

Oral Assessment

for Every Classroom

A practical guide for middle and high school teachers

Formats · Rubrics · Examiner Tips · Research



Why Oral Assessment — and Why Now?



The AI problem

Generative AI can write a polished essay in seconds. The question 'Did the student understand this?' can no longer be answered by reading their written work alone.

The authenticity solution

Students cannot fake real-time spoken thinking. When a student explains, defends, and responds on the spot, you see genuine understanding not a borrowed draft.

The skills argument

Most employers rank communication as highly, or higher than technical skills. Oral assessment develops the very competencies students need in the workplace and in life.

The equity opportunity

Well-designed oral assessment often reveals capability in students who struggle with written tests such as multilingual learners, students who process differently, and strong verbal thinkers.

Two Families of Oral Assessment



GROUP ORAL ASSESSMENTS

Socratic Seminar

Text-based collaborative inquiry; teacher facilitates, students lead

Fishbowl Discussion

Inner circle discusses; outer circle observes and evaluates

Harkness Method

Oval-table student dialogue; teacher observes and maps contributions

Structured Debate

Two sides build and defend a position; rebuttals required

INDIVIDUAL ORAL ASSESSMENTS

One-on-One Viva / IOA

Student defends their work or explains a concept in conversation with the teacher

Hot Seat / Expert Witness

Student takes on a role (historical figure, scientist, character) and answers questions from peers

Role-Play Scenario

Student performs a real-world task: briefing a committee, advising a client, presenting findings

Verification Oral

Short follow-up to written work: 'Walk me through your reasoning here'

Part One

Group Oral Assessments



Socratic Seminar · Fishbowl · Harkness · Debate

The whole class is the assessment. Every voice is evidence of learning.

Socratic Seminar

Text-centred collaborative inquiry led by students

Fishbowl Discussion

Inner circle performs; outer circle observes and assesses

Harkness Method

Student-driven oval-table dialogue with minimal teacher input

Structured Debate

Structured argumentation and evidence-based rebuttal

The Socratic Seminar



What it is: A student-led discussion anchored in a shared text, image, data set, or primary source. The teacher asks an opening question, then steps back. Students build the conversation together.

HOW IT WORKS

- 1 Students examine the text in advance
- 2 Class sits in a circle — teacher sits outside it
- 3 Opening question: broad, interpretive, no right answer
- 4 Core questions: probe specific details and tensions in the text
- 5 Closing question: personal evaluation — what does this mean for you?
- 6 Students speak to each other, not to the teacher

WORKS IN ANY SUBJECT

English / Humanities

A poem, an essay, a primary source — what does the author value most?

History / Social Studies

A political cartoon, a speech, a photograph — whose story is missing?

Science

A dataset, a case study, an ethical dilemma — what does the evidence actually tell us?

Math

A worked problem with an error — where does the reasoning break down?

Health / Ethics

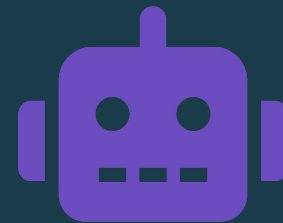
A scenario — what should happen, and why does it matter?

Bonus Section

AI as a Partner in Oral Assessment

Before · During · After · Tools · Cautions

AI does not replace the teacher-student conversation.
It helps you design better ones, give faster feedback, and reach every student.



Three Roles AI Can Play in Oral Assessment



AI is most useful as a preparation and feedback tool, not as an examiner. Think of it as your teaching assistant — one that never sleeps and can handle the time-consuming scaffolding work so you can focus on the conversation itself.

