

Revision Handbook



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Dear Year 11 and IB students,



This booklet is intended to help you revise effectively and achieve the best possible grades for all of your exams.

Please take the time to read it carefully and try some of the tips inside.*

Every individual has a style of revision which suits them.

It is important that you find what works best for you. Your teachers will be available in lessons and at revision sessions and intervention sessions in order to help you and answer any questions you may have. You can email your teachers who will arrange to meet you or reply in writing to any questions you may have.

Work hard in your revision and you will then enjoy your exams.



* The source of much of the material in this booklet is *The Study Skills Handbook* by Stella Cottrell.

Individual memory styles

We each have a combination of memory strategies that work best for us. We each use varied strategies to remember different kinds of information.

Activity: how do you remember things?

Try to recall each of the items 1-6. After each one, note down what you did to help you remember.

1. What is your best friend's phone number?
2. How do you use a pencil sharpener?
3. What was your first day at school like?
4. What did you wear yesterday?
5. Where are your best clothes now?
6. How do you get to the nearest postbox?

You probably used different strategies to remember the phone number than to recall your first day at school. You may have used some of the following strategies - if not, experiment with them now.

Fact Strategies

Many techniques may help in learning a fact such as a telephone number. You might try:

- Chanting the rhythm of the number.
- Using your fingers to map out the pattern of movements needed to dial the number.
- Seeing the number in your mind.
- Hearing your voice saying the number.
- Drawing out the digits with your finger.
- Writing the number down quickly.
- Noting any memorable peculiarity of the number, such as a repeated pattern (2727) or a reversible number (1331).
- Noting any smaller numbers of personal significance to you, such as the year you were born or a relative's house number, contained within the number.

Event Strategies

Trying to recall your first day at school may have called up different types of memory.

- The emotional memory of the event may have come to mind - your excitement at starting school, or your distress at being left by your mother, or your fear of the teacher. You might experience this physically in your body, as a tightening of the stomach muscles, for example, or a change in your breathing.
- You may have a strong visual memory of the journey to the school, or of moments during the first day. These may run through your head like a film or a series of snapshots.
- You may be able to hear the noises of the school the shouts in the playground, or the school bell. You may remember certain smells, or even the taste of chalk on your fingers.

Other Strategies

In remembering the six items you may have used quite different strategies.

- To remember how to use a pencil sharpener you may have moved your hands to guide you through the sequence of movements.
- To remember what you wore, you may have recalled the place where you were.
- To remember where your clothes are now, you probably used a mixture: visual recall of where they usually are, and a check through your memory of recent events to see if there was any reason why they might be somewhere else.
- For the postbox, you may have visualised the local geography, or remembered a time you posted a letter, or imagined the walk to the box, or repeated instructions under your breath.



How good do you think your memory is in general? Where do you feel your memory strengths lie?

What helps you remember things? Here's a simple way to find out.

- Colour in 10 words on this word chart.
- Read through the chart for 2 minutes and cover it completely.
- Write down all the words you can remember.
- Read the following section as you check your results.



What helps you remember?

Look at the words you recalled. Does the selection of words you remembered suggest that you used any of the strategies below? If so, you have valuable clues about how you can arrange information you want to recall.

Your memory may be assisted by any or all of the following:

- **Recency effect:** You may have remembered best the words you learnt last. particularly good memory for names.
- **Primacy effect:** You may have remembered best the words you learnt first.
- **Sound:** You may have remembered rhyming words, odd-sounding words, or words that you heard together in your head.
- **Visual features:** You may have noticed the look of a word (such as the words in capitals or those with shapes around them).
- **Visual association:** You may have linked words with pictures or mental images.
- **Locus (place):** You may have associated a word with a place you know.
- **Visual arrangement:** You may have remembered where items were on the page. (If so, you may find it easy to recall flowcharts or pattern notes, or be helped by visual spacing or making links with a picture.)
- **Real names:** You may have a

- **Semantic association:** You may have remembered words with meaningful associations, such as bread, butter, sandwich.
- **Being bizarre and unusual:** You may have noticed odd things, such as the words 'pong' and 'glink' which stand out. (If you did, you may find it helpful to link ordinary things with bizarre images or sounds.)
- **Stories:** You may have linked unrelated items so that they made a story. (This can help with the letters of a difficult spelling. For example, 'liaise': Liam Is Always In Such Ecstasy.)
- **Colour and activity:** If you remembered several of the words you coloured in, you may be sensitive to colour; or perhaps you benefit from doing things with information you are learning.
- **Musical association:** Did you try singing or chanting information to tunes you know?

Improve your memory

Memory Aids

Particular practices can help you remember things. Below are some that are well know, and you may have others of your own.

- **Self-awareness:** Know what tricks and methods you already use to remember things.
- **Repetition or over-learning:** This is essential. Go over information at least three times. Check back often for short lengths of time (rather than once for a long time).
- **Association:** Link what you need to remember with something you already know.
- **Mnemonics:** Any trick to help you remember is a mnemonic (pronounced nem-on-ic). One common mnemonic is to use the first letter of each keyword to make a new 'word' that sums up the whole subject. It doesn't matter if the letters don't make a real word.
- **Active listening:** Discuss what you're trying to learn with friends. Listen to your voice saying or reading it. Tape yourself. Exaggerate. Use accents. Be dramatic.
- **Writing things down:** In your own words, write things out over and over again.
- **Personalising it:** Relate what you learn to yourself. (For example in what way does it affect you? Does it remind you of someone you know, or somewhere you have been?)
- **Play:** Play with information. Look for the fun in it. Relax and enjoy the process.

Think about advertisements

Advertising agencies deliberately set out to make us remember their advertisements. The 'tricks' and 'devices' they employ to prompt our memory can also be used to help us to remember what we study.

