

STAYING ON TOP OF EXAMS

Exams can be a stressful affair. Here is a practical guideline to handle the time leading up to examinations, as well as some tips about the exams themselves. Many of the suggestions here are simple or “obvious”, yet at times when we are under pressure we can easily forget these basics.

Prepping for Exams...

Start a revision programme in good time before the exams. Whilst you do not want to 'peak' too early, leaving revision too late is the perfect recipe for stress. What you may not realize is that **doing the work takes less effort than thinking about doing the work!**

The Space

Create the study space. Think about where you work because creating a physical study space will help prep you mentally. Study in a well lit and quiet area, away from noises. This may be at home, at a café or at the library. If you study at home, see if you can separate your work place from where you relax. Even if this all happens within one small room, create a “working place”, containing everything you need for your work.

Remove all distractions. Phones, emails, social networks (e.g. facebook), pictures, music, TV etc. should all be kept and used in your “relaxation areas”. Make your work space neat and tidy – or at least pleasant and comfortable to look at and be in. Get used to working when you are in your work area, and “switching off” when you get up from this place.

Studying Smart

Find out about the exam. What format will the exam will take? Are the questions in essay, short answer or multiple choice? Is the exam open book or closed book? Knowing how the exam is marked and what proportion of your total grade it is worth might also be helpful.

Wallpaper. Write down key concepts you have to learn on small sheets of paper followed by examples of how they are used. Post these sheets around your house, e.g. - your bed, on the toilet door, in front of the CD collection. It helps with remembering things like equations, quotes and foreign languages.

Use past exam papers. Whenever possible, ask your teacher for past exam papers or practice questions. They can be a useful insight into what your exam will be like and can also provide a guide for what you know and the areas in which you need help.

Keep asking questions. Ask your teachers or even friends for help if you are having trouble developing a study routine or need help with understanding subjects or a particular topic. Asking for help **does NOT** mean you are a failure or stupid – in fact, it is smart to tap into their experience and knowledge to help you perform better. Keep going back to them if you are still unsure or you have more questions. It is *their* job to be available for you.

Form study groups. This is one helpful way to revise your notes and work through past exam questions. It can also help you feel supported, keep you motivated and focused. If you have questions about your work, a study group may be a good place to have them answered.

Know your preferred learning style. Some people work better using text based memory tools, like acronyms (e.g. ROYGBIV - colours of the rainbow; acrostics e.g. Every Good Boy Deserves Fruit). Other people find more visual tools more useful, e.g. - mind maps or tree diagrams. Some are auditory learners and learn best when they listen to the materials being read out. Find out what works for you!

Revise and learn (do not just re-read). At times reading through notes does not result in learning or understanding. Here are some tips to help you recap each topic:

- ➔ Highlight and memorise important vocabulary, technical terms definitions
- ➔ Highlight and memorise formulae, rules, diagrams, charts
- ➔ Make a summary of key points
- ➔ Draw mind maps to highlight key relationships between concepts
- ➔ Give yourself frequent mini quizzes

Stay Organised

Plan ahead. Find out the dates of each exam and work out a study timetable leading up to them. Breakdown what needs to be covered and come up with a rough timeline of when each chapter/ section needs to be covered. Plan mini

tests to help you identify gaps in your knowledge. This can give you some direction and help you focus on what to study each week or day.

Calendars and timetables. This can be bought, made or even created online or on your phone. Leave it where you will see it and make sure you have frequent access to it. Use bright and colourful sticky notes and pens to warn of approaching deadlines.

To do lists. Each day you sit down to a task (coursework or study), make a 'to do' list. Prioritise what needs to be done first. Breaking what you need to do down into small, manageable tasks will make it seem less overwhelming. Crossing each thing off as you complete it can give you a sense of achievement and helps you manage the time you have left.

Balance

Take regular breaks. Getting up, moving around and away from your desk at least every 50 minutes for ten minutes makes you concentrate and learn better.

You are not a machine. A certain amount of pressure is good for us and helps us perform well. But this is different from the popular game of "look how stressed I am", which is supposed to impress others with how hard one is working. So, maintain some balance in life: make time for exercise, adequate sleep and down time (hanging out with friends, watching TV, surfing the net etc.)