BEFORE	DURING	AFTER
Design smarter, faster	Scale personalised feedback	Analyse and act on patterns
Generate Socratic seminar question sets (opening, core, and closing questions) for any text in seconds	Snorkl: students record voice explanations; AI gives immediate, personalised feedback before the work reaches your desk	Snorkl's analytics dashboard groups students with similar next steps — identify misconceptions at class level, not just individual level
Build debate resolutions, argument frameworks, and rebuttal prompts aligned to your unit	Practice partner: students use Claude or ChatGPT to rehearse answers, get probing questions, and self-evaluate	Paste anonymised transcripts or notes from oral assessments into Claude to identify patterns across responses
Draft viva and hot-seat question banks — with Bloom's Taxonomy or Webb's DOK tiers built in	Socratic Mind (Georgia Tech): AI conducts full oral assessment dialogues and scores against a rubric	Generate tailored feedback comments for individual students based on notes you took during the oral
Create and refine rubrics based on your learning objectives — then test them with sample responses	AI discussion tools can project real-time prompts to re-energise a stalling seminar or fishbowl	Produce differentiated follow-up tasks for students who showed specific gaps during the oral
Produce student-facing scaffolds: sentence starters, preparation guides, question prediction sheets	Formative check-ins: quick voice-recorded responses to an AI prompt at the end of a lesson	Create summary reports for parents or records: 'Here is what we assessed and what your student demonstrated'

AI Before: Prompts You Can Use Right Now



Copy any of these prompts into Claude, ChatGPT, or MagicSchool AI. Replace the bracketed details with your own unit, text, or subject.

Socratic Seminar Questions

"I am a high school [subject] teacher. We have read [text/article/primary source]. Create a Socratic seminar question set: one opening question (accessible, no right answer), four core questions that probe specific tensions in the text, and one closing question asking students to connect the ideas to their own experience. Include a one-line facilitation note with each question."

★ Generates a ready-to-use facilitation guide in under 60 seconds. The facilitation notes are what save you when discussion stalls.

Debate Resolution + Framework

"I am teaching [unit] to [grade level] students. Generate a debate resolution statement, three opening arguments for each side, two anticipated counter-arguments for each side, and rebuttal prompts students can use. The topic is: [topic]. Keep language appropriate for [grade]."

★ Students who see the strongest version of the opposing argument before the debate produce significantly better rebuttals.

Viva / Hot Seat Question Bank

"Create a question bank for a [10-minute] individual oral assessment on [topic] for [grade level]. Include: 3 recall questions (Bloom's Level 1-2), 4 application questions (Level 3-4), 3 evaluation questions (Level 5-6). Each question should have one suggested follow-up probe if the student's answer is shallow."

★ The follow-up probes are the highest-value output. They save you from running out of things to say mid-assessment.

Rubric Builder

"Create a 3-level rubric (Developing / Proficient / Exemplary) for a [format: Socratic seminar / debate / individual viva] in [subject] at [grade level]. The learning objectives are: [objectives]. Include a criterion for use of evidence, quality of reasoning, and listening/response. Add a short teacher note at the bottom about what NOT to grade."

★ Always add the 'what not to grade' clause. AI-generated rubrics often include accent, grammar, or communication style by default — exclude these explicitly.

Snorkl: AI Feedback on Student Voice Explanations



Students record themselves explaining their thinking on a virtual whiteboard — speaking, drawing, and writing. Snorkl's AI analyses the explanation and gives immediate personalised feedback on what was strong, what was unclear, and what to try next. The teacher sees everything.

HOW IT WORKS IN YOUR CLASSROOM

1

Teacher creates a prompt

A question, problem, or concept you want students to explain. Can be created from scratch or from Snorkl's library of standards-aligned activities.

2

Students record their explanation

They speak and draw on the whiteboard simultaneously — showing their process, not just their answer. No time limit.

3

AI gives instant feedback

Students see what they did well and where their reasoning was unclear — before the teacher sees it. Many revise and resubmit immediately.

4

Teacher sees the whole class

Dashboard groups students by similar misconceptions. You see who needs a follow-up conversation — and who already has it figured out.

WHAT TEACHERS SAY

"I used to spend days reading and providing feedback. My students now use Snorkl's immediate feedback to bring their score up before it reaches me."

— Middle school English teacher

"Instant feedback even encourages students to improve their answer without being asked!"

— Ed-tech coach, National Tech Camp 2025

"It's such a great way to find out what students really know — beyond what PhotoMath or AI can fake."

