

What to do if exams go badly

This study guide offers advice on identifying the cause of poor exam performance, and guidance on how you can improve your performance for resits or future exams.

Related guides: 'Revision and Exam Skills', 'Exam Stress' and 'Common Exam Errors'. See also <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/student-support-service/learning-enhancement/study-resources/revision-exams> for Frequently Asked Questions, links to past exam papers, and resources on managing stress.

Students often feel that exams are a greater hurdle than coursework. Stress and nerves, poor memory, time pressure, insufficient revision or not understanding the question can prevent exams from going as well as you would like. Many people feel that they are just not good at exams. There is often no feedback for exams, so students cannot always tell why they did not do well, and often feel helpless and unable to do anything to improve their situation.

However, if you have failed an exam and need to resit, or you find that you are not achieving the marks that you get in coursework you will need a way to figure out why you are not performing well so you can avoid making the same mistakes in the future. The problem may lie either in your understanding of the subject, or in your revision strategies, or in your exam technique, and you need to know which so that you can improve your performance. There are several questions you need to ask yourself to help you identify the problems and find strategies to overcome them.

How many exams did you do badly in?

- If it was just one or two exams that didn't go as well as you had hoped, then it may well be a problem with that particular subject, either your understanding of the topic itself, or how you responded individually to the way it was taught or examined.
- If you did badly in several exams, or have a history of not doing well in exams, then it may not be a problem with your understanding of the subject, but with your revision or exam technique. This is especially likely if you are doing well in coursework for the subject.

Do you know why you didn't do well?

- **You know you find that subject hard.** Talk to your tutor or other students on your course, or find other sources to learn from (e.g. other textbooks) that might suit you better. Everyone has areas they understand better than others, and everyone has teaching or examining styles that suit them better than others. You could talk to your tutor or other students on your course, or you might find some strategies below to help you compensate in this particular area of the course.
- **You know you didn't work hard enough or do enough revision.** Obviously, you need to work harder next time, but it might be helpful to think about why you might not have worked as hard as you needed to. There may be other circumstances such as family or paid work commitments that got in the way, and you will have to think about how these might be managed next time. However, many people put off preparing for their exams because they find revision boring, too much to manage, or are not sure if it's effective. If this is the case, it may be that you could review how you revise using some of the strategies below. Your revision may not be active or varied enough, you may be over-estimating how much there is to do, or may even have put off starting revision as you weren't sure about how to go about doing it.
- **You know you were tired.** You need to look after yourself in the run-up to exams. Many students work too hard, and find that despite their excellent preparation, their performance on the day does not reflect how much they have done. Protect yourself from burning out by reminding yourself that you *need* breaks and time off. Do not ask yourself if you 'deserve' time off; breaks are not a treat but a necessity, and actually improve your concentration. Remember too that exams test your ability to problem-solve as well memorise knowledge, and that if you are awake and alert in the exam, you will do much better than if you know a great deal but are too tired to use your knowledge effectively.
- **You know nerves or stress got the better of you.** Stress affects our memory and ability to think clearly. Some adrenaline before or during exams is normal and can be a helpful boost, but too much can impair your performance. If habitual nerves are preventing you from doing well in exams, then it might be helpful for you to address this. Sometimes nerves can be a product of uncertainty and lack of control over exams, and some of the strategies below might also help you to feel that you know what to expect, and can take more control over your performance.
- **You know you had other circumstances that affected your performance.** Sometimes life outside studies can have an adverse affect on your studies, and exams can be particularly vulnerable to this. If there are non-academic factors which might affect your performance, you need to complete an extenuating circumstances form which you can get from your School office, preferably before the exam board meets. If the problems are health-related, you need to discuss this with your GP so they can supply supporting medical evidence if appropriate.

However, if you don't know why you didn't do well in your exams, then think back to your revision and the exam, and see if any of the following occurred. You can also book

an appointment with a Learning Enhancement Tutor to discuss further or follow these strategies up.

Was it a problem with your revision?

For many people, their performance in the exam is determined not by what happened on the day, but in the quality and quantity of their revision. However, many students feel that they *did* work hard, and are puzzled as to why this did not result in a good performance. It is more often the quality of your revision (how you revise) than the quantity (how much you revised) that is the problem. If any of the following experiences are familiar to you, it may be that changing the way you revise could improve your performance.

Your approach to revision and exams is exactly the same as it was at school.

