

Perspectives of an HDR examiner

- Basically, I look for two things when examining an HDR thesis:
 - a) expertise in a field;
 - b) an original contribution in regard to that field that is at least plausible.
- For PhD candidates the bar is raised on both: on expectations of mastery of a field, and on the originality dimension, such that it is a “significant contribution to knowledge”.
- In order to show a) and b), though, various things are needed, including a coherent structure, which is tightly knitted together, explained clearly, and well-argued.

Expertise in a field

- All relevant texts are addressed
- A plausible rationale is given for not addressing any texts/ideas that might appear to be relevant
- Disciplinary fields will have differing expectations of what expertise consists in.
- Some institutions in the US, for example, think that you can't write a thesis on a French/German philosophy without having expertise of French/German, even if all materials translated. In which case, you would need to display your expertise with original sources
- Your supervisor will advise on such subtleties

Originality

- Hard to define!
- But it is not that you have to be Plato, say, but more that you have something to say which can make a group sit up and take notice.
- Your thesis can certainly draw on, or supplement, the work of others
- It might also be a new application of theoretical work already done.
- Establishment of new facts, evidence of independent critical thought
- Be able to enunciate the “thesis of your thesis”. 3MThesis.

James Pryor: Your assessor as “lazy, stupid, mean”

- “Pretend that your reader is *lazy, stupid, and mean*. He's *lazy* in that he doesn't want to figure out what your convoluted sentences are supposed to mean, and he doesn't want to figure out what your argument is, if it's not already obvious. He's *stupid*, so you have to explain everything you say to him in simple, bite-sized pieces. And he's *mean*, so he's not going to read your paper charitably. (For example, if something you say admits of more than one interpretation, he's going to assume you meant the less plausible thing.)”

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

Dos

- Have a clear structure, and be able to sum up the ‘thesis of your thesis’ in a couple of sentences
- Establish clearly how each chapter contributes to thesis goal
- Give the thesis the look of necessity about its structure
- Show expertise in relevant literature, both ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’
- Have a novel, original point to make
- Pretend your examiner is “lazy, stupid and mean”, and write so as to guard against potential problems stemming from such vices
- Be respectful in regard to field of scholarship in which you are intervening
- Be clear about the scope of your thesis

Don'ts

- Leave your examiner wondering what you are doing and why
- Include material that is simply interesting, but not relevant to central claims/arguments of your thesis (at most include them in footnotes)
- Make yourself a target, i.e. don't make grandiose claims you cannot back up. You can change the field post-PhD with your magnum opus, and seek to establish a polemical reputation, etc., but I wouldn't do it for your PhD – it is a high-risk strategy, the risk being annoying your examiners.
- Be uncharitable in regard to theorists/ideas being considered, especially if you want to challenge/critique them. Avoid “straw-men”
- Submit your thesis with heaps of spelling and grammar mistakes
- <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/how-not-to-write-a-phd-thesis/410208.article>

Some final thoughts

- PhD doesn't have to be your magnum opus. Have to convince just 2 or 3 examiners you have expertise and originality in a field
- If you and your supervisor have discussed a potential examiner as a possibility, and you don't refer to their work and it is relevant, that is bad move... Worth doffing your cap, and if you express disagreement, do so politely and charitably (e.g. that is what you would do if someone were "lazy, stupid, mean")
- It is a lot of words, but persistence usually pays off.
- While many do not complete their theses, almost all candidates who submit their thesis end up passing (at Umelb only 1% do not).