

LEARNING

DEVELOPMENT & SUCCESS

LDS “How to” Series: How to prepare for oral exams

Oral examinations are a common part of many different programs. They have been shown to improve scores on written exams¹, assess depth of knowledge and assess a student’s ability to translate theory to practice². They can take different forms, including prepared presentations, interviews, or a demonstration of skills². However, oral examinations are often a source of anxiety for students, as they are quite different from a typical written exam.

How do I prepare for oral exams?

Preparing for oral exams can feel daunting. The key to feeling prepared for an oral exam is practicing in the style that you will be expected to answer³. If the exam is formal, it is important to familiarize yourself with the structure that is expected for your answers. If there is specific terminology that you are expected to use within your answers (ex. Key words, red flags, etc.), you should practice using them so that you include them during the exam.

You can use your learning goals or course outline to guide your studying; for example, these can be used to create your own test questions. If there are topics that you anticipate being asked about (ex. common scenarios), you can create questions with these as well. When creating your questions, remember that oral examination can be used to assess the depth of your knowledge². Your questioning can start with superficial understanding, but don’t forget to probe your assumptions and get into specifics of a topic. For example, a surgical question might start by asking you to assess a patient but will likely delve into the specific procedure that the patient needs, how to perform it, and then about ongoing treatment post-operatively (such as chemotherapy).

You can also prepare yourself by studying with friends³. Each friend can create some questions, and then ask them of each other. Remember that how you deliver your questions is important; ask your friends to critique your style of delivery, as well as the content of your answers. Ask each other probing questions, and debate answers with each other to test your understanding of the material³. You can also try recording your answers and then critiquing your style yourself, or have a friend provide feedback⁴.

How do I structure my answers?

Part of your assessment in an oral examination involves how you deliver the material. Does your answer follow logical steps? Do you remember important details? Can the assessor follow your train of thought, or must they spend time parsing your answer for meaning?

For clinical examinations, it is often best to deliver your answers chronologically. Walk the assessor through the steps of an examination or procedure as you would do them in real life. While you do this, make clear key details (for example, looking for red flags, important clinical exam findings, etc.).

LEARNING

DEVELOPMENT & SUCCESS

In non-clinical examinations, your answers can follow a thesis based structure³. You can start with your general thesis statement, and then follow this with a few arguments to support it.

What are some presentation style tips?

As we have mentioned, how you compose yourself and your answers are a part of your delivery. Try to keep your answers concise enough that you are not rambling³, but give enough detail to demonstrate that you are familiar with the material⁴. If you do not know the answer immediately, you can pause to collect your thoughts⁴. It is often better to pause than it is to begin speaking with no clear arguments. You can also ask the assessor to repeat the question if you are unsure about it.

Some more tips for presentation style are:

- Speak slowly and clearly
- Keep your tone even and measured⁴
- Try to make eye contact with your examiners
- Try to keep your posture relaxed but interested (ex. try not to slouch in your chair, face forward/in the direction of the people that you are speaking to)

Remember, the assessors want you to succeed! Although this style of examination is different, you have the knowledge and the ability to succeed in oral examinations. You've got this!

1. Goins, S.M., French, R.J., Martin, J.G. *The Use of Structured Oral Exams for the Assessment of Medical Students in their Radiology Clerkship*. *Current Problems in Diagnostic Radiology*. 52:5, pp. 330-333. (September-October 2023). Accessed October 20, 2023. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0363018823000464>
2. *Guidelines for Oral Assessments and Exams*. Office of Teaching and Learning, University of Guelph. (N.D.) Accessed October 20, 2023. <https://otl.uoguelph.ca/guidelines-oral-assessments-and-exams>
3. *How to take an oral exam*. Hamilton. (N.D.) Accessed October 20, 2023. <https://www.hamilton.edu/academics/centers/oralcommunication/guides/how-to-take-an-oral-exam>
4. Inomics Team. *4 Tips for Oral Exams*. Inomics. (December 22, 2020). Accessed November 15, 2023. <https://inomics.com/advice/4-tips-for-oral-exams-407764>