

Revision and examinations



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Introduction

Do you feel that sometimes you don't do yourself justice in exams? Perhaps you've never taken an exam and are wondering how to prepare yourself. It may have been a long time since you took an exam, and you feel a need to refresh your technique. You may be looking for reassurance and advice because you've had a bad exam experience in the past.

This course aims to help you to improve your own revision and exam techniques and reassure others who experience anxiety and stress over exams.

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Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- manage time more effectively when revising and in the exam itself
- learn, or brush up on, revision and exam skills
- feel equipped to approach exams with less anxiety and stress.

1 Revision and exams

Everyone has different experiences of exams. You may never have taken an exam and are wondering how to prepare yourself. It may have been a long time since you took an exam, and you feel a need to refresh your technique. You may be looking for reassurance and advice because you may have had a bad exam experience in the past. Whatever your reason, we hope that this course will help.

This course is a practical one, and we will begin by helping you to identify your key concerns over revision and exams. We will then move on to look at techniques to help you to manage your revision and tackle the exam itself. We have included a section on handling revision and exam anxiety, and we end by giving you some suggestions for further sources of help. The course covers a range of topics and, although you may read the whole of the course, it is more likely that you will dip into it selectively, using the *Identifying key concerns* activity in Section 2 to identify the parts which relate to your own particular needs.

We encourage active learning and, as such, encourage you to work through the course with a pen and paper to hand so that you can do the activities as you go along. When you have worked through this course, you should have greater confidence in your ability to prepare for, take and pass exams. You will feel more in control of the situation, rather than allowing it to control you. However, remember that these things do not happen instantly. It often takes time to master any skill completely. If this course helps to put you on the road to greater success in your exams, then it will have achieved its aim.

Good luck!

2 Identifying key concerns

Each one of us has a different set of concerns about preparing for and taking exams. It is worth spending a little time reflecting on these concerns and identifying what your individual needs are, in order to set up good support strategies for yourself.

Activity 1

Allow approximately 10 minutes.

- Whether or not you have had past experiences of taking exams, jot down your main feelings and concerns about revision and taking an exam.
- Now have a look at the following comments, made by other students, and put a mark by any that echo your feelings.

Student comments	Strategy	See Section
On revision		
I leave revision to the last minute and then get in a flap.	Plan your revision.	3
I just read and re-read my notes but they don't stick.	Try some new understanding and learning strategies.	3
I'm never sure where to start revising.	Use Activity 2 as a starting point.	3
I don't know when to start revising.	Make a revision timetable.	3
I don't have much time to revise.	Try to set aside time slots each day.	3
I'm not sure my notes will be easy to revise from.	Try making summary sheets, cards or posters.	3
It's hard to concentrate at home.	Make a good working space.	3
I don't know if I'll have enough time to cover all the topics.	Select what you cover by looking carefully at the course material and questions. Make a revision timetable.	3
There are so many other things on my mind.	Talk to someone if problems mean revision is very difficult.	6
As the exam gets closer I get too nervous to revise.	Try an anxiety management or relaxation technique.	5
On taking the exam		
I sometimes rush in and start a question and realise afterwards there were questions I could have done better.	Read through the whole paper and choose carefully.	4
I just can't remember things when I'm in the exam.	Try some memory strategies during revision	3
I tend to spend ages on a favourite question, and then have almost no time for the last question.	Make a quick time plan at the start of the exam - have your watch handy.	4

Everything just spills out in a disorganised way.	Make a quick plan for each question.	4
I often panic when I get into the exam room, and my mind goes blank.	Work on relaxation.	5
I'm no good at exams, I always let myself down.	Try positive self-talk techniques, e.g. I <i>can</i> do it!	5
I haven't taken an exam in years.	Set yourself a 'mock' exam at home.	3
My handwriting will be unreadable	Practise writing at speed regularly.	3

Alongside the comments are some suggested strategies for tackling these difficulties. Each strategy is covered by one of the sections of this course. The third column contains the number of the section relevant to that strategy. Your own comments on your concerns may not be listed here, but you may find them addressed through the many other ideas contained in this course.

