

ORAL QUALIFYING EXAMINATION IN SBOS

- Guidelines for Students -

Purpose

The oral qualifying examination is the final step before the student begins dissertation research. At this stage the student should have acquired considerable knowledge of the field of psychology and of one or more specialty areas. It is also the time when some of this knowledge should be interrelated in an integrated fashion, when the student has begun to gain a perspective on the facts that have been acquired. Finally, the student should have formed some opinions and viewpoints that are his or her own, positions that are the result of a healthy skepticism and some thought about the theories, concepts, and methods that have been studied.

While the assessment of information is a part of the oral examination, the focus is on knowledge integration, critical thinking ability, perspective, and the ability to communicate as a professional psychologist.

Student Materials for the Examination

Statement of Professional Development. As a way of bringing sharper focus to the oral, the candidate will prepare beforehand a Statement of Professional Development which will be used by faculty in the examination.

The statement, to be no more than 10 double-spaced pages, is to be delivered to the examining committee at least a week before the examination and is to contain the following:

1. An indication of the general area of concentration (e.g., social, cognitive, organizational, developmental), a description of the student's specialization (i.e., portfolio focus), and how they are related.
2. The bulk of the Statement of Professional Development should focus on a statement encompassing both concentration and specialization that includes the following:
 - a. A descriptive analysis of key issues, why they are central, and their current status.
 - b. An examination of the concepts or theories that are relevant and useful to the student's area of study and the student's position on them.
 - c. Values or positions that the student views as part of his or her thinking about the field.
3. A brief statement of how the student's course work, portfolio, job experience, research, and other training are related to the specialization (about one page).
4. A brief summary of how the student prepared for the examination (about one paragraph).

Students should feel free to add to or modify these points in the interest of presenting a clear statement for discussion. It is a good idea to talk over plans for examination preparation with the Academic Advisor.

Vita. The statement of specialization should be accompanied by a current vita, which should be delivered to the committee at the same time.

Faculty Preparation for the Examination

Before the examination, the examining committee will have available for their review:

1. The student's Statement of Professional Development
2. A current vita
3. Department files on the student's academic progress, including the portfolio and accompanying documents.

Each member of the committee should examine these materials beforehand to formulate suitable subjects for questioning.

Focus of the Examination

The student's Statement of Professional Development will provide direction for a significant portion of the examination. However, during the oral qualifying exam, the faculty are evaluating whether the student has a thorough grounding in the general area of concentration and the specialization area. In addition, the student should be prepared to answer some questions in any area in which the student has taken graduate coursework.

Note that specifics of proposed dissertation research shall not be the primary focus of the exam. Ordinarily the student will meet with the dissertation committee to discuss proposed dissertation research prior to beginning the research.

Performance Criteria

Although it is difficult to provide specific evaluation criteria for an oral qualifying examination, these factors are considered:

1. Grasp of specific knowledge in concentration and specialization areas. While the examination emphasis is not on memorization, it is assumed that the student will have acquired a significant fund of knowledge about the general area of concentration and the area of specialization.
2. Integration and perspective. The examination seeks evidence of the student's ability to bring order to the knowledge acquired by relating it to concepts, theories, and historical trends.

3. Evidence of a personal point of view. The ability to examine information critically and be able to articulate one's own point of view.
4. Professional demeanor. The ability to speak with clarity and conviction and to be comfortable about what one knows and does not know.

Selection of the Examining Committee

The Department Chair, after receiving a recommendation from the Academic Advisor, sends a recommendation regarding the composition of the committee to the Provost, who appoints the committee. It is assumed that the Advisor will ordinarily be a member of the committee and will be conversant with the specialization area of the candidate. Core courses should not be the determining factor for committee participation. Whenever possible, one member should be someone on the faculty who has had little contact with the student. While students can make their views regarding potential committee members known to their advisor, they may not necessarily be followed. Students are not to canvass faculty regarding committee membership.

Examination Procedure

The usual length of an oral examination is about two hours, including the question period and the deliberations following. Before the examination begins, the committee may ask the student to step outside while they decide on general areas for discussion and a division of labor. The examination itself may begin with a request that the student briefly summarize his or her relevant academic preparation and current activities. Faculty then follow whatever pattern of questioning they deem appropriate.

After the question period, the student is requested to step outside while the committee members discuss their appraisal of the performance. At the end of deliberations the student is called back in, the result is given, and, typically, committee members share their impressions with the student. The decision options are Pass or Fail. For a student to pass, at least two of the three committee members must decide to pass the student. If the decision is Fail, the committee may recommend that the student be granted another attempt to pass within a specified period of time, that the student be dropped from the doctoral program and considered for a terminal M.A. degree, or that the student be terminated and not permitted to register as of a specific semester. It is extremely unusual for a student in Psychology to fail the oral qualifying examination and not be allowed a second attempt.

Students should keep in mind that faculty have a vital stake in their academic success. Examining Committees try to conduct proceedings which are fair and which allow students the opportunity to show their competence.

Practice oral examinations with fellow students can be very useful, especially if the panel includes students who have passed their oral examination.

Sample questions:

What are the most important theoretical perspectives in your general area of concentration? Who are the key theorists? What are key empirical findings that address these theories? (Ditto for your area of specialization.)

If you were to design an introductory course in your general area of concentration, what would be the major topics that you would include? Why? What theories would you include? What empirical research would you cite?

What are a few of the most important issues in your area of concentration? Describe alternate theoretical perspectives and cite empirical support.