

## Kirsten's successful appeal

Dear John,

I am writing this as a hope to get some sense of closure on an experience, which continues to haunt me. The feelings of the unsuccessful PhD-er are difficult to describe, but it is the sense of helplessness in the fact of subjectivity and unfairness that are probably the hardest to bear. I have a PhD, but that is only owing to the fact my examiners made mistakes in the process of my viva. Had they not done so, I would have had no grounds to appeal and my PhD thesis would languish, unread and unsuccessful.

I have read many of the other stories, and mine is slightly different. Supervision was excellent. I became great friends with my supervisor and remain so to this day. She found lots of people who would read my work, and so I had ample commentary from the early days. When we both felt that perhaps I had gone beyond her field of expertise, we looked for an external. As a notable expert in the field had made positive comments on a paper I gave at a key conference, we approached her. At all times, it was this collaborative, highly supported effort. The expert, while based in the states, was keen to help and she became my external supervisor. She was fab – very detailed comments that were always very quickly returned.

It was at the point, after eight years of part-time study, when I had over 100 000 words, that we thought it was time to trim and submit. I finalised the thesis, at 98 000 words. The final chapter was seen as my best: my external examiner said she really didn't have any comments on it – I had proved myself as an independent researcher and she was very impressed with the standard of my work. Both she and my internal supervisor signed off the thesis very happily. We knew that I had broached areas that were unpopular, and that my methodology was quite groundbreaking, but it was all very well backed up through extensive reading, and both were very confident. My papers at the key national conference had been very well received – a further boost of confidence.

Examiners: the internal one seemed a good choice, with some clear awareness of the issues, although my methodology might be a little difficult, but no more than that. The external was the one I had cited most, was recently retired, and was a generally very amenable person. I had spoken with him early on, and he seemed interested and open. That seemed to tick the usual boxes.

It was the night before the viva that things started to go wrong. My supervisor rang to say that she had a feeling things were going to be difficult. She wanted to warn me after the glowing reports she and the external had given me – she didn't want me to have a shock.

The day of the viva started badly. I don't remember all the facts now, but it involved being given the wrong directions and the wrong room. Insignificant stuff really, but not good in putting me in the right frame of mind. My supervisor was present which was a good confidence boost – and she took detailed notes, which were useful later on. From very early on, however, it was clear that the external examiner was thinking in terms of a 'resubmission'. When the meeting over-ran, and my supervisor suggested a break for lunch, the external examiner suddenly called the meeting to a halt and

declared the result: a resubmission. He then presented me with a piece of printed text, listing my four new chapters. In the subsequent report, which had to be chased, my methodology was rubbished, my writing style, very bad attention to detail, with numerous mistakes, etc, etc.

The real problem for me was not the time/effort it would take to re-write, but the basic issue of how was I to re-write when supervised by two people who thought that what I had written was good anyway? They didn't get the problems, so how could they help me address them? The thesis I was to write was not my thesis, but the external examiner's take on it. I just couldn't do that. There wasn't any offer of an MPhil, so it seemed a complete loss of eight years part-time study. Nothing to show for all that work. On top of that was the continued conviction that it was good. There was no change in the opinions of my supervisors: they continued to have every confidence in my thesis, and shared my frustration. The attention to detail point was systematically gone through – yes there were nine typing errors in a thesis of just under 100 000 words. Yes, I'd mistaken one name. No, my use of several terms was not wrong, but the examiner's own ignorance! My internal supervisor was hopping mad at her colleague too!

I don't know about other subjects, but there was absolutely no right of redress in the area of disagreeing with the examiner's judgement or suggestions for re-write. Despite the top expert of the US agreeing with my thesis, and my internal supervisor who has an excellent reputation, is well published, and regularly examines other PhD theses, also supporting it, their academic judgement seemed to count for nothing. That surely needs to change in this archaic system.

But, back to reality. As we looked further into what I could do, we found that there was a hope. The viva has to count as part of the process. The fact that one examiner had gone into the viva with my rewrite written down, had declared my resubmission without consulting the other was clear enough. And that was the grounds of my appeal. We also submitted my external supervisor's damning report of the criticisms that had been set out (my lack of errors etc), but that was more for information/background – it couldn't count as a ground for appeal. It was successful, and so another viva was set up.

This time, there were three examiners, not two. It was arranged on a different site, to allow for a new start for me. How different an experience it was. None of the bullish, antagonistic questioning, no rubbishing of my techniques. Yes, it was tough, and they challenged and probed. But it was fair, and academically challenging not personally. Towards the end, my supervisor asked, 'You have given Kirsten a lot of suggestions for how to tweak her work for publication, could I just clarify if this is for the PhD award or for publication?' 'Oh for publication of course, it's clearly of PhD standard. She's just got to do the typos'. I burst into tears. And the tears are running down my face now as I write this. It still hurts so much seven years on, plus that enormous sense of relief - so perhaps closure is still not yet possible.

So, exactly the same thesis (I was not allowed to change a word). Result: no amendments, no re-write, no extra work, just a short list of typos. It was done in fifteen minutes!

So that is how I am now a PhD. And if that story puts you off the whole process, then perhaps my only words of advice are plan for a resubmission, plan that time after the viva for what you have to do. Don't invest too much in the submitted thesis as the finished product.

Perhaps I should also just add that I am now enrolled on my second PhD in an entirely different field. Some of us just don't learn...!

All best  
Kirsten