

## Revision & Exam Skills

***This guide looks at revision and exam techniques to help maximise the effectiveness of your exam preparation and performance. These techniques will enhance your recall, aid concentration and help you make the best use of your time during an exam.***

*Related guides: [‘Using Past Exam Papers’](#), [‘Creative Revision Strategies’](#), [‘Thought Mapping’](#) and [‘Improve your Memory’](#).*

### What is revision?

Revision is best seen as an **active** process. It involves reworking your course material to make it easier to understand, remember and adapt to specific questions. Passive forms of revision, such as simply re-reading notes or trying to learn them word for word, fail to develop an active engagement with the subject matter. Exams at university do not only test factual recall, but also your understanding and your ability to organise, analyse and apply your knowledge. You will need a range of active revision strategies and techniques to suit the material you are learning, the type of exam question you will be answering, and your own personal learning style.

This guide looks at three key steps to exam success:

- Step One:** organising your revision
- Step Two:** active revision techniques
- Step Three:** exam technique.

### Step One: Organising Revision

#### What will you be examined on?

Find out as much as you can about the format and scope of the exam. For example:

- Will you be required to write essays, short answers or answer multiple choice questions? Or will it be an oral or practical exam?
- Is there opportunity to select topics for revision or will you need a broad area of knowledge?

- How long is the exam? How many sections does it have, and how many questions do you have to answer? Are the sections and questions weighted equally?
- Do you have a choice of questions? Are there any restrictions on which questions you can answer?
- What will you be allowed to take into the exam, and what are you forbidden to take?
- Does the exam test mostly facts? Or does it also test understanding, ability to apply techniques or models, interpret data using theories, make connections between different parts of the subject, etc?

Check your departmental handbook for exam information, look at past papers and ask your course tutors for further guidance.

### **Do you have all the necessary material?**

Check your notes for each topic.

- Are there any gaps?
- Do you need more information on a topic?
- Are you missing notes or handouts from lectures you didn't attend? Have you lost any? If so, arrange to make copies from another student.

This initial survey should be done as early as possible to ensure that you have all the necessary information from which to revise. If you will have a choice of questions, then select a range of topics to ensure good coverage for the exam. Revise at least twice as many topics as the number of questions you are required to answer.

### **How much time do you have before the exams?**

Record the dates of the exams in your diary or on a wall planner so that you can see how much time is available for revision. You can then make a monthly plan as an overview of the weeks before the exams and a weekly plan to organise your time on a day to day basis.

### **How will you plan your revision?**

Begin by making an overview of each subject, listing the main topics in that subject, with the key sub-headings under each topic. Alternatively, you could create a spider diagram or thought map. This creates an index of what needs to be revised so that you can divide your revision into easy-to-manage sections and give each section a place on your monthly and weekly plans. Use these plans to make the best use of your time and to maintain a realistic view of how much work is being covered. Be prepared to change and update your plans if you fall behind or cover more topics than expected.

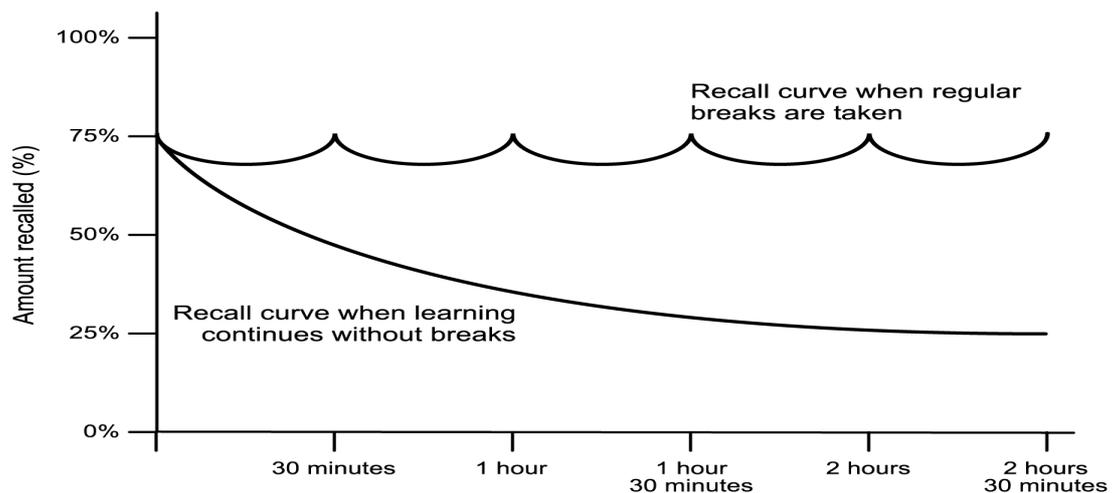
When making your revision timetable, try to keep your working sessions short, and remember to schedule breaks. You may find it helpful to do small amounts on any one topic at a time, change topics frequently and plan to revisit them at varying intervals – after a day, or a week.

