



# A written exam with oral commentary: the best of both worlds?

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In various fields of higher education, oral exams are used to check whether students have achieved the predefined competences of a given programme component. However, lecturers more often opt for written exams – not only for practical reasons, but also because the **objective scoring of an oral exam requires extra attention**. In this ECHO teaching tip, we will first list the main **benefits and challenges** of oral examination, and then turn our attention to a **written exam with oral commentary**: to what extent does this combination offer the best of both worlds, and what points should be kept in mind?

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## Oral exams: benefits and challenges

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Oral exams have several **benefits**. Compared to written exams, they can give **lecturers** a clearer picture of the student's level of competence through interaction. By asking extra questions, lecturers can delve deeper into the answers given and gauge the student's level of understanding more thoroughly. This makes it relatively easy for you as a lecturer to find out whether a student has simply memorised the learning content, or actually understands it.

There are also several **benefits** to oral exams for **students**.

1. Lecturers can give students a nudge in the right direction if necessary, so that a question does not necessarily have to remain completely blank when the answer does not come spontaneously.
2. Any ambiguities in the phrasing of a given question can be clarified by the lecturer before the student responds.
3. Students get the opportunity to give a general impression of their level of competence, which can be taken into account in the final scoring.
4. During an oral exam, students have the opportunity to demonstrate not only their competences with regard to the learning content, but also their presentation and communication skills.

5. The prospect of an oral examination often encourages students to study harder, because they don't want to appear unprepared when faced directly with the lecturer. Oral exams encourage students to process the material in a more active way, for example by practising answers out loud and thoroughly arranging ideas (Hazen, 2020).
6. Oral examination forms are often better suited to the needs of students with disabilities. For example, students with dyslexia have a strong preference for oral exams. At the University of Antwerp, students with special needs are often made aware of the possibility of adding an oral commentary to their written exams (see [this ECHO teaching tip](#) on special arrangements and exams, 2019, in Dutch).

For certain competences and learning objectives, an oral assessment method is **required** to check whether students have acquired the necessary knowledge, skills and/or attitudes. Oral assessment methods are particularly suitable when the teaching material deals with subjective or nuanced topics. For example, conducting negotiations or devising complex solution strategies is best tested orally. In some domains, oral exams are downright **essential**, such as in foreign language education (e.g. Akimov & Malin, 2020; Hazen, 2020).

However, besides these benefits, there are also some **difficulties and challenges** associated with oral exams. An often-cited concern is that social bias, involving factors



such as gender, ethnicity, religion, or the personal relationship with the student, can influence a lecturer's assessment (Isaacs et al., 2013). To avoid social bias, it is important to establish criteria that are not influenced by a student's immutable characteristics (gender, ethnic background, socio-economic status, etc.). Lecturers can only make reliable statements about students' competences when they measure mutable variables only. This way, all students are given the same chances to succeed, regardless of their backgrounds (Van Petegem & Vanhoof, 2002). Organisational problems may also arise. It can be quite an undertaking for lecturers to organise individual oral exams for a large group of students. Often, only a limited number of questions is used, which may jeopardise the validity of the assessment. Although time is often scarce (in large groups), it is important to provide sufficient examination time for each student. Drawing up a testing matrix can also help to ensure the validity of oral exams (see [this ECHO tip](#) published in 2013). Another way to ensure validity is to use an extra assessment method that complements the oral examination. From the student's point of view, fear of an oral exam can have an impact on performance. Students who are shy, who have little experience in public speaking, or who have language/communication difficulties will experience more anxiety during an oral exam than during a written exam (Hazen, 2020). You can read more about how to address this below (in the tips '*Communicate your expectations to students in advance*' and '*Reassure students*').

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### Written exam with oral commentary

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By **adding an oral component to a written exam**, you can combine the best of both assessment methods (i.e. written and oral). This combination makes it possible to achieve a level of testing that is sufficiently broad and sufficiently deep.

The **breadth of an exam**, on the one hand, increases when more questions are included and a wider range of topics is explored, which has a positive effect on the reliability and validity of the assessment. A sufficiently broad examination is one with a written component where students don't have to explain every single question orally, so more questions can be asked. For instance, as an examiner, you can read the student's written answers and ask extra questions only where you feel this is necessary or where you would like further clarification. You can choose to ask certain questions in writing only, such as pure

knowledge questions, while assessing other questions orally as well, such as case studies or insight questions.

The **depth of an exam**, on the other hand, can be increased by asking oral follow-up questions so the student can elaborate on a written answer. Including both a written and an oral component also allows students to play to their strengths: some are better at written communication, others are more at ease orally.

The following **tips** can help you safeguard the **quality** of a **written exam with an oral component**:

- *Communicate your expectations to students in advance.*

Communicate the assessment criteria and make clear **to what extent students' written and oral communication skills are explicitly included in the assessment**. Even if you do not explicitly include these in your assessment, it is still important for your students to have language skills, so they can demonstrate their level of competence in terms of the learning content. Be sure to provide **learning opportunities** so your students can practise this. This [ECHO teaching tip](#) (2017, in Dutch) contains more information on how to deal with Dutch language errors made by non-natives. Additionally, this [ECHO teaching tip](#) (2016, in Dutch) provides specific tips on how to make your linguistic expectations for writing tasks clear to students.

