

Exam skills

The following transcript is based on material in *The Study Skills Handbook*, by Stella Cottrell.

"I just panic: I freeze up. I talk on the phone when I should be revising, and I stare out of the window when I should be writing in the exam"

"I keep reading my course notes over and over again and at the end of hours of revising I can't remember a single thing I'm supposed to have learned."

"I always run out of time, sometimes I even miss out a whole question, and I just think, whoosh, there go 10 easy marks, and I come out and I want to cry."

For any number of reasons you might feel that exams are hell on earth: you may feel that you simply can't perform well under stress, that you can't demonstrate your understanding or even remember your name in exam conditions, that you can't focus your mind on revision until the night before the exam, or that your handwriting will simply be illegible after three hours of non-stop scrawling. It's very easy to convince yourself that exams are simply a bad system and that you're no good at them. But the fact remains that you are still going to have to face them, until lecturers devise a better way of ensuring that you understand the course without any help from your friends, so here's a few ideas and strategies for improving your confidence and your performance.

First, let's consider your attitude to exams. Have you ever thought that there might actually be advantages to exams?

"You aren't expected to come up with anything very long or carefully thought through in an exam, so in a way it's easier, and they don't worry so much about your spelling or presentation."

“There’s no need for long lists of bibliographies or references, which I hate doing, they take almost as long to do as the assignment itself.”

“Exams are very pressured, but at least it’s a relatively short period of time and afterwards you can go out and have fun, it’s much better than having constant pressure all year.”

“If I didn’t have exams I definitely wouldn’t go over the course material again and I think that revising the stuff you did at the beginning of the course really fixes it in your head and makes it all make sense.”

A good start to coping better with exams is to make a deliberate choice to see them as a positive benefit to your learning, drawing together all the strands of your course and providing a ring-fenced period of time for you to really get to grips with the material before you move onto the next course.

As well as having a positive attitude towards revision and exams, it’s also important that you’re feeling healthy and able to cope, so make sure you eat well, get enough sleep (most people need around 8 hours to perform at the top of their game) and take plenty of breaks.

“I found that if I studied really hard for an hour or two then went out for a run, the stuff seemed to stick better in my head. It was easier to concentrate too, knowing I was going to stop and do something energetic in a while.”

“I started to find that when I went to bed all the stuff I’d been revising was buzzing round my head and I was getting stressed about the exams so I started taking a Terry Pratchett novel to bed and reading a chapter before I went to sleep, it made me laugh and I slept much better.”

“I know a guy who just stopped eating properly and survived on coffee and Pro-plus in the week before the exams: he made himself really ill

and overslept on the morning of his last exam, he had to retake it six months later!”

So having worked on your attitude and your lifestyle, how do you actually go about the business of revision itself? You can't learn every single fact for every single subject, so the first rule is: *select what you're going to revise*. One of the best ways to do this is by using past exam papers to spot which topics recur frequently. But question-spotting can be dangerous if the questions you've revised don't come up, so make sure you give yourself some options: if you need to answer three questions, revise at least five topics.

If you don't set aside time for revision, it won't happen. So the second rule is: once you've decided what you're going to revise *draw up a timetable*, giving the most time to the subjects that carry the most marks.

“I found my revision timetable worse than useless because I didn't build in any time off, it was completely unrealistic and I just ended up even more depressed and stressed watching myself get further behind, next time I'd definitely build in time to relax to keep myself sane.”

“I found that instead of actually revising I just kept reworking my four-colour revision timetable as the exam got closer, next time I'll just do something really simple and not get hung up on it!”

“The most useful thing I did with my revision timetable was to set aside two whole days for answering past papers, it got me used to the format of the questions and the way different topics kept recurring in slightly different questions, and I really needed the practice in writing a timed answer because the first time I tried it I didn't get half way through in the time allowed!”

Practice in writing at speed for a long period of time is very important: if you usually use a computer to write assignments, emails and so on, you may find you need to build up the muscles required to write legibly for several hours.

Doing past papers as timed essays without the aid of your notes is a great way to get up to speed with both thinking and writing under pressure as well as helping identify the areas that require more revision. Remember that it's highly unlikely the exact same question will come up in the exam so don't waste time learning your answers off by heart: instead focus on identifying and understanding the key models and theories so that you can use them flexibly in an exam depending on the exact wording of the question.

Simply reading your notes over and over is not a very effective way to revise: the information simply slides over the surface of your mind without leaving a trace. So rule three is to *use active learning strategies* to ensure that you involve yourself in what you're learning, looking for links between different elements and reflecting on what you're studying. If you can really engage with and understand the material you're studying, and relate it to what you already know, it moves into your long-term memory and becomes much more interesting and useful in the process.

"I found it really helpful to summarise passages of text in my own words, it made me notice which bits I hadn't really understood, identify which bits were really important and also meant I had a nice concise summary to go back to for last-minute revision."

"I use mind-maps all the time when I'm revising a subject to get all the different bits of it down on paper and see how they link up with each other, I can add key models and examples underneath each heading. I sometimes have to draw a map a few times before I get it right, but each time I understand it a bit better."

"When I have to remember something really dry, like a list, I try to invent a really outrageous mental picture that includes all the elements. Or I'll think up a rude acronym to remind me of the first letter of each bit."

“My mate and I used to study together and try to cover the same stuff at the same time, afterwards we’d talk it over and get the other person’s point of view, just discussing it somehow makes it stick in your brain better and often he’d come up with something I hadn’t thought of, which was really useful.”

“I use index cards for each topic so I can shuffle them about and see how different topics relate to each other, also they’re just the right size to take a batch with you on the bus to the exam for some last-minute cramming.”

