

**Module:** Presentation Skills and Strategies

**Level:** M2/Literature and Civilization

**Academic Year:** 2024-2025

**Lesson objectives:**

By the end of the lecture, students will:

Be prepared for the oral examination.

Acquire the necessary skills to perform well during the viva.

**Viva Voce**

**Viva voce:** other terms are used, such as the ‘oral defence’. This word is useful in that it reminds us that the primary function of the viva is to give students an opportunity to defend their work (Murray, 2011).

More developed definition for the term ‘viva voce’ is as follows:

“On the day a robust performance is required but be careful to avoid dogmatism. Examiners are impressed by thoughtful, reflective candidates who give consideration to constructive criticism and are able to modify their arguments accordingly....” (Burnham, 1994, p.33).

What you are expected to do is to be ‘robust’ in defining your work, but you are not supposed to be dogmatic (even if your examiners are). As for ‘constructive criticism’, you will have been receiving that for some time, in feedback from your supervisor, but perhaps not orally. Receiving criticism in writing gives you time to prepare- and perhaps disguise your true feelings. In the viva, you will have to respond to criticism and to feedback instantly with people watching you. They may catch your reaction from your non-verbal behaviours, such as eye contact, or lack of it, facial expressions and hand gestures, as well as your tone of voice and what you actually say. With so many ambiguities and potential unknowns Burnham (1994) is quite right in stating that preparation and demystification are key.

**Purpose of the viva**

- ✓ Did you do the work yourself?
- ✓ Have you done the reading?
- ✓ Do you have a good general knowledge of the field?
- ✓ Did you write the thesis yourself?
- ✓ Can you do research independently?

- ✓ Can you communicate your subject to others?
- ✓ Can you talk about it professionally?
- ✓ Did you receive any training?
- ✓ Did you learn anything?
- ✓ Have you contributed to new knowledge?

The most common criteria: according to Burnham (1994), the main criteria that most examiners may apply to your thesis are as follows:

- 1- A clear account of the problem addressed in the research.
- 2- Consistent development of this theme in all chapters.
- 3- Clear statement of relevance of conclusion to the discipline.

This could be one of the ambiguities of associated with the viva, because there is no single, universal set of definitions of purposes, or practices.

### **Pre-viva:**

While many students have negative feelings prior to their vivas for many different, understandable reasons, it is not essential to see it in that light. Doing so may prevent you from learning during the viva. It may also make you miss the more positive aspects of the experience. Before the viva, then try and see your preparation in the same light as preparing for a job interview.

Find out all you can about the viva at your institution: how it is conducted, what the roles of the participants are, what the examiner does, how you should prepare, other students' experiences.

### **Putting a strategy into practice**

- ✓ How can you practise for the viva?
  - 1- With friends, with anyone
  - 2- With postgraduates in your area.
  - 3- With a postgraduate who has had a viva.
  - 4- With your internal examiner and supervisor (mock viva).

In this respect, you prepare a practice session. Ask them to ask specific and general questions, easy and hard questions, to interrupt you, to challenge you, and to give you feedback.

- ✓ Practice session: one hour

1. Aims: discuss what you want to achieve.
2. Which skills do you want to develop or improve?
3. Which strategies do you want to practise?
4. Prepare questions.
5. Run the 'viva' for real, for one hour, without stopping.
6. After this, have a full debrief: how did you do?
7. How do your colleagues feel you did?
8. Where do you need more practice?
9. How can you practise this again?

If you do practise thoroughly you will give an excellent- not just adequate- performance on the day. You should not just aim to survive the viva, but to give one of your best performances.

✓ Anticipate the questions

It is not enough simply to recite sections of your thesis. You have to develop convincing answers to the questions asked. You have to answer probing questions that you may have answered more than once in your thesis. You have to rehearse.

General questions:

- 1- Would you please summarise your thesis for us?
- 2- Who would you say are the key people in your field?
- 3- Would you say that your thesis has any weaknesses?
- 4- Surely it would have been better to use a different method?

There will also be more detailed questions, possibly working systematically through each chapter. You can anticipate questions about each of your chapters. These may be general or specific, but can be challenging.

Questions the literature review should answer:

- 1- Why is this subject important?
- 2- Who else thinks it is important?
- 3- Who has worked on this subject before?
- 4- What had not been done before?
- 5- Who has done something similar to your topic?
- 6- What did you adapt for your study?

- 7- What is your contribution?
- 8- Who will use your material?

Again, these may not be exactly the questions you will be asked in your viva. In fact, they are questions that maybe asked of your thesis.

- You should be prepared to talk about anything you have written in any section. You have to show that you fully understand everything you have written.

Questions about your methodology:

- 1- You will be asked about the link between your research questions and hypothesis.
- 2- They may ask you to state why you rejected other methods.
- 3- Is the methodology for data collection appropriate?
- 4- In the circumstances, has the best design been chosen?
- 5- Has the candidate given an adequate justification for the design used?

### **Mock viva**

The mock viva is when the supervisor, possibly along with the internal examiner, puts you through a simulation of the viva. You can use the aforementioned questions to prepare for the mock viva.

The advantage of the mock viva is that it helps you adjust to the more formal verbal style of oral examination. It helps you develop your skills for more extended focused discussion. Your supervisor can, since he knows the area, come up with realistic questions.

The disadvantage of the mock viva is that, while it provides realistic practice, it does not guarantee that your examiner will run things in the same way in your real viva, ask you the same questions or respond to you in the same way.

### **During the viva**

You can take your dissertation with you, so that you can refer to it and follow the discussion when someone else refers to it. You will also need notepaper and pens, surely for obvious reasons. This means writing notes for your answers.

Writing down the questions asked by the examiner is a good technique instead of forgetting it and asking him to repeat it.

You remember to speak in the past tense. This means that you are talking-throughout- your viva about work that you have completed, past tense, about how you interpreted it, past tense about what you have argued the importance of the work is which still past tense is.

Your examiner may change to the future tense in order to discuss what might be the next step in your research, what you will do next, where you see the field is going in the future.

The use of the passive form would be much better than using the pronoun “I”. At some stage, you need to make it clear that the work is yours, then it is absolutely fine to use “I”. If you do not use it at all, you give the impression that you did not do it yourself.

Another verbal strategy to practise over and over again is “define” and “defend” helps students answer difficult questions without becoming defensive. For instance, “do not you think it would have been better to.....” the tendency is to start an answer with a defence of what was done.

A strong strategy is to define what we did first, and why, and then say how it was. You can show that you understand both the strengths and the limitations of the approach you chose. Above all, it saves you from appearing defensive. Your role is to defend not become defensive when faced with challenging questions.

## **List of references**

Murray, R. (2011). *How to Write a Thesis*. Open University Press : England.