

Oral Qualifying Exams

The oral qualifying exam is generally designed to assess a graduate student's knowledge competency in their chosen field of study, and their ability to conduct original research resulting in a thesis or dissertation. Consider the following general recommendations when preparing for the exam.

*It is important to note that there is no standardized format for oral exams. Each department has their own unique practices and procedures, so some of the following recommendations may not apply. Students should familiarize themselves with their respective department's protocols well in advance before preparing for the exam.

- 1) **Write down questions – and potential answer ideas – as questions are asked.** This slows the pace of the exam if you are feeling flustered, or if a question is particularly confusing or long.
(Don't get too focused on what you are writing though – just jot down ideas so that you can still remain focused on the question, but not have a blank moment when the question is finished.)
- 2) **Start with information you know or restate the question.**
Dealing with unexpected questions is tricky because you don't want to pose as if you're knowledgeable about an area, nor is it acceptable to say, "I don't know." Examiners want to see how you think through tough questions, so consider starting with what you know about that topic, even in a general way. This is a way to connect the unfamiliar issue to your research, highlight what you do know, and demonstrate that you are able to make large connections. Use phrases like " Though I'm not especially familiar with X, I'd like to talk more broadly on X [*insert what you do know or find interesting about that general topic*]" ; "What interests me most about X [*insert what they asked*] is Y."
- 3) **There may not be a specific or right answer.**
Examiners are probably not looking for gaps in your knowledge. They may not even have a specific answer in mind when they ask the question: they just want to see you engage intellectually and critically with a question. In those cases, start with what you know in a general way then get more specific as you verbally work your way through the answer, even if it takes a few minutes to get to the answer.
- 4) **Make specific references to key research happening now in the field.**
Be able to clearly and specifically state a few current/up to date researchers and projects that relate to your research. Include scholars who are supporting or critiquing your research.

5) **Be engaged in your research.**

Examiners want to hear what interests you and why. Show your enthusiasm! If you are not engaged in the research or cannot express that the research or texts really strike you as important, intriguing, etc., then the examiners will likely not be intellectually engaged in the conversation.

6) **Summarize complex statements.**

Talking through complex ideas can be hard. Stopping periodically in a response (or at the end of a response) and briefly summarizing a main point can really help the examiners focus on the point that you are trying to convey. Use language like “in other words,” or “to put it more simply.”

7) **Take interruptions in stride.**

If an interruption occurs, acknowledge the question, finish the response you are already working through, and then address the interruption. Writing down the interrupting question will help keep your thoughts straight and will slow the pace a bit to keep you from getting frazzled.

8) **Deal with criticism gracefully.**

It is likely that a committee member will disagree with at least one of your responses, sometimes harshly. It is important to keep your cool and not get rattled. There is a power differential in the room and it is the examiners' prerogative to criticize your ideas.

It is important to respectfully acknowledge their critique as valid. “You make a valid/important point. However...” Then offer a counter to the critique. If you do not have a counterargument, then you can discuss in detail how the critique is useful in revising your thinking about the topic. The important thing is how this will improve your research, not who is right or wrong.

9) **Be gracious and polite throughout the entire session.**

Before the exam begins, thank the committee for helping you prepare for the exam and the opportunity to share your ideas. At the end, thank them again and briefly make a concluding statement on what you gained from the exam.

10) **Maintain good eye contact and body language.**

When you begin to respond to a question, make sure to initially maintain eye contact with the committee member who asked it. As you begin to develop your answer in more detail, shift your gaze to the other committee members in the room as a way to include and engage them with your response. This can help create the conditions for follow-up questions to be asked, which can make the intimidating formality of the exam experience seem more like a conversation (as opposed to a rote question and answer exercise).

Additionally, show that you are engaged by maintaining good posture, and speaking audibly and clearly.

Preparation Before the Exam

- 1) Get plenty of rest the week before the exam, not just the night before.
- 2) Eat a hearty breakfast/lunch. The exam can feel like a mental marathon so make sure you have plenty of energy.
- 3) Have a glass of water nearby. Some exam sessions can last up to three hours and you will inevitably feel parched.
- 4) Find out in advance what the dress code is and dress appropriately. The qualifying exam is a major step on the path to academic professionalization so dress the part!
- 5) Some departments give students the option to begin the session with a prepared statement. If you have this option, take advantage of it. It allows you to speak first, impress the committee right away, and set the exam's initial tone. Be sure to talk with your advisor and other committee members well beforehand about what the statement should entail. If they do not have any specific requirements, use the statement as a way to reflect on what you learned and gained through the preparation process, why those insights matter, and how you plan to apply this knowledge for research on your dissertation.
- 6) Talk with a variety of your peers about their exam experiences to get some useful tips and advice.
- 7) Arrange a mock exam session with your peers or GCC tutors. Include people that have passed the exam and whose research is similar to yours. This is a great exercise that introduces you to the exam format in a lower stakes environment. It is also a great opportunity to receive feedback and advice from your peers.