“For my finals I nicked a big drawing pad from my little sister, wrote up the key themes and models for each topic on a different sheet as I did my revision. I stuck them up around my room and just kept looking at them for a week or so before the exam, and I found that in the exam I could picture what was on each sheet, it really helped fix it in my mind.”

We’ve talked about the importance of attitude and lifestyle and identified three key rules for effective revision: select what you’re going to revise; draw up a timetable (and stick to it!); and use active learning strategies to make sure the information sticks in your brain. So how do you approach the big day itself? What strategies can you use to make sure you have the best possible chance of doing yourself justice in the exam? First let’s look at the most basic things to get right, making sure you’re in the right place at the right time with everything you need.

“It sounds really obvious but I spend a bit of time just making dead sure where I’m supposed to be and what time I’m supposed to be there, ever since a friend of mine went to the wrong exam hall and missed the exam completely. If I don’t know the place well I try to visit it so I know how to get there and I’m not stressing about finding it on the day.”

“I always force myself to eat a really good breakfast and take a banana and bottle of water in with me too, it’s amazing how sitting writing for

three hours makes you hungry! And I also take at least 3 pens just in case they run out.”

The night before the exam get together everything you're going to need for the exam: identity card, calculator, ruler, pens and so on, so that you don't forget something vital as you run out of the door.

Assuming you've made it safely to the exam, there are a few things you can do before you even put pen to paper which will help your chances of success: first, close your eyes and take three deep, slow breaths to get yourself calm and focused. Next, read the instructions on the paper at least twice: it's just possible something has changed from the past papers you've been working on. Fill in your personal details, then read the whole paper through carefully, making sure that you check every side of every page! Once you know how many questions you need to answer and how many marks there are for each, write a little note on the answer paper of what time you need to start and finish each question – give equal time to questions with equal marks, and take away 15 minutes from the overall time: the first 5 minutes to read the paper and select questions, and 10 minutes at the end to look back over what you've written.

Try to identify which part of the course each question refers to, and which issues it is directing you towards. Be especially careful if a question is very similar to one on a past paper: a small change in wording could mean a very different answer is required. Then tick all the questions you could attempt, and give two ticks to questions that you think you could answer best. List the question numbers you decide on a separate sheet and use this to jot down beside the relevant question number any ideas that occur to you so that you don't forget them. Then read through the questions you've decide on one last time to check that they really do say what you thought they said, and highlight the key words to make sure you address them.

OK so you're ready to start writing. Resist the temptation to simply dump everything you know about the subject onto the paper in front of you: instead,

use the first 20% or so of the time available for the question to plan your answer. Make sure your essay answers the question as it's put, not as you would like it to have been put, and that you have a clear introduction, a consistent line of reasoning supported by specific evidence, examples and models, that you evaluate opposing viewpoints and that you finish with a conclusion that follows logically from your argument. Don't be tempted to spend more time than you've allowed on a single question: the law of diminishing returns states that if you spend twice as long on an essay you will not get twice the marks for it. Best to give reasonable answers to all the questions required rather than a brilliant answer for one and nothing for another, in order to get all the quick-win marks available. If you've not finished, simply leave a space and move onto the next question: you may get time to come back to it at the end, and in any case the examiner will see from your plan what you intended to cover and you will almost certainly receive credit for this (for this reason, NEVER cross out your plans or rough working!).

Here are some more helpful tips on surviving exams:

"If I have to answer three questions I rank them A, B and C: A is the one I'm really happy to see on the paper, B is the one I think I can do a reasonable job on, and C is the one I'm only doing because all the others are impossible. Then I start off with B to get me going, move onto C to get it out of the way, and finish with A so I end on a high even though I'm tired by that time, and it means I'm less likely to overrun on my favourite question. It's very important not to let yourself overrun on B or C though, otherwise you don't have time for your brilliant answer on A!"

"If I dry up I grab a sheet of rough paper and just keep writing, anything to do with the question, it just helps get my memory going and stops me panicking or staring out the window. It usually only takes a second or two before I remember something useful and can start answering the question again."

“I use a mind map to plan my essay and tick off the branches as I write about them rather than writing it out as a list, it’s easier to structure it once I’ve decided what will be included and how the different bits relate to each other.”

“If I’m really running out of time I give up trying to write in full sentences and just bullet-point the last paragraph or so, at least I get the stuff down on paper though I probably lose marks for presentation!”

“Every so often I stop and re-read the question to see if I’m still answering it, it’s amazing how often I drift away without even realizing it.”

Let’s just go over all those points one last time:

- Look at your attitude to exams, try to see them as something positive
- Make sure your lifestyle gives you the best possible chance, by eating well, getting time to relax and sleeping 8 hours a night
- Make your revision count by:
 - Selecting which topics to revise
 - Drawing up and sticking to a revision timetable, with time for breaks and emergencies built in
 - Using active learning techniques to make sure the information gets into your brain and stays there.
- In the exam, take time to calm and focus yourself, read the whole paper through carefully before you do anything else, select the questions you plan to answer and allocate a start and stop time to each one, leaving yourself a little extra time at the end for reading back over what you’ve written.
- Reread the questions you’ve chosen to make sure you know exactly what’s required, identify the key words and keep reading the question every now and again to check you’re still answering it.

- Plan your essay to make sure it's structured and focused, and make sure you don't cross the plan out just in case you don't get time to cover all the points you'd planned
- Don't allow yourself to get carried away on one question and lose your chance of the quick-win marks on the others: stick to your timings and leave a space if necessary so you can go back to a question if you have time at the end.

Finally, remember that it's only an exam, it's not Armageddon. Try to keep it in proportion. And celebrate once your exams are over. You will never know the subject as well again in your life and that in itself is an achievement. Make sure you plan something enjoyable and relaxing afterwards – you deserve it, and you'll need something to look forward to while you revise! Good luck, and try to enjoy the experience.