

# The Oral Irish Examination

## Hints, Strategies, Techniques

The Oral Irish examination will determine, to a greater or lesser extent, how well you are going to fare in your Leaving Certificate Irish Examination. If you do well in your Oral examination, then it will be extremely difficult not to succeed at the subsequent written examination.

There are quite distinctive advantages to doing the Oral Irish examination, and I am listing some of them now in order to allay the natural fears many students have of a one-to-one examination.

- In the first instance, the Oral Irish examination is held in March or April every year. This gives you the opportunity to concentrate on the oral aspects of your Leaving Certificate course more or less exclusively, knowing that once it is over you can re-direct your attentions to the written examinations which are still the best part of three months away.
- Secondly, the proportion of marks given for the Oral Irish Examination is very generous. Students sometimes do not realise that the Oral Irish examination carries a full quarter of the total marks available for the subject. In other words, it is possible to have a maximum of 150 marks safely “under your belt” before you even put pen to paper at the June examination.

To get this into context, and to show how important it is to try to do well at your Oral Irish examination, just consider the following:

There are 600 marks going for Irish; 150 of them go for the Oral Irish examination, and 450 marks are available at the written June examination between Papers One and Two and the Aural test.

If you are an average student, or even a weak student who can show that you have prepared well for the Oral Irish examination, it is possible that you will score something in the region of 100 out of the possible 150 marks at the Oral Irish examination. In order to pass Irish you need 40%. 40% of 600 is 240. If you have achieved an average mark of 100 at the Oral Irish examination, then all you need to score at the written examination in order to get a D grade is 140 marks – and that is out of the two written papers (including the Aural test)! Surely this cannot be considered too difficult for any student who has put a fair degree of work into the course.

With the same average mark of 100, all that is needed to clock up an honour (C) grade is an extra 230 marks; a B grade can be got by scoring 320 out of 450 marks. If you are aiming for an A grade, however, the requirement is 510 marks – so if your Oral Irish examination mark is only the average 100, you will have left yourself with a very difficult task to score 410 out of 450 marks at the written tests.

Remember also that the Oral Irish examination is common to Pass and Honours students, and that, therefore, the marks achieved during the progress of this 15-minute test are either Pass or Honours marks, depending on the level for which you opt.

- A third major point to demonstrate the importance of the Oral Irish examination is that during this examination it is you, the student, who is “in the driving seat”. What I mean is that, with good preparation and a little cunning, it should be possible for you to steer the examination to flow in the direction you wish. You will be choosing the five passages from which you will have to read one. If you are astute enough you should also be able to choose generally the subjects about which you will talk. There will be more about this later.

You should also bear in mind that your “dreaded examiner” is an Irish teacher from another school who earns his/her living by teaching students just like you. The examiner understands the difficulties facing you, and is invariably sympathetic to your plight. Remember - the examiner’s own students are going through a similar ordeal in his/her own school.

The Oral Irish examination is not a test in knowledge as such. You do not need to know all about current affairs or the world’s economic problems, for example. The test is

an attempt to assess your ability to talk in Irish and, truthfully, the subject matter is of little importance. Neither is it a truth test – you can tell the examiner just about anything you like. The examiner neither knows nor cares for instance, where you spent your summer holidays last year - nor what your career hopes are. What you must do is talk, and talk with fluency. Fluency is more important in the marking scheme than accuracy. Do not, therefore, sacrifice fluency in the hope of avoiding grammatical errors.

Finally, before going on to deal with Hints, Strategies and Techniques for scoring well at the Oral Irish examination, I want to stress to you the statistical fact that it is much more *difficult to fail* the Oral Irish examination than to pass it.

I will now take you through the Oral Irish examination step by step, and I will offer comhairle do leasa (good advice) on each respective aspect of the test.

When you have entered the examination room you should say “Dia is Muire duit, a dhuine uasail”, and be prepared to give your Ainm and Examination Number as Ghaeilge to the examiner. You will be offered a seat, and you should say “Go raibh maith agat” as you sit down.

