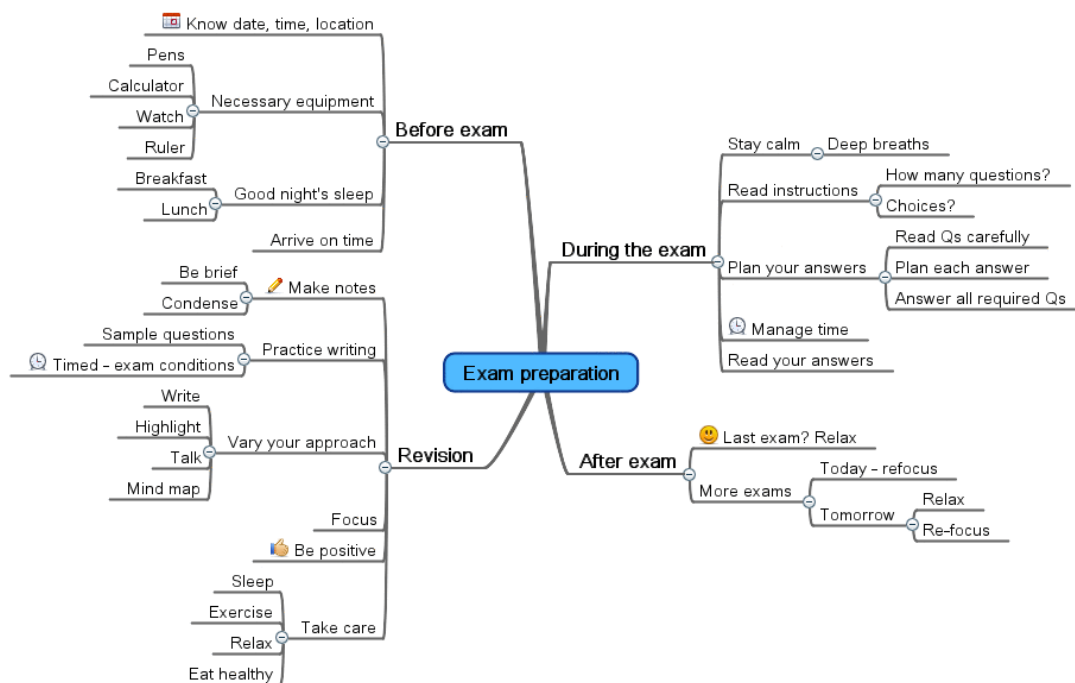




## Exam techniques Workshop

This handout looks at exams and exam techniques and covers:

1. Before the exam – a few weeks before, the night before and on the day
2. During the exam
3. After the exam – post mortems, relaxation, time management
4. Discussion of stress



**Mind map overview of exam preparation tips**

Much of this will be practical tips for the exam situation – the section on revision covered time management, and the preparation in the weeks before the exam, which are also very important! The section will largely focus on essay type exam questions, but some tips on multiple choice exams are also included.

### **Preparation for the exam**

1. WELL BEFORE THE EXAM – make sure that you have properly checked the date, time and location of an exam and worked out anomalies, things that are worrying you, timetabling clashes etc and discuss with the appropriate person/people – this helps keep stress to a minimum and you can focus on the important revision and study
2. Have all of the equipment that you need – sufficient pens; a watch to keep track of the time, etc. SORT ALL OF THIS BEFOREHAND
3. Water or other non-alcoholic drink – if this helps you to concentrate
4. ARRIVE IN GOOD TIME – obviously you need all of the allocated time, if you are very late you may not be admitted at all. Arriving in good time helps to keep nerves under control. Normally, students are expected to be in their places 10 minutes before the exam starts.
5. GET A GOOD NIGHTS SLEEP BEFOREHAND
  - If it's a morning exam then EAT BREAKFAST
  - If it's an afternoon exam then eat lunch, but not something that will make you feel sleepy

### **During the exam**

1. STAY CALM! – try hard to get any nerves under control before looking at the exam paper – within the time constraints of course – but a few deep breaths before turning the paper over may well pay dividends.

