

Section 15

Revision Techniques

Introduction

This section in your Study Skills manual will consolidate information relating to revision techniques. This section will consider how to *prepare* for examinations and Section 15 will look at exam techniques. For most of us, the thought of exams does not elicit positive feelings – indeed they usually bring on a feeling of dread! This section is going to show that most of us have the same feelings towards exams and that there are measures that can be taken to improve your revision techniques in order to improve your exam performance. This will help to build your confidence and generate a more positive feeling towards your exams, which should, in turn, lead towards gaining better exam marks.

The list contained in the box below is a gauge to see how you feel about examinations. Please read the box and make a mental note if any of these reflect how you feel about examinations.

How Do You Feel About Preparing For Exams?

1. I find it difficult to begin revision while we are still covering new issues.
2. I sleep badly the night before an exam.
3. I'm always certain I'm going to fail exams.
4. I can't draw up a realistic timetable.
5. I can't concentrate on my revision for long enough at a time.
6. I seem to forget things.
7. Other people seem so confident.
8. I can't get down to revision until the last moment.
9. I don't think I work hard enough.
10. Sometimes I feel like giving up.

If any of these things apply to you then do not worry, as almost certainly most people will agree that at least one of these issues applies to them - especially thinking that they are the only ones who cannot cope and everyone else seems very confident and self-assured! The information in this section will give you practical exercises which, if you follow, should help you develop a more confident attitude towards exams.

What do Exams Involve?

Exams are not are memory tests which require you to write everything you know about a given topic. Instead, they require you to organise your knowledge for revision, recall the information that you have learnt and studied, and restructure your knowledge in an organised and coherent manner.

What Do Exams Require Of You?

1. Organise your knowledge for revision:
 - sort through your notes
 - check areas you are less sure of in the library and with friends
 - get an overview of your subject by reading the appropriate sections of reference books
 - read summaries
2. Recall what you have learnt:
 - memorise information sufficiently
 - recall under exam conditions
3. Restructure your knowledge in response to a particular question:
 - know what the examiners require from you
 - shaping it into the form asked for by the exam

Revision Preparation

In the following tables below information on topics concerning revision is subdivided into twelve points (The issue of creating timetables has been covered in previous sections but it is essential for revision to plan out your time in advance).

1. Timetable

- Make a timetable - this will help you plan your revision.
- Write in exam dates and times.
- Plan your work in advance.
- Manage your time - develop a regular work schedule.
- Include other unavoidable academic / work / family commitments, and time for relaxation, exercise or social events.
- Set a revision timetable with realistic goals.
- Plan your revision as far in advance as possible.
- Think of it as part of the course - not something separate.
- Don't cram everything in the last few days before the exam.
- Do this well before your exam, because people often find that by the time they include their course work and other commitments, they have far less time than they thought.

2. Time

- Use any spare moments for revision.
- Practise regularly - every day is better than once a week.
- Arrange your revision into short blocks of time.
- Work in regular, shorter blocks of time, rather than one long revision session.
- Regular revision will help you to remember your material.
- Revising one hour every day is much better than one day every week.
- Work out when your best time of day is to concentrate.
- Decide on your best routine, then stick to it.
- Working late at night isn't usually a good idea.
- Give yourself a reward after each session.

3. Feeling Tired?

- Don't revise until you become tired: you will not remember what you have read, and your efforts will be wasted.
- If you start to feel tired, take a short break, and maybe get some fresh air.
- Short sessions of revision should help you to avoid this danger.
- For efficient revising, short and often is best.

4. Distractions and Concentration

- Avoid distractions and practise regularly.
- Don't try to revise too many subjects in the same revision session.
- Switching between subjects may cause confusion.
- It's better to do one small thing well, rather than several things badly.
- A series of small successes will make you feel more confident.

5. Breaks

- Take short breaks - you can have fun too!
- Feeling tired? - don't push yourself to the limit.
- Work for short time with adequate breaks.
- Do something you find relaxing.
- Don't use this as an excuse to escape hard topics.
- After the short break, go back to work again.

6. Create Good Conditions

- Get the conditions right!
- Work in the library - a perfect place to study.
- Good lighting helps - give your eyes a treat.
- Background noise - learn to live without it.
- Get all your study materials - the basics you need for revision.

7. Mock Exams

- They're useful practice - learn from your mistakes.
- Make it easy - start with a short exercise.
- Try different ways - write rough drafts and plans.
- Mocks can help you overcome writer's block.