Exams in Higher Education are a different matter to school exams, such as GCSEs or A-Levels. You may find that although you did well at previous exams, this approach is not working at university. School exams tend to focus more on memorising knowledge and recalling it in the exam, whereas in Higher Education, you are expected to apply that knowledge in different ways to solve problems. Revision should focus much more on understanding what you learn, making connections between different topics, and selecting and applying it in different ways. It might be helpful to look again at past papers, bearing in mind that the questions are usually asking for something more than simple recall of facts, and see if you can interpret what you are being asked to do in a more complex way. Your revision and exam technique should then reflect this creativity and complexity.

Your revision mostly consists of reading your lecture notes, books, etc, and maybe making notes. Your revision may be too passive. Simply reading something over, and even making a few notes, is not enough for the information to 'go in'. Revision works best when you are doing something active with the information, for example:

- making mnemonics (memory 'triggers' such as acronyms, word association or rhymes)
- making condensed summaries, mind-maps and overviews of your notes
- re-working your notes into different forms (such as prose to mindmaps, mindmaps to bullet lists, bullet lists to diagrams, recording your notes to listen to, etc)
- practising writing essay plans or answering past papers
- synthesising information from more than one source

You found you just couldn't revise everything. Your expectations may be unrealistic, and you may have tried to learn too much, at the expense of what was really necessary. An exam tests different skills to a piece of coursework. It assesses if you have a good *working* knowledge of the subject, and if you can apply this to answer questions or solve problems under a time limit. You should distinguish between the essentials and unnecessary detail. If you have a choice of questions, it is often good to select a few areas in which you will specialise, and cover others in less depth. Of course, you take some risk on the topics coming up in the exam, but if you try to revise everything equally, you may only gain a superficial understanding of everything.

This process of selection is in itself a good way to help master your subject. To do this, you will have to gain an overview of the subject; evaluate topics and decide which are the really essential aspects and which are less vital; spot connections between topics so you can revise the parts which are 'transferable' and could be useful for a number of different topics; and understand the general principles of the subject so you can use what you know in a creative way. You can use the structure of the lecture course to break down the subject into different topics, or you could compare two different sources, for example, two textbooks, and see what they have in common. You can also use past papers to familiarise yourself with the sorts of questions that you will encounter in the exam, and the level of detail you will need to provide.

You find that things just don't stick in your mind once you have revised them.

This may be because your revision is very passive (see above), but it may also be helpful to use the following strategies. Firstly, you need to test yourself on the information, and secondly, you need to keep revisiting it. Many students neglect these vital strategies. Testing is an excellent way to learn something, as well as a means of assessing whether you have learned it. You could test yourself by summarising something you have just read, by using flash cards, or with a friend. Revision also means revisiting material several times, not just on one occasion. Each time you return to a topic, you improve your memory of it as it goes from your short-term into your long-term memory. You can improve your memory with practice; the more you revise, the more you will be able to remember, and the quicker you will be able to memorise things.

You only revised from your lecture notes. Lectures are intended to be a starting point for a topic, and to give you a good overview of what you need to learn. However, they should always be supplemented with wider reading. This helps you to synthesise related ideas and make links between topics, which will be a useful skill in the exam. Do not think of wider reading as adding *more* to what you have to learn – just exploring it in greater depth and from different angles.

Your revision didn't cover everything you needed. This may be because you unintentionally prioritised some topics over others; those you find easy, for example, or because you felt overwhelmed and lost sight of what needed to be covered. Perhaps you would benefit from making a revision timetable, to ensure that your coverage is balanced. You might still choose to focus on some things more than others, but you will avoid spending too much time on one topic, at the expense of others, without realising. You need not draw up a detailed schedule for every day, but you should draw up a list of topics to revise and make sure you have divided the available time appropriately so you have an idea of how much time to spend on each area, even if you don't timetable those times in detail in advance.

This issue can also arise when students try to 'question spot' – when they make assumptions on what topics will appear in the exam based on patterns from previous years' papers. Question spotting is unwise, as there is no increased likelihood of a given topic appearing on this year's paper based on previous years. Instead of second-guessing the examiners, it would be better to gain a good overview of your subject, and perhaps think about what questions you might set, if you were the examiner, and practice answering them. You might also consider whether you are not being selective

enough, and trying to revise in too much detail, or not reading around the subject (see above).

You couldn't remember things when you tried to memorise them. You might be using a mnemonic strategy that doesn't suit your learning style, or too limited a range of techniques. Read the Study Guide [Improve your Memory](#) for more suggestions. However, you may also be overburdening your memory. Exams do rely on a certain amount of memorisation, but often not as much as you may think. It is just as important to focus on understanding, linking and applying your knowledge, as memorising it. Often, if you understand information, you don't need to memorise it as you have engaged with it on a deeper level. This may also affect how you approach exam questions. If you focus primarily on memorisation during revision, then in the exam, you may simply be regurgitating what you have learned, and not actually answering the question (see below).

