

## **The Chronicle of Higher Education**

May 14, 2009

### **An Orals Survival Kit**

*By Eric Hallstein, Michael Kiparsky, and Anne Short*

It is like standing in front of a firing squad. Your executioners are four professors who are experts in their fields. You writhe before them as they take turns posing questions almost beyond your grasp. The threat hangs constantly over your head: Fail to satisfy them, and your graduate career will end.

That's how many graduate students imagine their oral exam. But the reality doesn't have to be that bad.

While it's true that a Ph.D. oral exam can be the most terrifying hurdle in graduate school, it can also be a positive and rewarding experience. Truly. For many students, the stress associated with preparing for orals is largely because they will experience the exam format for the first, and last, time. Too often, no one explains what to expect or how to prepare. We know because we've been there. We're all doctoral students in the sciences and social sciences who have successfully passed our oral exams. And we are about to let you in on the real secret of orals: The outcome can be determined, in large part, in advance of the actual test. Your performance is the end product of a much longer process of collaborative learning and demonstration of knowledge that starts when you first meet the members of your exam committee.

The scope, structure, and timing of oral exams vary among institutions and departments. Some exams test your subject-area knowledge, some focus on your proposed research, and many cover a combination of the two. The nature of the exam may not be clearly spelled out to students, or it may be difficult to understand before you have been through the experience.

Your first task is to clarify what your exam will be about. As far in advance as possible, talk with students, faculty members, and advisers to answer some basic questions: What will be the structure of your exam? How much material will it cover? Will the exam focus on knowledge of your chosen fields, your proposed research, or both? Note that there may not be one-size-fits-all answers even within a single department.

As you proceed through your preparation, make a conscious decision about what the oral exam means to you. Frame it as an opportunity, rather than an obstacle, as you solidify your expertise, refine your research plan, and strengthen your relationships with members of your exam committee (some of whom may serve on your dissertation committee). This process will not only help you develop more effective studying and organizational habits, but also help you become proficient at discussing your research.

Prepare your exam committee. As soon as you know the members of your committee, meet individually with each of them. Every interaction you have with your committee will make the exam itself more predictable and your preparation more focused.

It's helpful to view those conversations as informal, friendly negotiations. In many cases, you can steer your committee members toward your objectives, although you should not expect to perfectly predict what will be on the exam.

If you have the freedom to construct your own committee, select people you like, people who like you, and people whom you think will like one another. If your department assigns faculty members to your committee, learn as much as you can about them and their research.

Ask committee members about their exam style and about the scope of the exam. It's fair to ask: "I know the exam will mostly be an extemporaneous conversation, but are there particular topics you want me to demonstrate knowledge of?" (Note: This question is one step away from "What are you going to ask me?") You need to establish expectations clearly with your committee to avoid nasty surprises and help make your studying efficient. Overcommunicate.

Try to meet with each committee member once or twice a month. That may not be normal practice in all departments, but push for it if you can. In each meeting, choose a topic, a book, or a paper to discuss, so as to gradually demonstrate your knowledge and expose areas that deserve more attention.

Develop reading lists. Many students are responsible for identifying their exam "fields" and developing reading lists that will define the content of the exam. Define your fields carefully. Write a brief statement that delineates each field and how it relates to your research. That statement will help you create a focused reading list and may give your committee a better sense of the boundaries of your preparation.

Keep your readings lists as short as possible, but remember that expectations range widely. Natural-science students in our program may have 10 seminal journal articles on their reading lists, while social-science students often have dozens of books. In many departments, your reading list is a proxy for a wider body of knowledge you are expected to know that includes the context, theory, and significance of the articles. Even a short list can be quite comprehensive. To really understand a key paper, you may have to trace it backward and forward in time, reading papers it cites and those that cite it later.

Discuss your reading list with your committee members as early as possible. Start small, as professors are more likely to add to a draft reading list than to subtract.

