

The ART OF VIVA

- What is a viva
- What is a dissertation viva
- The role of a dissertation viva
- Viva Variations and Patterns in Practice
- Marking criterias
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| SUMMARY | |

1.1 What is a Viva?

Viva Voce is an Italian phrase literally meaning “with living voice”.

Viva Voce is an examination administered by spoken communication. This is a two dimensional examination comprising of a group of Lecturers or Professors in most cases termed as “committee” and a student or a group of students.

The committee would raise certain Questions from the written examination(s) taken by the student(s) or a piece of work submitted by the student(s) i.e. Essay, Thesis, Dissertation Etc. Although a Viva Examination can also be taken independently without a prior written examination.

This Oral Examination, over the years has become a necessary part of examination process for almost all kinds of degrees which students wish to qualify for. It is termed as the easiest way to assess the first hand knowledge of the students about their field of study, be it at any level.

In most parts of the world it constitutes 40% of the total marks a student needs to be eligible for a degree but in other instances it can go up to 70% as well, as some institutes rely heavily on Oral Examination to evaluate a student.

Most Colleges and Universities usually provide the details of Viva Examinations to be held in the course of the degree a student wishes to enlist for in the beginning of the course but it is not definite and the Professor might call for a Viva Examination whenever he/she feels the need for it.

1.2 What is a Dissertation Viva?

A dissertation is a substantial piece of work submitted mostly as a conclusive part of a taught program mostly Masters and PhDs. Since a dissertation is based on a raw research conducted on the basis of a hypothesis it's rare that there are no ambiguities or unanswered questions in the dissertation and mostly a dissertation viva is arranged to clear out these doubts.

In a dissertation viva a committee of three members, two from the home institute and one external member cross questions the student/scholar raising questions from all the unclear parts of the dissertation submitted. The questions asked can also be the questions which the research conclusion has raised itself.

- The student/scholar can also be called in for a dissertation viva for other reasons pertaining to the marking procedures.
- The student might be a borderline candidate who is just a couple of marks away from graduation and the committee wants to give him/her a second chance to clear the dissertation exam.
- The student might also be called in to verify if the research is legit and authentic and that the student has conducted the research himself.
- There may be some parts of the dissertation which are not clear enough to understand as to what the research is trying to conclude and the student can be called for a dissertation viva to clear out any such ambiguities.

In ideal situations, students/scholars are supposed to be immaculately and appropriately equipped with the answers to all the possible questions and should know how he/she has to satisfy the knowledge savvy committee members by clearing out all the doubts in their minds regarding his/her dissertation or thesis.

1.3 The Role of a Dissertation Viva

A dissertation viva is one of the most feared parts of the educational career of a student, the reason being their ill understanding of the nature of this kind of examination and inability to prepare accordingly. Most students would like to skip their dissertation viva if they can qualify for degree without it which is not the case.

On taking a careful optimistic look at a dissertation viva one finds out that it's an opportunity in disguise which can help students do so much for their work which they were unable to do before. A dissertation viva gives you a chance to

- Discuss and confer on your work with the best available experts in the field.
- Improve and augmentate your argument and conclusions.
- Consider and to get advice on how you can get your work published.

Above all it's an opportunity for testing yourself to the fullest before you enter your professional life at a full scale level. When you face some of the most qualified people in your field you are actually putting everything you have on test. Be it your ability to speak your mind, your ability to face people, the ability to express your believes, your ability to survive competitive environment confidently and proficiently etc.

1.4 Variations and Patterns of Dissertation Viva

A dissertation viva can be conducted in a number of ways. The student /scholar might be given the choice or may be called in with prior notice of the type of viva and a brief description about the course of the dissertation viva. The basic building blocks of viva usually remain the same but they might be arranged differently in some instances.

What most students do is that they make up their mind of a step by step dissertation viva and when they walk in the committee room the world seems different and they get confused and lose their already shaky confidence. Instead one should go about with a free mind because when you know your research and your dissertation well enough it doesn't matter what the pattern is, you will be able to answer all the questions no matter what order they are asked in.

