

How to prepare well for exams

This article in the CIFE advice series is aimed at students in the final month before major exams. By this stage you will, we hope, have covered most of the material, done the assignments you've been set and be on course to at least pass. This guide aims to help you make best possible use of the time you have left so that you enter the exam room fully prepared and able to do the best you are capable of. Even if you've missed a lot of course material, not handed in enough work and had serious problems with quite a few topics this guide may well help you recover the lost ground, so long as you don't give up!

The guide starts with a section called '**Revision: the Grand Plan**' emphasising the importance of drawing up a plan of campaign for the final push towards the exams. The second section looks in more detail at how to revise. Most students don't revise effectively. Check out the suggestions in '**How to revise actively**' to see which ones might work for you. The third section focuses in on '**Making the best of a revision session**' – how to get maximum value from 40 minutes of work. Finally, there's a section on '**Survive in the Exam room**' which describes what you should do to prepare for exams and how to function well during the exams themselves

Revision: the Grand Plan

You're X weeks away from that crucial exam, and you want to make sure that it all comes together on time for the big day. That **needs serious planning** to make that happen with a minimum of stress.

Even if you normally manage your life on the spur of the moment, you should plan this.

- A plan keeps you on-track
- A plan reduces stress (yes, you won't stick to it 100%, but you'll build in a bit of slack for that)
- A plan reassures family (who can be another source of stress)

Every one is different, so there's no ideal plan we can give you, but here are some points which we know help

- Make sure that you know what your teachers want you to do before you make detailed plans - it is a real pain if you duplicate revision they are going to do with you, or revise the wrong topics etc. In addition teachers will be able to suggest more interesting ways to revise
- If you spend too great a proportion of your time on one subject, either because it is your favourite one or because it is known to be weak, the other subjects will suffer. It is very common for students to get their best results in subjects they found difficult - they neglected their stronger subjects during revision.
- Before you can revise properly, get your files sorted out. Use a copy of the syllabus to put notes in topic order. If you've got gaps (material mislaid or missed), fill them now - make your own, copy from friends etc.

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- You might combine this with the **first revision run through** - you're aiming to go through everything three times between now and the exam. The first run through is a big skim: read all your notes carefully but without trying hard to remember them. This stage reminds you of the big picture. It shouldn't take you more than three to six hours.
- Then comes main revision: **the big grind**, when you learn the details. More about this below.
- Finally, **skim through again**. Aim to finish the big grind a few days before the exam, so you've a few days to skim through it all again. Repetition is a key part of good revision! If you made some form of condensed notes as part of the big grind these will come in handy now.

The big grind

- This is the main time of learning detail.
- Use a syllabus to divide the task up into a lot of smaller topics (it's easier to get started and to see your progress if you divide one monumental job into a series of smaller do-able tasks). Make a provisional timetable for which topics you will cover each week.
- At the start of a week, look at the topics you've planned to revise and decide which topics you will revise each day. Each evening decide when you will fit in each of the next days' topics.
- Build in a bit of slack because you are likely to get a bit behind.

Arrange your life to make revision possible

- **Carve out the time.** You've got to find time in a life that's busy enough anyway. Where will you find it. Think about this before you hit crisis point - what's got to give way, where can you turn 'down time' into study time? Sacrifices should be less difficult now the exam is close.
- **Sort out your space.** If the place where you do most of your private study isn't easy to work in, see what you can do to make it better. What distracts you when you are trying to settle down? Can you do something to reduce that distraction? Is the TV, Playstation, PC too easy to turn on when you're feeling under pressure? Can you do without them for a few weeks?!
- **Get parents and friends onside.** Your parents' anxiety may turn them into naggers. The best way round this is to show them that you're in control. Put your revision timetable on the kitchen door and keep them in touch. That way you're better placed to ask them to back off if they are over-doing the parental concern. Friends can be a wonderful support or a major distraction. Back off them if you find they're getting between you and what you have to do.
- **Keep healthy.** Serious revision will take up a lot of your energy, and so you need to keep a careful watch over other demands on your time, especially if these include a big social life. You don't have to live like a hermit, just pace yourself and avoid those situations which are likely to leave you washed out the next day. There is nothing worse than exhausting yourself by doing too much at once, leaving nothing in reserve for the exams themselves. Make sure that you eat sensibly and that you get some exercise. Getting a good night's sleep helps too, and you should ask for advice if you find it difficult to get to sleep at a reasonable hour.)
- **Stay cool.** A bit of tension is only to be expected, but don't let yourself succumb to the panic which can paralyse. If you've planned everything, started early, and stuck to your plans you will be fine. If you are worried, try to pin down what is bothering you: the chances are that you can do something about it. Don't let yourself be haunted by nameless anxieties ! Friends can be a real help, but a pleasant mutual moan can pull you all down rather than reassure you that what you are going through is universal and not the start of personal decline. If panic starts to really get you down, and especially if you spend more time worrying than working you ought to get help - teachers, family etc.