Organize and study. The oral exam is probably unlike any test you have ever taken. You will need a good system of taking notes and synthesizing information. You will also want to practice communicating your knowledge and thinking on your feet during the exam. Given the magnitude of the studying involved here, burnout is common. Our suggestions:

- Project management is critical since you will work toward a test date many months in advance. Before you pick an exam date, create a study syllabus that realistically charts out a schedule for mastering your readings and for accomplishing other key milestones. Leave plenty of time to synthesize information and allow some elbow room for the inevitable slowdowns. Make sure your schedule includes a couple of long weekends off. Once you've mapped out a time line, stick to it.
- Create a support group to work through concepts with others, and practice expressing your ideas orally.
- Don't forget what is *not* on the list—you are being evaluated on your general expertise, so give yourself latitude to think broadly during your studying. Make a point to know the major historic breakthroughs and shifts in your fields. In addition to each text, understand the main ideas, themes, actors, and conflicts of your fields.
- Many people find it effective to build the overall picture of their field as they study, rather than waiting until the end. Pace yourself. You want to know what authors said (or did) and how each one relates to the others.
- For each reading, ask: How does this reading affect or influence my research? The reading could influence the study design or framing, exemplify a theoretical argument, or highlight a gap. The exam is about your ability to engage with the material, not to memorize it.
- Write, write, and write some more. Orals are unlike class exams where you have to remember the material for only a few days. You need to become fluent in your discipline. Whether it is on notecards or multipage appendices, it is helpful for most

people to systematically take notes on each source as soon as they finish reading it. You may want to record a two-sentence summary and list methods, key findings, and the source's relevance to your research. Those summaries will be a helpful reference for your studying.

- Get some rest. Connections happen best when one is rested. Fresh ideas often emerge spontaneously in off hours.
- The final push. In the final few weeks leading up to the exam, shift your focus toward synthesis of your readings, clear articulation of your ideas, and understanding the broader context of your chosen fields. The broad relevance of your subject matter is fair game in many departments. Think about how your topic fits into the "real world." Read the newspaper, attend relevant seminars, skim relevant journals.

About three weeks before your exam, recruit a few senior students to create a mock version. Follow that with a second mock exam a week later. Take those sessions seriously. Many students find practicing for orals to be their most important study aid. Even if you know the material, you need to practice communicating what you know under pressure.

About two weeks before the exam, start scaling back on your studying. Your mind needs time to rest and prepare. Shift from learning new material to synthesizing. Just before the exam, take a day or two off completely. Do something fun to help you relax. Get plenty of sleep.

Exam day. You are ready. Your hard work is about to pay off. Focus on the immense amount you have learned, not on the details that may have slipped through the cracks. The people on your committee want you to succeed—even if they might make you sweat in the process.

If you give a presentation, use it to show your committee members that you are ready for whatever they throw at you, and as a way to try to steer the conversation. Consider bringing a couple extra copies of written materials you have prepared, such as your research proposal or syntheses of your fields. Take notes as you are questioned and briefly outline your responses.

Try as much as possible to make the oral exam a conversation, rather than a question-and-answer session. Think of yourself as a teacher, rather than as someone being examined. You just may know more about the questions being asked than anyone else in the room.

If you are unclear about what a faculty member is asking, request clarification. If you are stuck and unable to proceed, ask for a slight push in the right direction. It can sometimes help to work things through from first principles. State your assumptions clearly before launching into quantitative derivations or theoretical discussions. That way, faculty members can more easily understand what you are doing and redirect you, if necessary.

Remember to breathe.

The central goal of the oral exam is to find the limits of your knowledge. You will be pushed into discussing things you do not know well. At some point, "I don't know" is a correct answer. However, "I don't know, but here is how I would go about answering that question ..." is always a better one.

After the Exam.

Celebrate. Invite your friends out and take a well-deserved hiatus so that you are ready to return to your work.

The strong relationships you have built, the intellectual foundation you have established, and the approaches to learning you have developed will all help you to write your dissertation. In the end, the oral exam can be a satisfying entry point into the next phase of your research.

Copyright 2009. All Rights reserved  
The Chronicle of Higher Education  
1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037