2. READ ALL INSTRUCTIONS VERY CAREFULLY – don't lose marks on things that are completely avoidable, such as answering the wrong number of questions, or not allocating enough time for the questions offering the highest marks – allocate time to checking these instructions, don't rush this part.
3. DECIDE **FIRST** WHICH QUESTIONS YOU WILL ANSWER – and allocate time both for planning and answering.
4. **PLAN** – DO NOT skimp on planning time – this will serve you well if you do it properly, allowing you to give thought through and structured answers and allow you to recall all the ALL the relevant pieces of information you need to include.
5. TIME MANAGEMENT – answer all the questions that you are meant to – most problems come from answering, for example, three rather than the full four required. Have a crack even if you think you don't know – things will come back to you when you are planning!
6. ANSWER THE QUESTIONS IN THE ORDER WHICH SUITS YOU – so start with the one you are most confident with – you will find it relaxes you and you have the most energy at this point.
7. Make sure you have enough time to READ THROUGH YOUR ANSWERS – and to add in things that you may have missed. Put this in note form if there isn't much time left – you will still be able to gain some marks this way.

## **Planning**

When looking at a question and planning your answer

1. Make sure you read the question carefully and FULLY UNDERSTAND what it is asking you for/ to do
2. HIGHLIGHT the key words and concepts to help you with this
3. If the question asks for specific examples, or a certain theory to be considered, for example, taking the time to do this aids your answer in being truly relevant

It's a cliché – but true:

- MOST MARKS ARE LOST FOR NOT ANSWERING THE QUESTION!

You are not only trying to demonstrate the extent and depth of your knowledge but also your critical and analytical skills in essay style exams - your skills in constructing an argument, a logical, clear structured answer. So you will need to show that you have understood the question, not simply written down all the information you have on a topic.

4. TAKE PROPER TIME OVER PLANNING – not 30 seconds. It's a matter of choice and what works best for you, but in an exam of 3 hrs/ 3 questions you could give a few minutes per question to planning your answer. This time can help you to relax – you have the space to concentrate upon recalling things as they come and putting them into a structured plan – you don't have to answer the question straight away!

This amount of planning aids the quality of the answer in other ways: it gives time to plan a proper introduction and conclusion and these are essential for high marks. You can show that you have understood the question in the introduction and signpost how your answer will progress. If then for some reason you run out of time, then your examiner will know what you intended to do.

5. As you write CHECK THE QUESTION – to ensure that what you are saying is relevant and not deviating from the point.
6. You must ATTEMPT EACH QUESTION that you have to answer – an attempt is much better than the definite zero for an unanswered question
7. Even if it is in note form then you may have addressed central issues and can gain some marks for this.
8. WRITE LEGIBLY – again don't lose marks for something that you can control!

## **What am I being asked to do?**

In most questions there will be a key word which guides you towards the required approach. In order to successfully answer the question you will need to highlight and interpret these key words, targeting your writing accordingly.

### **Common key words**

Here are some of the most common key words and a suggested meaning for each.

- **Account for**

Explain the cause of

- **Analyse**

Separate down into its component parts and show how they interrelate with each other

- **Annotate**

Put notes on (usually a diagram)

- **Assess**

Estimate the value of, looking at both the positive and negative attributes

- **Comment**

To make critical or explanatory notes/observations

- **Compare**

Point out the differences and the similarities. This question needs to be carefully organised to produce a logical answer

- **Contrast**

Point out the differences only and present the results in an orderly fashion

- **Describe**

Write down the information in the right order

- **Discuss**

Present arguments for and against the topic in question.

- **Distinguish**

Identify the difference between

- **Evaluate**

Estimate the value of, looking at both the positive and negative attributes

- **Explain**

The word 'explain' means that you have to give reasons. You have to explain why rather than just define

- **Justify**

Here you will need to present a valid argument about why a specific theory or conclusion should be accepted

- **Outline**

Give the main features or general principles of a subject, omitting minor details and stressing structure

- **Relate**

Either - Show how ideas or events are linked into a sequence or - compare or contrast

- **Review**

To make a survey of, examining the subject critically

- **Suggest**

This question may not have a fixed answer. Give a range of responses

- **Summarise**

State the main features of an argument, omitting all that is only partially relevant

- **To what extent...**

Asks you to justify the acceptance or validity of an argument stressing the need to avoid complete acceptance

- **Trace**

Follow the development or history of a topic from some point or origin

### **After the exam**

Take time to discuss the exam with others **if** you find this helpful, but don't spend too much time thinking about or discussing the exam you have just taken – it's done and you cannot change it. This is especially important if you have another exam to take.

- If it was your last exam – take time now to relax
- If you have more exams, but it is a while until the next one, ensure that you have planned some relaxation time between exams

- If the next exam is soon, or immediately after this one, then make sure that you refocus on the one to be taken, not the one that you have finished – this is over with, give time and energy to the next one to be done. If possible try to take a small amount of relaxation time before the next exam to help with this refocusing.

