

# Best Practices for Oral Exams

Ryan Miller

University of Geneva <Ryan.Miller@unige.ch>

While recently hyped as a defense against AI plagiarism, oral exams have fallen out of favor in American philosophy departments. They are often perceived as part of an antiquated system where the day-to-day coursework is sharply distinguished from a 100% weighted final exam, with a more oppositional than collaborative student-professor relationship. Such examinations do not lend themselves to blind grading,<sup>1</sup> and also reinforce the existing privilege of students who are confident, fast-spoken, and know what to study. This kind of oral examination is clearly at odds with the contemporary transparent and collaborative process embodied in techniques like specifications grading,<sup>2</sup> with its proven benefits for novice philosophy students in introductory-level courses.

I want to defend a rather different role for oral exams. Novice philosophy students need rapid feedback in order to know whether they have correctly understood the expectations embodied in syllabi and rubrics. Techniques like paper drafts, scaffolded assignments, or do-overs are of no benefit if the feedback does not occur early enough in the term for the student to change course. Negative feedback on an assignment the student has spent a long time preparing is often devastating, and can lead to disengagement. Moreover, these effects are compounded when the instructor is also a novice, or teaching a new course or at a new institution. Novice instructors, despite the best of intentions, often write confusing rubrics, have inappropriate expectations, or get behind on grading. The solution is agile grading,<sup>3</sup> where assessments are chosen to give rapid feedback to both students (who can change their study habits or revise their work) and instructors (who can revisit material, change their teaching style, update rubrics, or alter problematic assignments). Using oral exams as a first test or early midterm is an easy way to achieve these goals.

I have found the following practices useful in aligning oral exams with agile learning goals:

- 1. Have the exam no more than 1/3 of the way into the course.** This provides the early feedback students and instructors both need, and allows plenty of time to improve grades for students who do poorly.
- 2. Provide a list of possible questions in advance.** This encourages students to collaborate and ask questions, and guides their early reading and listening. If you provide five questions in advance, you can then set three for the exam, and have students answer two of their choice, providing breadth and flexibility. This also avoids undue stress, and any worries about students sharing questions with others. Unlike in written exams, it doesn't raise the risk of cheating.

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<sup>1</sup> Claudia Goldin and Cecilia Rouse, 'Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of "Blind" Auditions on Female Musicians', *American Economic Review* 90, no. 4 (September 2000): 715–41, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.90.4.715>.

<sup>2</sup> Linda B. Nilson and Claudia J. Stanny, *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*, Reprint edition (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2014); Sarah E. Vitale and David W. Concepción, 'Improving Student Learning with Aspects of Specifications Grading', *Teaching Philosophy* 44, no. 1 (20 January 2021): 29–57, <https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil2020121133>.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald C. Gannod et al., 'Agile Way of Educating', in *2015 IEEE Frontiers in Education Conference (FIE)*, 2015, 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1109/FIE.2015.7344019>; David Parsons and Kathryn MacCallum, eds., *Agile and Lean Concepts for Teaching and Learning* (Springer, 2019), <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-13-2751-3>.

3. **Make the examination worth 10-25% of the course grade.** The exam needs to be substantive enough to make earnest study worthwhile, or it will not have the desired learning effects for all parties, but low-stakes enough that poor performance is not devastating.
4. **Set a brief time period for the exam and stick to it (5-15 minutes).** Remember that sequential exams for each student really add up, so stick to the time limit and don't be afraid to penalize students for being late or not showing up. These penalties need not be devastating, but are a natural consequence for wasting the time of others—plus showing up is a real-world skill.
5. **Don't be afraid to prompt students.** Use the oral format to your advantage—comfort students who are anxious, and if a student doesn't understand the question, feel free to rephrase. If a student draws a total blank, provide some prompting (with an appropriate discount to the grade). This avoids those blank short essay questions which leave all parties feeling defeated, with poor (bi-modal) grade distributions.
6. **Write comments while the student is speaking, and an immediate tentative grade.** Only revisit the grade if you determine that your expectations for the whole class were way off. After all, the whole point is to provide feedback quickly, as soon as the class is all finished.

I have used this oral exam technique with great success as a lecturer in a variety of mid-sized introductory philosophy courses, in an institution with a 100% English-as-a-second-language, 100% first-generation, 100% Black/Indigenous Persons-of-Color student population. Oral exams also have side benefits, like reducing the barrier to office visits (since they have already visited once) and balancing assessment modalities for students who are more comfortable speaking than writing—all without taking time away from class. Overall, I have found early oral exams a consistent tool for building student engagement, with less than 2% of students reacting negatively.