Devices used by advertisers

Which of these devices are most effective in helping you remember?

- Music
- Simple Stories
- Jokes/puns/humour
- Childhood memories
- Visual images
- Repetition repetition repetition
- Invitations to interact:
competitions, encouragement
to identify with characters,
encouragement to phone in

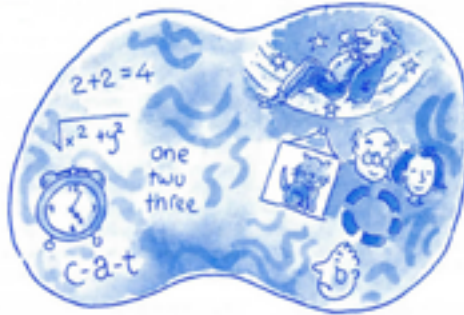


Using the brain

'Left brain'

Logical thinking style

- sequence
- logic
- analysis
- numbers
- lyrics of songs
- language
- names
- calculation
- sense of time
- reasoning
- chemical formulae



'Right brain'

Gestalt thinking style

- seeing the whole
 - metaphor
 - synthesis
- image, colour
- tune and rhythm
- some language
 - faces
 - intuition
 - emotion
 - imagination
- pattern recognition
- visuo-spatial skills

Left brain - right brain

The brain is divided into two hemispheres, left and right. Research into brain damage shows that different mental functions are affected depending on which hemisphere is damaged. This understanding led to the idea that each hemisphere is generally associated with particular thinking and memory styles.

- The two hemispheres are linked by over 200 million nerve fibres (known as the corpus callosum).
- There is a crossover effect: each hemisphere controls the opposite side of the body.
- The body is designed to help the two hemispheres to work together.
- Each hemisphere is also skilled in the mental capacities of the other hemisphere.

The hemispheres work together

Most activities involve using both hemispheres. For example, to remember a song, you need to bring together both the lyrics (left hemisphere) and the tune (right hemisphere). To remember a person, you need to link the face (right hemisphere) and the name (left hemisphere). If something in one part of the brain makes learning difficult, the brain has a tremendous capacity for finding a different route to learning.

This suggests that if something proves difficult to learn or memorise in one way, there is likely to be a different way your brain could learn it.

Many people identify more with either the logical or the Gestalt thinking style. Do you think you are more 'left brain' or 'right brain' dominant? You can use your preferred style to link information across the hemispheres. This encourages the parts of the brain to work better together and makes learning easier.

Using the left and right brain to improve memory

Although the brain uses both hemispheres for almost any activity, you can encourage this process, giving greater brain integration, and making use of more of your brain.

Locate the information in the brain

Try this experiment. While trying to visualise or recall information, first look up and to the left; then do the same but looking up and to the right. Also try looking left, then right, and then down to each side.

Which direction worked best? Does this hold true for different kinds of information? When you need to recall something, look first in the direction that is appropriate for you for that specific kind of information.

If you have a 'left brain' preference

- Write out the information by hand.
- Turn the information into lists.
- Number items of information so that the sequence is clear.
- Use headings to break up the information into different categories.
- Turn information into flow diagrams so you can see progression.
- Build up from details until you get the whole picture.



If you have a 'right brain' preference

- Draw a diagram or picture to show how varied information links up.
- Personalise information - find a way to make it relevant to your own life or experience.
- Use shape and colour to highlight and organise information.
- Use different colours for different topics.
- Sing the information you have to learn.
- Move around as you learn - try to recall what you have just learnt as you do the housework or walk to the bus stop.

For optimum memory, combine different methods

Whatever your left- or right-brain preference, find a way of linking those skills to the skills associated with the other side. For example, if you are a picture thinker, number and sequence your pictures. If you use lists, then sing or colour them.

'Left brain' thinkers need to ensure they have the whole picture and can see how everything fits together. 'Right brain' thinkers need to ensure they appreciate the sequence, order, and hierarchy of importance. When learning something, combine a mixture of memory strategies.

Look at it, repeat it with rhythm, **write it**, number it, **give it a shape**, turn it into a diagram, **say it aloud**, sing it, **draw it**, colour it, **act it out**, make it bizzare.

Strategies of the memory process

Another way of using the brain to improve memory is to work with the different stages in the memory process.

Four stages in the memory process:

1. **Taking in information** - noticing or attending to information, and absorbing it.
2. **Retaining it** - in short term memory.
3. **Encoding it** - interacting with the information in working memory so that the brain can store it in long term memory.
4. **Recalling it** - retrieving or remembering information, whether of purpose, by accident, or in dreams. Recall can seem accurate even when it is not.

Stage 1: Taking information in

What we already know and have a name for affects how we direct our attention, what we notice, and therefore what goes into memory. We need to maintain our attention in order to remember. If you study on 'automatic pilot', little attention is involved so you will remember less. You will remember more if you:

- Direct your attention consciously and purposefully.
- Focus in a relaxed way - not with hard concentration.
- Take breaks and make changes in what you are doing, so as to maintain relaxed attention - a few minutes moving around or doing something different is sufficient.
- Link information to what you know.
- Give names and labels to information.
- Deliberately arrange or adapt information so that it is structured and yet stands out as odd, distinct, different or more interesting, so that it grabs your attention.

Stage 2: Retaining information long enough to remember it

Rehearsing new information in short-term memory helps the working memory hold onto it. Repeating it gives the brain time to call up stored memories to help you make sense of the information and encode it for storage.

Rehearsal must start within a few seconds, as information fades quickly. Rehearsal is a useful strategy for holding onto names, dates, numbers, formulae and instructions for long enough to write them down. You can then employ other memory strategies to remember the information long-term.

Stage 3: Encoding information - the key to memory?

