

Preparing Effectively for Examinations



Description of this Guide

This guide will help you to understand that revision is an on-going activity and should not be considered something that occurs two weeks before the written examination. To help you do this we shall explore strategies for improving your memory skills, note-taking skills and personal, academic organisational skills.

Learning Outcomes

1. Evaluate your revision working habits and strategies
2. Become aware of the resources needed for revision
3. Be able to practise strategies for different note-taking approaches
4. Become aware of different memory strategies

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Preparing Effectively for Examinations

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Productive revision Productive working habits Making changes	The right 'mind set' Preparing for effective revision	About revising Organising the key concepts or theories in a topic Revision techniques	Memory strategies Develop your Memory Strategy	Tips and hints for the final stages of preparation Final Thoughts Mind Map Notes Branch Notes

1.0 Introduction: Common Difficulties

Most people feel nervous about taking exams. It is easy to feel you will be put on the spot, that you do not know what to expect, and that you may not do yourself justice. You can make the whole experience better by considering the following:

Common Difficulties: Tick which apply to you....

	Tick
1. I am often frustrated at examination times.	
2. I seem to spend a lot of time revising and not getting the good results.	
3. I am not sure if my techniques are the most efficient.	
4. I mainly leave revision until it is almost too late.	

If you have ticked to one of these then it is time to start thinking about how to improve your revision strategies.

If you ticked '1'

You have not perfected an effective and efficient system of revision. Your memory strategies may not be the most effective. You need to try out different techniques (see section 4).

If you ticked '2'

Your revision may be without a proper focus and plan of campaign. You may not know how to prepare for revision. You need to try out different techniques (see 1.1).

If you ticked '3'

You are stuck in a rut and no-one has told you **how** to revise effectively. You need to try out different techniques (see section 2).

If you ticked '4'

Your time management is in need of an overhaul! (See section 3 and Being and Independent Learner Guide).

REMEMBER !

If you always do what you have always done,
You will always get what you have always got.

1.1 Productive revision

Be prepared

Most students have some ideas about how to go about revising for examinations. However, the strategies you may have used in the past may have been effective for the type of examinations you did then, but are not necessarily the most efficient now. Preparation is not only about drawing up a timetable and arranging your files and books on your work space! You need to reflect upon how you have tackled revision in the past; analyse what worked well (you got good results) and what didn't work well (you got bad results).

1.2 Productive working habits

Which of these revision techniques worked well for you and which didn't	Yes/No
1. Writing out my notes again and again helped me to remember facts and information	
2. Reducing information into shorter notes helped me to remember facts and information	
3. Memorising essay answers	
4. Writing out sample essay answers under timed conditions	
5. Using mind maps or diagrams helped me to remember facts and information	
6. Putting important information on to a recording device and playing this over and over again	
7. Revising with friends	
8. Using colour (coloured highlighters, for example) to help me to summarise and understand key points and to remember facts and information	
9. Reading my lesson notes (without any other activity)	
10. Writing out essay plans from past questions	
11. Spending long periods revising a week before	
12. Using memory triggers to help me remember	
13. Using key words as the basis for understanding	
14. Any other method you have used..	

In certain circumstances, these are all useful techniques either on their own or, more appropriately, in combination. Think about why certain techniques worked well for you and why others did not, and develop your own approach.

1.3 Making changes

Make a list of the '*If only...*' things from past experience. This is the first step in making changes in the way you tackle revision and the examination itself. Think what you should do to make changes...

If only.....	Making changes...
Two of the questions in an exam seemed to be about the same thing, but they weren't. If only I had read the questions properly I would have got better marks.	

2.0 Getting in the Mood

In addition to learning a set of skills, you also need to establish the frame of mind you need in order to work best.

2.1 The right 'mind set'

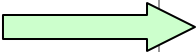
Preparing for examinations is not just about learning and memorising facts and information so that you can regurgitate them in a timed examination. It is also about:

- Knowledge of what is expected of you by your teachers
- Consideration of the assessment criteria
- Selection of important theories, ideas and evidence
- Realistic self-expectations
- Development of efficient note-making systems
- Development of organisational strategies
- Getting a buzz from understanding your subject

So check out the learning outcomes for a unit or module you are studying. Consider whether your revision techniques would cover those outcomes for the examination part of your assessment.