— Math/Science educator

Free (up to 20 activities) · COPPA & FERPA compliant · 40+ languages · K-12 ·
snorkl.app

AI as Oral Practice Partner: Socratic Mind & Beyond



SOCRATIC MIND (Georgia Tech / UCSD)

What it is

An AI-powered oral assessment platform from Georgia Tech that conducts live spoken or text-based dialogues with students, using Socratic questioning to probe depth of understanding.

How it works

Teachers set up questions using Webb's DOK or Bloom's templates. Students engage in a real-time AI conversation. The AI does not accept vague answers — it probes until the student explains their reasoning.

The key design principle

Unlike ChatGPT, Socratic Mind is specifically designed NOT to agree when a student argues long enough. It maintains intellectual pressure.

Results from pilots

77.8% of 600 Georgia Tech students found it more educational than essay questions. 88.2% of students in a GSU pilot preferred it to multiple-choice. 2024 MIT SOLVE winner.

For school teachers

Currently in research phase, not yet a consumer product. But the principle is immediately applicable: students can use Claude or ChatGPT with a specific prompt to simulate the same dynamic.

AI AS STUDENT PRACTICE PARTNER

Share these prompts with students to use Claude or ChatGPT for oral exam practice:

Pre-seminar preparation

"Act as a Socratic facilitator. I have read [text]. Ask me three questions about it — open-ended, no right answer — and probe my first answer with a follow-up before moving to the next question."

Viva practice

"You are preparing me for an oral exam on [topic]. Ask me a question, then — whatever I say — ask 'Why?' or 'Can you give an example?' three times before accepting my answer. Do NOT tell me I am right. Just keep probing."

Debate preparation

"I will be arguing [position] in a debate on [topic]. Play the opposing side and make the strongest possible argument against my position. When I respond, challenge my weakest point and ask for evidence."

Hot seat rehearsal

"You are an audience member and I am [historical figure/character/scientist]. Ask me three questions in character. After each of my answers, ask one follow-up question that someone who disagrees with [figure] would ask."

AI-Powered Discussion & Feedback Tools for Group Orals



MagicSchool AI

Free (generous)

magicschool.ai

Purpose-built AI for teachers. Generates discussion questions, Socratic prompts, debate frameworks, and rubrics. 60+ tools including a Differentiation Assistant for adapting questions to different learner levels.

In your classroom: Generate your Socratic seminar questions in 2 minutes instead of 30. Use the Differentiation tool to create scaffold versions for students who need more support.

Snorkl

Free (20 activities)

snorkl.app

Students record voice + whiteboard explanations; AI gives immediate individual feedback. Analytics dashboard shows class-level misconceptions. Supports 40+ languages. COPPA/FERPA compliant.

In your classroom: Assign as a pre-discussion activity: students explain a concept aloud before the seminar. You arrive knowing who has it, who doesn't, and what the main misunderstanding is.

Eduaide.AI

Free tier

eduaide.ai

All-in-one planning platform with strong rubric builder. Can generate assessment items with Bloom's Taxonomy alignment, co-planning support, and Common Core / NGSS alignment.

In your classroom: Use the rubric builder for Harkness or debate assessments. Share the output as both a teacher guide and a student-facing version — Eduaide generates both separately.

Claude or ChatGPT

Free

claude.ai / chatgpt.com

General-purpose AI that teachers use with specific prompts. More flexible than purpose-built tools but requires prompt engineering. Excellent for question generation, practice dialogues, and feedback drafting.

In your classroom: The most versatile option for experienced users. Paste a student's verbal explanation (from your notes) and ask: 'What are three probing follow-up questions I should ask this student?'

What AI Cannot Do

The human teacher remains irreplaceable in oral assessment



Read the room

AI cannot see a student's face change when a question touches something difficult. It cannot notice that a student who is usually quiet is on the edge of a breakthrough. Human attunement is irreplaceable.

Build the relationship that makes honesty possible

Students take intellectual risks in oral assessment when they trust the person listening. That trust is built over time, in human relationships. No AI can substitute for it.

Distinguish nervousness from ignorance

A student who stumbles on their first answer may be anxious, not incompetent. AI assessment tools consistently report this as a limitation — 83% of NYU students found AI orals more stressful than written exams.