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How to revise actively

As well as planning your overall revision strategy, it's important to overhaul the **way** you revise. Most of us have a routine for revision which isn't actually all that effective. Do any of the problems below seem familiar? If so perhaps you need to try out some of our ideas for **Active Revision!**

Problems with typical revision

- **Boredom:** Reading notes over and over again doesn't make you think. Once boredom sets in your learning becomes much less effective and your morale takes a nose-dive.
- **Over-familiarity:** Your notes will all look pretty familiar to you, and it is not easy to sort out the points you really know from those you half-know but which really need more work. You do need to revise material that you are comfortable with but your most significant advances will come from identifying and tackling the 'grey' areas at the margins of your knowledge.
- **Inflexible thinking:** Exams require you to think on your feet, using old material in new ways. Preparing for exams is as much about developing mental flexibility as it is about remembering details. If you re-read your notes you are going through material linked together in exactly the same way, every time.

Ways to revise more actively

- **Make a set of condensed revision notes:** Doing this not only involves you in re-writing but also forces you to think about the relative importance of the points you are dealing with. To condense information you have to decide what is important and what can be left out. Keep your new notes for last minute revising. Some people keep condensed notes on cards which can be carried around easily. Condensed notes do not need to be in the form of prose; you can display topics visually in a 'Mind Map' or Spider Diagram.
- **Self Testing:** Before you open your notes to read over a topic, get out a blank sheet of paper. Think hard about the topic you are about to revise, and then spend 5 minutes jotting down as many of the main facts/ideas as you can remember, almost as though you were making a general essay plan on the subject. Then start reading the notes. You should find the actual reading much more productive. You are less likely to spend a lot of time learning things you already know and your attention will be directed to those aspects you couldn't recall when you were testing yourself. These are obviously the areas which most need learning.
- **Practice past papers:** Doing old exam questions is a valuable revision tool as well as a means to practicing exam technique. The 'toughest' way to use questions is to do them in strictly limited time without looking the relevant topic up. This is the closest to actual exam conditions, but may be a bit scary. A less head-on approach is to look at the question (and if necessary revise the topic) and think it over in unlimited time. Then close your books, start the clock and write your answer. Once you have finished, put your answer away for a while, then go back to it, and try to mark it yourself, using the book as need be. This is not a substitute for teacher marking, but you can learn a lot from assessing your own efforts.
- **Revise with a friend:** Working with friends can be double-edged - it is easy to end up talking about work rather than getting on with it. However, when revision really begins to drag, you might find taking turns to quiz each other injects an enjoyable mix of competition and mutual support.

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- **Find something new to revise from:** Get hold of a new text-book or a Revision Guide and use it in with your notes, comparing as you go along. You will find plenty of points at which they are identical, but you will also find differences which it can be very worthwhile trying to reconcile. Puzzling over whether one example is better than another gets you thinking about important principles...mental flexibility again.
- **Make the best of revision classes:** Dovetail your own revision with any revision classes your teachers may hold. To get the best out of a revision class you should review the topic yourself a day or so before. Note down anything you are unclear about, so you can ask about it. You will find that you get a lot more from the lesson because you have already got the main ideas sorted out, and you are ready to absorb the finer points. After the class check your notes to make sure that they are accurate
- **Ask your teachers for help:** The suggestions above are only some of the ways to set about injecting new interest to revision. Your teachers may well have their own views on revision in general, and on revising their own subject. Find out what they think, and seek their advice whenever you need it. Teachers are there to help you - but you must ask !

Making the best of a revision session

So you've sorted out a plan and decided how to make your revision active. Now you're facing an actual session of revision. What can you do to make the session really effective - in other words, how to get a lot done in the available time and how to make the material stick in your mind?

Most of what follows applies equally to any sort of study, but it particularly important to make each session count when revising. This is because you are under pressure to get more done in a given time, and because most people find it harder to concentrate on revision than on new work.