The strategies we have outlined can help, as the following comments from students who have tried them indicate.

1. Making a plan made me feel I had some control and could cope.
2. Using a mind-map as a different way of planning a question was incredibly helpful to me.
3. Arranging a lift by car to the exam centre was the best thing I did - I had been so worried I would spend ages parking and be late!

3 Revision

Revision is not, as the word suggests, simply 'looking again' at the material covered in a course - it is a more active task. It involves organising material and finding ways of remembering it, that suit your own particular learning style. Although the time you set aside for revision is important, the approach you adopt and the techniques you use to revise are more vital. Sometimes the thought of having to revise can seem daunting, but be reassured, revision skills and techniques can be learned and practised.

- Find a place to revise:

Other than the obvious suggestions of having a warm, well-lit and comfortable place to work, we also suggest that you think about choosing a revision place where you can spread out your materials and leave them as they are, without having to pack anything away. This means that you can pick up and put down your revision whenever you find time to revise. This will help you to make the most of your revision time.

On the other hand, you may find that you concentrate better away from the distractions of home. If so, try using the private study facilities at your local library.

- Identify the stages of revision:

Although you will eventually develop your own particular approach to revision, it is valuable to reflect a little on the stages you might go through in preparing for your next exam. To do this, we suggest that you adopt a technique called mind-mapping.

Mind-mapping can be used to collect and organise ideas at any time during your studies. Some people have the kind of memory that uses visual cues very effectively, and mind-mapping taps into this memory style. It enables you to lay out your thoughts on a particular topic in a structured way, and to use the way remembered ideas lead on to other associated ideas.

Activity 2

Allow approximately 20 minutes.

- Think about how you plan to approach your revision. Then try mind-mapping your ideas, using the 'map' outline in Figure 1 Blank revision mind-map.
- Once you have completed your mind-map, compare it to the completed version included in the discussion below. As you can see, the topic for the mind-map - *How will I revise?* - is in the centre. The nice thing about mind-maps is that the organisation of your thoughts can come later. So go ahead, just think about the whole process of revision and put your thoughts into the blank boxes. To start you off, we have included a suggestion in the top right box. Once you have done this, decide whether there is any order or link between the activities you have recorded.

