



Durham
University

A young woman with glasses is sitting at a desk in a library, reading a book. She is wearing a dark purple shirt. The desk is cluttered with several stacks of books. A large, ornate window with a grid pattern is behind her, letting in bright light. A desk lamp is positioned to her right, illuminating her work. The overall atmosphere is quiet and studious.

Skills: Revision and Exams

Revision and Exams

Exams can be the thing of nightmares for some people. Some people are better suited to course work or just don't enjoy working under such time pressure whereas other students may find they work better in an exam environment. Whichever kind of person you are, there are plenty of things you can do before, during and after an exam to make your life a little bit easier, and hopefully perform to the best of your ability.



Before the Exam

Plan

Before you even start revising, be sure to plan how, when and what you're going to revise so that you use your time effectively. Before anything else, ensure that you know exactly when all of your exams are as this will allow you to prioritise your revision and ensure you've covered all of your revision in good time.

Effective Revision

There are numerous revision techniques to choose from but the important thing is that you are honest about what really works for *you* so that you are using your time effectively. The technique(s) you choose may also be dependent on the subjects you are taking. Here are some popular revision methods:

Re-reading	Writing summaries of topics	Making notes
Highlighting important information	Mnemonics (e.g. Richard of York Gave Battle in Vain)	Group discussions
Self testing	Sitting past exam papers	Flash cards

Research does suggest that the most effective method of revision is re-reading information, making flashcards and then repeatedly testing yourself.

This creates better memory links and encourages the information to be more effectively stored in your long term memory. The second and most important finding was that spreading out revision is most effective – start early and, rather than studying one subject in its entirety and then moving on, distribute the revision between subjects and over time. Even if you then do some last minute cramming before the exam, you should have all the important information already stored in your head!

Revision Tips

Don't:

- Spend more time planning your revision than actually doing it – this is a popular procrastination method!
- Keep using the same revision technique if you don't feel it's working for you – try something new. Equally, don't kid yourself into thinking you can listen to your favourite music or revise in front of the TV if you can't – let your brain focus on one thing and reward yourself later.
- Use the same revision techniques as your friends – if you don't feel they are working for you.
- Start your revision at the last minute – your brain can only retain a certain amount of information in such a short period of time.
- Spend hours revising without a break – it's not good for you and it won't be effective.
- Panic – you can only do your best so put in the time to revise properly so that you feel as confident as possible when you go to sit the exam.

Do:

- Make a plan but keep it realistic - nobody can, or should, study 24 hours a day.
- Take regular short breaks to allow your brain to process what you've learnt – also stretch out your legs and your back, it's easy to forget how long you've been sat in one position when revising.
- Ask for help if you don't understand any of the material – your teachers should be available and willing to help. For some subjects it may also be beneficial to revise with friends so that you can test each other but ensure that your time is spent productively.
- Try and find past exam papers to get an idea for the way in which questions might be structured, the complexity and length of question you may expect.
- Look after yourself – eat properly, exercise (go for a walk, play a sport, do some yoga – whatever you enjoy doing) and don't block out the world. Feeling fit and healthy will be beneficial for your brain and gives you one less thing to worry about during a stressful time. Staying hydrated is also good for your brain!



During the Exam

Arriving

- Know exactly where and when your exam is – this may sound obvious but it's easy to mix up room numbers and names when you're nervous so plan ahead so that you don't need to worry about it on the day.
- Arrive in good time – arriving late will make you feel flustered and won't help you feel relaxed as you go in.
- Make sure you have a spare everything – pens, pencils, rulers – whatever you need.
- Know the rules. Don't arrive with items you know you won't be allowed to take in.
- If you must take your phone into an exam room, ensure that it is either in a bag away from your desk or handed to the invigilator if required. Most importantly it should be **TURNED OFF**.
- If your exam requires a calculator, dictionary or other item, ensure you have it and that it's the right kind that's permitted for the exam.

Remember that exams are not designed to try and catch you out and examiners are not looking take marks away from you – examiners will be looking at your paper to see where they can *give* you marks.



During

Take a breath – this is your opportunity to show what you have learnt and studied hard for.

Ensure you have everything you need on your desk and keep an eye on the time.

Listen carefully to the instructions of your invigilator – they will tell you when you can turn over your paper and begin.

The Questions

It's incredibly easy to be caught out during an exam simply by not taking the time to read and assess the whole paper before starting. This is vital so that you know how to plan your time and to ensure that you don't miss anything.

- Read the instructions on the front of your exam paper very carefully:
 - Do you need to answer questions in different booklets?
 - Are there different sections – if so, how many questions should you answer from each?
 - Are there more questions on the back of a page?

Make a note of the marks each question is worth as this may help you answer them. See the example from a biology exam below.

Exam Question:

- 2 (b) During a myocardial infarction, areas of heart muscle begin to die. Explain why.

[3 marks]

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[Extra space]

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Marking Scheme Used by Examiner:

2(b)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Reduced blood flow in <u>coronary artery</u> / <u>coronary artery</u> blocked;2. Less / not enough / no oxygen;3. <u>Respiration</u> drops / stops (so cells start to die);	3	QWC <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. accept clot in <u>coronary artery</u>2. Accept less glucose3. Ignore reference to energy production "less oxygen for respiration" = 2 marks
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3 marks often implies 3 required elements to your answer.

If the first questions are only worth a few marks but there is an essay question which is worth more marks, ensure that most of your time is spent on that essay question.

Plan your essay answers – just as you would plan an essay in class or for homework. Take a few minutes to work out exactly what is being asked of you, plan a structure and ensure you make a note of your key points to include as they come to you. At the end, check your answers and read all your text through – does it make sense?

After the Exam

Relax! You can't change the outcome of that exam (this may be a terrifying thought or a relief); it's over so there really is no point worrying about it. Try not to spend the day going over the questions with friends – it's so tempting but this can be very stressful.

If you have more exams to revise for, make sure you have a bit of a break first; reward yourself for having completed this one.

If this was your last exam – there's nothing left to do but celebrate!



Remember, exams can be stressful and it's important to do the best you can but they are designed to see simply how much you've learned and can usually be re-sat if something goes wrong. Some people cope better with the stress of exams than others. If you don't think you're coping well, speak to your family and friends about how you feel. There are some useful resources at the end of this document.

Further Resources:

Durham University Research Skills Series:

Planning Your Essay

Presenting Your Work

Articles from BBC Radio 1 on dealing with exam stress, revision strategies and exams:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/1HsY1X8ySjKBMVXPVCbP4qH/exam-stress>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/4Klq403Q2CrqQVFslcJP00F/revision-basics>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/2Tc9FPRfmszxGzjDC7cLNg4/defeat-your-revision-enemies>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/5ZF1w7JfntKyM1bzyggq338W/blitzing-exams>

Article on common mistakes in exams (aimed at university students but still contains useful tips!):

<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/apr/30/student-advice-exams-success>

Day of the exam tips:

<https://www.examtime.com/blog/the-day-of-the-exam-15-tips-to-boost-your-performance-during-the-exam/>

Revision advice:

<http://www.palgrave.com/studentstudyskills/page/revision-strategies-and-tips/>

http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/wiki/Revision_Methods_and_Tips