## Step Two: Active Revision Techniques

### Planning a revision session

- Set a definite time for the beginning and end of the session to get you started and keep you focused.
- Set clear, well-defined goals for what you can realistically achieve in that session. Don't set goals that are too vague or broad. Begin with a topic you find difficult and end with one you find easier.
- Pay attention to the environment you work in. Poor heating or lighting can distract you from studying, so sort these things out before your revision session.
- Let other people know that you have set specific times for studying so that you will not be disturbed.
- To maintain optimum levels of concentration you should take a five minute break every half hour. Keep your breaks short and free from distractions. Just getting up to walk round the room or make a drink is enough to renew your concentration.

The following graph clearly shows the relationship between breaks taken during extended periods of revision and successful recall.



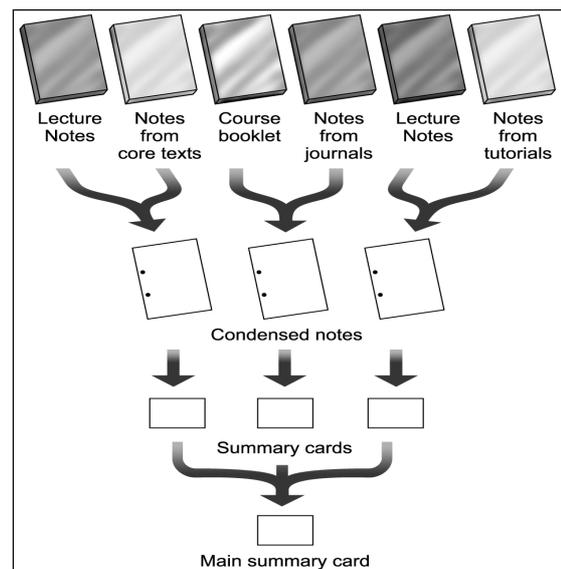
Graph showing the importance of regular breaks in revision

## Condensing your notes

To make revision active, condense your notes into a new form that is easy to understand, to remember and to adapt. This process facilitates the consolidation of your knowledge, encouraging you to make connections and identify underlining principles.

- Take your original notes on a topic and make a new condensed version with clear headings and highlighted central points. The act of selecting the most important points in your notes will help you to check you understand your material. Do not simply replicate lecture handouts – incorporate your own notes from lectures, seminars and reading.
- When you have a condensed version of your notes you can then summarise the notes further, to create a list of headings with keywords for each point. These keyword lists should be easy to remember and thus enable you to review a lot of information in a short space of time.

Condense your notes by selecting and summarising information



- To make information more memorable, try reworking your notes using colour, space and image. This technique uses the associations of colour, space and image to increase levels of recall and encourage active engagement with the material.
- This active process of condensing and reworking helps you to understand and retain information much better than passive re-reading or rote learning. You can always go back to your full notes to check details, but you are aiming to understand and remember these details using your condensed notes as a prompt.