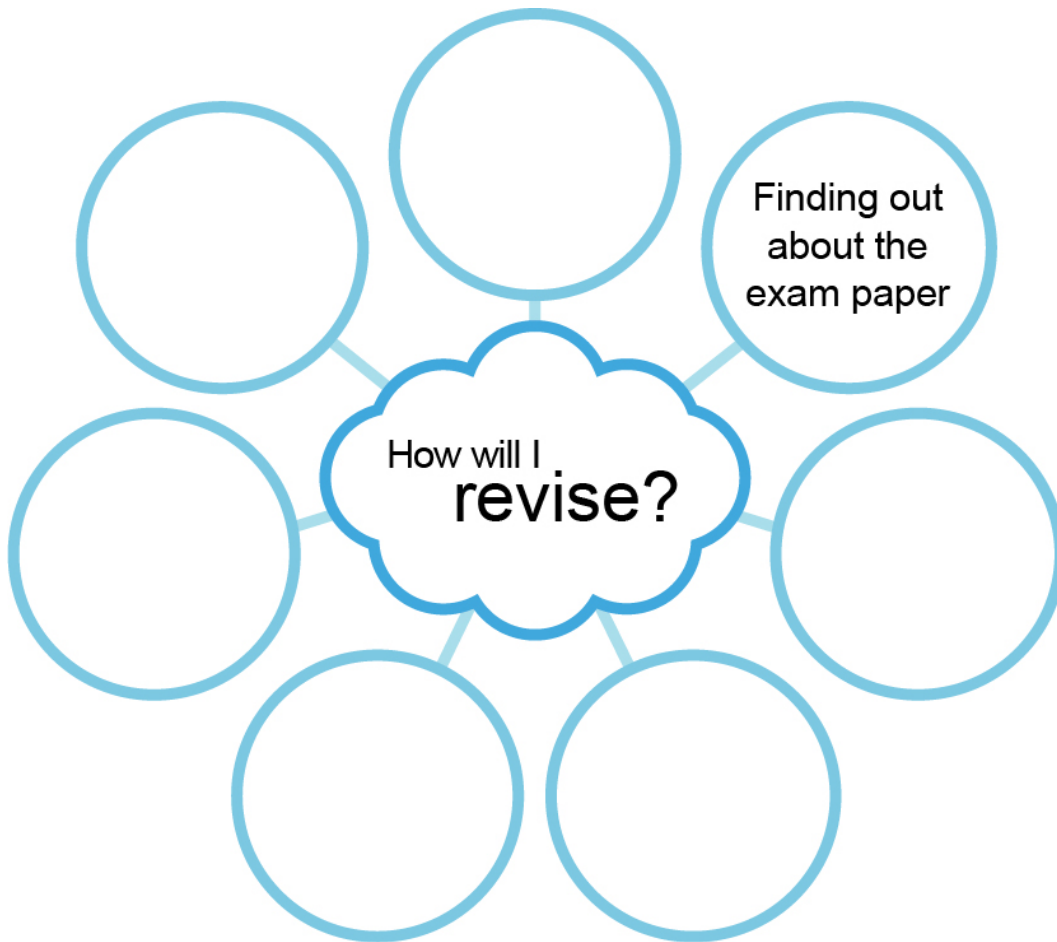


Figure 1

This image shows a blank mind-map made up of a central box surrounded by seven further boxes. Each of the surrounding boxes are linked to the central box by a line. The central box contains the words 'How will I revise?'. A box to the top right contains the words 'Finding out about the exam paper'. The other boxes are blank.

Figure 2 shows our suggestion for a 'Revision mind-map'. The numbers in each box show suggested stages in the revision process. Our map may not look identical to yours, but we imagine that we have identified similar activities.

