

Oral Exams

Purpose: With advances in generative AI, many instructors are rethinking how to assess learning authentically. Oral exams, once considered old-fashioned in some disciplines, are making a comeback for good reason. They allow instructors to:

- 1. Directly Assess Individual Understanding**

An oral exam ensures the person answering is truly the student enrolled and not relying on unauthorized assistance.

- 2. Probe Depth of Knowledge**

In real time, you can ask follow-up questions, challenge assumptions, or adapt prompts to gauge both foundational knowledge and higher-order thinking.

- 3. Build Communication Skills**

Oral exams require students to articulate their thought processes clearly, fostering valuable skills applicable in careers and everyday interactions.

- 4. Promote Academic Honesty**

The live nature of oral exams makes it difficult for students to use unapproved resources without detection.

You can use oral exams on their own, or as a follow-up to a written exam.

Strategies and Steps for Implementation

Designing an Effective Oral Exam

- 1. Clarify Goals and Expectations**

- a.** Define which skills or knowledge you want to assess (e.g., problem-solving, application, analysis, argumentation).
- b.** Share sample questions or a grading rubric in advance so students know how to prepare.

- c. Consider pairing students up for a practice session in which they ask each other the questions and provide feedback.

2. Keep Exams Manageable for You

- a. Limit each session to 10–20 minutes per student.
- b. Focus on a few core concepts or scenarios rather than the entire course.
- c. Once a student has demonstrated proficiency in a particular area, you can demonstrate that and move on to a different area.

3. Ask Open-Ended, Probing Questions

- a. Start with a broad question, then use follow-ups to explore reasoning and understanding.
- b. Use “what if” scenarios or require students to explain steps in solving a problem.

4. Be Aware of Cheating Software

- a. You should know that some companies are developing cheating software that operates in real-time during video calls. This software is often designed for coding and works less well in humanities and social sciences.
- b. You can design around this – though not block it entirely – by using the exam to review examples and sources specific to your class.

5. Consider Format Flexibility

- a. Conduct exams via video conference or in person.
- b. For larger classes, consider group oral exams with each student addressing a set of questions.

- c. Offer opportunities for practice or low-stakes oral assessment earlier in the term.

6. Record or Take Notes

- a. With student consent, record sessions to ensure fairness and for your own reference.
- b. Provide brief, immediate feedback to help students reflect and learn.

Instructor Planning Guide

1. Learning Goals

What knowledge, skills, or habits of mind do I want students to demonstrate through spoken responses?

2. Oral Exam Purpose

Will I use oral exams as a stand-alone assessment, or as a follow-up to a written task?

3. Question Design

What types of open-ended questions will best assess analysis, reasoning, and real-time understanding?

4. Rubric and Criteria

What are my criteria for evaluating performance (e.g., clarity, accuracy, depth, application), and how will I ensure consistency?

5. Format and Logistics

How long will each session be? Will I meet with students individually or in small groups? Will this be in person or virtual?

6. Preparation and Practice

How will I help students prepare? Will I provide sample questions or offer a practice opportunity?

7. Academic Integrity

How will I verify student identity and ensure originality of responses?

8. Accessibility

Have I made accommodations for students who need additional time or alternative formats?

9. Documentation and Feedback

Will I take notes or record sessions? How and when will I give feedback?

10. Canvas Integration

Have I entered the oral exam in Canvas with correct assignment grouping and weight?

Instructor Checklist

- ☐ I have identified the learning goals this oral exam will assess.
- ☐ I have clarified whether the oral exam is formative, summative, or a follow-up.
- ☐ I have drafted open-ended, probing questions aligned to course concepts.
- ☐ I have created and shared a rubric or evaluation criteria with students.
- ☐ I have scheduled oral exams and ensured time is manageable (10–20 minutes per student).
- ☐ I have offered students guidance and/or opportunities for practice.
- ☐ I have taken steps to verify student identity and discourage academic dishonesty.
- ☐ I have confirmed accessibility accommodations are in place as needed.
- ☐ I have planned to take notes or record sessions for fairness and review.
- ☐ I have planned for brief, timely feedback after the oral exam.
- ☐ I have entered the assignment into Canvas and confirmed grade settings.
- ☐ I have reviewed Harvard DCE grading and confidentiality policies.

Resource: [Exam Types and Policies](#) (Harvard DCE)