Ask the truly unexpected question

The best follow-up question you ever ask comes from genuinely listening to a specific student in a specific moment. AI questions are adaptive — but they are also probabilistic. They generate what is likely to work, not what is perfect for this student.

Validate the thinking process as it happens

When a teacher leans forward and says 'That's a really interesting way to think about it — say more,' something happens that no algorithm can replicate. That moment of being heard by a human is part of what makes oral assessment powerful.

The principle that guides all of this:

Use AI for the work that takes your time away from students. Save your time for the conversation itself.

Fishbowl Discussion & The Harkness Method



FISHBOWL DISCUSSION

Setup

4–6 students in an inner circle discuss the topic. Everyone else forms the outer circle — their job is to observe, not participate.

The outer circle's role

Each observer tracks a dimension: who builds on others, who uses evidence, who asks good questions. This turns listening into an assessed skill

Switching

Circles rotate halfway through. Outer-circle students who observed what a strong contribution looks like now have to do it themselves.

The 'hot seat' variant

One empty chair in the inner circle — any outer-circle student can claim it at any time to contribute, then must return. Creates energy without chaos

Best for

Controversial topics, rich texts, post-unit discussions where you want every student engaged, even when not speaking.

THE HARKNESS METHOD

Origin

Developed at Phillips Exeter Academy in 1930. Students sit at an oval table. The teacher sits outside the oval, takes notes, and does not join the conversation

What the teacher tracks

Who speaks to whom. Who gets talked over. Who brings the group back on topic. Who invites quieter students in. This map of the conversation IS the assessment

What it demands of students

Students must guide the conversation themselves. When it dies, they have to revive it. This builds exactly the skills they'll need in meetings, seminars, and debates

Adapting for any classroom

Push desks into an oval. Works with 12–33 students. One Chicago teacher used it with 33 students and saw college-readiness test scores surpass benchmark

Best for

Complex texts, ethical debates, cross-subject synthesis. Especially powerful at the end of a unit when students have enough knowledge to disagree meaningfully.

Structured Debate



What makes debate an excellent oral assessment: it requires students to do three things simultaneously — hold their argument, listen to the opponent, and adapt in real time.

A SIMPLE STRUCTURED FORMAT

1

Opening statements

2 min each

Each side states their position clearly with 2–3 supporting reasons

2

Cross-examination

3 min each

Opponents ask questions; teams must respond directly without deflecting

3

Rebuttal

1–2 min each

Address the strongest point the other side made — this is where real thinking shows

4

Closing statements

1 min each

Restate your position incorporating what you've heard

DEBATE TOPICS BY SUBJECT

Science

"Nuclear energy should be part of our climate response"

History

"The dropping of the atomic bomb was justified"

English

"The ends justify the means" — using a novel's characters as evidence

Social Studies

"Social media has done more harm than good to democracy"

Health

"Schools should be responsible for students' mental health"

Part Two

Individual Oral Assessments



One-on-One Viva · Hot Seat · Role-Play · Verification Oral

One student, one conversation. You see exactly what they know and how they think.

- One-on-One Viva: student defends their work in conversation with the teacher
- Role-Play: student performs a real-world professional or civic task
- Hot Seat: student in role answers unpredictable questions from the class
- Verification Oral: brief follow-up to written work to confirm understanding

Hot Seat, Role-Play & Adapted Professional Models



Professional oral assessment models from law and medicine can be directly adapted for school. The principle is the same: students perform real thinking under pressure, for a real audience.

Hot Seat / Expert Witness

Based on courtroom expert witness testimony

How it works:

One student sits at the front in role as a historical figure, scientist, or novel character. The class has prepared questions in advance. The student must answer in character and in depth.

In your classroom:

History: 'You are Rosa Parks — the class will ask you about your decision.' Science: 'You are Darwin, defending natural selection to a skeptical Victorian audience.'

Science Station Oral (adapted from OSCE)

Adapted from the Objective Structured Clinical Examination used in medical schools

How it works:

Students rotate through 3–5 lab stations with different scenarios at each. At each station they must explain their reasoning orally — to the teacher, a peer assessor, or a recording device.