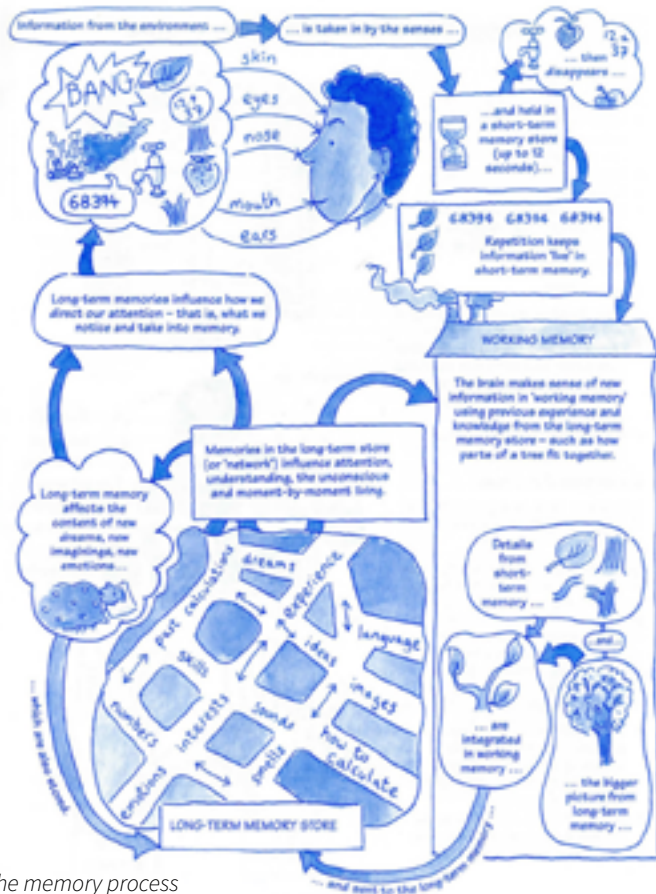
The brain encodes new information so that it can be represented in the memory. Codes may be oral, auditory, kinaesthetic (using touch and feelings), verbal, semantic (related to meaning), visual, emotional, or motor (using a muscle sequence). For example, when you tell a story, the brain encodes the pattern of fine-muscle movements you used to speak and stores them. It can also encode and store the sound of your speech on your own ear; the images and emotions which the story brought to mind; the look of the text; and details such as who was in the room or the buzzing of a neon light. The brain links information it has encoded - so any one aspect could trigger the whole memory later. The more facets of an experience the brain has encoded, the more triggers there are to memory.

Suggestions for multiple encoding

Use your environment

- Use a different room for each subject.
- Notice aspects of the environment such as the light or feel of the room - how do you feel in that place?
- Attach your notes to the furniture. Notice their location.
- Associate a different location with each subject. Associate furniture, windows, plants and ornaments with particular topics.





Stages of the memory process

Use your clothes

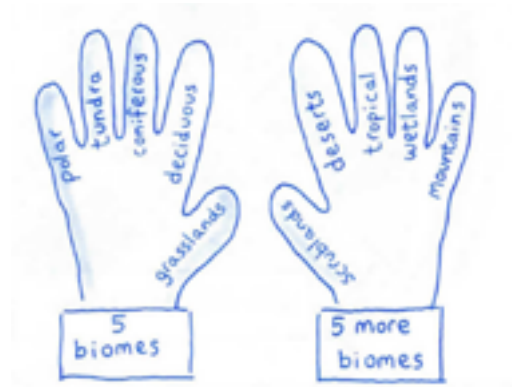
- Associate items of clothing with topics in your learning, a shoe could represent one aspect of foreign policy; each button on a shirt could represent a quotation. Clothes with patterns, pockets and buttons are especially useful.



- Wear these clothes into the exam room as a memory trigger.

Use the parts of your body

- Parts of your body are especially helpful as triggers to memory, as your body will be there in the exam room. For example, each hand could represent an essay plan - each finger one major topic; each segment of each finger a principal reference you would use. The fingernails could represent counter arguments; the knuckles could be associated with relevant quotations.



Use motor memory

- Study on the move. If you exercise, associate each movement with something you wish to remember. To refresh the memory, go through the exercise in your mind.
- Writing, drawing and speaking also use motor memory: the fine-muscle sequence is recorded by the brain.

Use auditory memory

- Using a digital recorder, record yourself and then play this recording back.
- Sing an essay plan for a possible exam essay to a well known tune. Make a list of which tunes go with each subject.
- Go over a topic with a real or imaginary friend, or your cat.
- Read notes aloud in peculiar voices.

Use visual memory

- Make page layouts clear and attractive.
- Turn your material into a film sequence that you can watch in your mind's eye.
- Assign to a topic an object such as a car, and label different bits of the object with the things you need to remember; the driving wheel with your main point; the four wheels with four main theorists; the doors with examples of practical applications of the theory; items in the boot could remind you of background information or historical development; and parts of the engine or objects on the front seat could indicate future developments.



- To remember complex lists and formulae, such as accountancy balance sheets, use a sequence of images linked by a story.
- Use scale (size) and visually distinct images to separate out similar or confusing material, such as information about similar theories. Arrange these in a visual hierarchy.



Use Colour

- Assign each subject area a different combination of colours.
- You may find it useful to use a given colour for references or for formulae throughout your notes, so that you can spot them easily.
- Give each theme a different colour. As each theme appears, highlight it in the colour you allocated to it. You can then see at a glance which pages cover what, and which combinations of themes come up together. This makes reading more interactive, and finding information faster.
- Use colour on pattern notes or in concept pyramids to indicate information of similar types or levels. Organising your information clearly in this way can aid recall. You may also find that you remember different colour combinations easily.
- To help you recall sequences of information, use colour combinations that are familiar to you, such as the rainbow, traffic lights, or the order of stripes on national flags.