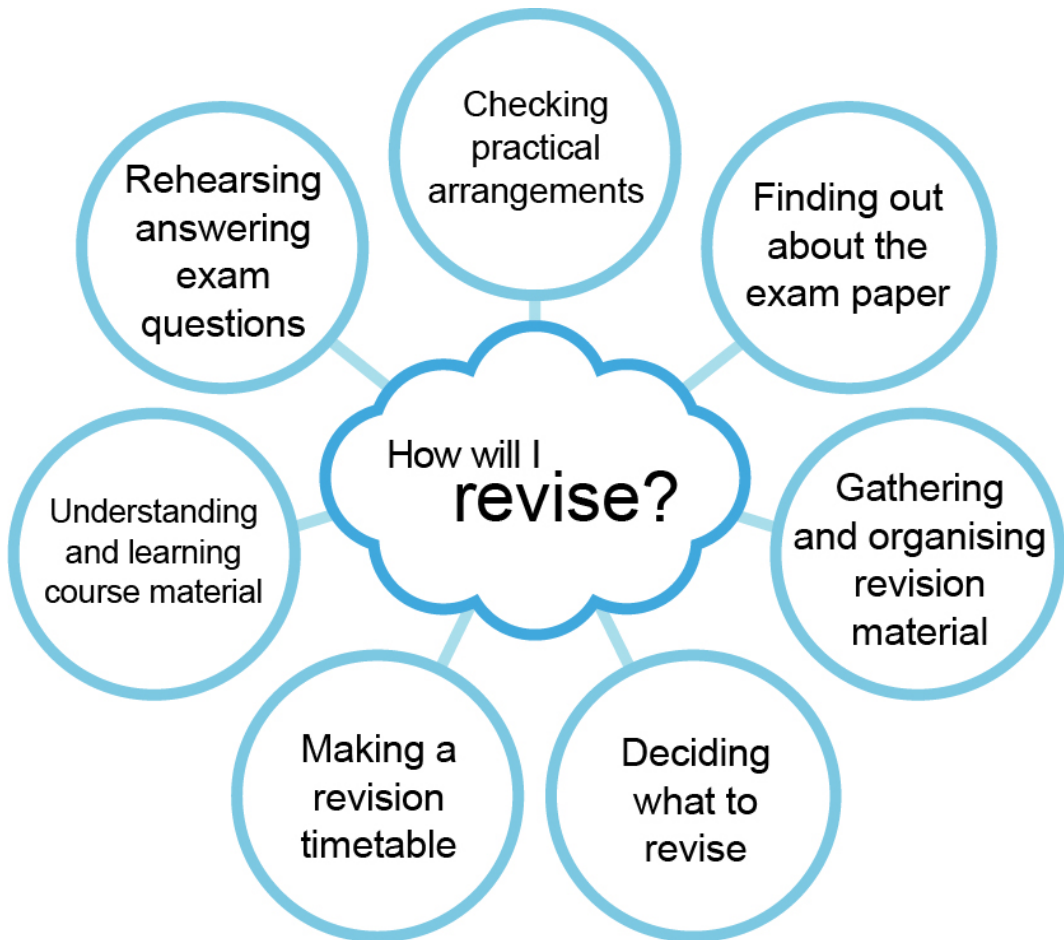


Figure 2 Completed revision mind-map

Over the next few pages, we will look at each of the stages of revision identified by the mind-map in greater detail. These are listed below.

- Stage 1: Finding out about the exam paper
- Stage 2: Gathering and organising revision materials
- Stage 3: Deciding what to revise
- Stage 4: Making a revision timetable
- Stage 5: Understanding and learning the course material
- Stage 6: Rehearsing answering exam questions
- Stage 7: Checking practical arrangements

The advice contained in this course is relevant to all subjects, but the main emphasis is on the written word and, in particular, the exam essay format. Later in the course, we have included some specific information about revising for maths, science, technology and modern languages.

3.1 Stage 1: Finding out about the exam paper

As a first step, it is a good idea to find out as much as you can about the exam paper for your course. Find out how your exam paper is set out, the way the questions are

organised, and what weight each question carries in terms of marks. Different papers adopt different formats. Some require multiple-choice answers. Others ask for essay or short paragraph answers. Some require technical or numerical answers. Reading the instructions on the exam paper is particularly important, as the following quote from a student indicates:

‘I could have kicked myself... as I walked out of the exam room, I looked again at the instructions and saw, to my horror, that answering a question from Section 1 was compulsory and not optional, and I had left that section out! I just think that sometimes reading simple instructions can be hard when you have that knotted up feeling at the beginning of an exam!’

Activity 3

Allow approximately 25 minutes.

Find a past exam paper and answer the questions listed below. You might find these in your university library or online in your course materials. It will be a good idea to write your answers down.

1. Are there sections to the paper?
2. Are any of the sections or questions compulsory?
3. How many questions are there, and how many must be answered?
4. Do the questions require short or long answers, and how are they weighted in terms of marks?
5. Are there any multiple-choice questions?
6. How much time is allowed for the exam, so how much should you allow per question?
7. Do questions relate to particular books, blocks or course, or do they draw from all parts of the course and relate to the key course themes?
8. If you are able to look back over several exam papers, do certain topics appear year after year, albeit in a different format?
9. Is there an oral element to the exam paper?
10. Are any of the questions available to you before the exam (these are usually referred to as ‘seen’ questions)?

It is helpful to sort out exam paper details beforehand so that, in the exam, you can get on with the important business of answering questions. If you become familiar with the presentation of the exam paper, it can be reassuring. This activity can also help you to decide which topics you might want to revise.

Once you have an idea of the style and format of your exam paper, you are ready to gather together the materials from which you will need to revise.

3.2 Stage 2: Gathering the course material together

You will need to gather all your course material and lecture notes together, and organise them properly. Your course material or texts should contain an overview of your course.

Keep this to hand, as it will prove invaluable in you come to identify the topics you will need to revise.

There are also other sources of information that you can draw on when gathering information for your revision.

Activity 4

Allow approximately 10 minutes.

What other materials could you use in your revision? Jot down some ideas.

Here are some of our suggestions.

1. Summary notes made from course texts.
2. Completed and marked assignments.
3. Assignment topics you did not choose and accompanying advisory notes.
4. Audio visual materials (with associated notes if available).
5. Handouts from tutorials or lectures, exercises and notes.
6. Specimen or past exam papers.

