



# Outside the Bandwidth

## Oral Examination Procedure

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In these brief notes the purposes of an oral examination are set forth and practical rules for conducting one are given. Careful attention to the elementary rules is necessary in order to assure a truly successful examination. From the standpoint of each individual examiner the basic purposes of the oral examination are: to make the examiner appear smarter and trickier than either the examinee or the other examiners, thereby preserving his self esteem, and to crush the examinee thereby avoiding the messy and time-wasting problem of post-examination judgment and decision.

Both of these aims can be realized through diligent application of the following time-tested rules:

- 1) Before beginning the examination, make it clear to the examinee that his whole professional career may turn on his performance. Stress the importance and formality of the occasion. Put him in his proper place at the outset.
- 2) Throw out your hardest question first. (This is very important. If your first question is sufficiently difficult or involved, he will be too rattled to answer subsequent questions, no matter how simple they may be.)
- 3) Be reserved and stern in addressing the examinee. For contrast, be very jolly



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- with the other examiners. A very effective device is to make humorous comments to the other examiners about the examinee's performance, comments which tend to exclude him and set him apart, as through he were not present in the room.
- 4) Make him answer each problem your way, especially if your way is esoteric. Constrain him. Impose many limitations and qualifications in each question. The idea is to complicate an otherwise simple problem.
- 5) Force him into a trivial error and then let him puzzle over it for as long as possible. Just after he sees his mistake, but just before he has a chance to

explain it, correct him yourself, disdainfully. This takes real perception and timing, which can only be acquired with some practice.

- 6) When he finds himself deep in a hole, never lead him out. Instead, sigh, and shift to a new subject.
- 7) Ask him snide questions, such as, "Didn't you learn that in Freshman Calculus?"
- 8) Do not permit him to ask you clarifying questions. Never repeat or clarify your own statement of the problem. Tell him not to think out loud, what you want is the answer.
- 9) Every few minutes, ask him if he is nervous.
- 10) Station yourself and the other examiners so that the examinee cannot really face all of you at once. This enables you to bracket him with a sort of binaural crossfire. Wait until he turns away from you towards someone else, and then ask him a short direct question. With proper coordination among the examiners it is possible under favorable conditions to spin the examinee through several complete revolutions. This has the same general effect as item 2 above.
- 11) Wear dark glasses. Inscrutability is unnerving.
- 12) Terminate the examination by telling the examinee, "Don't call us; we will call you."



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