2.2 Preparing for effective revision

Be prepared!

Preparation and Planning	
1. Look at the 'Learning Outcomes' for your units. These will help you to understand what you could be tested on in examinations	2. Check that you know the assessment criteria for your unit. This helps you to understand what is needed to get the best grades and marks.
	
4. Organise your notes: (a) Use different folders when saving your notes electronic for different course notes and information. (b) Use file dividers and have a numbering system for each section of lessons on a specific unit or topic.	3. Get past papers for the relevant examinations that you will be taking. Make sure that your exam will be in the same format. Past papers are a useful source of information about what is expected in examinations and can help you to prepare more effectively.
	

3.0 Revision Notes

Examinations can help you to consolidate your knowledge and bring together lots of different strands from your unit. During revision time you may find that the 'penny will drop' for you on some topic that you found puzzling during Key Stage 3. Making effective revision notes will help in this process and will ultimately give you an indication of what you understand and where the gaps are in your knowledge.

What sort of notes you produce and how you distil a whole programme of study into revision notes is to some extent personal preference. There are a variety of ways of producing effective notes which you may want to consider. It is vital however, that whatever system you choose it provides **you** with **useful notes** and is an **efficient** use of your time and effort.

Good notes will help you to:

- Understand new (and at times) difficult concepts
- Get an overview of the topic or unit by changing the information which is in a linear format (i.e. written text) to one which will provide links and connections (i.e. use of diagrams and flow charts)
- Remember new terminology (use highlighters for key buzz)
- Group the information in a useful format for quick access when preparing for examinations – use as a handy memoriser or something visual.

3.1 About revising

Revision boils down to personal preference. However, you may not have thought about how you revise before, but now consider how you have been doing this and start thinking of alternative ways of revising. Consider now the location aspects of how you revise – your revision scenario.

	Your answer	Ideal? Better to ...?
Where do you revise?		
Is it noisy?		
What about comfort factors?		
Do you prefer to revise alone or with friends/both?		
What is likely to distract you?		
What time of day do you prefer to revise/study?		

Now write a statement of your ideal revision scenario.....

Some students find that they have amassed a lot of notes from all their different lessons. It may seem rather daunting to try to consolidate these! It may be an

impossible task and as a result you are immediately put off doing what is a very important aspect of revision that involves not only memory techniques but understanding.

Some students feel that if they start too soon they will have forgotten everything by the time the examinations come. You must think about what has worked in the past and has given you success. It is important to know what works for you – check what you wrote in section 1.2, and your ideal revision scenario from your statement above in the previous activity.

3.2 Organising the key concepts or theories in a topic

- Gather together all notes relevant to the examination and organise them into sub-sections relating to different topics/examination questions. **Decide how you are going to code each section or topic.** Put the notes into different piles to start with.
- Look out for **connections** between topics that could be useful, for example common theoretical or methodological **approaches** to different topics, or different theoretical or methodological approaches to the same (kind of) topic.

Select a topic you want to revise and to get an **overall sense** of your subject discipline:

- a) Make a list of the **key areas** of debate or conflict
- b) Make a list of the key theories or concepts and those responsible for them

Now,

Subject being revised	Key concepts in this subject	Key misconceptions in this subject

3.3 Revision techniques

It is important to find a method that suits your learning style and a particular topic. You may find you want to change your method depending on the topic you are revising – just be alert to this. Remember to revise effectively you will need to remember facts and figures, understand concepts/theories and the critical debates of your topic.

Some common approaches include:

- Summarising notes or handouts into '**distilled**' notes (key words, phrases) of no more than two sides of A4 for each possible question topic.
- Some people find **flash cards** useful for this. Flash cards can incorporate colour for different layers of information and for making links.
- If you are a very *visual* learner (if you are unfamiliar with this see the *Understanding Your Learning Style Guide*), you could draw charts/maps of key ideas using **visual symbols/shapes**, which act as a metaphor for key concepts and ways in which they relate to one another.
- If you would rather listen, because you have a preferred style of learning which is *auditory*, you could use **recording devices** to read key notes onto, then play them back several times so that you can become more familiar with the language of your discipline and with the key ideas relevant to the exam.
- It can really help to **enlist the help of a friend** in any or all of these approaches, as long as you promise not to distract each other from the task in hand. Some students enjoy working with others and can learn by discussing ideas and explaining concepts to each other – this helps to consolidate knowledge and picks out where gaps in understanding occur.
- Whichever revision methods you use, work towards a situation where you can **imagine a map of the topics needed for the exam**: which are the bigger and smaller areas? How do they relate to one another? Are there themes running across different areas, like streams through a varied landscape?