## **Stress**

- Exam time is stressful, and can be so much so that the nerves about exams become the source of stress themselves. You may have heard people say, that some nerves are useful in an exam situation – they make us work and take the task seriously.
- HOWEVER – controlling excess nerves and stress will help you to give a better performance in an exam situation – one that reflects the amount of work that you have completed

### **Some symptoms of unmanaged stress**

- Increased heart rate and blood pressure:- feeling tense, irritable, fatigued or depressed
- Lack of interest and ability to concentrate, apathy
- Avoidance behaviours; abuse of drugs, alcohol, tobacco.

### **Some ways to manage stress effectively:-**

- Add balance to your life - don't overdo it either when working/studying or playing.
- Know and accept what kind of person you are: strengths and weaknesses.
- Take "time-outs", especially during study.
- Exercise regularly
- Walk loosely and walk more!
- Learn and practice relaxation skills
- Study each subject regularly for moderate amounts of time.
- Discuss your problems with people who will listen - friends, family, chaplain, mentor.

## Summary Points

### Seven Rules of Revision.

1. Make your own revision notes. You'll learn as you write and once you've got them, you're half way there.
2. Be brief. Check the syllabus or ask a lecturer to make sure you've got the key areas covered.
3. Think of revision positively, the more structured revision you do, the more positive you will be about the actual exam.
4. Don't overdo it. Your concentration lapses after a couple of hours, so take regular breaks.
5. Experiment with different revision techniques. Variety beats boredom.
6. Focus. Don't make pointless notes. Look at past exam papers and see how questions could be asked.
7. Get confident. If you're positive about exams, you will take in more information and remember it when it counts.

### Six Simple Techniques.

1. **Condense.** Fitting notes onto one side of paper makes them easier to stomach, so rewrite and cut down as you go.
2. **Highlight.** Target key areas using colours and symbols. Visuals help you remember the facts.
3. **Record.** Try putting important points, quotes and formulae on tape. If you hear them and read them, they're more likely to sink in.
4. **Talk.** Read your notes out loud, it's one way of getting them to register.
5. **Test.** See what you can remember without notes, but avoid testing yourself on subjects you know already.
6. **Time.** Do past exam papers against the clock; it's an excellent way of getting up to speed.

### Food for Thought.

- Eating a variety of healthy foods doesn't just give your body a boost; it also benefits your brain cells.
- Skipping meals may well give you extra cramming time, but it can also leave you hungry and unable to concentrate.
- So, eat regularly and sensibly.
- Eating well reduces the overall stress on the body and it can make you feel good about yourself.
- Think wholemeal sandwiches and fruit, rather than cakes and biscuits!



### **Brain Fuel.**

- Bread, pasta, cereals and potatoes are filling and packed with starchy carbohydrates, which release energy slowly, meaning you can keep going for longer.
- Fruit and vegetables give you essential vitamins and minerals. Aim for at least five portions a day.
- Food like pasties, chips and crisps are high in fat. Keep them for treats.
- Drink plenty of fluids. Dehydrated brains don't think clearly and water is healthier than sweet, fizzy drinks.
- Meat, fish, pulses, milk and dairy foods are good sources of protein. Moderate amounts are essential for a healthy diet.

### **Do Some Exercise.**

- One of the best ways to deal with stress is to exercise.
- Exercise provides a way of releasing lots of the muscle tension, which stress produces.
- Staying hidden away in your bedroom can often seem like the best option when revision time is short, but don't!
- If you can't get out, at least get up and out of your chair for a stretch and a wander.
- You will find that after exercising your muscles are relaxed and calm and you feel lots better.
- Exercise also helps to clear the mind.

### **Under Pressure? Six Golden Rules.**

1. Stick to fulfilling your potential, not other people's expectations.
2. Ask for help if you need it.
3. Take time out and relax, it will pay off.
4. Focus on yourself, not on what anyone else thinks or does.
5. Remember, this is not your only chance to prove yourself.
6. Believe in yourself, you've got no reason not to.

### **Ways of Avoiding Stress**

1. Think positively
2. Take time to "play"
3. Do some exercises
4. Use breathing techniques
5. Eat well, drink water
6. Relax your muscles
7. Talk about what's going on

8. Put your favourite music on and pump up the volume.
9. Rent videos, order pizza and crash out on the sofa.
10. Go shopping and treat yourself.