Use verbal memory

- Reduce information to keywords.
- Organise information into hierarchies under headings.
- Write out your information in the fewest words possible - this process encourages interaction with the material.

Use semantic memory

- Spend time considering the implications of what you have found out. For example, who is affected? What would it mean for the future? What changes might arise? What theories could this information overturn? What are the moral, legal or ethical consequences?
- Think of a different way of saying what you have already written.
- Decide which are the three most important aspects of the subject, or the most important theories or ideas. Then decide which is the one most important.
- Consider all the ways in which one area of a subject is similar to another.

Stage 4: Recall

Good recall is linked to how much attention and awareness you bring to the process of taking in information and encoding it.

Over-learning to aid recall

If you want to recall information at will, such as for exams or for complicated sequences that you use regularly, you may need to ‘over-learn.’

Strategy for overlearning

1. Make a set of pattern notes or an outline for an essay plan on a large index card or on paper, so that you have an overview.
2. Write names, dates and keywords for the references for each topic on index cards. Check that you can recite or reproduce the information on the card from memory.
3. If you can't, put the prompt card into a plastic folder (so it won't get smudged) and carry it around with you. Glance at it briefly in spare moments, such as at the bus stop or while doing the dishes.
4. Do this several times over a few days. Just looking at the prompt from time to time, or running the information through your head, will keep the memory fresh. Little and often is more effective than simply repeating the information over and over on one occasion.

If the information is hard to remember, there is probably a way of encoding it that suits you better, so experiment with something different.

Revision and exams

This part of the booklet offers you opportunities to:

- Consider some advantages of examinations.
- Become aware of some common pitfalls - and learn how to avoid them.
- Develop ideas for approaching revision in the long term and in the build-up to exams.
- Consider other preparation needed apart from revision.
- Develop strategies and techniques to help during the exam itself.
- Learn ways of managing stress in order to facilitate your learning.
- Feel you have some control over the exam experience.

The prospect of examinations can be extremely stressful, whether you have performed well or badly in the past. You may even feel resentful - that it is a waste of your time, or that you know the material but can not show your knowledge under exam conditions. Understanding the reasons for exams, being aware of ways that exams can be an advantage to you, and knowing you have some control over the process, can help to create the positive mindset needed for a successful exam experience.

The purpose of exams

The main purpose of exams is for teachers/tutors to check that you have understood the work covered on the course and that the work which demonstrates this is entirely your own.

Preparing for exams involves a high release of energy and an unusual degree of focus, which produces a very intense kind of learning. That focus and intensity are not easy to reproduce under any other conditions.

Some advantages of examinations

There are some positive benefits in exams:

- You can not be expected to give very long or detailed answers in exams: you need to use less information than in a comparable piece of coursework . As a result, less in- depth research and reading may be needed than if you were set additional coursework.
- You don't have to write out references or bibliographies in full at the end.
- Examiners are generally more sympathetic about scrawled handwriting, minor grammatical errors, spellings, and forgotten details than teachers/tutors are for coursework.
- Compared with continual assessment, there is less pressure on you throughout the year.

What does revision involve?

The pressure of the exam stimulates you to draw together the strands of your study, and to acknowledge areas that need more work. You can view this pressure negatively, as stress and the likelihood of failure, or positively - as a challenge encouraging you to heighten your own expertise. As an exam approaches, it is useful to make adequate preparations.

- Organise your notes. The process of sorting out what is essential from what is interesting in a general way reminds you of what you have covered.
- Reduce your notes to key headings, points and references (name and date only).
- Make master cards with key memory triggers for whole topics. These can be in the form of pattern notes or concept pyramids.
- Check your own learning. Work interactively with materials, then write out or tape what you have learnt. Check back to your notes and find the areas you omitted. Write and check three times to build up your memory.

Use past exam papers

Past papers are your best resource. At first the wording of exam papers can be off-putting; questions may seem vague as they cannot 'give away the answer.' It is important to get used to this style well in advance of the exam.

- Remember that each question links to an area of the course. You need to find that link and consider which issues the question is directing you towards.
- Look for patterns of recurring questions.
- What is the minimum number of topics you can revise to answer the paper?

Select what to revise

The revision process is primarily one of selection.

- Select which topics you are going to revise . If you will need to answer three exam questions revise at least five topics.
- Work out answers to a range of possible exam questions for each topic, so that you feel able to deal with almost any question that might be set on the topics you have chosen.
- Select the most important theories, references and evidence for each topic. It is much easier to do this before the exam than during it.
- Organise the selected information so that it is easier to remember.

Draw up a timetable

Work out exactly how much time you have to revise, given potential 'emergencies', and time to relax.

- If they carry equal marks divide the time equally between the subjects you are studying, and then between the selected topics.
- Set aside time for practising past papers.
- Read about time management.

Build up writing speed

Quality and relevance is more important than quantity. Concise answers can get high marks. However, if you are used to word-processing most of your work, your handwriting speed may have diminished. Practising timed essays - or writing anything at speed every day will help build the muscles needed for handwriting at speed.

New reading just before the exam

Opinion varies on whether you should read new material just before exams. It can keep your thinking fresh and bring your work in to perspective. If reading new material confuses you, however, just focus on the notes you have already.

Effective revision

Ten common pitfalls in revision...

...and how to avoid them

1. **Leaving revision until the last minute.**

Revision is a way of pulling your understanding together in preparation for the exam. You can include and plan for revision from the beginning of the course. Here are some examples:

- When planning and reading for a part of the course, write alternative essay titles on separate pages. Jot brief notes, or page references to material, under each title.
- Make your notes readable, attractive and visually compelling as you go through the course - this builds the memory.
- If possible, start to over-learn names, dates and key details from index cards at odd moments early in the term. Even if you forget them, they will be easier to learn a second time round.
- Begin intense revision about four weeks before the exam.
- Read the sections on 'Exams' well before the exam.

