

## Examination Strategies for Candidates

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*The examination is a celebration of the work as well as an exam of its quality.  
(staff member, 2020)*

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Often the language used around examination highlights negative connotations: exam, pass/fail, corrections, or the misleading expression ‘Viva survivors’. Rest assured: a Viva is not something you survive, rather, a great opportunity to critically discuss your work with future peers who reviewed it in depth and are interested in your research. Prepare well and enjoy it!

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*A phrase I often use myself when examining is ‘can I create a space of critical celebration’. It is a space of critique in the best sense of that word, a space to engage in a discourse around what is working, what is powerful, what can be developed, enhanced. But I think the idea of celebration is important, it implies a generosity, a hospitality. It implies that something has been created. That in and of itself deserves celebration. And the examination element brings that element of critique in that. (Helen Phelan, Artistic Research Doctorate Examination, Visioning the Future Seminar, 2020)*

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### ***Presenting Your Practice***

An Artistic Research doctorate examination entails a more complex process than a traditional Viva. You need to take into consideration the position of your practice within this context. How important is it, in the context of your research, that the practice is experienced by the examiners? What would be the most appropriate format for them to experience your work? This might involve a performance, a screening, an exhibition, video documentation of a critical incident in rehearsal, and many other forms. Consider the logistics: booking a theatre venue or similar, setting up, recruiting performers, and securing funding for example.

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*I did one examination where it was a video drive, so you watched a recording while in a car and we held the Viva in the car. It took some getting through regulations to allow us to do that, but we did it. There are ways that the candidate with the supervisor can help bring forward the practice into the Viva moment. Especially if the practice is being seen before then only in documentation or maybe two years before the Viva takes place. (...) Of course, then it's the examiners responsibility to give it the due space in the discussion. (Vida Midgelow, Artistic Research Doctorate Examination, Visioning the Future Seminar, 2020)*

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Review your institution's regulations: are you able to follow through with your plans, do you need to request or argue for a different format, and if you have to adapt, how can you do so without compromising the integrity of the research? Review the support (financial, logistic, production, or otherwise) that your institution provides. For most Artistic Research projects, experiencing the work is a vital component of examination, and the logistics around that vary in different fields, countries, and institutions. Depending on institutional requirements, the examiners' experience of practice can take place either several months in advance of the Viva, or close to the oral examination itself.

### ***Choosing Adequate Submission Formats***

The best way for you to prepare is to know and understand the protocols behind examination in your programme well in advance: check if there are specific formats, targeted durations, associated logistics, and the schedules around experiencing practice, if this takes place in person or through documentation. Make sure you are fully familiar with the expected submission formats. You will submit your doctorate in three parts:

- **Written component:** review the word count in your programme.
- **Documentation of your practice:** for example, website links to audio-visual media, a portfolio photo book, an appendix with scores, transcripts, rehearsal notes, story boards, etc. Some organisations have moved to online e-submission of doctoral theses, if this is the case, it is even more important that your examiners have opportunity to experience other forms of practice and practice documentation.
- **Artistic practice:** check your course regulations, discuss with your supervisor(s) well in advance and make a plan.

Your institution submission formats may not be entirely suitable for the specificities of your project. Finding the most appropriate submission format for your material can be a challenge. Discuss this with your supervisor as it may be possible to submit your doctorate in an alternative form.

## *Mock Viva*

A Mock Viva is a 'dress rehearsal' which follows a similar protocol as the Viva: an academic in your Department reads your thesis / views your work, and then spends an hour asking questions and examining you as if it was a real Viva. You are then given feedback not just on your answers but also on how you handled yourself. The Mock Viva can adopt a more formal approach to fully resemble the Viva format – for example, with two mock examiners, a chair, and following the same Viva protocols, such as asking the candidate to leave the room as the panel deliberates.