- Obviously, you must know your numbers through Irish.

## Prescribed Prose Reading

You will choose which set of five passages from which you wish to read. The examiner will select a passage therefrom for you to read.

You should have decided well in advance of the test on the set of passages on you wish to be examined, and you should have practised reading them **out loud**.

Many students can read quietly to themselves with efficiency and with total understanding, but find themselves faced with major difficulties when confronted with oral reading. The only solution to this is **practice**.

You can expect to be given approximately one minute to read the selected passage to yourself before reading it aloud, so take all the time that you are allowed. Use this time to read the passage, to mentally figure out any words or phrases which may cause you trouble, and to get an overall meaning of the passage. You will be using your own prose book, so place a mark on it to show the start and the end of the excerpt you are to read.

- If you feel more comfortable, you may stand while reading.

If you have had good practice at reading out loud during the period of your Course, the maximum marks under this section could be awarded to you without any undue hardship on your part.

### Technique:

Read a passage or two – out loud – twice or three times each week during the school year. Record the passages on tape. Listen to them carefully. If your reading is weak, ask your teacher, or some friend who is good at reading, to help you.

Listen to An Nuacht being read on the radio and on television, and try to emulate the easy and natural style of reading out loud. Listen to professionally produced CDs of actors reading the excerpts, and copy their style of reading.

Tape yourself reading the same excerpts, and compare yourself to the professionals.

Be satisfied with nothing but the best!

## Unprescribed Conversation

At this stage the examiner will, through careful questioning, try to strike up a conversation with you. Your “first nerves” will, hopefully have disappeared by now.

*The most solid piece of advice you can now be given is to relax, and try to treat the test as an ordinary conversation, and not as an inquisition.*

Remember, the examiner will be as reluctant as you are to have awkward silences in the room, so he/she will feed you questions to keep you talking. Try to avoid “yes” and “no” type answers – these will lead the conversation nowhere! Talk – give opinions, stress facts, tell lies – but talk! It is an Oral Irish examination, and the examiner can mark only what is heard, so you

must keep talking. You should try to give at least a three-sentence answer to any question that comes up.

For example:

Examiner: An bhfuil aon suim agat i gcursaí polaitíochta? (Have you any interest in politics?)

Your answer to such a question will depend not on whether or not you are interested in politics, but on whether or not you are willing and prepared to talk about politics in Irish. Suppose that you are interested in politics, you could say something like this:

**Tusa:** Tá suim an-mhór agam i gcursaí polaitíochta. Is breá liom a bheith ag féachtaint ar an Nuacht ar an teilifís agus a bheith ag léamh na nuachtáin faoi chursaí polaitíochta. Is é Prime Time an clár is fearr liom. Ceapaim go bhfuil obair an-mhaith á dhéanamh ag na Teachtaí Dála

That type of response would almost certainly bring a response from the examiner asking you what kind of work a T.D. does. In this way, you can lead the conversation!

Alternatively, you may not wish to talk about politics, so you might answer something like this:

**Tusa:** Níl suim an-mhór agam i gcursaí polaitíochta. Níl am agam le bheith ag féachtaint ar an teilifís nó le bheith ag léamh na nuachtáin faoi chursaí polaitíochta. Táim ró-ghnóthach ag staidéar don Ardteist mar tá torthaí mhaithe ag teastáil uaim. Teastaíonn uaim a bheith i mo Chuntasóir.

The examiner will then be very inclined to ask you either (a) why you want to be an accountant or (b) what work an accountant does. As far as you are concerned, virtually the same answer would suffice for either query.

Technique:

Answer the examiner's question, but be prepared to use your answer to lead to the next question which you would like to answer. Have your preparation done well, and the examiner will usually co-operate with you.

