**Finding your voice**

You don’t need to worry about oral exams, as long as you prepare well in advance and try to keep calm. Sarah Armstrong offers some words of advice.

O
cal (viva voce) examinations are possibly the most daunting of exami-
nations to undertake and uni-
versally dreaded by students. 
Although they can be intimidat-
ing to a candidate’s knowledge and form a funda-
mental part of the finals ex-
amination procedure at 
many dental schools and in postgraduate qualifi-
cations.

**Before an examination**

Nerves are a common 
problem for candidates un-
dertaking oral exams and 
these can affect people in differ-
ent ways; disrupting normal 
sleeping and eating patterns, af-
flecting your revision and causing panic during the exam itself. 
Thorough preparation is key, 
there’s no substitute for putting 
the work in and getting the revi-

done. Make sure you know 
what the format of the exams will be, the topics covered and 
what will be expected of you.

Mock examinations are an 
important aid in getting you 
used to oral exam situa-
tions. They are there to help you 
practice answering questions is 
valuable feedback.

On the examination day, try 
not to concentrate on your own 
exam performance. Candidates 
have a habit of embellishing 
their performances – be them 
good or bad, which can be the 
last thing you want to hear just 
before you enter your own exam. 
Everyone will have a different 
exam experience – there will be 
different patients, examiners 
and questions making it almost 
impossible to draw comparison.

During an examination

Although tensions can be 
running high in an exam situa-
tion, it’s important to give your 
self time to think. Make sure you’ve heard and understand the 
question before answering, 
rather than launching off on a 
tangent; clarify the question if 
you have any doubts. If you don’t 
know the answer to a question, 
tell the examiner you don’t know. 
Guessing is risky, especially if 
you say something which could 
be considered dangerous. Don’t 
worry if you can’t answer every 
question – the examiners are try-
ing to explore the 
limits of your 
knowledge.

**‘Don’t be afraid of the examiners asthey are there to help you pass, not to give you a grilling.’**

Frequently in oral examina-
tions there is no regimented 
line of questioning; this is your 
opportunity to guide the exam 
using the answers you give. If 
you are asked to give a differen-
tial diagnosis remember, com-
mon things are common! Don’t 
mention rare mucosal disor-
ders before you mention the 
more common lichen planus/candidosis – the exam-

ers WILL know more about it 
than you and the margin for er-
ror is much greater. They will 
be more interested to hear you 
speak confidently about a disor-
der you are likely to come 
across in every day practice 
rather than give an assortment 
of facts about the weird and 

**Thinking clearly**

A key factor in oral exam 
success is being able to think in 
coherent steps. Examiners 
want to see that candidates can 
think logically. Often you may 
be given what can seem like an 
overwhelming amount of infor-
mation about a patient (records, 
models, radiographs etc). The 
best way to tackle this is to 
bring the information into steps as you would if a 
patient were present; pres-
sentation complaint, his-
tory of complaint, 
medical history, 
social history, 

**Remember, oral examina-
tions offer a unique opportunity 
to demonstrate the extent of your 
knowledge, prepare well and you 
should be fine!**

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