When organised after you submitted, the Mock gives you an opportunity to prepare and experience the Viva without the pressure of the actual event, and the feedback you receive will help you to get ready for the actual Viva. The Mock can also take place shortly before you submit: in this case, the feedback will also highlight areas that need further work and questions or concerns which you need to address for your final submission. The Mock Viva is a really good opportunity to test out how your work is perceived by someone outside of it and to find out what kinds of questions may be raised, identify areas that need strengthening, and help you prepare for the actual Viva. A number of institutions organise a Mock Viva as part of their protocols, if your programme does not normally arrange one, ask if they can.

## *Challenges You Might Encounter*

Once you are familiar with the protocols and submission requirements, and have considered how you are going to submit your doctorate and present your practice, there are still some challenges you might encounter:

### BEFORE THE VIVA

- **External examiner profile.** Your institution / supervisory team may consult you on potential external examiners. Consider whether there are particular aspects of your research that you want your examiner to have expertise on. If your project is interdisciplinary, can you combine the expertise of the internal and the external examiners to cover the fields? Identify

what you think would be appropriate for your project so you can discuss with your supervisor should your institution involve you in the process.

- **Enough-ness: how much of practice to evidence and how.** Better questions to ask yourself as you put your submission together and decide what to include might be: is it essential to include this and why, what does it contribute? Is the submission as a whole coherent and logical? Are there elements that feel weaker – should you work on those or edit them out? You produced tons of artistic material throughout the degree – artifacts, scores, film drafts, sound files, recordings of work in progress, documentation of performances – but you only need a small selection to highlight your contribution to the field through creative practice. Think of the submission as a whole and curate it carefully.
- **Curate the examiners' journey through the thesis.** If you are submitting separate materials with your portfolio or documentation of practice – a USB drive, a website, a photobook or any other means – when and how are those encountered? You can invite the examiner to review your portfolio at the start, signpost specific points in the text where they should review a particular piece of practice, and/or present the materials within the text or as an appendix (remember, important things should not be an appendix). Focus on what would be most appropriate for your project to weave a clear path between reading and experiencing the work.

## DURING THE VIVA

- **Ensure the examiners understand the value of practice.** Ideally, your examiners will have a background in Artistic Research and will fully understand the value and role of your practice. In some situations – such as in interdisciplinary projects, or when the examiner comes from the humanities – you might have an examiner who is fluent in another area of practice and who does not fully grasp the value of your work. As a candidate, you need to be prepared to argue and defend the approaches you have taken, to articulate the contribution of the practice to the PhD, and to be fully clear on how your practice contributes to knowledge. This should be stated in your thesis. Prepare well by reflecting on how your practice is advancing knowledge, what is unique about it, and what is original about the contribution you are making.

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*Sometimes students are not aware of what's unique about their project, or not as aware as they could be. (Yvon Bonenfant, Artistic Research Doctorate Examination, Visioning the Future Seminar, 2020)*

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- **Shifting mindset from performing to discussing.** Some institutions run the Viva and the sharing of practice in the same day due to logistics and financial constraints. This approach puts undue pressure on the candidate, who has to prepare for both simultaneously. If you are performing (or putting up a performance) on your Viva day, ensure you have time in between for a break and to shift your mindset from performing to discussing.

## AFTER THE VIVA

- **Celebrate!**
- **Make a plan for PhD corrections.** If you are given a list of corrections, work through them systematically. Divide them into three groups: Easy, Medium, and Hard. For each correction ask yourself, is this easy and straightforward to do, or does it require some thinking, research, re-structuring? Assign each correction to one of the groups. Start with the Easy corrections and work through them one by one. This will give you a sense of accomplishment and build momentum. Then, tackle the Medium ones, and leave the harder work to the end, when you already have a steady workflow.

## Resources

There are many general Viva resources which will help you prepare for the discussion part of the Viva. Rowena Murray gives an overview of what to expect on the day and how to prepare on the lead up to the examination:

- Murray, R. (2009) *How To Survive Your Viva: Defending A Thesis In An Oral Examination*. 2nd edition, Berkshire, England Open University Press.

Peter Smith has a list of general Viva questions that will help you prepare for the range of topics you will be expected to discuss:

- Smith, P. (2014) *The PhD Viva: How to Prepare for Your Oral Examination*. London: MacMillan Education UK

Galway University also has a guide on their website on [Viva preparation](#).