Organising when you work and what you work at is an essential preliminary to making a work session productive. Assuming that you have the overall pattern under control, here is an approach which works:

- Try to **sort out niggling worries** before getting down to revision. While this won't always be easy, you should be able to stop minor problems of the 'What will I wear tomorrow ?' variety from intruding on your work.
- Begin by **setting aside a period for doing the work**, with a definite start time and finish time. A fixed start time is important for obvious reasons - for one thing it will make you feel guilty if you fail to stick to it. Deciding in advance when you will stop also helps; you then know when the session will end, giving you something to look forward to.
- If you **promise yourself a reward** of doing something enjoyable after the session this may help keep you going but this will only work if you are strict with yourself. Don't go ahead with the promised reward if you haven't done the work !
- **Take a break** after each session to unwind before the next one (but don't let the break go on too long; 10 minutes is about right).
- If you are doing a long stint it is a good idea to **vary the sort of material you cover** in each session. Spending three hours solid on one subject is heavy going even with breaks.
- Before you get started **check that you have all the notes**, books, paper etc that you will need (but don't use this as an excuse to keep postponing the moment when you actually get to grips with the material).
- Set yourself **a clear target** of what you hope to get done during the session - the more definite the better. You will get more sense of achievement out of finishing a specific task than if you just do as much as you can during the time. Experience will help you judge how much you are likely to get through.
- **Above all, make your revision active!** As described in the previous section of this Guide.

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Survive in the exam room

This article is all about how to make sure that you give your very best performance when you're faced with the exams themselves: there in the exam room.

Everyone is different, and that's true of how people cope with sitting exam papers. Subjects differ too: type of questions, amount of choice, length of paper. So there's no one approach that fits all. However, the ideas below will probably help you give your best. Think about them and **practice the suggestions before you face the real thing!**

- **Rehearsal:** It's easy to forget all your good resolutions once you're in the stress-zone. So use any opportunity you can to put these ideas into practise to find out whether they work well for you. You should welcome opportunities for writing answers under timed conditions. In the longer term, practicing reduces stress, and will help ensure that you don't go blank with panic in the exam room.
- **Be ready:** Know where you've got to be, and make sure you get there with 10 minutes to spare (too early give time for panics, too late and you're panicking already). Assemble everything you need for the exam well in advance so you don't have to turn your room upside down at the last minute, or find yourself without some key item. Don't forget spare batteries for calculators etc, and make sure you abide by your schools' rules on what you can and can't take into the exam with you.
- **The first five minutes:** It helps to have an almost **automatic routine** for the first few moments in the exam room, which you have practiced in mocks and which will steady any anxieties. This might be as simple as the way you arrange your exam equipment on your desk. When you open the paper, breathe deeply and start to read through it. Look all the way through it before you start writing, even though the paper is a long one and all the questions are compulsory. That way you will get your bearings on what lies ahead, and it will be easier to resist the panic which might hit if you dive straight in to a difficult first question. Once you have checked out the paper, decide on the first question to tackle.
- **The order in which you tackle the questions:** Your choice of first question is really important. If you come unstuck on it, you will find it harder to approach subsequent questions with confidence. Even though you have to attempt all questions on the paper, you may well be better off starting somewhere other than question one if the first question is a horror. The ideal first question is one that asks about an area you know and which looks as though it will be straightforward to deal with. Until you have warmed up it is better to avoid answers which need careful thinking.
- **Keeping track of time:** You need to be aware of how time is passing so that you don't leave yourself with insufficient time for the final question(s). You can't get marks for answers which you do not write ! The first 50% of the marks for a question are much easier to get than the second 50%, so to go well over time on a question just to get the last few marks is dangerous and is only justified if you know that you will not be able to write much at all for the final question. Another guiding principle is 'Don't spend too long on difficult questions'. It is probably better to move on and come back to the tough ones at the end if time permits. There is nothing as tragic as running out of time, and then realising that the questions you didn't get round to were really easy. **No answer equals no marks.**
- **What to do if time is running out:** If time is ebbing away and you still have a lot to write, switch over to note form. You won't get full credit, but you will get a lot more marks than if you continue in long form and have to stop writing with a third of the answer still to write to go.

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- **What to do if you have some time left over:** Use it to check over your answers and to check that you have answered all the questions you are expected to. It is easy to forget that you skipped a question early on. Now is the time to return to it. Now is the time to guess at answers to questions you are unsure of. You can be sure of getting zero if you don't write anything, so make it your policy to try everything: you will not be penalised for guessing wrongly, and you stand a reasonable chance of picking up some valuable marks.
- **What not to do after the exam:** Post-mortems straight after the paper are generally a bad idea. For one thing they usually turn out to be inaccurate, for another it is pretty easy to depress yourself and affect your morale for the next paper. The only time they are worthwhile is if you badly misplayed your tactical plan. In this case it is worth sitting down and sorting out a way to avoid doing the same with the next exam. Otherwise, wait until you have the result.

Good luck from all of us at CIFE!

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