8. Choosing Revision Topics

- Use your coursework - to get an overview.
- Read your lecture notes - learn from what you've done.
- Look at the seminar topics.
- Course work questions may be similar to exam questions.
- Read your feedback comments - then follow the advice.
- Learn the main ideas - and the technical terms.
- Read course handouts - to fill in the picture.
- Use past papers - to know what's coming.
- Memorising information - learn just the basics.
- Decide how many topic areas you will need to revise.

9. Using Past Papers

- If your course is new, ask your tutor the best way to prepare for the exam.
- They may be able to give you sample questions similar to those set in the exam.
- Use past papers to get used to the way questions are worded.
- Go to the library and photocopy the last 2-3 years' exam papers.
- Some will begin with quotations and ask you to discuss them.
- Some will list different areas and ask you to write a few paragraphs on each.
- Get used to the kind of language used in exam questions.

10. Essay Plans

- Make essay plans of what you would include in your answer in your preferred method.
- If you want more practice at writing essays, you can write practice exam answers in the allotted time.
- Use each others essays - remember that the course work will be reflected in the exam questions.
- Use ALL the feedback - especially on essay questions.

11. Notes and Prompt Cards

- Make notes on your notes every time you revise, improving them and make them more meaningful.
- Use a personal glossary or summary cards to help revision (see Appendix).
- Use prompt cards – revision notes in your pocket!
- Make some revision notes on small index cards.
- Carry them around with you for revising in short breaks.
- Have an overview of the course and its topics.
- Don't try to fill the card with information. It will be difficult to read - and remember.

12. Quick Revision Tips

- You can sometimes use very short periods for revision.
- Five or ten minutes may be enough to remind yourself of a course overview.
- Short periods are also useful for revising word lists, dates, or formulas.
- Carry small revision cards and prompt lists for this purpose.
- Three or four shorter sessions like this might be more useful than one longer block.

Ineffective Revision

The following boxes contain information relating to ten common pitfalls that people may do when they are revising. Therefore these ten issues are listed so that you can see, at a glance, the things which you should avoid when revising.

1. Leaving Revision until the Last Minute.

- 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.

2. Reading Notes Over and Over Again.

- Use creative and interactive strategies 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 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.

3. Writing Notes Out Over And Over Again.

- Working to different essay plans 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 a 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.

4. Writing Out Essays And Learning Them Off By Heart.

- 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.

5. Finding Ways of Putting Off Revision.

- Make a revision timetable which leaves empty spaces to cater for emergencies.
- Do a spell of revision before each 'urgent task'.
- Use watching television or other distractions as a reward – put them in your timetable.
- You may be missing company. Try revising with other students, or involve others in your revision.

6. 'I can't force myself back to study'

- Check your motivation.
- Rather than 'forcing' yourself, encourage and entice yourself through short-term goals, challenges, creativity, and company.
- Check that your timetable has sufficient breaks for rest.

7. 'I Start To Panic. I Feel I'm Never Going To Get Through It All or Remember It'

- Work with positive-minded people.
- Work steadily to small goals.
- Speak to a professional counsellor at the university.

8. 'I can't cope with the boredom of it. I start to daydream or wonder why I am bothering.'

- Work in a lot of shorter spells.
- Boredom suggests that you are not using a variety of interactive learning techniques or 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.
- Invent an essay or a test for yourself.

9. 'I have too many responsibilities for sufficient revision'

- Make use of short spells of time.
- 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.

10. Stopping Revision Before The Process Of Over-Learning Is Complete.

- It is important to keep checking back what you have learnt, 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.

Memory

As stated previously, examinations are not just about memory and regurgitating reams of learned facts and figures. Instead, they are about your interpretations of theories, ideas, facts and figures and how you apply that knowledge to answer specific questions. However, having said that, examinations obviously do require that you 'remember' information in order that you reproduce it in your exam paper. We will now look at how your memory works and aids to help your memory.

How Your Memory Works.

1. Long term memory.
 - This is where ideas and memories from years before are stored.
 - This is where you will store most of the information about your subjects.
2. Short term memory
 - This is where recent information is stored.
 - This is where you will probably store formulae and quotations.