**Do not go into the Oral Irish examination with the intention of using a piece that you have learned off by heart** so that when

you are asked a question you use the first opportunity you get to "trot it out". No marks are generally given for "oral essays", and you could be just using up precious time during which you could be adding to your total marks. By all means, prepare your material. In fact, you would be most foolish not to prepare your answers and your vocabulary. However, be sure that what you say is in the form of a conversation.

If you do not understand the examiner's question, say so (Ní thuigim). The question might then be re-phrased for you in a way which you will understand.

**Do not** introduce any subject about which you are not able/willing to speak. Do not, for example, tell the examiner that you are very interested in snooker if you cannot tell how a game of snooker is played, and if you are not sure of your colours in Irish!

### Some Hints:

1. Always say something in response to a question.
2. Fluency is far more important than being word- and syntax-perfect.
3. You could probably survive the Modh Coinníollach question with just a verb or two!
4. Anticipate questions. Do not wait until you are asked a question before you consider the answer. For example, have an answer ready for “Céard a dhéanfaidh tú nuair a fhágfaidh tú an scoil?” and for all such likely questions.
5. Use “props”. Wear a badge, a brooch or a ring that may attract the attention of the examiner, and be prepared to talk about it. You might like to wear a “No smoking” badge or a Fáinne or a Pioneer pin. The conversation could easily be steered into a discussion on the dangers of smoking, the opportunities for speaking Irish in your area, or the problems of underage drinking – topics that you will, of course have prepared! If you are unfortunate enough to have your arm or leg in a plaster at the time of the Oral Irish examination, be sure that you are in a position to tell the examiner how the accident came about, because you are almost certainly going to be asked!
6. Know your numbers, the principal colours, the days of the week, the months and the seasons of the year through Irish. Know which is your favourite time of the year, and why.
7. Know the names through Irish of all the subjects you are doing in school, which subjects you prefer and which you dislike most, and why.
8. Because you are having a conversation with a stranger, you can expect more or less the same style of opening questions, e.g., name, where you live, place in family, how you travel to school, what you see on your way to school, what you want to do when you leave school, what subjects you are doing in school, etc. *There is little justification for not getting close to 100% for these types of questions.*
9. If you are asked a “hard question”, for example about the current state of international relations, do not despair. You have already passed the Oral Irish examination, and the examiner is just trying to give you extra marks. The good examiner will try to stretch you to the limits of your ability so that the highest possible mark can be given to you.
10. Use as many verbs as possible in your answers. Examiners love to hear a variety of verbs in the conversation.
11. Speak out in a clear, natural voice so that the examiner can easily understand you. Do not be intimidated by the presence of a tape recorder. All students must be recorded. This is done so that the Examinations Commission can be sure that the standards used by your examiner are exactly the same as those of every other examiner country-wide.
12. Demonstrate to the examiner that you have tried, and you can be sure that you will do well.

13. Listen attentively to the examiner and try to answer in the appropriate tense.
14. Present yourself well – be mannerly – make a good impression.
  - Obviously at the Oral Irish examination there can be now provision for awarding marks under this heading. It is also true, however, that in all examinations the examiner's impression of you may have some influence. It does no harm to have such an impression working for you rather than against you.
15. Practise speaking Irish well in advance of your test. If you find yourself waiting with some others for your turn to go into the examination room talk quietly so as not to disturb others, but talk – in Irish!
16. An odd word of English will, generally, do you no harm; but remember, it is a test to assess your ability to speak Irish.
17. Don't keep your eye on your watch wondering how much time there is to go – let a conversation develop and you will be surprised at how the time passes so quickly.
18. Most Oral Irish examiners want to give the candidate the highest possible mark for their performance. You must help the examiner by speaking Irish as well and as fluently as you can.

## Marking Scheme

In summary, a total maximum of 150 marks is available for the Oral Irish examination (compared with a maximum of 450 for the written papers – including the Aural test), as follows:

Reading: 30 marks

Conversation:

Cumas: 35 marks

Stór Gaeilge: 85 marks