

# Revision and exams

## Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to:

- take charge of the exam experience
- 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 daunting. However, you can take charge of many aspects of the exam process so that, when you enter the exam room, you feel in the best possible position to perform well.

Knowing the purpose of exams, understanding some ways that exams can be an advantage to you, and having techniques and strategies that you can use, can all help to create the positive mindset needed for a successful exam experience.

## The purpose of exams

The main purpose of exams is for lecturers to check that you understand the work covered on the course and to ensure 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. These produce a very intense kind of learning that is not easy to reproduce under any other conditions.

## Some advantages of examinations

There are some positive benefits from exams!

- You cannot 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 weak presentation, minor grammatical errors, spellings, and forgotten details than lecturers are for coursework.
- Compared with continual assessment, there is less pressure on you throughout the year.

## **What does revision involve ?**

Revision is the process of reviewing the work to be examined, going over it to:

- check you have covered the syllabus in sufficient breadth and depth
- remind yourself of what you have learnt
- check your understanding
- employ strategies to help recall in the exam room

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 either:

- negatively – as stress and the likelihood of failure
- or positively – as a challenge encouraging you to heighten your own expertise.

Before an exam approaches, it is useful to make adequate preparations.

- Organize your notes – the process of sorting out what is 'essential' helps to remind you of material covered during the year.
- Reduce your notes – to key headings, points and citations (name and date only).
- Make master cards – using memory triggers. You could use pattern notes or concept pyramids.
- Check your learning. Work interactively with materials. Write out or record what you have to recall. Test your recall. Write and test recall of difficult material several times to build your memory.

### **Use past exam papers**

Past exam papers are your best resource. The phrasing of these might feel off-putting: questions may seem vague as they cannot 'give away the answer'. It is good to become familiar with such wording before 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 pattern of recurring questions.
- Check the minimum number of topics you could have revised to complete that paper.

## 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.
- \* Start to over-learn names, dates and key points early in the year, using notes or 'flash cards' in spare moments. 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' given below well before exam.

- 2 Reading through notes over

- \* 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.

3	Writing notes out over and over again.	*	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 flash cards.
		*	Reduce information to a series of memory triggers. Reduce a set of triggers to one key word or image.
4	Writing out essays & 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 practicing, 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 (such as 'urgent' things that need to be done, watching TV, or chatting with friends or family).	*	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.
		*	You may be missing company. Have a go at revising with other students, or involve others in your revision. Explain a subject to them: can they understand your Explanation? Ask them to test you on your memory triggers, or to ask you questions from your notes.
6	'I can't force myself back to study.'	*	Check your motivation
		*	Rather than 'forcing' yourself, encourage and entice yourself to study through short-term goals, challenges, creativity, and studying with others.
		*	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.
		*	Read about <b>Dealing with stress</b>
		*	Work steadily to small goals
		*	Speak to a professional counselor at the university.

8	'I can't cope with the boredom of it. I start to daydream or wonder why I'm bothering.'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Work in many shorter spells rather than long revision sessions.</li> <li>* Boredom suggests that you are not using a variety of Interactive learning techniques, nor using your creativity</li> <li>* Look for ways of introducing variety into your study sessions.</li> <li>* 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.</li> <li>* 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.</li> </ul>
9	'I have too many responsibilities to make revision practicable.'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Make use of short spells of time, on buses, during tea breaks, and the like.</li> <li>* Divide your material into short sections. Always carry some with you.</li> <li>* Carry an exam question in your head and jot down ideas as they occur.</li> </ul>
10	Stopping revision before the process of over-learning is complete.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Check back repeatedly over what you have learnt, reducing your material to shorter, key memory triggers as your recall improves.</li> <li>* Keep asking yourself: 'How can I use this material to answer other questions that might come up?'</li> <li>* Over-learning takes time – use spare moments well.</li> </ul>

## Revision strategies

A good revision mentality requires creativity, interactive study techniques, a high degree of motivation, time management, working well with others, writing skill 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** discussed next.

### **Have a revision mentality for the whole term or year**

- Make your notes clear, visual, colorful, dynamic, and memorable. Leave lots of space to add new information later.
- Make flash cards of key information as you go along.
- Go over material at regular intervals so that you have less to do at the last minute
- See 'Revision pitfalls' discussed earlier

### **Use time carefully**

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

### **Work with others**

- Arrange revision sessions with friends

### **Ask for help**

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

### **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.

### **Revise by ear**

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

### **Stay healthy**

- Sleep, relax and take plenty of breaks.

#### **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

## **Revision and exam preparation**

### ***Preparing for exams: checklist***

- 1 I can find something positive for me in taking these exams
- 2 I can develop the right frame of mind for these exams
- 3 I know exactly when the exams are
- 4 I am aware how many questions are required for each exam

- 5 I have read the course or module details carefully to check what I am expected to know about the subject
- 6 I have organized my notes so that the material is easy to learn
- 7 I can work out how many topics I need to revise for each exam
- 8 I am aware of the range of questions that can come up for each topic
- 9 I have made a realistic revision timetable, with clear priorities
- 10 I know how to work on exam answers using past papers
- 11 I have started to practice writing out answers at speed
- 12 I am aware of the memory strategies I need to revise for the exam
- 13 I know how the marks are weighted for each questions
- 14 I am aware of how to use time most effectively in the exam
- 15 I am aware of how to avoid common pitfalls in exams
- 16 I am aware of the differences between exam answers and coursework
- 17 I know how to manage stress and use it effectively

### **Reflection: Improving revision strategies**

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

## **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; organizing a timetable, **Priority organizer** 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, flash 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. revising 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 be assessed?
- Are any mock exams provided?
- Where can you get past papers?

Keep a record of this information – see the **Exams** checklist below

### **Find out the exam 'instructions'**

Familiarize yourself with the instructions, or 'rubric', 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 indicate where to write your name or 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 times that you will start and finish each question – this is one less thing to do in the exam room. Remember these and, when you enter the exam room, jot them down 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 up your own questions.
- Arrange the seating so that you cannot 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 'flash' cards. Check your understanding and memory. Find ways of keeping up interests and motivation.
- Organize cover for any domestic or employment responsibilities. Plan for emergencies. If possible, arrange for child care or other support from the day before the exam, so that you are free for final revision.
- 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. Slow-releasing carbohydrates, such as bread and cereals, are best.
- 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.