

How to Study for Oral Exams

Oral exams can be a nerve-wracking experience, but they do not have to be. And they won't if you study for them properly.

There are two major differences between oral exams and traditional written exams.

1) To do well on oral exams, your knowledge of the material has to be **firm**. Think of the difference between being able to speak a foreign language versus being able to read and write: faster recall is needed. The stress of the exam may make you "blank out" if your knowledge is not firm.

2) Because of fewer (usually three, maybe four) questions asked, you need to know **all the material** to guarantee success. If you only study 70% of the material, the probability that all three questions asked will be on the topics that you studied is only about 35%. And there is about 20% chance that two of the questions (or all three!) will be on the other topics.

So, **on top of the regular day-by-day study of the material**, this is how you need to study for oral exams to do well on them.

1) Go over all sample problems, problems from homework assignments, quizzes, and the textbook. Try to do them yourself, but, if necessary, look up in your notes, books, re-watch lectures etc. Keep notes on what you had to look up. (If you are only trying to get a C on the exam, you can skip the Hard questions. But you should still do the Medium and Easy questions).

2) If you realize that you constantly need to look up material for certain topics in the course, re-learn that material and do the corresponding problems again.

3) Several hours later (preferably, **next day**), close all notes and go over all problems **in random order** and try to solve them. Ideally, try to answer them **aloud**, as if you were on the exam. You will not be able to solve some of them, even though you thought you understood them yesterday. This is normal, and not a reason to panic or give up. Just take note of the problems that you could not solve and after going through all problems once, study again the material on the problems that you missed and solve them.

4) **Repeat Step 3** until you can confidently answer all sample questions in random order. This will probably take four or five iterations, but **you can do it!** You just need to start your exam preparation early enough, about a week before the exam.