In your classroom:

Biology: 'Explain what you observe in this slide.' Chemistry: 'Walk me through why this reaction happened.' Physics: 'What does this graph tell you?'

Mock Trial / Policy Debate

Adapted from law school moot court

How it works:

Students argue both sides of a policy, historical, or ethical question before a panel of 'judges' (peers, another teacher, community members). Rebuttals are required. Scores based on argument quality, not which side wins.

In your classroom:

Social Studies: 'Should the UN have intervened in Rwanda?' English: 'Is Jay Gatsby guilty of the American Dream or a victim of it?'

Novel & Emerging Formats Worth Knowing



These formats are being piloted in schools and universities right now. They range from low-tech to AI-powered.

The Viva Platform (InitialView)

Episcopal Academy, PA (Substack, 2025)

Students upload a written piece; an AI generates 4 tailored questions based on their own writing; they record video responses. Teachers see both the work and the student explaining it.

In your classroom: Low-lift to pilot: any written assignment can become a mini-oral defence. 'Here is your essay. I'm going to ask you three questions about it.'

Student-Created Podcasts

UK Forensic Science classrooms (2025)

Students produce a short podcast episode explaining a concept, case, or argument. Preferred over traditional oral presentations; deeper engagement and creative expression. Less performance anxiety.

In your classroom: Replace a unit summary essay with a 5-minute podcast. Students write a script, record, and submit. Pair with a short live Q&A to verify understanding.

The Conversational Exam

George Washington University (2025)

Students code or solve problems live while explaining their reasoning aloud in small groups. Access to documentation permitted — just like the real world. Real-time performance cannot be faked.

In your classroom: Lab reports, math problems, coding tasks: 'Solve this in front of me and explain what you're doing as you go.'

AI Voice Oral Exams

NYU Stern (2026 pilot)

A voice AI conducts a 25-minute oral exam, asking about a student's project decisions and an unscripted case study. Cost: ~42 cents per student. Scored by a 'council' of AI models.

In your classroom: Not yet classroom-ready at scale, but signals where the field is heading. Watch this space for 2026–2027 school implementations.

Part Three

Rubrics for Oral Assessment



Group Discussion · Debate · Individual Oral

Good rubrics do two things: tell students what 'excellent' looks like before they speak, and give you consistent evidence to show them afterward.

Tip: Share rubrics with students at least a week before the assessment. Use them as a teaching tool, not just an evaluation tool.

Rubric: Group Discussion (Socratic Seminar, Fishbowl, Harkness)

Criterion	Developing	Proficient	Exemplary
Use of evidence	Makes claims without referring to the text or source material	Supports most claims with a specific reference to the text or data	Uses precise textual evidence to build and extend arguments; distinguishes strong from weak evidence
Building on others	Makes isolated points; rarely connects to what others have said	Responds directly to classmates' ideas; agrees, disagrees, or extends them	Consistently threads ideas together across the discussion; synthesises multiple contributions
Quality of questions	Asks yes/no or factual questions; rarely poses challenges	Asks open-ended questions that move the discussion forward	Asks questions that reveal a gap or tension in the group's thinking; invites deeper analysis
Listening	Frequently restates what has already been said; misrepresents others' points	Accurately represents others' ideas when responding to them	Tracks the arc of the whole discussion; notices patterns and contradictions across contributions
Content knowledge	Demonstrates surface familiarity; makes errors that go uncorrected	Shows solid understanding of the material; self-corrects when challenged	Demonstrates deep, connected knowledge; draws on prior learning to enrich the discussion

Note: Grade the discussion, not the student's personality. Quiet students who build carefully on one point may outperform frequent contributors who repeat themselves.