The usual patterns and variations observed by most examiners are not designed to unhook the student but to make sure that the core idea of the individual dissertation viva is addressed efficiently. The student must take the viva positively whatever the pattern of the viva is. Following are the probable patterns and variations of a dissertation viva.

You might be answering questions as soon as you walk in and introduce yourself. This happens usually when the committee members have already seen your dissertation thoroughly (which they usually do) and they like the whole thing but they have just a few questions they think you need to answer.

On another instance you might be asked to give an overview of your dissertation in the beginning and then a few questions might be raised from your introduction leading to the more insightful questions.

You can also be given some part of your dissertation and asked to explain a certain idea or a finding you have highlighted in that part and once you are done you will be asked a couple of questions before the detailed question answer session ensues.

Note: These variations are subject to change at any point of time by the committee members.

1.5 Viva Voce Marking Criterias

Having the prior knowledge how your dissertation and dissertation viva are going to be marked you will be better able to go through all the steps of your work. Before you appear for your dissertation viva your dissertation is marked so we have to look at how your dissertation is marked first.

There are four basic marking criterias of a dissertation

Blind double Marking

Double blind marking means that separate copies of the same dissertation are examined by separate examiners anonymously and both markers record their marks separately.

Double Marking

Double marking means that the dissertation/thesis will be marked by two different internal examiners separately or by one assessor and one internal examiner. Both examiners record their marks and a final mark is concluded.

Double Marking by Retrospective Sampling

Double marking by sampling means that the dissertation will be marked first by the internal marker and then another marker will mark the dissertation selecting an already marked sample and marking it again independently but without making any remarkable changes to the grades except when there is a discrepancy greater than 10%.

Single Marking

Single marking means when the dissertation is marked by one examiner only. This marking method is usually adopted for summative work not the dissertations but it can be used in some instances.

After your dissertation has been marked formally you will be scheduled for a dissertation viva. The viva will be designed entirely based upon your dissertation, the topic and the hypotheses. Your dissertation viva will be judged according to the following criterion.

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- Your knowledge about the topic.
 - Capacity to present smartly.
 - Ability to understand, interpret and answer the questions asked.
 - Your ability to communicate and translate the knowledge verbally.
 - Your ability to handle pressure situations.
 - Your analysis of the topic and the elicited findings.
 - The ability to solve problems at hand quickly.
 - The possession of evaluative skills and their effective use in the viva.
 - The use of appropriate of examples and case studies.
 - Your ability to think quickly and proficiently.
 - The reasoning for your positive or negative critical analysis of the literature reviewed and the ability to connect your work with it.
 - Your readiness to accept the shortcomings of your research.
 - Provision of valid reasons for using a certain methodology or research tool.
 - The ability to prove and justify the reliability and validity of the research tools.
 - Your ability to prove the significance of your work.
 - Your ability to propose further research questions to be addressed with logical reasons.

2.1 What to do before the viva?

It's just a Viva

The very first thing to do before the viva is to get that viva phobia out of your head. It's not an out of the world phenomenon, thousands of individuals around the world take their dissertation vivas every year and most of them manage to get through it. It is a common practice in the educational career building of an individual pursuing higher education and a necessary one too.

It is like when you have to cross a road with high speed traffic buzzing in front of you and you are scared how you are going to get to the other side and wondering how others can do it but when after a courageous effort you manage to cross it you are as relieved as ever telling yourself "it wasn't so hard after all".

The idea is to take it as just another examination which you have to take nevertheless if you want to qualify your degree and prepare for it just like you prepare for any other exam. There are certain things you can do prior to your viva which can help you boost your performance in the viva.

Advice

Your supervisor who has been very close to your work all along is the best source of advice. Always go and ask him what he thinks of your work and what questions he thinks can be raised from it. Someone creditable who wasn't associated in any way with your work can also be a good source of advice. Discuss your viva with a couple of friends who have already taken their viva can be a lot of help as well. If you can arrange a mock viva it is the best thing you can do for preparation because it will help you practice shielding the questions.