<p>2. Reading through notes over and over again</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use creative and interactive strategies. This keeps your mind alert, and helps to integrate information. • Instead of just reading, read in order to find out. The best way to do this is to look for material related to possible exam answers. Ask in the library for past exam papers for your course, and invent your own questions. • Discussing past exam questions with friends makes this process more interesting. • Time yourself writing some essays without looking at your notes. This not only shows you which areas need more work but helps to increase your handwriting speed and your ability to think and write under pressure.
<p>3. Writing notes out over and over again.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This can be a good strategy if you learn through ‘motor memory’. Working to different essay plans keeps the information fresh and develops your thinking about the subject. • Some people find that rewriting notes interferes with visual recall of their original set of notes. For them, it is preferable to develop one good complete set of notes, plus a series of index cards. • Reduce information to a series of memory triggers. Reduce a set of triggers to one key word or image.
<p>4. Writing out essays and learning them off by heart.</p>	<p>This is time-consuming and counter-productive - it is unlikely that the identical question will come up in your exam. It is better to spend time reflecting on, and practising, a range of answers, so that you over-learn the material. You will then be able to work with it flexibly during the exam, selecting exactly what you need for the exact title given.</p>

<p>5. Finding ways of putting off revision (such as 'urgent' things that need to be done, watching TV, or chatting with friends or family).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make a revision timetable which leaves empty spaces to cater for real emergencies. Do a spell of revision before each 'urgent task'. • Use watching television or other distractions as a reward - put them in your timetable. • See Tricks for getting started. • You may be missing company. Try revising with other students, or involve others in your revision. Explain a subject to them: can they understand your explanation? Could they test you on your memory triggers, or ask you questions from your notes?
<p>6. 'I can't force myself back to study.'</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check your motivation. • Rather than 'forcing' yourself, encourage and entice yourself to study through short-term goals, challenges, creativity, and company. • Check that your timetable has sufficient breaks for rest.
<p>7. 'I start to panic. I feel I'm never going to get through it all or remember it.'</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with positive-minded people. • Read about Dealing with Stress and Memory. • Work steadily to small goals. • Speak to a professional counsellor.
<p>8. 'I can't cope with the boredom of it. I start to daydream or wonder why I'm bothering.'</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work in regular but shorter time frames. • Boredom suggests that you are not using a variety of interactive learning techniques, nor your creativity. • Look for ways of introducing variety into your study sessions. • Look for unusual angles on the material you have, or images that sum up the material. Think of ways in which seemingly unrelated material could be linked. Invent an essay or a test for yourself. • To stretch your mind and increase your interest, set yourself greater challenges. For example, read a more advanced article on the subject and consider how you could weave any relevant material into your exam answers.

<p>9. 'I have too many responsibilities to make revision practicable.'</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make use of short spells of time, on buses, tea breaks, and the like. • Break the work into small pieces. Always carry some work with you. • Carry an exam question in your head and scribble down ideas in odd moments.
<p>10. Stopping revision before the process of over-learning is complete.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is important to keep checking back what you have learnt, and to reduce your material to shorter, key memory triggers. • Keep asking yourself: 'How can I use what I have learnt to answer other questions that might come up?' • Over-learning takes time - use spare moments well.

Revision strategies

A good revision mentality requires creativity, interactive study techniques, a high degree of motivation, time management, working well with others, writing skills and being able to use your powers of selectivity, critical thinking and memory.

As you can see, if you have used the strategies suggested in earlier chapters, you have already advanced towards doing well in your exams. Tick the boxes beside specific revision activities listed below if you consider that they would help you. Work these into an **Action plan**.

Have a revision mentality for the whole term or year

- Make your notes clear, visual, colourful, dynamic, and memorable. Leave lots of space to add new information later in the term.
- Make up index cards of key information as you go along.
- Go over your work at regular intervals so that you have less to do at the last minute.
- See 'Revision pitfalls'.

Use time carefully

- Start as early in the year as possible.
- Draw up a revision timetable.
- Draw up a **Priority organiser**.
- Make a **Time circle** for revision.
- Use stray moments for revision.



Keep a positive mindset

- Work on your motivation and your attitude towards exams. Regard difficulties as challenges for which you can devise new strategies.



Ask for help

- Find out from tutors how exam answers differ from course essays.

Revise by ear

- Record yourself answering questions - listening to your own voice can help memory.



Stay healthy

- Sleep, relax and take plenty of breaks.

Work with others

- Arrange revision sessions with friends.



Use memory triggers

- Devise memory triggers.
- Distil your notes to key points, key words, and memory triggers.
- Learn by heart essential information only, such as dates, names and formulae.



Use exam papers from former years

- Check which questions come up regularly.
- Brainstorm answers to past questions.
- Make outline plans for as many questions as you can.
- Time yourself writing some of these, to build writing speed and for general practice.
- Discuss questions with others. Work out plans together.
- Consider in advance what detail needs to be left out of exam answers.