You meant to work hard, but got tired easily and switched off. You are probably not taking enough breaks, or varying your work enough. Very few people can really concentrate for much more than half an hour or so without a short break, and revision is hard work. Plan shorter revision sessions, and change topic regularly to keep yourself fresh. This will also help you to revisit topics regularly, and to make connections between ideas and avoid confusion of similar areas.

Was it a problem with your exam technique?

Of course, your knowledge and understanding of the subject are crucial in exam success, but exam technique can also play a large part. This refers to all the skills you need to use in an exam *other* than subject knowledge: time management, close reading of instructions, planning, presentation, and organisation. Failing to do any one of these could impair your performance. If any of the following experiences is familiar to you, you may need to improve your exam technique.

You misread the instructions or exam question, couldn't find the venue or forgot important items. Arriving at an exam flustered will affect your performance. Not allowing time to ensure you read the instructions or exam questions carefully will cost you marks. You need to prepare more in advance, finding out the venue, and how long it will take to get there, finding out about the exam format and making sure you lay out everything you need beforehand, such as pens, your university card, etc. If this kind of experience is common for you, then you need to reflect on why this happens and develop some routines to ensure that everything goes smoothly.

You ran out of time. This may mean that you were answering questions in too much depth and detail, and may be a signal that you hadn't interpreted the question properly (see below). Exam answers are often not intended to be as detailed or thorough as coursework. However, if you have to rush your answers, this may mean you didn't set aside time to plan, and therefore can't decide what is relevant and what you should leave out. Giving yourself time to interpret the questions and plan your answer is not a waste of time, and may actually save you time later in the exam. Beware also of not allotting time appropriately among the questions. If you spent ages on one question at

the expense of others, even if you answered it perfectly, you cannot gain more than the marks allotted to it, and this may not make up for an incomplete attempt at other questions.

You had lots of time left at the end. Exams are designed to give you enough time to answer the questions but also leave some time to read the exam paper carefully, plan your answers and review them afterwards. You may be missing the opportunity to read the question and check you understood it correctly, plan your answer and check it over at the end. This may gain you valuable marks. If you have done this, but still have time left over, then you may not be giving as full an answer as required. You may also need to reconsider how to interpret questions (see below).

You couldn't write enough. This may be that you misinterpreted what the question was asking you to do and answered it on a superficial level. However, if you find you physically cannot write fast enough, you may need to start practicing your handwriting in the run-up to the exam. Many people who usually use computers find that their handwriting strength and flexibility are weakened, affecting how much they can write, and how legible it is. Of course, if this has a medical cause, or is due to a condition such as dyspraxia, you could talk to your GP or the Dyslexia tutors about appropriate concessions.

Your mind went blank. This may be a stress reaction, in which case you might like to explore some relaxation techniques (see above). It may also be that you need to work more on memorisation strategies and other ways of learning your material in more depth. Your mind going blank can be a result of revision that is too superficial, which does not revisit topics and does not work with them actively. You should review your revision as suggested above.

You didn't know how to answer the question. You may have focussed too much on *learning* the relevant knowledge, and perhaps not enough on *applying* it. Practicing with past papers, or making up your own questions to practice with, is a good way to prepare and get used to the ways in which you will be using your knowledge in the exam. Practicing the ways in which you might be asked to use your knowledge will keep it flexible and help you to respond to questions quicker and more accurately in the exam.

You thought it went well at the time, but didn't get the mark you expected. This can be puzzling, but the affects of adrenaline, or misunderstandings about what examiners are asking for, can mean that our impressions of how an exam went are often not accurate. However, if this is the case, then a likely explanation is the way you interpreted the questions and what you were being asked to do. Many students see exams primarily as a test of *knowledge*, and focus their revision on memorising knowledge. However, exams also test what you can *do* with that knowledge to answer a question or solve a problem. You need to think about exactly what the question is asking you to *do*, as well as what it is asking you *about*. Highlight the key instruction words as well as the topic words in the question. Students often respond to questions by writing down everything they know about the topic, and because they were able to write a lot, they feel it has gone well. However, they were not being asked to regurgitate

everything they know, but to select and use that knowledge in some specific way, and they lose marks accordingly. Review past papers to see what they are asking for: description, explanation, application, analysis, synthesis or evaluation of the knowledge?

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
- 🖱️ Click: <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/student-support-service/learning-enhancement>

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