

Miranda's question

1 The question

I'm a final year PhD student at Wessex University and am looking forward to your talk on Wednesday. I have a question that I'd like you to address if possible, which is 'how do you know when your thesis is ready to submit? - specifically, if your supervisor says it's good enough but you're not so sure, especially since your supervisor has not been very helpful throughout the duration of the PhD.

I have a supervisor that looks at my work when I've made vast amounts of progress then says "yes, it all looks great" - not very helpful, as I'd rather they criticize it than the examiners in the viva.

I have tried to address this issue with my supervisor, and they just keep telling me that I'm doing a great job and "will be fine". It's nice of them to say so, but I need to know when it REALLY IS good enough! I hope I'm making sense - I suppose the most obvious answer to my question is 'when YOU are happy with it'. However, I'm just wondering if there are any rules in the book that I am oblivious to? You know you sometimes have that nagging feeling that everyone knows something that you don't and that they know what they're doing far more than you do...? I continue to procrastinate about whether I am good enough, clever enough etc to even be doing a PhD.

Are there any ways to 'know' when you are ready to do the most daunting thing of all and submit the damn thing?!

I appreciate that you have lots to cover in your talk, but would be most grateful if you could give me a few pointers...

Q How would you respond to this questions?

2 John's reply

Many thanks for writing to me and sharing your problem which of course I will deal with in complete confidence.

What you ask reflects a very common concern especially among conscientious students. I will deal with the general problem on Wednesday, but I will also offer some thoughts to you personally, before and if necessary after the Wednesday meeting. But before that, can I ask a couple of questions?

1. What independent feedback have you had so far? E.g. from departmental seminars, second supervisor, upgrade committee, progress reviews etc?
2. Have you spoken about your research at conferences or seminars outside Wessex?
3. Have you submitted any of your work for publication?

Q Discuss John's response and suggest alternatives

3. Miranda's clarification

1. I have had very little independent feedback. The problem is that both of my original supervisors left when I was a third of the way through. I had both a forensic and a clinical psychologist as supervisors, which unfortunately both left at around the same time. I now have two supervisors (both social psychologists). I looked into transferring but decided to stay at Wessex because I could not find a forensic supervisor at a suitable university. I had an upgrade review after one year of starting the PhD, to be upgraded from MPhil to PhD status. Unfortunately though, there was no-one directly in my field to give constructive feedback.

2. I have spoken about my research on one occasion, right at the beginning, when I had to seek permission from the education authority to gain access into the college where I conducted my data collection. I presented my proposal to a research panel. I received both positive and negative feedback, and was thankfully granted access. However, this was almost three years ago, and my research has changed somewhat since then. The idea of standing up now and presenting my research seems very daunting. I suppose I'm worried that I'll sound like I don't know what I'm talking about. I'm good at writing but very shy speaking in front of people. I wish now, that I had tried to find more opportunities to present my research much earlier on. In hindsight, I should have transferred university, even if this meant deferring my work for a year.

3. I have not submitted any work for publication.

I feel incredibly embarrassed about my answers to the above questions. It is so easy to deny that you're having difficulties.

Team task

Having discussed this correspondence and Miranda's problem, on the acetate provided

- 1. list ways in which a student can become confident that their work is of Doctoral standard,**
 - 2. suggest how a supervisor can contribute, and**
 - 3. indicate how this could be addressed in departmental practice**
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