Self evaluation

Revision and exam preparation

- I can find something positive for me in taking these exams
- I can develop the right frame of mind for these exams
- I know exactly when the exams are
- I am aware how many questions are required for each exam
- I have read the course or module details carefully to check what I am expected to know about the subject
- I have organised my notes so that the material is easy to learn
- I can work out how many topics I need to revise for each exam
- I am aware of the range of questions that can come up for each topic
- I have made a realistic revision timetable, with clear priorities
- I know how to work on exam answers using past papers
- I have started to practise writing out answers at speed
- I am aware of the memory strategies I need to revise for the exam
- I know how the marks are weighted for each question
- I am aware of how to use time most effectively in the exam
- I am aware of how to avoid common pitfalls in exams
- I am aware of the differences between exam answers and coursework
- I know how to manage stress and use it effectively

*In what ways have your past revision strategies and your approach to exams helped or hindered your exam success?
What can you change or improve for your next set of exams?*

Planner

Revision: seven-point action plan

1. **Positive state of mind** e.g. checking my motivation; giving myself positive messages; working on stress; accepting the challenge. Things I will do to stay positive:
2. **Time** e.g. going over my work from early in the year in different ways; organising a timetable, Priority organiser or Time circle for revision; dealing with my excuses for not revising; using spare moments. I will:
3. **Variety** e.g. working in many short spells; using varied and interesting ways of going over my material. I will:
4. **Over-learning** e.g. rewriting notes, index cards, new essay plans, memory triggers. I will:
5. **Practice** e.g. doing past questions; working under exam conditions; having a trial run. I will:
6. **People** e.g. sharing revision with other people where possible. I will:
7. **Selection** What topics will I revise? What level of detail can I really use under exam conditions? I will:

Advance preparation for the exam

Find out basic information

- How many exams will you have?
- When are the exams?
- What are these exams?
- How will you best be assessed?
- Are any mock exams provided?
- Where can you get past papers?

Find out 'exam instructions'

Familiarise yourself with the instructions written on exam papers: these can be difficult to understand if you read them for the first time under the stress of the exam itself. They usually tell you about where to write your name and exam number, and how many questions you have to answer. (The invigilator may read the instructions aloud at the start of the exam.)

Plan out your exam time in advance

For each paper, work out the time that you will start and finish each question - this is one less thing to do in the exam room. When you get into the exam room, write your timings on a piece of paper and keep sight of them.

Practice

Like most things, exam performance improves with practice. Attend any mock exams provided, even if you feel you are not at all ready - the experience is important. If no mocks are provided, arrange your own with friends or by yourself.

- Pick out an old exam paper or make your own questions.
- Arrange the seating so that you can not see each other's papers.
- Write the answers within a set time limit - work alone, in silence.
- Afterwards, discuss your answers with each other.

The week before

- Drink plenty of water in the week before the exam so that you are not dehydrated.
- Build in movement and exercise so that you work off excess adrenalin.
- Work daily on relaxation, so that your thinking remains clear and focused. You will still feel some nervous energy, which is useful for exams.
- Learn the information on your 'master cards'. Check your understanding and memory. Find ways of keeping up interest and motivation.
- Avoid people who may make you feel unsure of yourself - those who are super-confident, and those who panic.
- Visit the exam room and get the feel of it.

The night before

- Check over any exam details you have.
- Prepare what you will need - pens, ruler, water, a snack, the exam room number, your identity card, a jumper and so on.
- Avoid people who panic.
- Have a snack and a hot relaxing bath before bed. Leave plenty of time to sleep.



The day of the exam

- Eat well before the exam, to keep up your stamina.
- Leave plenty of time for the journey in case of delays.
- Plan to arrive at the exam room as it opens: it may take time to find your seat.

Checklist for exams

Subject area:

Exam title:

Date:

Day:

Campus:

Building: Room:

Length of exam:

Number of questions I have to answer (in each section, where applicable):

Preparation: time needed for reading through questions; choosing questions; planning answers.

Final check: time needed to check for sense, for errors, that questions are correctly numbered, neatening the script, and so on.

Total preparation and final check time needed:

Time left for writing answers (total time minus preparation and final check time):

Total marks available
for each question

Length of time to spend
on each question

Time to start each new
answer

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

Any unusual features of the paper or exam conditions?

Which aids - dictionaries, calculators, etc. - are permissible for this paper?

What must I take to the exam room? Identity card? Pens? Coloured pencils? Any special equipment? A jumper? Water? Snacks, to be eaten quietly? Glucose tablets?

In the exam

First things

- Orientate yourself.
- Find a positive, calm, focused state of mind.
- Check that you have been given the right exam paper. (Mistakes have happened.)
- Read the instructions slowly, at least twice.
- Fill out personal details as required.
- Read the whole paper. Always check both sides, even if you think one side is blank.
- Divide your time equally among questions that carry the same marks. Jot down the times you will begin each question.

Selecting exam questions

- Read each question through at least twice.
- Work out what is expected, in general, for each question. Which part of the course does it refer to? Towards which issues is the question directing you?
- If a question sounds like one you have done before, check the wording very carefully before you select it. A slight difference in wording might require a very different answer.
- Tick all questions you could attempt. Tick twice the ones you could answer best. Don't rush this; it's vital that you choose the questions that you will do justice.
- For the questions you select, highlight key words in the title. Notice how many parts there are to the question. Read questions through again very slowly to make sure you have not misread any key words. At this stage you may realise that a question is not what you thought, and you may need to select a different one.
- At any time, jot down ideas you have about any of your selected questions on a separate sheet. Note the relevant question number beside each idea.

Writing exam essays

Follow a similar procedure to that used when writing any other essay. Use structure, organisation, evidence and a clear line of reasoning - without these you will get very few marks for content.

Exam essays can be easier to write because:

- You need less evidence and fewer examples than for coursework.
- You can write less about each point.
- You can miss out some background detail.
- You don't need to give a bibliography or supply detailed references.
- Minor grammatical and spelling errors, and rushed handwriting (provided it's readable), are generally less important.

'What if I go blank?'

- Don't try too hard to remember. Leave a space, it may come back later.
- You may be too tense - use a relaxation exercise you have used before.
- Keep writing . On spare paper jot down any words that have anything to do with the question. These should eventually start to prompt your memory into action.
- Ask yourself questions, starting with the most basic - who? when? what? how? - until you become more focused.