Recalling Information

1. Use 'hooks' to help you recall the information.
2. 'Hooks' are things you can associate with the information to help you remember it.
3. For example, try to make links between ideas and other ways of representing them other than writing.
4. Colours and diagrams work well.
5. A change of surroundings help sometimes, so try working in different places occasionally.
6. Try to reduce all the important points on a topic to a single summary sheet.
7. The process of summarising will help fix the ideas in your mind.
8. One sheet is much easier to revise from and memorise than a sheaf of notes.
9. Use index cards to show topic headings and key points/ dates.
10. Carry them around with you to read.
11. Use post-it notes for bullet points, key phrases, important dates.
12. Stick them somewhere you can see them to jog your memory
 - visualise them.

Group Revision Sessions

If you are studying for a while before your exams (as you should be!), then you may find that you are feeling a bit isolated and missing company. If this is the case then it may help to participate in group study sessions, or combine groups study sessions with your own individual study. However, if you find that you prefer studying on your own then that is perfectly acceptable, but there are some advantages to group revision sessions and some of them are outlined below.

Advantages to Group Study Sessions Include:

1. Company

- makes the process of revision seem more worthwhile and interesting,
- reassurance - you are not the only person who feels the way you do.

2. Deadlines to Help You Work to Schedule

- if you agree to meet up to discuss a topic, you are more likely to complete your work on time.

3. Discussion

- helps you understand ideas,
- and to explore them in a way which makes them more individual to you,
- helps you remember ideas, people often recall conversations better than what they read.

4. Other People's Time

- you can divide the work load,
- take it in turns to brief the others on specific areas,
- helps cover more ground more quickly,
- if you get stuck on something, there is more chance that you will work it out if there is more than one of you.

5. Less Chance of Missing Out a Crucial Bit

- talking the subject over with other students will help you identify the gaps,
- sometimes your fellow students can explain something in a way that's easier to understand than your lecturer's.

Stress

Regardless of how we each feel about examinations, they are certainly a stressful time in your life. However, whilst a bit of nervous energy can help performance in exams, stress can be debilitating and can affect both your revision and your exam performance. Therefore it is important to try and minimise your stress levels both before and during the examination period.

Managing Stress

1. Anxiety can be one of the main obstacles to performing well in exams.
2. Prepare well for the exam so you feel confident, although you will still probably feel nervous.
3. Anything that makes you laugh will help you relax.
4. Try to have a routine worked out for the night before and the day of you exam - what you will wear, how long it will take you to get to the exam, where you will park etc. These are things which can worry you otherwise, making you more tense, and having a plan will help you stay calm.
5. Negative thoughts - 'I can't do this', 'I should never have started this course' - are very destructive and interfere with your performance. To block them, make a list of positive things - 'I was good enough to start it so I'm good enough to finish it', 'I can do anything if I try hard enough' - and repeat them to yourself when the negative thoughts start. It may seem a very artificial exercise, but it really can help.
6. Don't forget to try and eat reasonably well!
7. And try and get lots of sleep!

Conclusion

Before you look at the next section on exam techniques it is worthwhile to look at the box below with statements relating to your self-evaluation of your revision time and your mental attitude towards your revision and your exams. The 'check list' below covers some practical issues about your exams (which will be covered in more detail in the next section) but some are more reflective about your revision for the exams.

Self Evaluation

- I can find something positive for me in taking these exams.
- I know exactly when the exams are.
- I am aware how many questions are required for each exam.
- I can work out how many topics I need to revise for each exam.
- I am aware of the range to 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 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.

Practical Exercise

When you are revising for exams it is important to be aware of the format for each exam – and remember that each exam may vary. Thus the following exercise involves knowing what each exam requires you to do. Have this information ready before you start your revision so that you know exactly what you are revising for and how many topics you have to cover for each exam. On a cautionary note always have more areas studied that you need to answer questions on so that you can definitely answer the minimum amount of questions required.

Know What Your Exam Will Look Like.

Fill out slot a. for your first exam, b. for the second and so on:

1. How long is the exam?
a. b. c.
2. How many questions do you need to answer?
a. b. c.
3. What format will they be in (essay, short answer, multiple choice?)
a. b. c.
4. Will the exam follow the same format as in previous years? (yes/no)
a. b. c.
5. Can you get copies of previous exam papers to work from? (yes / no)
a. b. c.

Concentration Levels

Make a list of the high concentration tasks which will be best done when you feel most alert, and low concentration tasks which you can do when you're feeling sluggish:

ALERT

LOW EBB