### **Think positively.**

- Lots of exam success can just be put down to positive thinking.
- Thinking you might fail drains away your confidence, makes you worry a lot more and makes you less enthusiastic about working hard.
- Don't tell yourself things like, "I'm useless at this subject" or "I haven't got enough time to revise properly". This isn't helpful.
- Talk positively: for example, "This subject is difficult, but if I put my mind to it, I'm sure I will understand it", or, "I can get my revision done when I plan a proper revision timetable".

### **Talk about it.**

- Think about some people who make you feel relaxed and will listen to you.
- Talk to them. Your listeners can be family, friends, teachers or others.
- Asking for help is not a sign of weakness.
- It is a sign of maturity and strength to realise when you have difficulties and to feel confident enough to share those difficulties with others.
- Take time to "play" during your revision period, make sure you give yourself some time to do the things you enjoy.
- Do the things that relax you and take your mind off your studies.

### **THE NIGHT BEFORE.**

- The night before can be hard.
- Don't start revising completely new areas; it'll just confuse you.
- Stick to key points and summaries, rather than big chunks of text. If it feels like nothing's going in, don't worry.
- Whatever revision you do now will pay off later.
- Finally, get a decent night's sleep and you'll perform better. Here's how:
- Try and go to bed and get up around the same time each day.
- Avoid caffeine-packed coffee, tea and coke late at night.
- Taking a long soak in the bath can really help you wind down.
- Going to bed on an empty stomach makes sleeping harder.
- Stress kills sleep. Get exams into perspective. There's more to life, so try not to worry.

## **THE DAY OF THE EXAM.**

Exams are tests of your thinking, not competitions to fill the most paper. People often come out of exams saying, “How much did you write?” The best marks do not always go to the pupil who wrote the longest answers.

Do not start the exam as if it is a race: take time to read the questions and resist the temptation to start answering the first question straight away.

Don't worry about your classmates who may already be scribbling away, or are asking for more paper before you. If necessary, begin by taking a couple of minutes to write down anything you are afraid of forgetting.

### **Reading the instructions carefully.**

- Read the whole paper through carefully, noting all the instructions given about the number, choice and value of questions.
- If you have a choice of questions, select and mark those questions you feel confident you can do well. Then decide on your question order.
- There are no rules that say you have to do number 1 first.
- Tackle the questions you know you can answer well first. This gives you more time to think about the difficult questions and boosts your confidence.
- The most common ways that students fail is simply by not answering the right number of questions.

### **Using time well and writing the right amount.**

- Work out how much time you can devote to each question and stick to it.
- If you have to answer 5 questions and you only answer 4, you will lose 20%, however good your answers are.
- 5 average answers are better than 4 brilliant ones.
- If the question paper says how many marks a question is worth, use this to guide you on the time you need to take.
- If part (a) is worth 5 marks and part (b) is worth 15 marks, you should spend three times as long on part (b).
- Don't fall into the trap of spending the most time trying to answer questions about which you know the least.

### **Planning your answer.**

- Which questions you want to answer and in what order.
- A quick bullet-list of points to give you a handy structure for essay questions.

- Without an outline, you are likely to stray from the point, or to forget important points. Remember: stick to the point of the question!
- Be relevant!
- To use any spare time you have at the end of the exam for checking through your answers.

### **Writing your answer.**

- Answer the questions that have actually been set, not the ones you'd hoped to see.
- Be as concise as possible. Keep to the point.
- Write neatly, but also as quickly as you can. Try not to spend too long on any single question.
- Construct a concise list of what you would have put in your answer if you find yourself running out of time, that way you should still score some points.

### **Avoid.**

- Cheating. It's not worth it.
- Panicking. Sometimes your brain takes time to find facts. Calmly re-read the paper and you'll soon get back into gear.

### **Glossary of exam words.**

<b>Word</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Compare	Are the things alike or are there important differences? Which do you think is best? Why?
Contrast	Look for differences
Criticise	Use the evidence to support your opinion on the value of merit of ideas, facts or views of others
Define	Give the meaning
Describe	Write in detail
Differentiate	Explain the difference
Discuss	Write about important aspects of the topic; are there two sides to the question? Consider the arguments for and against
Distinguish	Explain the difference
Evaluate	Judge the importance of success/failure
Evaluate (Maths)	Final the numerical answer to a problem
Explain	Make clear
Illustrate	Give examples which make the point clear
Interpret	Explain the meaning in your own words, for example you may have to interpret a graph
Justify	Give reasons to support an argument of action
Outline	Choose the most important aspects of a topic. Ignore the minor details.
Relate	Show the connection between things
State	Write briefly the main point
Summarise	Bring together the main points