REVISION AND EXAMS

The material included in this guide has been gathered and adapted from the following publications:

*The Study Skills Handbook* by Stella Cottrell  
*How to Pass Exams* by W.G. Leader  
*Passing Exams without Anxiety* by David Acres  
*Use Your Memory* by Tony Buzan  
*The Student’s Guide to Exam Success* by Eileen Tracy

Part 1 concentrates on revision, recommending strategies that make the most of how the brain and memory work. Part 2 covers exam technique and practicalities.

PART 1

**BE PREPARED!**

- Know when and where the exam is.
- Know what the format is:
  - length of paper; types of question; number of questions; amount of choice; allocation of marks etc.
- Know what to revise:
  - check past papers for recurrent topics, patterns of questions; check course notes for other topics emphasised; make a list of key ideas/concepts/words to define; make a list of possible questions.
- Know your own strengths and weaknesses.
- Prepare for revision from the start:
  - make course notes user-friendly; condense information onto index cards; learn key information as you go. (See “Memory Information” below.)
REVISION

DON’T

- Leave it until the last minute.
- Make excuses for not revising.
- Just read through your notes over and over again.
- Try and revise all topics in the same depth.
- Always go it alone.
- Burn yourself out.

DO

- Plan for revision from the start.
- Make a revision time-table.
- Set specific tasks for each revision session.
- Make the most of your personal “best” learning time and the way the memory works (see “Memory Facts” below).
- Organise your revision space.
- Be active in your revision:
  - prepare summaries of topic areas – spider plans, mind maps etc.
  - build in variety.
  - use all your senses. (See “Use Your Brain” and “Strategies for Remembering” below.)
  - use past exam papers.
  - work with others.
  - set questions and make up tests for yourself.
  - use memory tricks to learn key facts.
- Build in relaxation time.
- Eat and sleep properly!
MEMORY INFORMATION

Memory involves:

- Taking in information through the senses
- Retaining it in short-term memory
- Transferring it into long-term memory
- Storage
- Retrieval – recall (deliberate, accidental, in dreams)

Active revision, using all the senses, can help to transfer information to the long-term memory for recall in the exam.

We remember:

- 20% of what we read
- 30% of what we hear
- 40% of what we see
- 50% of what we say
- 60% of what we do
- 90% of what we read, hear, see, say and do

Revision techniques that use all the senses will be most effective.

During a learning period the brain remembers items:

- From the beginning
- From the end
- Associated with other things
- That are emphasised/stand out in some way
- That appeal strongly to the senses
- That are of particular interest

Organising revision into 20-30 minute slots makes the most of the beginning and end “high” points of recall.

Regular breaks (2 – 10 mins.) help your brain to sort out the information you’ve taken in, so you return to study both rested and better informed.

Active revision techniques that use all the senses; connect related information and emphasise key points will help you to remember more.
After a learning period:

- You retain more of what you’ve learnt after a few minutes have passed since the end of the learning period
- You lose 80% of detail learnt within 24 hours of learning it

Build in regular review throughout your course to make the most of the rise and prevent the decline:

- After 10 minutes
- After 24 hours
- After 1 week
- After 1 month
- After 6 months – exam revision

**USE YOUR BRAIN!**

The brain is divided into two hemispheres.

Each is dominant in different skills, but both have all the skills.

Most activities involve using both.

Most people have a “left” or “right” brain preference. The more you use both sides together, the more one benefits the other.
Left brain

Logical thinking style
Sequence
Cause and effect
Logic
Analysis
Numbers
Words
Calculation/deduction
Sense of time
Reasoning
Temporal – one at a time
Uses language to name, describe, define
Lists
Chemical formulae

Right brain

Global thinking style
Seeing the whole
Inter-relationships
Metaphor
Synthesis
Image, shape, colour
Rhythm
Intuition
Emotion
Imagination
Spatial – all at once
Uses pictures, shape, colour
Dimension
Pattern recognition

STRATEGIES FOR REMEMBERING USING ALL THE BRAIN’S SKILLS

Use auditory memory

- Make a audio recording
- Make up a song or chant
- Go over a topic with a friend (real or imaginary)
- Read notes aloud – over-dramatise

Use visual memory

- Make pattern notes/mind map/concept pyramids
- Incorporate images, shape and dimension
- Link a topic to an image, e.g. a car. Link each part of that object with an aspect of the topic.
- For complex formulae/lists, use a sequence of images linked by a story.
- Use symbols for abstract concepts.
- Use colour to code notes, essay plans

Use verbal memory

- Reduce information to key points/words – use as memory triggers on index cards
- Organise information into hierarchies/pyramids under headings
- Summarise information in your own words
- Devise mnemonics and silly stories to link facts

Use order/sequencing

- Sort by category, colour, grouping, numbering
- Make flow charts/concept pyramids

Use movement
• Study on the move
• Make up an exercise routine – associate each movement with something you want to remember

Use your surroundings

• Attach notes to furniture, objects – note location.
• Use different rooms for different subjects – note how you feel in a particular room.
• Stick flow charts/concept pyramids on the wall.

Use yourself

• Use different body parts as triggers to remembering key aspects of a topic.
• Link different clothes/features with topics/key points.
• Wear those clothes into an exam as a memory trigger.

Use association and emphasis

• Link new information to what you already know
• Make key ideas stand out in some way
• Combine information into meaningful “chunks” to maximise the storage capacity of your short-term memory

Use all your senses and all the tools available to you. Be flexible - try out different approaches.

PEG MEMORY SYSTEMS

An unchanging list of key memory images – pegs don’t change but what you hang on them does.

