

What examiners want

RMIT research supervisors tell!

1. Unity/alignment of argument

- **Thesis**

Alignment between research questions, methodology, results and the claims you make about your results in the discussion section or chapter

- **Project-based exegesis/commentary**

A crossover between the written dissertation and the project work, between the theory and the creative endeavour.

2. Clear logical flow

- Clear logical structure – your examiner will read it over several sittings, so make sure it is clearly signposted.
- Direction – take the examiner on a journey; and don't tell the punch line before the joke!
- Give the reader the ability to move through a mass of material and follow the research story at the same time.

3. Voice of authority

The examiner assesses the way in which the student speaks to the research. This is what we call the author's voice. In research writing the voice must be clear, scholarly and 'in control' of the ideas.

If this is done well, the student will get good comments even if the content has limitations.

4. Breadth

Candidates must give the sense that they are familiar with the whole field. They briefly acknowledge the work of key researchers and map out the field in order to show their place within it.

5. Evidence of process and analysis

The examiner wants to know the process the candidate used to get results; and how the results have been analysed.

Examiners ask these questions of your text:

- How did you come to that conclusion?
- Have you used a method appropriate to the methodology and epistemology?
- Have you used the facts in a rational way?
- Have you been transparent and thorough in evaluating the research?

Examiners may not agree with the content, but if they can't fault the process, the candidate will pass. An examiner is assessing **your skills as a researcher**, not the overall impact of the results.

6. Even dead ends can get a tick of approval

Professor Doug Swinbourne is keen to remind students that sometimes rigorous research produces little in the way of results:

I've seen theses in the past where the outcome was that this theory can't be supported, this idea is not right, and we can't now decide which is the right direction to go because the results are so conflicting.

And the researcher who did it felt bad. But the point was, the examiner looked at it again and said 'Well you've demolished one dead end, which won't waste anybody's time, and you did it well.'

7. Treading between two cultures: the 'reasonable effort'

There are times when the examiner cannot know what you are doing unless you tell them quite explicitly. Here is an example where extra information needs to be supplied so that they can better understand the context of the research:

Dr. David Hodges is interested in the issues arising for international students who are conducting field-based research. One of his recently successful candidates, Daravone Kittipanh from the Lao PDR, was caught in a dilemma when writing up her literature review. As a civil servant in the government, she is not in a position to be critical of their policies or strategies; on the other hand, there is nothing in the literature that documents their policies and strategies.

This candidate has felt the pressure to use literature that demonstrates her comprehension of what happens in other countries; this, however, is not relevant to her situation. As Hodges says, 'In Daravone's case there is very limited literature – do we expect her to look at irrelevant literature? Then there's nothing to review. We've made a compromise – *demonstrate that you've made all reasonable efforts.*'

It is in Daravone's interest to inform the examiners of her position. Oral presentations and mini projects that alert examiners to 'insider' issues need to be included in the documents that examiners receive.

Specific terminology may be expected in one culture while forbidden in another. Daravone needs to be sensitive to nuances in the English language so that she does not cause harm to herself or to others. She must ask a range of readers: how does this word read to you? How does it sound? She is looking for a qualitative, value-driven response.

8. The Literature review: examiner expectations

1. The selection of the literature

- Logical structure
- Balanced coverage
- Recent and relevant studies
- Demonstration of development and limitations in this area.

2. The criticism of the literature

- Clear organisation and categorisation of research
- Move from broad concepts to specific focus
- Analysis of research limitations, esp. in design and methodology
- Comparison and contrast of studies; tensions highlighted
- Clear relevance to research problem or question.

3. Summary and interpretation of the literature

- Overall interpretation of available literature
- Clear theoretical or empirical justification for current research
- Clear rationale for research

9. Write an honest scholarly narrative

- Believe wholeheartedly in what you write.
- Write for your examiners.
- Show them what you have gone through.
- Your audience does not want to read a popular 'text'.

Laurene Vaughan, Media and Communication

Contributing supervisors: Professor Doug Swinbourne, Associate Professor Laurene Vaughan, Associate Professor Andrea Chester, Associate Professor Pia Ednie Brown, Dr. David Hodges, with candidate Daravone Kittipanh.

Examiner Guidelines: See the links to pdf documents on the Supervisors page and the Literature Review page