Doing well in the exam

Five common pitfalls in examinations...

...and how to avoid them

1. Doing silly things

Silly things can fail exam candidates or lose marks or the examiner's goodwill.

Well before the exam, find out what is required. Make sure you turn up at the right exam centre on the right day. Check that you have been given the right exam paper. Be sure to write your name or exam number on the answer paper and on additional sheets. Read the questions. Check the back of the exam paper. Answer the right number of questions. In the exam itself, schedule time to check such details carefully.

2. Mystifying the examiner

The examiner won't pore over your script for hours, nor see through your answer to what you don't know. There is no 'magical ingredient' you have to deliver.

Examiners have a large pile of scripts. They want to get through these as quickly as they can, with just a few minutes for each. They may check your introduction and conclusion for the gist of your argument, skim the answer to evaluate your line of reasoning, check that you are using material from the course to support your answers, and evaluate roughly what grade the work is worth. They are unlikely to mark it as closely as tutors mark coursework. Often a second marker goes through the same process: if she or he disagrees, the external examiner's opinion will be asked. Only excessively bad grammar, spelling errors or handwriting are likely to stand out.

<p>3. Using exam time poorly and answering too few questions</p>	<p>Give equal time to questions that carry equal marks - and more time to any that carry extra marks. The law of diminishing returns applies to the amount of time spent on any one question: if you spend twice as long on one question, you are very unlikely to get twice as many marks. You are more likely to pass if you give reasonable answers to the set number of questions than if you spend all your time writing some brilliant essays but miss out one question completely.</p> <p>If you run out of the time you have allocated to one answer, leave a space - there may be time to come back to it at the end.</p>
<p>4. Writing everything you know about a topic</p> <p><i>There is no value in simply writing down all you know to prove you've learnt it.</i></p>	<p>The examiner is not interested in how much you know - indeed, you may get no marks at all for simply listing a lot of information. Just as for coursework, marks are given for showing you can make sense of the question, relate it to course issues, develop a line of reasoning, evaluate opposing viewpoints, and offer supporting evidence.</p>
<p>5. Abandoning structure and the usual essay-writing techniques</p>	<p>Because of the speed at which exam markers work, they appreciate answers with clear, well-organised structures, good introductions and conclusions, correctly numbered questions, and clearly labelled scripts which are easy to read. You lose goodwill if your script is messy, illegible or confusing to read.</p>

Self evaluation

Exam strategy

Yes No

Things to do, or
to watch out for

Do I ...

read the whole exam paper carefully?

follow all instructions?

answer the correct number of questions in full?

plan time well, so that I can check through my answers?

know exactly how long I have for each question?

share out time according to the marks available?

use all of the available time?

read each question at least twice?

spend time working out what all the questions mean?

ask myself what the examiner is looking for?

spend enough time considering the best questions for me?

feel confident about what I am expected to do?

find questions that are similar to ones I have practised?

find I have revised enough topics?

know what a 'good' answer looks like?

know which writing style is appropriate?

know the correct format or layout?

plan my answers (on paper or in my head)?

develop a clear argument (where appropriate)?

use examples from the course materials?

keep strictly to answering the question set?

avoid irrelevant detail and going off at tangents?

get to the point quickly?

avoid flowery language and vague introductions?

include an introduction and a conclusion?

keep focused on the exam during the exam?

check my answers for mistakes?

check my answers to see if they make sense?

If you answered 'yes' to most of these questions, then your chance of exam success is high.

If not, look again through the relevant sections of this Handbook and work out what you need to practise. If you are still uncertain about any aspects, consult with your tutor.

Dealing with stress

A *mild* degree of stress can be helpful, providing a challenge with stimulation, excitement, and focus. Some people deliberately search out stress to make life more exciting.

Studying towards deadlines and exams involves different amounts of stress for each student. Added life pressures, such as shortage of money, difficult relationships, bereavement,

Spot the signs

Do you...

- lie awake worrying?
- feel guilty when you aren't working?
- get frustrated easily?
- get a dry mouth, heavy pounding or a 'butterfly' feeling in the heart, sweaty hands, nausea, or twitching muscles?
- grit or grind your teeth?
- flare up easily at other people?
- regularly eat in a hurry, or go on binges?
- smoke or drink 'to unwind'?
- drop or break things frequently?
- notice signs of increased irritability, tearfulness or moodiness?

Look at the suggestions on the following page. Tick things you could try out. Which one will you try first, or next?

or changes in your work, family or housing situation, can all add to your stress level. Excess stress can severely affect physical and emotional health, concentration and memory.

If you suffer from excess stress, you need to take steps to reduce it. The signs can be extremely varied.

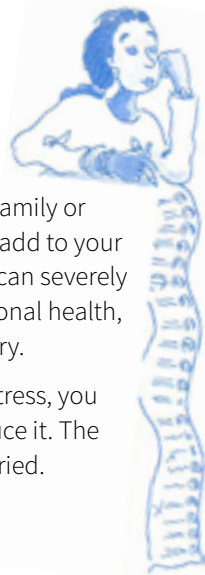


Know your own triggers

When do you start getting worked up?

- when things are not going your way?
- when work mounts up?
- when you are trying to please too many people apart from yourself?
- when other people seem to be doing things badly, or better than you?
- when you set yourself unrealistic goals?
- in traffic jams, or using public transport?
- other triggers?

In your journal, list the times when you get most stressed - or what makes you feel tense. Describe what happens. What do you do to handle the situation? What else could you do?



Managing stress

A good revision mentality requires creativity, interactive study techniques, a high degree of motivation, time management, working well with others, writing skills and being able to use your powers of selectivity, critical thinking and memory.