This gathering process will lead you to realise that you have a wealth of material available for your revision. Reducing the material to manageable and digestible chunks is arguably one of the most important stages in the active revision process. We will be dealing with this in Stage 5.

3.3 Stage 3: Deciding what to revise

In Stage 2, you will have reminded yourself of the scope of the course, and you will also have a sense of the range and breadth of topics you have covered. Now you need to decide what to revise.

Activity 5

Allow approximately 20 minutes.

Stages 1 and 2 will have given you some idea of the range of revision topics and potential material you could draw on for revision.

Make a preliminary list of course topics. Then look at past or specimen exam papers to see which of the topics on your list appear, and how often. Having done this, think of the material you have to revise from - is it limited or quite detailed?

You may find that for one topic you not only have an assignment, but also notes from your tutorial, course materials, audio visual material, or supplementary readings. Such a selection points to this being a strong revision topic for you.

Although there is no exact formula for how much you should cover in your revision, it is a good idea to revise more topic areas than the number of questions to be answered. You may find that a particular topic you have revised has a question with a narrow focus or an awkward slant.

It will become clear that certain topics appear on the exam paper year after year. Some topics will have a wealth of material for you to draw on, and other topics will simply be

your favourites and easier to learn. It is always a good idea to show your list of revision topics to a tutor or fellow student. You can ask them what they think about your revision plans.

3.4 Stage 4: Making a revision timetable

There are no hard and fast rules about when you should start to revise. Some people say you should have a revision strategy set up from the start of a course, typically involving careful and systematic highlighting of study texts and the making of condensed notes on key course elements. Others would say that it is only in the later stages of a course that material comes together in a sufficiently meaningful way to make a revision strategy possible. The time you have available, and your own study style, will probably shape your revision timing and approach. You may even find that your approach to revision changes from year to year, depending on your personal circumstances and the format and demands of your course. Don't consider this a sign of disorganisation. On the contrary. You should congratulate yourself that you have a flexible repertoire of study skills on which you can draw when circumstances dictate.

If you are a perfectionist, then be realistic. Sometimes you may have to compromise and accept that, in better times, you could have revised longer and more effectively, and probably got better results - that's life! The chances are that you have learned from the experience and things will be better next time.

Having suggested that every year may be different, we would like to also suggest that it is a good idea to make a revision plan, even if this needs to be modified as time and life go on. As you move into the last third of your course, it would be a good idea to look ahead to the various demands, course-related and otherwise, which are likely to be made on you as your exam date draws near. You are likely to have final assignments or projects to submit, together with the usual expected and unexpected demands that work, family, and social life place on you. You can usually successfully work around busy periods, as long as you plan them into your revision schedule.

Activity 6

Allow approximately 20 minutes.

Figure 3 shows an example week of a study calendar. Using the headings in bold, make out your own study calendar to begin planning the lead up to your exam. You will need your calendar to cover more than one week. Start by putting in the exam date itself, or a provisional date, if the actual date has not yet been set. Now put in other important work, social, and family commitments. Put in today's date, if that is possible within the time frame of the calendar.

Day	When	Topic	Task
Monday	Before work: 2 hours 6 - 8 am	Topic a, b, c	Gather material together and read past exam papers.
Tuesday	Evening: 3 hours 8 - 11 pm	Topic a, b, c	Reduce each topic to key points on summary cards.
Wednesday	Evening: 4 hours 7 - 11 pm	Topic a, b, c	Try answering questions on each topic using summary cards only.
Thursday	Evening: 1 hour 6 - 7 pm	Topic a	Try a mock exam question without using notes.
Friday	Evening off		
Saturday	Afternoon: 2.5 hours 2.00 - 4.30 pm	Topic x, y, z	Gather materials together and identify key points.
Sunday	Morning: 3 hours 9 - 12 pm	Topic x, y, z	Make summary cards.