Read and Read

It is your dissertation that you will be defending in the viva and from which you will be asked a lot of questions. Therefore you have to have your dissertation memorized and understood as good as it gets. It is impossible to memorize a 20000 words dissertation but the key features of the dissertation from the literature review chapter to conclusion chapter should be on your finger tips if you want to walk out with a smile on your face.

The facts and figures you referred or used in your work should be in your mind with the exact values and references.

The Committee Members

Having some prior knowledge about the likes and dislikes of the professors can be a great help in satisfying the committee. You can ask the previous students or your course mates who have taken their dissertation viva about the professors or conduct a little research about the professors yourself.

There are always a few things professors don't like to hear and a few things which they love to hear from the students. It could be anything from your way of talking to highly technical things. If you can give them what they like they just might overlook a little bit on your research and methodology limitations.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Take some firsthand advice from your friends or seniors or download free videos from the web and see how the vivas go in the real world and try to practice your dissertation viva accordingly so that you can get used to the atmosphere of a viva. This will help you acclimatize to the weather in there rather quickly and you will be feeling a bit comfortable.

Cross Question Yourself

Take a quick look at your dissertation and note down the questions you expect the committee to raise. Since a dissertation viva is usually entirely different from what the students perceive most probably these will be the questions you are not going to be asked.

Now take another critical look at the dissertation and list some random questions which make very little sense to you and try to answer them. These questions are more likely to be asked. If you can answer them you effectively you are going places.

The reason why these questions usually skip the eyes of the students when preparing for the dissertation viva and professors end up asking these questions in the viva is that they have more insight knowledge of the topic even though they have not conducted a research like you have. The reason being their vast experience and their always up to date knowledge about the topic which they get from the contacts and professional relationships they have developed over the years.

Try to figure out the limitations and mistakes of your work

Nobody can judge your work better than you, that's given but only when you take a critical look at your work rather than a praising one. It's better to criticize yourself rather than getting a committee bashing. If you can find your own mistakes then you will also be able to make sure you amend the chapters or parts in focus.

Most often the core mistakes are in the research methodology section and it's a safe bet that every research tool has some limitations and drawbacks. The key is to recognize and accept those drawbacks so that you have an effective defensive strategy in the viva because they will always ask you why you chose this tool in context of the limitations documented or established by your work.

Make a note of the mistakes you made in a past viva

Everybody makes mistakes but to insist or persist on those mistakes is blundering. If you have ever taken a viva before no matter how big or small it was, you have to make sure you note down the mistakes you made back then and every time you practice you scan your answers for those mistakes. These mistakes could be of any kin from speech problems to jumbling and mixing of the facts and findings.

Try to scan your work according to these mistakes and see which parts of your work are more probable to elicit these mistakes out in your viva. If you can find any such parts in your dissertation make sure you plan how you are going to avoid these mistakes in case a troubling question is raised by the committee.

Get used to the room and equipment if you have to use any

Sometimes you might be asked to present your dissertation first in front of the committee and then you will be questioned. Presentations can be tricky and getting used to presenting is a quivering idea. Make sure you are accustomed to all kind of equipments you have to use just in case.

Students who don't know the equipment handling get shaky when they are asked to use one. When they are trying to work their way with the equipment with the professors watching they lose their confidence and this shaky self esteem stays with them till the end.

You should also have an idea about the committee room where your Dissertation Viva is supposed to be conducted such that you know your position and the committee members' position in the room so that when you practice do it accordingly and when you enter the room you don't hesitate to walk to your spot and present naturally.

Try to evaluate yourself

After you have identified your mistakes and the limitations of your work and practiced questioning yourself you have to evaluate your performance. This part of your preparation needs utmost honesty. You have to be truthful to yourself without indulging yourself in a self occupied state.

Evaluating yourself will give you an idea where you stand and where you want to be so that you can re-plan your viva. This will also give you an idea what grades you should expect in your dissertation viva without any exaggeration of hopes.