Rubric: Structured Debate

Criterion	Developing	Proficient	Exemplary
Clarity of argument	Position is unclear or shifts during the debate; reasons are vague	States a clear position with 2–3 distinct, logical reasons	Presents a sharply defined position with well-structured reasoning that holds throughout
Use of evidence	Makes unsupported assertions; evidence is irrelevant or incorrect	Uses relevant facts, data, or examples to support key claims	Selects the most persuasive and precise evidence; explains how evidence supports each claim
Rebuttal	Ignores or dismisses the opponent's argument without engaging with it	Addresses the opponent's main point and explains why it does not defeat their position	Identifies and tackles the strongest version of the opponent's argument; doesn't strawman
Listening & response	Responds to a different point than the one made; appears to not be listening	Accurately represents the opponent's argument before responding	Picks up specific words or phrases from the opponent and engages with precision
Clarity of delivery	Difficult to follow; pace, volume, or organisation makes comprehension hard	Speaks clearly and at an appropriate pace; argument is easy to follow	Confident and fluent; uses pauses and emphasis to make key points land

Important: make clear that the goal is to argue well, not to hold the 'winning' position. Students assigned the side they personally disagree with often learn the most.

Rubric: Individual Oral Assessment (Viva / Hot Seat / Role-Play)

Criterion	Developing	Proficient	Exemplary
Depth of knowledge	Answers are surface-level; relies on memorised phrases without real explanation	Explains concepts accurately; can say more than the 'textbook version'	Demonstrates rich, connected understanding; draws on nuance, exceptions, and context
Reasoning & explanation	States conclusions without explaining how they were reached	Walks through reasoning step by step when asked; makes logic visible	Anticipates follow-up questions; explains not just what but why and how
Response to probing	Shuts down or repeats the same answer when questioned further	Engages with follow-up questions; revises or extends answers when challenged	Treats probing as a thinking opportunity; uses it to demonstrate deeper understanding
Handling uncertainty	Makes something up or becomes silent when unsure	Acknowledges when uncertain; can say what they do know and where the gap is	Distinguishes what they know, what they infer, and what they'd need to find out
Communication	Difficult to follow; uses technical vocabulary incorrectly	Speaks clearly and uses appropriate subject vocabulary accurately	Explains complex ideas simply when needed; adjusts language to suit the question

Accent and grammar are never graded. State this explicitly and in writing before the assessment. Students perform better when they know you're listening to their thinking, not their delivery.

Setting Students Up to Succeed



Most students have rarely been asked to explain their thinking out loud. Anxiety comes from unfamiliarity — not inability. Scaffolding closes that gap.

1 Share the rubric first

- 1 Give students the rubric at the start of the unit, not the day before. Use it as a teaching tool — discuss what 'exemplary' looks like with real examples.

3 Run a practice oral

- 3 A low-stakes mock — pairs, five minutes — before the real thing. Let students use the rubric to evaluate each other. Concrete exposure beats abstract explanation.

5 Give a question bank in advance

- 5 For vivas and hot seats, share 8–10 possible questions in advance. Students prepare for all of them; you choose 3–4 on the day. Reduces anxiety without reducing rigour.

2 Build oral habits into every lesson

- 2 Think-pair-share, turn-and-talk, cold calling with think time. Students who explain ideas daily are not anxious about explaining them in an assessment.

4 Clarify what is and isn't assessed

- 4 State explicitly: accent, grammar, and communication style are not graded. You are assessing their thinking, not their performance style.

6 Frame it as interview prep

- 6 Students who see the oral as a life skill — not just a test — approach it differently. Every job interview, presentation, and team meeting involves exactly this.

Equity: Designing for Every Student



What the research says about equity

Well-designed oral assessments often benefit multilingual learners more than written tests — they can show understanding they can't yet write

Clear rubrics, worked examples, and peer practice benefit all students, not just those with additional needs

Individual questions tailored to each student's own answers reduce the 'one size fits all' problem

Additional time and private settings are easy to implement in oral formats

What to watch and plan for

Students from high-context cultures may view speaking up as risky or disrespectful — frame discussion norms explicitly and culturally sensitively

Anxiety is higher for multilingual students in high-stakes oral formats — low-stakes practice is non-negotiable

Assessor bias (conscious and unconscious) is harder to control in conversation than in anonymised written work — use rubrics, calibrate with a colleague

Social anxiety and communication disorders require flexible pathways — consider written response options or pre-recorded formats

How to Listen Well



Use the 6–8 second pause

After a student stops speaking, count silently before responding. This gives them space to add to their thinking — and prevents you cutting off their best idea.

