

STAT 572 How to answer questions in an Oral Exam

Marina Meilă

Department of Statistics
University of Washington

June 1, 2021

The most important thing

MAINTAIN DIALOGUE

- during presentation, you were in the lead (had the stage for 25 mins)
- during Q & A examiners are in the lead
 - take your clues from the examiners, be responsive, note if they follow/understand you
- **beware of miscommunication** (see next page)
- Help them help you

Tips for good communication

- Repeat/rephrase the question in your own words
 - great when you need time!
 - examiners appreciate it! puts your best foot forward
- Give a short/summary answer first
 - ...and let it be known that you have more to say
 - consider if you need to write / draw or not
 - if you repeated the question, you had time to collect yourself so that you can be short AND clear
 - think of a slide that is relevant and go to it (if there is also a long answer)
- ... then stop and ask
 - Did I answer your question?
 - Shall I go into details?
 - **Optionally:** "this is related to the following interesting fact that I did not mention in the talk"
- If you are asked for the long answer, or for details (see also next slide)
 - still stop often to make sure audience is with you
 - be ready to rephrase what you just said if you find you weren't understood ("shall I rephrase?")
 - check if they follow
 - give opportunity to intervene / ask questions / stop you
- In general, it is effective to ask for leading from the committee ("would you like me to also explain Z?", "shall I define X?")
- Seek opportunities to bring up interesting things (see also **Be prepared**)

Use all the props

- ... to make your answer **clear and precise**
- think a little before you speak
- go to the relevant slide
- know when to write a formula
- “a drawing (or formula) is worth a thousand words”
- **Werner’s advice** “if you find yourself drawing with your hands in the air, go draw on the board” (or tablet)
- in zoom, you can actually draw/write on the slides!
- okay to show some things in the paper or in your report
 - if you do this, tell committee “I can show you X in paper/report”
 - only useful/necessary for really detailed questions – may be too distracting so it’s best to see if examiners really want to go there (better to have prepared slides)
- okay to have notes and consult them – but be mindful of time used!!
- use all the techniques for effective teaching and communicating (e.g. speak clearly, into the mic, etc.)

Be prepared

- note the questions you are asked during practice presentations
- imagine questions that may be asked
 - from the paper
 - relation of paper with other areas, associations (mentions these in your talk!)
- think of ways you could draw concepts from the paper
 - “the figures you had no time to make”
- think up very simple examples – they are inspirations for good drawings too
- practice with tablet, markers, writing on slides, etc
- plant (seed?) questions during your talk
 - “I will skip issue X, but I’m happy to explain it during the Q & A”
 - “there is a connection with Y that I am not going into ...”
 - even if you aren’t asked about these, they show you are well prepared!
- Find opportunities to say something interesting about the paper (or about what you did)
 - can be something great or remarkable, can be a criticism

What if you are asked something you don't know?

- ① Don't try to fudge it
 - chances are, it won't work
- ② Repeat/rephrase the question
 - maybe they actually asked something else? **has happened!**
- ③ Think of the most related slide/fact in your presentation and go there
- ④ Change the question
 - but be clear about it
 - "if we assume X, then the answer is ...", "in the special case of $p = 1$, the answer is ...", "in this example..."
 - Think of the most related question you can answer
- ⑤ Take a deep breath
- ⑥ Remember the most important thing: **keep the dialogue going!**
 - most of the time, the examiners will see that you are in difficulty and will offer hints, ask helpful questions
 - ask for clarifications (it's a way to ask for help)
 - say what you know and where your limits are (e.g. "I know X, but not Y") – chances are that you will get some hints
- ⑦ in general, show that you are trying to think on your feet, and let everyone know what you are thinking about
- ⑧ it's okay to be slow, okay to not hide your emotions ("excuse me while I take a deep breath")
- ⑨ Do not
 - launch in a monologue
 - be quiet for too long
 - if it happens, end it by telling the committee what you have been thinking of (best is to go to item 4)
 - or just say "please, may I have a hint?"
 - say things that are plain wrong