2.2 What not to do before the viva?

Thinking about viva

Don't over stress your mind by thinking about the dissertation viva all the time. This will put a lot of stress on your mind. Fix a certain amount of time for the viva preparation in your everyday schedule. During this time only think and plan about your dissertation viva and nothing else and once the time is over get back to your life. If your viva is always on your mind you won't be able to concentrate on other important things and you will always be finding things you need to do for the viva which are actually not that important.

Don't discuss

Do not take your upcoming dissertation viva to everybody's ears and brains. If you are always discussing your viva with people no matter who they are you will get all kinds of ideas and suggestions and you will unconsciously reprogram your viva according to whatever they said no matter how ineffective it might be.

You can take some past experience based theories from commendable people in your friends or colleagues circle or any senior students, if you can find any and take the jinx out of their experience but never plan your viva according to someone's experiences by considering it parallel to your viva.

What were you asked?

Don't go looking for the questions the committee members asked the past students. Every dissertation is unique in its topic selection, hypotheses, literature review and research methodology. The professors are never going to repeat the same questions although the nature of the questions a certain committee member asks can be investigated but it shouldn't be depended upon either. Minds and professors are subject to change any moment.

This again will direct your mind towards a certain unwanted direction with all the past questions asked going haywire in your mind and confusing you to the point that you forget the actual context of preparing for the questions which you have already made or your about to.

The last moments

The day you have to take your viva you are naturally supposed to be a little confused as to what is going to happen in there although you know everything about a dissertation viva but since it's you who has to face the music right now you get a bit confused.

Remember, this is the worst time to read or memorize anything. Not only you will not be able to understand anything right now but also you will fatally damage your already carefully managed viva related knowledge in your mind. People will try to talk to you and provide you some "free advice" on the viva. Don't listen to them. You know everything about a viva.

3.1 Clear Out the Ambiguities, Tell what is Asked

One of the foremost reasons why you have been called in for a dissertation viva is because there are a few doubtful parts or sections in your dissertation which the committee members were unable to understand fully.

So your prime objective is to clear out those doubts and demonstrate on your professors the reasons why the work looked ambiguous and also that you have complete command on the subject. While answering this sort of questions, make sure you stay in line with the context of the questions and don't run sideways. The questions are usually asked in a straightforward manner and you will be able to understand them but if by any chance you don't there is no problem in kindly asking the member to repeat the question.

Some students would go on elaborating on the questions as long as it's not even needed adding all kind of irrelevant information which although is from the dissertation itself but not related to the question asked. This can bring havoc. The professors might doubt your understanding of the work because you were unable to comprehend the questions asked from your very own work and secondly that they will come up with questions from the irrelevant information you provided in the answers.

3.2 Use of Examples and Anecdotes.

The easiest way to explain or elaborate the professor on a certain question is the use of an example or anecdote. It can connect your point to the listener immediately because your answer is then seen in the context of the example you have used but overuse of such examples is not a good idea either.

By overuse it means that you shouldn't use more than one examples because it will confuse the asker even more rather than clearing the doubts. Instead use just one clear and relevant example which can accentuate your point easily. Here again, the use of irrelevant examples will not do any good and rather hurt you in the sense that the committee members will be compelled to think that you haven't got the idea of the question asked or that you cannot find an appropriate example for the answer which means your research wasn't up to the mark.

3.3 The Art of Predicting the Questions

Usually all three committee members have jolted down and selected the questions before the viva which most often range from 5-10 questions each but during the viva they can ask you some random questions as well. These random questions are very troublesome sometimes for the students because these are unexpected questions which suddenly pop up in the minds of the professors.

The reason and the origin of these questions are your answers. The answers you provide for a question asked can lead the members to another question if the answer wasn't complete or the question was answered out of context.

Always make sure you have answered the question precisely but effectively. This will reduce the chances of eliciting new questions out of your answers unless you are smart enough to turn the direction of the viva to your comfort zone with calculated answers. This approach can be risky as well because it might get out of your hand with just one miscalculated word or phrase. So, it's recommended that you just be precise and accurate and let the viva follow its natural course.

As for the question prediction part, whenever you practice your dissertation viva yourself or in a mock viva always keep a record of your answers and try to find new questions out of your answers yourself. You can even record the whole

session and listen to the recordings later on and write down whatever questions your answers can possibly toss and this will enable to predict the question in the actual dissertation viva.