Communicate clearly what the **relative weight** of the written component is versus the oral component.

**Provide information about the structure of the exam in advance**. How much time do students get for the written component? How many and what kind of (extra) questions will be asked during the oral component?

In some cultures, oral exams where lecturers engage in individual conversation with each student are less common (Leask & Carroll, 2013). Therefore, it is particularly important to properly inform **international students** in advance. It may be useful to develop an information brochure at the study programme or faculty level. [A short guide to oral assessment](#) is an example of such a brochure.

- *Use an answer model and/or evaluation criteria/a 'rubric'.*



Use an answer model and/or evaluation criteria/a 'rubric' to ensure **transparent and reliable** assessment.

Decide in advance how you are going to deal with the **answers to extra oral questions** in the assessment. Include this in the answer model.

**Write down any extra questions** you ask, so that you can review them afterwards when determining the final mark (see below).

- *Spread out the questions.*

Due to the limited time frame, not as many questions can be asked during the oral component. However, you still have to make sure that **for each student, the examination as a whole** (written component and oral commentary) **is representative** of the competences of the programme component. A **testing matrix** can be helpful in this regard; you can find more information in this [ECHO teaching tip](#) (2013).

- *Write down an indicative mark after each exam, but only award final marks after all exams have been taken.*

Be aware that your assessment can be influenced by **external circumstances**. For example, you might find yourself going easier on the first student in the morning than on the last student on a long, tiring day. And after an excellent exam, chances are you will be more demanding of the next student. By **reviewing the students' answers** (take notes during the exams) **and your assessments afterwards**, you can limit the influence of these factors.

- *Use multiple assessors.*

If the situation allows it, you should consider involving colleagues in your assessment, as this can increase the reliability of the assessment. In that case, make sure that everyone **uses the same assessment criteria** and **interprets them in the same way**.

You can also ask colleagues (e.g. assistants) to check whether the exam questions, the answer model, the assessment schedule and the communication to students are sufficiently clear.

- *Strive for well thought-out planning.*

Adequate organisation (i.e. providing sufficient time for the oral commentary, not scheduling too many students in a row, taking breaks, etc.) is a must to keep a clear head at all times in your role of assessor. It is also advisable to **have someone else supervise the written exam** so you can focus fully on the oral exams.

- *Reassure students.*

Even when students are properly informed beforehand about the structure of an exam, they may still experience a high degree of anxiety. That is why you should always start by putting students at ease at the beginning of an exam. You can start the oral exam by asking them which question from the written exam they would like to elaborate in more detail.

If a student does not seem to know the answer to a question at all, there is no point trying to discuss it much further. You can try to **nudge them in the right direction**, but be sure to move on to the next question in time.

## Want to know more?

### General literature

Akimov, A. & Malin, M. (2020). When old becomes new: a case study of oral examination as an online assessment tool. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*. DOI: [10.1080/02602938.2020.1730301](https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2020.1730301)

Centre of Expertise for Higher Education (2013). *Vijftig onderwijstips*. Antwerp: Garant.

Hazen, H. (2020). Use of oral examinations to assess student learning in the social sciences. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 44(4), 592-607. DOI: [10.1080/03098265.2020.1773418](https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2020.1773418)

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Isaacs, T., Zara, C., & Herbert, G. (2013). *Key concepts in educational assessment*. London: Sage.

Leask, B., & Carroll, J. (2013). *Good practice principles in practice: Teaching across cultures. A quick guide to assessment*, retrieved on 15 May 2020.

Van Berkel, H., & Bax, A. (2014). Toetsen met een mondelinge toets. In H. van Berken, A. Bax, & D. Joosten-ten Brinke (Eds.). *Toetsen in het hoger onderwijs* (pp. 151-168). Houten, Netherlands: Bohn Stafleu van Loghum.

Van Petegem, P. (red.) (2009). *Praktijkboek activerend hoger onderwijs (Deel 4: Toetsing)*. Leuven: Lannoo Campus.

Van Petegem, P., & Vanhoof, J. (2002). *Evaluatie op de testbank*. Mechelen: Wolters-Plantijn.

### ECHO Teaching Tips (in English)

[Here](#) you can find an overview of all the teaching tips in English about testing.

- [Reliability of written examinations](#) (2018)
- [Measure what you want to know](#) (2013)

### ECHO Teaching Tips (in Dutch)

[Here](#) you can find an overview of all the teaching tips in Dutch about testing.

- [Bijzondere faciliteiten en examens](#) (2019)
- [Rubrieken als begeleidings- en beoordelingsinstrument](#) (2017)
- [Hoe omgaan met taalfouten van niet-moedertaalsprekers Nederlands?](#) (2017)

### Sources accessible only to UAntwerp staff (after logging in)

The [Pintra page](#) on 'Education on campus and online' includes good practices, ECHO tips, digital tools, and in-depth material on student assessment.