## **The importance of review**

Without regular reviews of what has been revised you will not retain the information you have taken the trouble to learn. Review involves testing your recall of a topic, paying attention to your ability to understand central concepts, remember key facts and link the information to other topic areas. Having condensed your notes, you are now testing your ability to expand them again from these prompts, just as you will in the exam.

Methods of review can include:

- testing your recall of key facts with index cards, putting to the back of the pile cards you can remember and repeating the cards that need more concentration
- reproducing from memory headings and keywords for a learnt topic area and then checking them against your notes
- enlisting the help of a friend to test your recall
- recording yourself explaining concepts or theories to an imagined audience, then playing back your explanation, checking it against your notes
- making a thought map or flow chart to summarise information you have remembered
- putting up posters or post-it notes of key information around your room to prompt you to test yourself.
- practising questions from past papers or make up your own questions. You could write full answers under exam conditions, or write less detailed plans, thought maps or bullet points.
- practicing the skills you will be asked to show in the exam. Try comparing and contrasting two different topics, illustrating a theory with examples, using a model to interpret data, analysing a case study, etc.

Review need not take a lot of time and can take place at the beginning of a revision session. It can also be fitted into any spare time during the day. Frequently reviewing your material will help to build up your confidence and reassure you that progress is being made. Aim to revisit each topic several times, not just once, and at varying intervals.

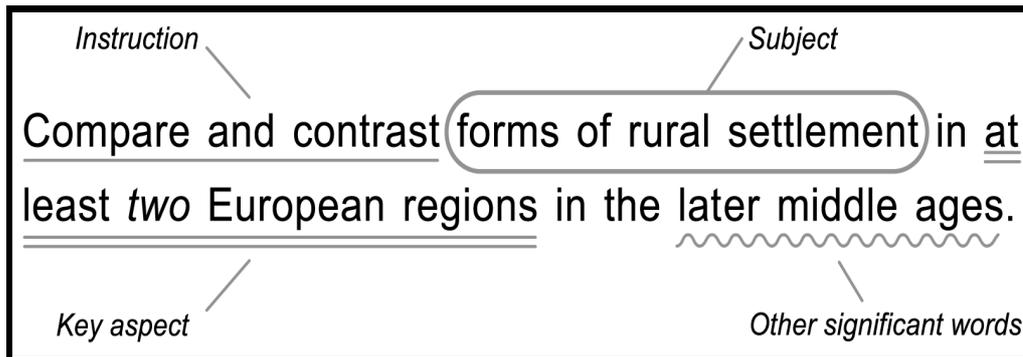
## **Step Three: Exam Technique**

The best exam technique is to prepare and practise your approach **before** the exam. This section shows you how to develop and practise techniques for analysing questions, planning answers and organising your time in the exam.

## Question analysis

It is essential to read each question carefully. Analyse each question to focus on its exact requirements, especially the subject and the instruction. This will help you to select and adapt the right material for your answer.

The example below shows a method of question analysis that you can adapt for your own use in exams.



Make sure you pay careful attention to the question. Misinterpreting or not answering the question is a common error in exams. Take care not to overlook aspects of more complex questions. Some questions can ask you to consider more than one topic, or can give more than one instruction, such as 'describe and discuss'.

## Planning answers

Under time pressure it is tempting to ignore the importance of planning your answers. A few minutes spent planning the answer will help you make sure that you:

- select relevant information for the question
- put this information into an order that is logical and coherent
- write your ideas down at an early stage to help you remember your key points
- monitor how much information you are covering in the time allowed.

For short answers it may be a case of jotting down a few keywords to stimulate your memory and organise your thoughts. If an essay is required, you will want to spend a little more time organising your material in the form of a list of headings, thought map or flow chart.

## Using past papers

Use past papers and practise your exam skills with timed tasks.