The BIG Day

At Home

Look after yourself. Getting enough rest and eating reasonably is more important and effective than trying to do some last minute cramming. Don't get up very early, as this will just make you more tired. Eat breakfast, but do not drink too much liquid! If you have spare time do something you find relaxing - have a bath, go for a stroll - and keep away from those whose stress levels are contagious.

Forget cramming. If you followed through your study plan, there is no need to cram or panic, as you have done all you can do prepare. Rather than trying to learn any new material, look over a few key points.

Before Going In

Be on time. Arrive at the exam hall comfortably in time but not too early. Remember, the tension hanging over this short period of waiting just before the exam is highly contagious, so minimise your exposure to it!

Relax. It is natural to feel some anxiety when you go into the examination room. Use the few minutes before you are allowed to begin to do some simple relaxation and breathing exercises. Sit back and separate yourself mentally from those who are getting stressed.

During The Exam

Read it properly. Read the exam paper through slowly. If you must choose a question to answer, select the one you know most about and are most interested in. When you have chosen your question read it through twice to make sure you have understood and not misread the question. If you are allowed to do so, underline key words or phrases in the questions.

Order of questions. Some like to tackle questions in chronological order, others like to start with what they are most familiar with. Do what works for you, but if you ever find yourself stuck, move on and come back to it later.

Plan your essays. Scribbling a quick essay plan is encouraged. After doing your plan, look back at the question and check that you are answering the question asked - you do not get credit for a brilliant answer to a question you were *not* asked!

Manage your time. Answer the correct number of questions and divide your time equally between them - or according to the marking scheme if questions have different weighting. With essay questions, you will get more marks overall by doing three (say) *average* answers, than by doing two brilliant ones but leaving the third question undone!

Take regular micro-breaks. Whenever you pause at the end of writing a paragraph or stop to think for a moment, put your pen down and sit back - even if just for a moment.

Do not panic.

In an examination it is not uncommon for one's mind to go blank for a moment, or to be confused by a question put in an unfamiliar way. At these times it is easy to begin to panic. This is likely to take the form of doom-laden thoughts as well as physical symptoms such as feeling your heart racing, feeling faint, hot or sweaty. Although these symptoms are disturbing, perhaps even frightening, they are in fact very common and are not at all dangerous.

Quick steps to help with panicky feelings

1. Pause for a few moments. Put your pen down and sit back. Clear your mind and push out all negative, upsetting thoughts to the back of your mind and re-focus your attention on relaxing.

2. Engage in relaxation exercises.

- *Control your breathing.* Slowly inhale through your nose, counting to five in your head. Let the air out from your mouth, counting to eight in your head as it leaves your lungs. Repeat several times. That's it!
- *Relax those muscles.* Begin tensing, then relaxing your body. Start at the top of your head and continue down through the neck, shoulders, arms, hips, legs and feet.
- *Soothe those weary eyes.* Rub your palms together vigorously to create heat and place them over your closed eyes for a full minute.

3. Picture something positive. Choose an image or a place that appeals to you. Picture it in your mind as vividly as you can. Use as many sensory details as possible to help you with this.

3. Talk to yourself. Reassure yourself that you are not going to collapse or lose control. No matter how bad the anxiety feels, **do not leave the exam** as the anxiety level will fall within a short space of time. Remind yourself that panic is time-limited and the symptoms will reduce in a short while.

4. Get back to work. When you are able, get back to work. Remember that it is better to put *something* down rather than nothing.

Afterwards...

Before the day of the exam, it can be a good idea to decide what you are going to do immediately after the exam.

- If you are exhausted, some food or a sleep may help.
- If you are still wound up, you could do something physical, such as go for a run or a swim.
- If you are up to it, do something YOU find enjoyable!

Whatever you do, don't hang around and engage in discouraging chitchat over what you think you got wrong or missed. This will not be one bit helpful to the outcome!

Further support is available

Hopefully the suggestions above will be sufficient to remind you of some common-sense good practice. However, if you feel that you need further help, speak with your tutor, a trusted adult you find supportive or the School Counsellor.