4. Aids to Memorizing

However effective we are at revising and gaining an understanding of the material, we have to commit it to memory for an exam. The more thoroughly we understand a topic, the more easily we can deal with unexpected and/or complex exam questions. So, don't rely totally on pure memory recall or rote learning. However, we need to develop strategies to help us remember.

4.1 Memory strategies

Why do some people seem to have good memories and others struggle to remember what day it is? Perhaps, those with good memories have developed strategies for remembering and they have worked out ways of remembering which suit them best. **Rote-learning** (learning chunks of information by heart) may have worked in the past for some examinations but at University this is not a sensible strategy because of the volume of information you will have to deal with and because you are over-loading your memory without understanding of the subject. It is difficult to remember isolated strings of information, but when you have found a way to connect them, then you have a deeper understanding of the material, and this makes it easier for you to recall the information you need.

4.2 Develop your memory strategies

What sort of memory strategies do you use?

Think about how you remember. Answer the following questions:

What was your first day at school like? (episode)

What is your home postal code? (fact)

Where did you have your last lesson? (episode)

How do you open a document on the computer? (procedure)

A key concept in your favourite topic (knowledge)

Our long term memory is organised so we can remember facts, episodes, knowledge and procedures. These use different aspects of our memory. In addition, how facts and knowledge are remembered (written text, diagram, mind map etc.) could reflect your ability to recall that information. Certain subjects can be remembered effectively by drawing and labelling diagrams, e.g. the intricacies of the blood system, but this would not be suitable for learning the causes of poverty in the last century where a flow chart may be better.

You may find yourself better at remembering some types of things than others. Can you identify your memory strengths and weaknesses?

List two topics you will be studying (select quite different types of topics)

TOPIC A _____

TOPIC B _____

Memory strategies	TOPIC A	TOPIC B
Mindmaps, diagrams and flow charts		
Associations – making links with the information (topic map)		
Writing out information		
Remembering information in lists – re-arrange the order of the list so that the first letters of each word on the list make up something silly or amusing – a memorable mnemonic.		
Using shapes and colour		
Saying the information – to yourself or out aloud		
<i>Anything else you have found useful</i>		

5.0 Examination Techniques

5.1 Tips and hints for the final stages of preparation

At this stage of the process, you will have got to grips with new knowledge and will have worked actively to remember the information needed for the examinations. Ensure that you organise your time in such a way that you have left a **space for practising** the skills needed in the examinations. This means that you need to be able to recognise, at speed, information that has been restructured and reformulated in an exam question. You may want to practise with friends reformulating some of the questions on earlier papers or making up your own questions for each other.

- **Review and practise the skills needed in the examination.** Skills may include:
 - analysing exam questions
 - planning answers
 - writing appropriately and accurately
 - arguing effectively, using appropriate concepts and theories
 - close analysis of texts (verbal or visual) or other kinds of 'evidence'
 - selecting areas of knowledge in support of an argument
 - synthesising and reaching a conclusion
 - deciding which type of questions you are good at answering
 - getting your ideas down in a specified time
 - managing your time during an exam
 - prioritising information in an exam question
 - prioritising questions during an exam
- Look out for **revision sessions** which are provided by your teachers. These sessions will give you an idea of what is expected, and will also show you where you have gaps in your knowledge and understanding so that you can do more concentrated learning.
- **Characteristics of examination answers.** It is useful to analyse what makes a good answer – not just in terms of the subject content but also in terms of how the information is presented; how the answer has been argued, or how the wording of the question makes a difference to the way the information has been handled.
- **Examination writing groups.** Some students practise writing an examination answer under timed conditions and then mark each other's work. This means that you become familiar not only with getting your ideas down in a short time but also with the ability to re-shuffle your knowledge to fit the question.

5.2 Final thoughts

If you are too tired when you go into the examination, you will not perform well.

If you are still learning information right up to the last few hours before the examination, you will NOT remember all of this in the examination.