? What advice were you given?

That is exactly what I expected you would ask. It gets worse. My second supervisor stepped in to replace my first first supervisor who retired from the University due to illness. My previous second supervisor then became my first supervisor and soon after that we started to disagree over this one particular issue. I deliberately haven't gone into details. They don't matter. What does matter is how to respond if asked about something I really cannot defend.

I see. What did your second supervisor say about the situation?

Being less experienced she concurs with my first supervisor and said I should accept the advice and add the paragraph.

OK. You may of course not be asked anything about that paragraph. If that happens the problem does not arise.

That is what I am hoping for. But

I know. There is a possible way around the issue but you would need to be bold and very positive. Obviously it depends on how the question is put and why it was asked. You must judge that. But, try this. Smile knowingly at the examiners and do not look at the supervisor at all during this exchange or even after it. Then say something along these lines. 'I wondered if one of you would ask about that issue' ~ and, this is very important, here you must look at both examiners to involve them with your answer. Continue by saying ~ 'A colleague introduced me to those ideas and felt that they complemented the rest of my argument. At the time I was persuaded but now I am not so sure. If you felt that the paragraph should be removed I can do so since that would not really affect the tenor of my argument ~ would it?' Await their reply with a confident face.

I like it. And?

Wait for the reply. If they confirm that the paragraph is unnecessary delete it with their blessing. Your supervisor can't object to that. Or, retain it they want you to. Your supervisor will be happy. She has previously heard what you said to the examiners so Bingo!

Thanks. I will take your advice and let you know what happens.

Excellent. Happy to help. Is there anything else before I rush off to the General Office?

Well not really since you have reassured me on both the trivial and the substantial concerns that really did worry me. In fact, I even feel so relieved that I am looking forward to it! Thanks so much. There is just one other matter. Can I ask the examiners questions?

Of course. What had you in mind?

If we were discussing how I analysed my data, could I ask them if they would have done it differently? What I'm getting at is this ~ how can I draw them into telling me something about how they approach research? This would introduce a sharing element into the discussion making it less one-sided.

Now you really are thinking about the viva as a scholarly occasion. There is no reason why you cannot ask examiners such a question. They might even be pleased with the opportunity to talk about their own research. I am sure you have read-up on their research and

I have and I understand why they undertook the research that is published.

Great! Candidates, like you, who submitted 'a good thesis' have an opportunity to engage with examiners just like that. Here's Joan, must be on my way. Best wishes. Go and enjoy it!

Will do. Thanks for your help.

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