

# How to Prepare for an Oral Exam

## A Guideline for Handouts in Oral Exams in English Linguistics

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# **How to Thesenpapier**

## **Manual for Linguistics**

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Jun. 2008, updated Nov. 2012, Jan. 2016, Nov. 2016, October 2020

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## 1 Introduction

Students who intend to take an oral exam (e.g., in A5 and E5) are required to submit a handout ("Thesenpapier") with key statements to be discussed in the exam.

## 2 Deadline for Submission

At the latest, the handout must be submitted one week prior to the oral exam to the examiner(s) (preferentially by e-mail).

## 3 Coverage

In general, the whole module is the topic of the exam. However, the handout allows students to focus on their strengths.

- For each course, formulate 3 statements based on **at least** two topics from the course schedule. In other words, you have 6 statements in total for a "Modulprüfung" covering two seminars.
- Formulate a statement that interests you and which you want to talk about.
- Make sure that each statement is one or two sentences max.

## 4 Layout

Your handout should contain the following points:

- **Header:** The header of the handout should include your name and your course of studies, the course instructor(s) and the examiner(s), the course and the date of the exam.
- **Statements:** The statements should be brief. You can add short examples (e.g., sentences, utterances, short discourses, quantitative data) to illustrate or support your statement. If you have longer examples, they should go into the Appendix.
- **References:** In the list of references, list all the readings you have covered on the particular topic that underlies your statement. For the references, strictly adhere to the requirements set out in the "Manual of Style".
- **(Appendix):** In the Appendix, you can add longer examples such as excerpts from discourses, etc. The Appendix is optional.

## 5 Content

An appropriate statement on the handout describes a controversial position which you can argue for and against in the exam and which you can illustrate with examples. Here are two examples of suitable statements (1-2).

- (1) The Poverty of the Stimulus in first language acquisition implies that language acquisition must go beyond the input.
- (2) Connectionist theories of word production are too unconstrained to explain why there are no exchanges between lexical and function words in speech errors.

For your statements, avoid commonplace remarks like the following (3).

(3) Language acquisition is very fascinating.

You should also avoid just sketching general issues, as in (4).

(4) There is debate about the involvement of innate constraints in language acquisition.

This statement is far too general for you to be able to develop a coherent line of reasoning.

In a similar vein, it is not a good idea to just state the ideas of others directly, as in (5).

(5) Chomsky claims that children are born with Universal Grammar.

Such a statement hardly allows you to come to your own considered evaluation.

In general, you should be able to do the following for each of your statements in the exam:

- Define the terms in the statement
- Relate the statement to theoretical positions or models
- Give relevant examples (and maybe counterexamples)
- Sketch opposing views and positions
- Evaluate different positions and
- Come to a reasoned conclusion

Even if not all of the aspects mentioned above will be discussed in each exam, we advise you to think about all of them.

## 6 Final Words of Advice

Once you have collected all statements, you should check the extent to which they are compatible with one another. In the exam, you are often asked to relate several statements to one another. You will find that this becomes much harder if you argue for a particular position in statement 2, but you have defended its opposite position in statement 1. It is thus best to make sure your statements do not contradict one another.

## 7 Assessment

There are different requirements in every exam. Bloom's educational taxonomy can be used to illustrate the different requirements and expectations.

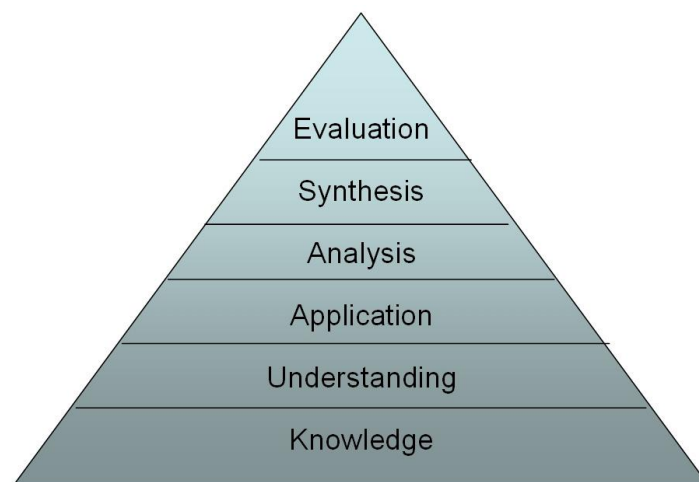


Figure 1: Bloom's Taxonomy (adapted from Bloom et al., 1956).

Using Bloom's taxonomy, we exemplify the different levels of an oral exam with typical questions or requests in the following table (Table 1). Depending on whether and how you cover these implicational levels, your grade will be lower or higher.

Table 1: Levels, requirements and typical questions/requests.

Level	Requirements	Typical Questions/Requests
<b>Knowledge</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Know facts</li> <li>▪ Reproduce different positions</li> </ul>	<i>Define and explain X.</i>
<b>Understanding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Reproduce facts and positions using your own examples</li> <li>▪ Explain facts using examples</li> </ul>	<i>Explain X using your own example.</i>
<b>Application</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Transfer general knowledge to specific cases</li> </ul>	<i>Explain to what extent example X is a case of Y.</i>
<b>Analysis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Segment complex issues into their structure</li> </ul>	<i>E.g.: What are the essential components of morphological analysis?</i>
<b>Synthesis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Put issues into perspective</li> </ul>	<i>Show the relationship between X, Y and Z.</i>
<b>Evaluation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Evaluate issues based on criteria</li> <li>▪ Develop considered assessments</li> </ul>	<i>Explain the pros and cons of one or several approaches.</i> <i>Which of the different approaches do you find more convincing? Why?</i>

Bloom, B. S., Engelhart, M. D., Furst, E. J., Hill, W. H., & Krathwohl, D. R. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals. Handbook I: Cognitive domain.* David McKay Company.