This way you will be able to document almost all the questions a certain answer can raise in any given situation and also you will be able to scan your answers and see the mistakes you are making which lead to another question.

3.4 Answering General Questions

These are the questions usually not more than 5-10 which the examiner decided to ask you after he thoroughly went through your dissertation. These questions are predesigned and most professors don't ask anything else because they have inserted all their queries in these questions.

Now to answer these questions one has to understand the psychology of the examiner's mind. The professors sitting in your committee are among the most qualified people in the very same subject which you have chosen for the research purpose and its almost given that all of them have publication(s) under their names or they have something to do with a remarkable research in the field which means that they know the subject better than you do.

So what happens is that when the examiners are going through your dissertation they automatically cross match it with their own knowledge. If they find something in your work which shovels their curiosity or something which contradicts their knowledge of the topic they note it down and put it into the shape of questions.

Now when they ask you these questions they are actually looking for answers for themselves and unintentionally matching your answers with their perspective of the point in question. Here counts your prior knowledge of the works, publications and ideological associations of the examiners. If you have this knowledge you can customize your answers to the likes/dislikes of the examiners or in some way associate your work with the examiners'.

Always remember that elaborative answers doesn't mean you can go on and on for hours. The curious committee members are not even listening to you after a couple of minutes for the same question, so whatever you have to say it quickly and precisely.

These general questions make up the bulk of your dissertation viva and messing them up will take you nowhere, so make sure you are fully alert and ready to answer.

3.5 Answering Open-Ended Questions

These are the questions which usually get the students in trouble because students take these questions easy and consequentially spoil the answers. When asked these questions there are two possible methods to answer them.

1. **Pessimistic Approach:** You have got no choices.
2. **Optimistic Approach:** You have got all the choices.

When you think you don't have any options given to you actually minimize your knowledge and ideas about the question in a box. It can work sometimes, like when the question is about something very precise and you have to give a yes/no argument. Following this approach you can be able to limit your answer within a descriptive confinement. You can easily manage the time and words at the same time.

On the other hand when following the optimistic approach you are actually operating with a free mind and you can take the answer anywhere using your extensive knowledge. The idea is that when you are not given an option you actually have all the options. But beware, this can run out of your hands too because if you go too far into the details even more questions can be taken from your answers, so make sure you only talk about the definite things.

If you think you can logically answer these questions in detail then go for it otherwise try to close the questions as early as possible.

For example if the professors asked you

“Please elaborate on the idea of judicial case value management”

Analyze the question for your knowledge. If you have got enough of it to speak on go ahead otherwise kindly ask the professor to close the question a little bit in a tricky way.

“Of course sir, where should I start from”

This way you will also be able to understand what the professor is trying to ask you and limit your answer accordingly because unlike the close ended or general questions these questions are not definitive and inquisitive in their nature and the professors ask these questions when they run out of queries so that they can elicit some questions from your answers. If you answer the questions directly you won't be able to keep the ball in your court and they will have the freedom to ask you more questions, the ideas for which were provided by your answers of course.

3.6 Answering Close-Ended Questions

Closed ended questions are the other major type of questions. These questions are asked to verify/confirm some points, usually meant to elicit only simple and specific answers. Also known as dichotomous or saturated type questions these questions form the building block of the credibility and authenticity of the research you have conducted especially when you are called in to judge the originality of your work.

These questions are limiting and they can be answered in a small number of words. Closed-ended questions can include conceited, inquisitive, or primary questions in some instances. These are the questions from which the examiners usually find out what they are going to ask next. The examiners would most probably know your answers to such questions already nevertheless they are asked to lead you to the chain of questions which they have already lined up in their minds.

When answering these questions you have to be quick and definite. For example, if you are asked

“Do you think the latest advancements in the field of cloning can be harmful for the societies world over in some way”

Now you don't have any other choice but to say “Yes” or “No” and your answer will lead them to ask why you have answered so. With these questions unlike the open-ended ones you don't have much space to elaborate your knowledge because you are not asked for your comment or opinion but for a definite and precise answer, so make sure you deliver one.

