

6. THE ORAL DEFENCE

According to current faculty regulations, all undergraduate dissertations must be publicly defended before the supervisor, preferably in person. Students have a maximum of **ten minutes** to present their work. If a dissertation is awarded a mark of 9 or above and has the endorsement of the supervisor, it becomes eligible for the highest distinction (*matrícula de honor*) and must additionally be defended before a committee appointed by the faculty. In this case, the student's presentation should again not exceed ten minutes.

The oral defence or viva is the culmination of the whole process and has an impact on how your work will be graded. In what follows, you will find some guidance for the defence, covering both preparation and the viva itself. The suggestions are not exclusive to dissertations on English literature and can be applied to anyone working in the humanities.

1. PREPARATION

Although it is not compulsory, you are strongly advised to prepare a **slide presentation** for the defence. Having the most important information displayed before you will make you feel more confident, and your supervisor and any audience present will be able to follow your ideas more easily and stay engaged.

The presentation does not need to be long: aim for between 10 and 12 slides, keeping in mind that you have a maximum of ten minutes.

- When **choosing a template**, opt for a clean, visually appealing design. Avoid overly busy layouts or excessive decoration, as these can distract attention from your content.
- When **selecting the ideas** to include, remember that the slide presentation is not a condensed version of your entire dissertation. Your task is to identify the most important points and present them in a clear, logical sequence. Be selective. Each slide should carry real intellectual weight: include the key concepts, arguments, and conclusions that define your work. At the same time, avoid overcrowding your slides with text: a slide that is too dense is as unhelpful as one that is too vague. Aim for **clarity and substance** in equal measure.
- Like the dissertation itself, the defence is conducted in English. It is a good idea to **check the pronunciation** of any difficult or technical words beforehand, as mispronunciation can undermine an otherwise strong presentation.
- **Time** yourself carefully to make sure your presentation fits within the allotted ten minutes.

- **Rehearse** the defence, if possible, in front of an audience. Make eye contact, pay attention to their reactions, and adjust your delivery accordingly. This will build your confidence ahead of the viva itself.
- Bear in mind that the oral defence is **not a reading exercise**. Avoid reading aloud from a script or from your slides. Your supervisor and committee want to hear you speak about your work, not recite it. Aim for a register that is direct and natural while remaining formal and academic. The key throughout is to be **clear and concise**, using **straightforward, direct language**. If you feel you need a **safety net**, prepare a brief outline or set of bullet points or cards to guide you, but practise enough to be able to speak from them rather than read from them.
- Finally, be prepared for **comments and questions** after your presentation. Make sure you have **something to write with**, so that you can jot down notes before you respond. It is also a good idea to bring a **hard copy of your dissertation** to the defence. Your supervisor and committee may refer to specific passages [“Could you further explain what you say on page 12 about. . . ?”]. You won’t have to rely on memory if you have your own copy. Moreover, you may use the hard copy to ground some of your answers, even if the questions do not refer to a specific passage and page. Having what you have written—and what you are being questioned on—right there will give you a sense of security.

2. THE VIVA

The defence is your opportunity to present and explain to your supervisor and committee what you have researched and written. Your ten minutes should be used purposefully.

The following structure is recommended:

1. **Introduce your topic and state your aim.** Briefly explain what your dissertation is about, why it is relevant and what you set out to analyse or demonstrate. Bring your copy of the work you analysed to the defence and show it to your audience as you introduce your topic. This immediately engages them and signals close familiarity with the primary source. You may also want to read out a brief passage directly from the book at some point during your presentation, rather than from your slides.
2. **Outline your methodology** or approach. How did you carry out your research? What kind of analysis did you perform? Which sources proved most useful and why?
3. **Provide a brief overview of your dissertation’s structure.** It will lend a sense of order to your presentation, making it easier to explain your **main findings** while demonstrating the logical progression of your analysis.
4. **Summarise your conclusions.** What does your work contribute and why does it matter? What does it demonstrate?

In short, the defence must cover four main areas: aims, contents, methodology, and conclusion. For the contents section, you should explain how you structured your study, the purpose of each section, and its key findings.

If you were standing during your presentation, take a seat once you have finished so that you can listen to questions and/or comments, as well as any feedback from your supervisor and committee. Listen carefully, take notes if needed, and answer as clearly and directly as you can.

***Remember that you are the person who knows your dissertation best.
Approach the defence with confidence.***