- Practise analysing questions and setting out plans to answers in order to test

- your recall and ability to adapt material to the set question.
- Practise writing a full answer in the time allowed. This will improve your ability to recall information and plan your answer at speed.
  - Review your answers by checking them against your notes and highlighting any missed or inaccurate information.
  - Review your use of time. Did you run out of time? Did you divide the time appropriately for the number and weighting of the questions?
  - Analyse your answer to see how it could have been improved. Did it need more information? Did it have a logical structure? Was your expression clear? Did you stick to the question? Use the practice session to identify and improve any problem areas.
  - Use your knowledge of the range of content and format of questions from past papers to devise your own 'exam questions'. If there are no past papers available, you could try setting your own, perhaps with a group of fellow students.

### **Planning your use of time in the exam**

If you have planned how you are going to approach the exam, you will find it easier to keep calm, to think and organise your answers. Where you have a choice of questions you will need to divide your time carefully. If equal marks are allocated for each question then divide your time evenly. Where there is a weighting for particular questions or sections then your timing should reflect this.

### **Essays and long answers**

- Begin by carefully checking the instructions on the paper. Highlight key instructions.
- Read through all the questions first so you can choose the best questions for you. Tick possible choices, and then go back and read them again.
- Start with the easiest question first. This boosts your confidence and gets your thoughts flowing.
- Analyse the question to ensure your answer is correctly focused on the question's requirements.
- Make a plan of your answer in the style you have practised in your revision.
- Write your answer, being sure to stick to your time plan. If you run out of time on that question, leave it and move on to the next. Always plan to leave time at the end for finishing off questions and checking your answers through.
- Follow the 'analyse, plan and write' procedure for your other answers, keeping to your time plan.
- Leave a few minutes at the end of each question to check your work for any obvious errors of expression or important omissions.

## **Multiple choice and short answers**

Begin by carefully reading the instructions and looking at the structure of the paper. There is no need to read through the paper before you begin to answer if you do not have a choice of questions. Instead, go through the paper answering the questions you are sure of. This will stimulate your thoughts and help you recall information. Then go back to the start and give more thought to the remaining questions.

- When choosing a multiple choice answer, be sure to read all the alternatives carefully before making your selection. There is often more than one answer which looks plausible, to the incautious reader.
- For short answer questions, you should use a brief form of question analysis, as a careful reading of the question will be essential in identifying the correct answer. Underline or highlight the keywords in the question to focus on the exact meaning.

## **Exam nerves**

Most people experience some degree of anxiety about exams. Whilst a certain amount of exam stress is natural and can be used as a motivating force, it is important to keep on top of exam anxiety. The best way to cope with exam anxiety is to be organised. The summary below highlights the key points for success in exam performance and these are especially important if you suffer from exam stress. The study guide [Exam Stress](#) has some practical advice on managing exam anxiety and details of sources of support.

## **Summary**

- Check the format and scope of each exam and then survey your notes, making sure there are no gaps.
- Create an overview of what you need to revise, including the subjects, topics and their topic sub-headings.
- Use this overview to divide your revision into a plan with sections that are clearly defined and manageable. Allocate each section to a time on a monthly and/or weekly plan.
- Set definite start and finish times for your revision sessions and have a clear goal for each session.
- Aim to break your revision sessions up with five minutes break every half hour.
- Use active revision techniques, including summarising your notes, and reviewing regularly, to check what you know and what you don't know.
- Develop a technique for question analysis and planning answers to use in the exam.
- Practise making plans and answering questions under timed conditions.
- In the exam, plan how you will use your time before you begin answering the questions and be sure to read the instructions and questions carefully.

## Want to know more?

If you have any further questions about this topic you can make an appointment to see a [Learning Enhancement Tutor](#) in the [Student Support Service](#), as well as speaking to your lecturer or adviser.

- 📞 Call: 01603 592761
- 💻 Ask: [ask.let@uea.ac.uk](mailto:ask.let@uea.ac.uk)
- 🖱️ Click: <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/student-support-service/learning-enhancement>

There are many other resources to help you with your studies on our [website](#).

**Your comments or suggestions about our resources are very welcome.**

	<p>Scan the QR-code with a smartphone app for more resources.</p>	<p>This guide is based on a study guide produced by Student Learning Development at the University of Leicester.</p> 
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