What Do Examiners Look for in a Thesis?
Role of the Examiner

• **Pre Viva Voce**
  – Present his/her report following the format stipulated by USM.
  – Express his/her views/opinions on the thesis.

• **During Viva Voce**
  – Examine the candidate’s knowledge on the subject that is related to the topics and all of the items in his/her thesis.

• **Post Viva Voce**
  – Express his/her opinion on the candidate’s ability and knowledge in answering questions during the Viva Voce.
  – Take part in the process of determining the outcome of the Viva Voce.
Examiner’s Recommendation

• Pass, Resubmission or Fail

• Pre Viva Voce
  – Individually
  – After reading/marking the thesis

• Post Viva Voce
  – Collectively
  – After posing questions and interacting with the candidate during Viva Voce.
Examiner’s State of Mind

• When opening the thesis, generally
  – enthusiastic
  – some degree of expectation
  – expecting interesting and challenging work
  – appreciates opportunity of first look of such work

• Continues to be enthusiastic if every part of the thesis is clear, well explained, smooth flow, well presented and easy to read.

• Became fed up otherwise
Examiner’s First Look

• Most examiners start with the Abstract and Introduction Chapter, then proceed to formally assess the thesis.

• Hence the first impression that an examiner gets from these will make the assessment easy (or breezy) or hard (with a lot of pain on the examiner, hence he/she will inflict pain on the candidate in the thesis and during viva voce).

• References show consistency.
Supervisor’s Role

• Read and correct the drafts. Please!
• There are colleagues who have the impression that the examiner is being paid so let him/her correct the unread and uncorrected thesis. If you are one of these colleagues, you are wrong and I advise you to change your attitude now!
• The extra work (and pain) you inflict on the examiner for not doing your work is not worth it. Read and correct the drafts!
• Supervisor is not supposed to answer for student during viva.
You Don’t Have Time

• Say what? You don’t have time to read the drafts? Make time. No excuses.

• The moment you supervise a candidate, you have to be committed to make time for the candidate.

• Negotiate deadlines if you’re busy and stick to them as much as you can.
Examiners are Humans

• Yes, they are. In this sense thesis examination can be subjective.
• They have their own ideas of what a thesis should be like.
• They have their own expectations.
• Their own ‘feel’ when assessing the thesis.
• They would also be thinking about how they would go about working on the same project.
Plagiarism

• “Plagiarism is not a victimless crimes.”

• It is a serious offense
Title of Thesis

- Is the thesis title too general? Should it be more specific?
- Does the title reflect on the content of the thesis?
Chapter By Chapter - Abstract

• Abstract and other pages before the Introduction.

• Things that annoy an examiner at this portion of your thesis - Bad English/Bahasa Malaysia in the dedication page

• Poor organization in your Table of Contents, List of Tables and List of Figures
• A lot of typos in the dedication, Table of Contents, List of Tables and List of Figures and Abstracts
• English and Bahasa Malaysia versions of the abstracts do not tally
• Abstract too long. Too many irrelevant things written in the abstract.
• Main findings and contribution?
Introduction

• What is the problem that you're trying to address? Not clear.

• Problem statement—Why you are doing what you are doing.

• Problem statement, objectives do not tally.

• Is your work original and important?

• Any hypothesis involved?
• **Hypothesis** helps to guide you to achieve your objectives; what do you expect to happen when you choose or do what you decide.
Literature Review

• Has the candidate shown due appreciation of relevant/recent literature?
  – ‘Important’ works are included
  – References are up to date

• Is the review a review?
  – Synthesis and critical appraisal. Were these done by the candidate?

• What is the connection between candidate’s study and the reviewed works?
• The examiner is annoyed if the review is
  – just a bunch of notes,
  – a long list of citations after writing a phrase with important keywords, or
  – of no relevance at all to the present work.
Methodology

• Is the research method appropriate to the discipline and inquiry, e.g. quantitative or qualitative or both?
• Did the candidate understand the method and was able to implement it rigorously in his/her study?
• Overall Flow chart.
Methodology (cont.)

• The examiner is annoyed if the candidate
  – Is confused about the methodology.
  – Did not describe in detail and clearly the methodology used.
  – Left out relevant steps in the methodology.
Results

• Are they clearly documented, fully explained and relevant?
• The examiner is annoyed if the candidate is plain lazy!
• Tables and Figures without write-ups. The examiner cannot analyze the results for the candidate.
• Error bars for experimental points.
• Coherence and clarity in the write-up is also required. Avoid being repetitive.
Results (Cont.)

• **Presentation**: Some results need to be put together so that it is easy to see the differences.

• Consistency in units, abbreviations, sequence in naming and presenting 2 or more objects, etc.
Discussion and Conclusion

• Avoid writing the results again.
• The candidate is supposed to discuss findings with past findings in the literature review.
• The examiner is annoyed with sparse discussion and abrupt conclusions with speculative statements without back up from a good support (factual/Ref.).
• Avoid citing irrelevant references.
• Do not write Literature Review in Results and Discussion.
• Be specific (refer to certain result in Table or Figure) in discussing your results.
• et al.
• Citing more than one reference: use ; between 2 references; chronological order.
• Are the references up to date ?
• Are they relevant ?
• Consistency ?
• Citing own references?
Some Frequently Asked Questions

– Expected questions are seldom asked. Surprised/unexpected questions are frequently posed. (Expect the unexpected).

– (A) M.Sc.
  • What’s new (materials, method, theory, etc.) in your work?
  • Basis of choice (material, method, parameters, etc.)?
  • Statistical analysis
  • Standard experimental procedure?
  • How do you justify the statement........
– (B) Ph.D.

• Novelty of work?
• Key contribution to the advancement of knowledge/science?
• Depth, not Breadth.
• Test of fundamental knowledge.
• Statistical analysis.
• Limitations.
• Evidence to support your results?
• Speculative statements, e.g. may be due to, probably because, etc.
• The literary presentation.
“Although generally insufficient to fail a thesis, shortcomings in literary presentation such as editing and clarity can be a strong deterrent to an examiner and result in a largely negative appraisal. Examiners quickly become annoyed and distracted by spelling, typographical, grammatical and referencing errors... One of the problems with work that is poorly presented is that the examiner tends to lose confidence in the candidate and can become suspicious that there are deeper problems of inadequate and rushed conceptualization. “