3.7 Defend your Methodology

Talking about research methodology defense most of the questions raised form this most important part of your dissertation are targeted to evaluate the generalization of the conclusions, the validity of the research tools used, the reliability of the findings and the reasons for choosing this methodology.

There is no research in the world which can be termed perfect, there always are some limitations or drawbacks. So, if you are criticized for these things don't lose your cool and confidence. It happens to everybody and you are no different. While listening to criticism or answering critical questions don't be apologetic and maintain your dignity but that doesn't mean you can antagonize the examiners.

You should have thorough insightful knowledge of the tools and methodology you have used and also about the relevancy and adaptability of your topic or subject to the tools. When you are answering questions about your methodology you have to be very professionally linguistic and statistically accurate because research methodology is what gives your dissertation the weight of credibility and significance along with literature review.

3.8 Ease through the Aggressive Questions

On an unlucky day you might have to face an aggressive committee for many reasons and sometimes without any reasons. The committee members might go on asking you questions which are seemingly offensive but very significant to be answered.

The reason could be a suspected plagiarism, an apparently false hypothesis or your bad relationship with the professors. If not dealt with carefully these questions can bring you world down in an instant and you can mess it all up then and there and waste your months' hard work on dissertation.

Just like other questions you have to answer these aggressive questions logically and raise and enlighten your point with utmost certainty and confidence because if you shake, you bake. To counter these questions always keep a few things in our mind.

- The committee members might feel offended by any of the radical ideas in your work, you have to make them comfortable and elaborate them with proper reasoning of your ideas which you have presented in your work.
- The questions can be asked just to make you “wrong footed” and to quake your confidence to examine your belief in the conclusions of your research so it is imperative you stay calm and on course.
- These questions might be a tricky way to get the answers which the committee suspects you are not going to deliver otherwise, so keep your cool and listen carefully to analyze the questions and then answer resourcefully but keeping in mind what you are not supposed to say.
- Sometimes usual questions might look like offensive ones because of the expressions or the tone of the askers or the way the question is asked, so make sure you are not underestimating the examiners' temper.

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- Remember if you have the grip on your work and topic and you have appropriately applicable basis for using a certain methodology or elucidated results these questions can not harm you and you cannot be bullied around. Take it easy and just answer the question.

The examiners want you to score well which they believe you can as you have come this far by completing your dissertation following all the specifications and limitations. They will be compelled to feel disappointed/offended if you prove them wrong and they will ask you these kinds of questions. So always try to meet them halfway if you want your dissertation viva to go smooth and steady.

3.9 The Million Dollar Question

Answering general questions which the examiners have already designed and selected is like everybody's business. These questions are mostly expected and prepared for but there are some questions which might pop up out of nowhere and you can get surprised by them. There can only be two possibilities and no other.

1. You listen to the questions and go blank and just say "I don't know" or something like that and waste a golden opportunity to score better than rest of the lot.
2. You listen to the question and answer it immediately and paint a broad appraising smile on the committee members' faces.

Not everybody is asked this question but if you can answer it, this Million Dollar Question can give that power boost to your dissertation viva. Identifying this one question is very important and there are a few secrets to the identification of the arrival and countering this question.

1. The professors are impressed by your performance and they want to give you a chance to make your score even better, so always expect this question when you are performing well.
2. For some reason the committee members think you know everything but you have just jumbled the answers a little bit so they want to give you another chance, so when you have not done too bad or too good expected a million dollar opportunity.
3. Keep tracking the expressions of the professors because most of the times when anyone of them would ask you a question the other two would be busy looking at their viva notes or etc although listening to everything you say but when one of them tosses this million dollar question all three of them would be looking straight in your eyes.
4. Most of the times this would sound like the toughest question so don't lose your mind when it sounds difficult, this is your chance to ultimate success. These few seconds which you have got to answer this question are the defining moments of your career.
5. Usually this question is the very last question of the dissertation viva, so keep your ears open for any conclusive tones of the committee members.