Attend to non-verbal cues

A pause, a shift in confidence, a half-finished sentence — these often signal where a student is at the edge of their understanding. Note them for follow-up.

Track threads, not just answers

Note when students contradict something they said earlier, or build on it. This is the foundation of any good follow-up question.

Listen to understand, not to evaluate

Temporarily suspend judgment. Your first job is to fully grasp what the student is saying. Assessment comes after comprehension.

Don't nod, say 'exactly', or confirm

Positive signals during a student's answer shape their next one. Keep your expression neutral and attentive. You want to hear their thinking, not a version shaped by your reactions.

Teacher Guide: Asking Good Follow-Up Questions



QUESTION TYPES THAT PROBE DEPTH

"Why is that?"

The single most powerful probing question. Forces reasoning, not recall.

"What would happen if...?"

Tests whether students can apply knowledge to a new scenario.

"Can you say that a different way?"

Students who genuinely understand can paraphrase their own ideas.

"What does that remind you of?"

Activates connections to prior learning and other content areas.

"What does this have to do with what you said earlier?"

Builds coherence — are they integrating their thinking?

"Walk me through your reasoning."

Opens up process thinking; especially useful when an answer feels rehearsed.

FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR FOLLOW-UP

Prepare, but don't script

Have 6–8 open-ended probes ready. If you have nothing prepared, you'll default to yes/no questions under pressure.

Follow the student, not your list

React to what they actually said. The best follow-up questions come from real listening, not a pre-planned checklist.

Individualise your questions

Tailor follow-ups to each student's answer. Equity research shows this is one of the most important design choices you can make.

Ask one thing at a time

'Can you explain that, and also compare it to...?' is two questions. Split them. Students handle each question better when it's clear.

Silence is data

A pause after a question may mean active thinking, not failure. Resist the urge to rephrase or simplify too quickly.

Key Sources & Further Reading



IOA Research

[Eachempati et al. \(2025\) — Advances in Physiology Education — Reimagining oral exams in the AI era](#)

[Krautloher \(2024\) — Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice — Equity and the IOA \(McCES framework\)](#)

[Kofinas et al. \(2025\) — British Journal of Educational Technology — GenAI and authentic assessment integrity](#)

[Ward et al. \(2023/24\) — Innovations in Education & Teaching International — IOA case studies](#)

Traditional Formats

[National Paideia Center — paideia.org — Socratic Seminar planning, facilitation, and assessment guides](#)

[Facing History & Ourselves — Fishbowl discussion strategy guide with classroom video examples](#)

[Phillips Exeter Academy — The Harkness Method in practice \(harkness.exeter.edu\)](#)

[Harvard Law School Ames Moot Court — model for structured oral argumentation and advocacy](#)

Novel Formats & Teacher Tools

[Episcopal Academy CTL Substack — 'When Assessment Becomes a Conversation' \(VIVA platform pilot, Dec 2025\)](#)

[Barba & Stegner \(2025, arXiv\) — The Conversational Exam: live coding + oral explanation](#)

[Frontiers in Education \(2024\) — Student-created podcasts as oral assessment in the AI era](#)

[University of Melbourne CSHE — Interactive Oral Assessment practitioner guide \(melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au\)](#)

The Bottom Line for Every Teacher



You already have the most important tool: the ability to ask a good question and listen carefully.

The format matters less than the quality of the conversation you create.

Start small. One fishbowl. One hot seat. One quick viva after a key assignment.

Then build the rubric, share the rubric, teach to the rubric.

■ Share rubrics before, not after

■ Explicitly state what is NOT graded

■ Practice orals at low stakes first

■ Follow students' thinking, not your script

Sources: Eachempati et al. (2025) · Krautloher (2024) · Kofinas et al. (2025) · Ward et al. (2023/24) · National Paideia Center · U. Melbourne CSHE · Kluger & Itzhakov (2022) · Episcopal Academy CTL Substack