As you can see, if you have used the strategies suggested in earlier chapters, you have already advanced towards doing well in your exams. Tick the boxes beside specific revision activities listed below if you consider that they would help you. Work these into an Action plan.



STAY RELAXED

Sleep properly

- Aim to sleep for 7 hours each day. More or less than this can tire you.

Take breaks

- Give yourself regular breaks in whatever you are doing.

Use the STOP! exercise

- Let yourself stop everything for a moment. Breathe slowly or count to 100.
 - Let yourself smile - even if this is difficult.
 - Spread out your hands and relax your fingers. Let your hands and feet be still.
 - Repeat 'Stop' to yourself until you feel calm.



MONITOR YOUR STATE OF MIND

One aspect of stress is the attitude we take towards challenges. The situation and feelings that panic one person may excite and interest another.

Listen to the voice in your head

- If you tend to think, 'I can't ...', 'Other people can ...' or 'I'm useless at ...', you need to change the record!
- Turn the message round: 'I can ...', 'I have already ...', 'I am able to ...', 'I am going to.'

Question your way of thinking

Ask yourself questions such as:

- Is there another way of thinking about this?
- Am I being a perfectionist?
- Am I expecting too much of myself (or others) in the current circumstances?
- Am I getting things out of proportion?
- What is the effect on me of having this attitude?
- Am I blaming myself for things that can't be helped?
- What can I do to improve matters?

MANAGE YOUR TIME

Be organised

- Organise yourself to avoid stress. Make timetables and action plans to avoid predictable crises and panics. Take control of your time.



Set priorities

- Work out your priorities and when you will do each of the tasks. Work out which things can wait - and let them.



TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY

Get exercise

- Do something energetic - walk, swim, run, play a game, clean the room, do some gardening. Get rid of pent-up energy and excess adrenalin.



Have a healthy diet

- Check what you are putting into your body. Could you fill it with less coffee, less smoke and fewer chemicals? Does your body need bigger helpings of substances that help it renew itself - such as food and water?



RELAX

Treat yourself

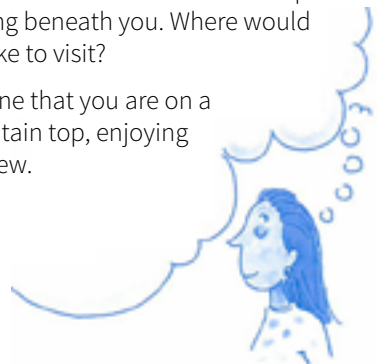
- Take a relaxing bath. Don't rush it. Light a candle, or treat yourself to aromatherapy oils.
- Put some time aside every day just to enjoy yourself or to do nothing. Try to get at least 20 minutes on your own in quiet.

Celebrate success

- Reflect on your achievements over the day or week - and reward yourself.

Daydream

- Imagine that the floor is a cloud or a big ball of cotton wool, and that you are sinking down into it and floating away.
- Imagine that you are on a magic carpet. Look down at the landscape moving beneath you. Where would you like to visit?
- Imagine that you are on a mountain top, enjoying the view.



Use a relaxation exercise

- Take time to relax, consciously.
 1. Lie on the floor or sit in a comfortable chair.
 2. Close your eyes and breathe out slowly several times. Don't force the breathing.
 3. If your mind is racing, do the 'Stop!' exercise.
 4. Notice where your body feels tense.

Then do each of the following several times:

5. Clench your toes tightly, count to three, then 'let go'. Repeat this several times.
6. Repeat this with all the muscles you can, working from your toes up to your neck.
7. Pull your shoulders right up to your ears - and let them drop. Repeat several times.
8. Screw up all the face muscles. Then relax.
9. Open your mouth into a big yawn.
10. Imagine yourself in a peaceful, beautiful, safe place. Listen for sounds and look at the colours there. It can be any place, real or imaginary. This can be a safe 'retreat' in the mind for you to go when stressed.

Breathe calmly

- After relaxation, sit or lie comfortably. Close your eyes. Put on relaxing music if you wish.
 1. Imagine that you are breathing in calm and tranquillity with each in-breath, and letting go of stress with each out-breath.
 2. Think of one word you find soothing, and repeat this in your mind.
 3. Do this for about ten minutes - or longer if you like.
- If you find that difficult, just stay still and be quiet. Listen to the sounds around you.
- Meditation classes may also be helpful.

Further reading

- Wilkinson, G. 1997. Understanding Stress. London: British Medical Association ('Family Doctor' series).
- Wilson, P. 1997. Calm at Work. London: Penguin.

Review

Examinations are a culmination of your term's or your year's learning - not just of the course content but also of strategies you have developed over the year. Many of the strategies that help you to do well at exams are similar to those needed for any assignment: organisation, selection, developing your point of view and a line of reasoning, and structured writing skills.

This means that revision and exam preparation are not separate events, completely divorced from the other learning activities you undertake in the year. If you have worked steadily all year, the exam period will be more manageable.

Don't build the exam out of proportion. If you don't pass, you are usually offered a second chance. If you still don't pass, it's not the end of the world - there is life beyond exams.

Regard heightened nervous energy and some stress as a useful friend. However, take care to relax and keep stress to a manageable level. Remember that the examiners - often your tutors - generally want you to do well. They will be looking for ways to give you marks and help you pass.

If you wish to hone your revision and exam skills, you may find it helpful to read further: Stella Cottrell, *The Exam Skills Handbook: Achieving Peak Performance* (Pelgrave Macmillan, 2007).

Exams can be an exciting time. By the time an exam is over you will probably feel that you really know your subject! Immediately after the exam you may feel a little deflated - be prepared for that. Arrange something enjoyable and relaxing as a reward.

Celebrate your achievements!

Good luck in your exams!



Be Ambitious

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