

# Guide to oral exams with Prof. Dr. Sebastian Weydner-Volkmann

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*Oral examinations can vary greatly depending on the examiner. The following describes the structure and procedure of an oral examination with Prof. Dr. Weydner-Volkmann.*

## Structure of the Exam

Oral Exam = 10 min presentation + 10 to 15 min discussion

Before the exam, you should discuss your thesis with Prof. Weydner-Volkmann during the office hours; an agreement via email might also suffice if you are well-versed in taking oral exams. At the latest, by the day before the exam, please email a **thesis paper (PDF)** with your **personal details at the top** (name, student ID, degree program, semester), the final version of your **thesis** or research question, a **rough outline** of the main parts of your presentation, and the **literature** you will refer to in the exam.

On the day of the exam, you should allocate approximately 45-60 minutes in total. The actual oral exam lasts about 25 minutes. The first 10 minutes are for a presentation and the remaining 10-15 minutes for the subsequent examination discussion.

Regardless of whether the exam is in person or online (via video conference, currently via Zoom), oral exams proceed as follows: After the greeting, you will be asked if you feel physically and mentally able to take the exam. If the answer is yes, the exam can begin.

To start, Prof. Weydner-Volkmann will read the agreed thesis of the presentation and then hand over to you. Now you have 10 minutes for your presentation. You should use this time fully but not exceed it. After the end of your presentation, the examination discussion begins. If the 10-minute limit is significantly exceeded, the presentation will be interrupted to move on to the examination discussion. After the discussion, Prof. Weydner-Volkmann will ask you to wait (either outside the door or in a virtual waiting room) to assess the exam. Once the assessment is complete, you will be invited back into the examination room to discuss your grade based on the oral

examination criteria (<https://weydner-volkmann.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Beurteilungsschema-Mundliche-Prufung-en.pdf>) with Prof. Weydner-Volkmann.

Typically, another person will attend the exam to take written records. However, this person plays no further role in the course of the exam and will not ask questions or make comments.

## The Presentation Part

In an oral examination, you practice delivering scientific presentations. This being a scientific presentation means four things:

1. Your presentation should follow a clear research question, or better yet, a **research thesis**. It's not enough to merely reconstruct a text discussed in the seminar; instead, you should come up with your own question or thesis on the seminar's topic, which you will pursue or defend in your presentation.
2. Your presentation must meaningfully rely on **research literature**, for example, by clarifying that you're not the only one interpreting a passage in a certain way, by mentioning what other perspectives or even controversies exist in the research, etc. Since you've noted the used literature in your thesis paper, a brief reference in the presentation like, "Reinhard emphasizes that Hobbes was the first to develop his political thinking within a modern philosophical system" is sufficient during the talk.
3. Your presentation should be logically **structured**: start with a brief introduction of your thesis, elaborate in several argumentative steps in the main part why one should generally follow this thesis, and summarize the content of your presentation in a few words at the end.
4. The presentation should be delivered in an appealing **scientific style**, meaning, for example, that you should demonstrate your ability to handle the relevant technical vocabulary. You should express yourself as precisely as possible and avoid generalizations. Your argumentation should not build on statements like "I personally think..." or "my feeling is...", but rather present philosophically developed reasons for your thesis.

## Content of the Presentation

You are expected to present an original thesis in your presentation. It's not enough to reconstruct a text from the seminar; in the oral exam, you should go beyond the seminar literature. You could, for example, compare different approaches discussed in the seminar or examine an approach for its strengths and weaknesses and use pertinent research literature to back up your claims. The thesis must be agreed upon with Prof. Weydner-Volkman before the exam, and its final version, along with personal details and references to the used research literature, must be submitted via email on a thesis paper to Prof. Weydner-Volkman at least one day before the exam.

If you would like brief feedback on your thesis, you must send it to Prof. Weydner-Volkman a few days before the exam (this is the only way to realistically implement any feedback). For more comprehensive feedback, you should schedule a consultation well in advance. Since formulating a suitable thesis (as with a term paper) is already part of the exam performance, the provided suggestions may be somewhat general.

Before the oral exam, you should practice your presentation at least once (but preferably several times), timing it to ensure it does not exceed 10 minutes. Practicing the presentation is also important as you become aware of passages that sound awkward when speaking but seem smooth on paper. It is also advisable to present it to a fellow student so that you can receive feedback. The more familiar you become with the presentation and the formulation of the argumentation, the more "mental capacity" you can devote to your presentation style and other exam-relevant aspects.

### **The Discussion Part**

The focus of the discussion part is your presentation in the context of the seminar. Therefore, in addition to questions about your presentation ("can you elaborate on what is meant by ..."), contextualization questions will be asked that relate to the seminar content (e.g., how the topic of your presentation is situated in the seminar context or how this text relates to another text from the seminar).

Crucial for the assessment in this part of the exam is whether a joint academic discussion is created, where ideally, you and Prof. Weydner-Volkman philosophically discuss the topic of your exam. Therefore, the questions posed also aim to initiate an academic discussion. The evaluation focuses not so much on whether you can answer the posed questions (in a "school-like" sense) but rather on whether you can demonstrate solid knowledge about the exam topic and its context, comprehend new arguments introduced into the discussion, or construct philosophically sound arguments.

You can also prepare for the examination discussion. Consider what questions might be asked following your presentation and think of appropriate answers. The same applies to contextualizing the exam topic. Consider, for example, the context in which the debate took place or is taking place, how the respective text relates to other texts and topics discussed in the seminar, etc. Therefore, in preparing for the oral exam, you should engage not only with the text about which you are presenting but also with the seminar as a whole.

It is helpful if you made appropriate notes during the seminar, which you can now refer to. It is also beneficial to practice this examination discussion with other seminar participants – ideally after they have also heard the presentation.

### **Scope of the Oral Exam**

The topic for an oral exam usually covers slightly more content than a seminar session. The crucial aspect is that the exam not only reconstructs something discussed in the seminar but also includes argumentative contributions by you. This contribution could be, for example, in the form of a comparison of different positions discussed in the seminar or in discussing the strengths and weaknesses of an approach. However, you can also go well beyond the seminar, for instance, by trying to trace and present a debate through further research.

### **Notes and media**

During the exam, you may use notes, but no media (such as Powerpoint presentations). Both during the presentation and the discussion, you should ensure that you do not fall into merely reading from your notes. If a script is used for the lecture, you should pay particular attention to maintaining an oral presentation style; otherwise, it will be hard to follow your argument. The flow of the conversation should never be interrupted by searching through your notes. To avoid the temptation of just reading from notes, it is sensible use bullet points rather than a full script. Your additional notes may also contain extra information for the discussion part, such as the publication date of a book, the birth date of a person, etc.

As a guideline, you can think of scientific lectures: notes and scripts (or the not allowed slides) are quite typical here, as is having some additional notes ready for the discussion. Good presentations maintain the form of the spoken word, using a

scientific (not polemical) style that makes use of technical terms relevant to the topic. Notes or scripts support the lecture. But a presenter that would need to "leaf through" extensive notes to answer a question would look very unprofessional.

If you do not have a good idea of scientific lectures in philosophy, then watch some lectures in a university context or search the internet for corresponding audio or video recordings.