Useful for remembering short lists of items:

Number/shape system

• Write down numbers 1 – 10
• Draw an image for each, same shape as number
• Link each item in your list to the image

  e.g.  1 - Candle, straw
        2 - Swan
        8 - Spectacles

Number/rhyme system

• As above, but use an image that rhymes with the number:
e.g. 1 - sun
      2 - shoe
      4 - door

Alphabet system

- As above but use letters instead of numbers. Link each letter with a word that starts with the sound of the letter:

  e.g.  A - Ace
        B - Bee
        R - Arch

Roman Room

- Link each item to a feature/object/piece of furniture in an imaginary room.

(For more information see *Use Your Memory* by Tony Buzan.)

Memory activity

1. Read through the following information about the stress response.
2. Reduce each paragraph to one key word that you can picture in your mind.
3. String the key words together into a story.

The Stress Response

- Blood flow is instantly directed away from the skin, digestive tract, liver and immune system, and delivered in extra quantities to the brain, heart and muscles.

- The heart beats faster, pumping more blood to the muscles.

- Blood pressure rises.

- Muscles tense up, ready for action.

- Breathing becomes fast and shallow, to increase oxygen intake.

- Pupils dilate, taking in more light.

- The liver releases stored sugar – levels of sugar, fat and cholesterol rise in the bloodstream, providing extra energy.
• Levels of platelets and blood clotting agents increase in the blood, to protect from excess bleeding in case of injury.

• Perspiration increases.

**Sample Answer**

• Blood flow is instantly directed away from the skin, digestive tract, liver and immune system, and delivered in extra quantities to the brain, heart and muscles. *(vital organs)*

• The heart beats faster, pumping more blood to the muscles. *(pump)*

• Blood pressure rises. *(blood pressure)*

• Muscles tense up, ready for action. *(muscles)*

• Breathing becomes fast and shallow, to increase oxygen intake. *(oxygen)*

• Pupils dilate, taking in more light. *(pupils)*

• The liver releases stored sugar – levels of sugar, fat and cholesterol rise in the bloodstream, providing extra energy. *(sugar)*

• Levels of platelets and blood clotting agents increase in the blood, to protect from excess bleeding in case of injury. *(platelets)*

• Perspiration increases. *(sweat)*

The whale, having eaten Jonah, was making ready to digest his vital organs. However, being a well prepared diver, Jonah was ready to fight back with a pump he had brought along just in case this kind of thing happened. He pumped up the whale; the whale’s blood pressure rose, as air pressure builds up in a tyre. Irritated, it burped up Jonah, using its strong burp muscles. Once released, Jonah took a gasp of nice, clean oxygen, and felt much better. Versatile Jonah was not only a diver but a teacher, and so he told his pupils all about the incident during school dinner, which consisted of sugar piled up on little, child-sized plates. The children were so terrified by the story that they came out in a cold sweat and could not eat.

*(From The Student’s Guide to Exam Success by Eileen Tracy)*

THE DAY BEFORE THE EXAM

• Do what feels right
– review key word cards or
– do something completely different

- check out equipment needed
- check time/place/candidate no. etc.
- do something relaxing before bed
- avoid stimulating drinks before bed
- go to bed fairly early

THE DAY OF THE EXAM

- Get up reasonably early
- Have breakfast – don’t drink too much
- Get everything ready
- Allow enough time for journey
- Arrive in time to compose yourself

IN THE EXAM

- Settle/compose yourself - set out equipment/watch.

- Listen to the invigilator’s instructions.

- Read the paper carefully (5 mins.) - check how many questions you have to answer and how marks are allocated.

- Read each question carefully and decide what it is asking you to do - don’t “pounce” on questions you want to see or ignore those without specific key instruction words.

- Tick all the questions you could attempt - tick twice the ones you could do best.

- Plan your time - share out your time according to the marks available. Note finish time for each.

- Tackle your best question first.

- Analyse the wording of each question - underline key words and other words that show the scope of the question. Use these as basis for your plan.

- Allow 5 mins. to plan each essay and 5 mins. to check.
• If you do run out of time to write a complete essay, at least make an outline plan of the main points you'd include.

• If time runs out before you finish an essay, make bullet points for the rest of the essay then move on to the next question. Leave space for later additions.

• Answer clearly and simply. Stick to the question.

• Check your name/exam number etc. are on the paper.

• Don’t leave early – use any time left to check grammar, spelling, missing words etc.

**MULTIPLE CHOICE EXAMS**

Students often think of multiple choice exams as the easy exam option. There are advantages to these exams:

• The correct answer is always going to be in front of you
• The exam will be testing for basic information, rather than expecting analysis

However, there are also challenges:

• You need to be familiar with a broad range of topics
• You need to be aware of details and distinctions

**Preparation for multiple choice exams**

• Review your notes thoroughly and memorise facts
• Pay particular attention to fundamental terms and concepts
• Use all the memory techniques available to you (see above)
• Work with others making up questions and testing one another; this exposes gaps in your knowledge
• Space your revision rather than cramming the night before

**Taking a multiple choice exam**

There are three parts to a multiple choice question:

1. The question itself
2. Several distracting alternatives, that test your true knowledge of the subject
3. The correct answer

Therefore:

1. Read the question carefully. Cover the answer choices, and see if you can answer the question without being distracted by the answers
2. Read all the answers carefully, even if you think you know the correct one
3. If you are stuck, try reframing each answer as a true or false question
Further multiple choice exam techniques

- Work out how much time you have per question
- Plan to have time at the end to revisit difficult or omitted questions
- Answer questions in order to avoid wasting time
- Flag the questions you need to revisit, but keep them to a minimum
- Don’t be afraid to change answers
- Answer every question – you have nothing to lose!
- If more than one question seems correct, ask yourself if each answer completely answers the question
- It is unlikely that there will be trick questions, so try not to respond as if this is so
- Look for the answers that use the terminology you’ve used or heard in the module