Figure 3 Example study calendar

How do things look? Do you feel reassured that you have plenty of time to revise? Have you allowed time for unexpected events? Doing this activity will have enabled you to plan your revision time realistically. If you are likely to be under pressure at particular points up to and around the exam time, you will be able to anticipate this, rather than be taken by surprise. This will allow you to make best use of the spaces in your revision calendar. This calendar won't remain static. You will probably have to cross out, insert and shift events and activities throughout your revision period, but at least you are keeping yourself in the picture and, arguably, you stay in control of your time as much as any of us can

It is generally the case that we have good times to work, and times when we work less well. These periods tend to be very individual, and sometimes we have to pause to reflect on our own most productive time. When you are filling out your revision timetable, be realistic about the times you work best. Put your most important active work into those slots, and allot more routine tasks to less productive times.

You have now identified your main revision sessions on your calendar. Early in the revision period you should identify slots in which you will actively revise the topic areas you have decided to revise. It is likely that you will have to review and reschedule your revision plans on a fairly regular basis. However, if you find that you are constantly reorganising your plans, ask yourself if you are setting yourself over-demanding targets.

3.5 Stage 5: Understanding and learning the course material

Simply reading and re-reading the course materials will take you more time than you can afford, and is not an effective way of learning material for an exam. Adopt what is called an *active* approach to learning for your exam. Different subjects demand different active methods but, generally speaking, this approach involves you in manipulating or doing things with the material in a way that helps it to stick, so you can recall it later.

The first thing you need to do is to reduce the masses of information you have on each topic to a manageable size. This can be done by condensing the notes down to key words and concepts. You can do this in a variety of ways.

Making summary sheets or cards

Andrew Northedge, in *The Good Study Guide* uses a diagram to illustrate this (reproduced as Figure 4). He notes that:

To boil the course down in this way, so as to extract its concentrated essences, is extremely valuable because it converts the broad themes and the detailed discussions of the course into a form which is more manageable for the purpose of answering questions in exams.

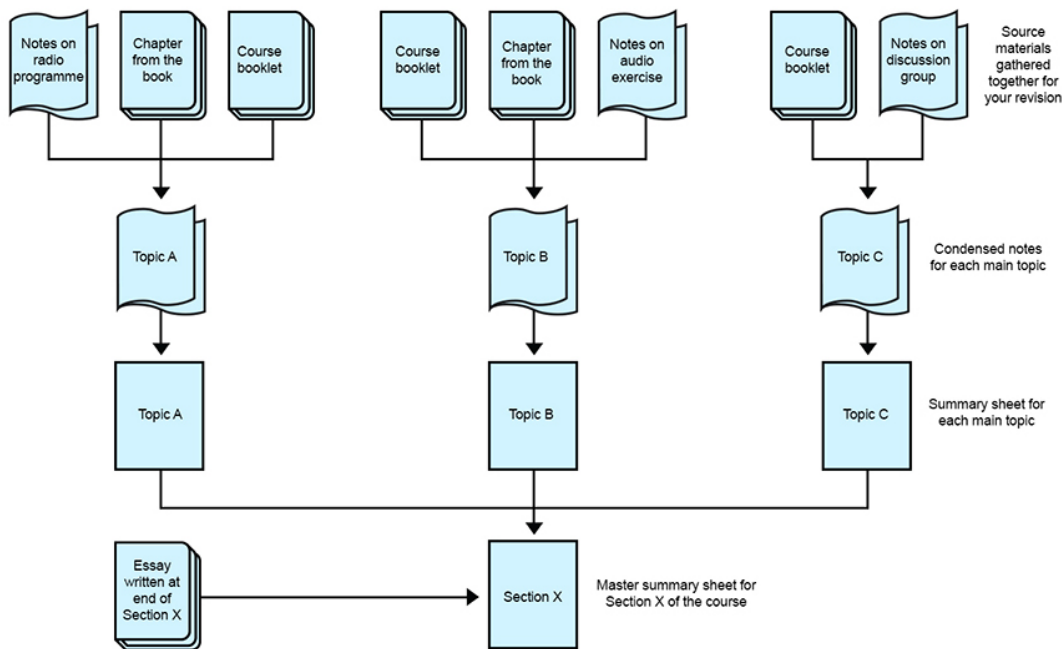


Figure 4 Summary sheets and cards

You can achieve this by following the steps below.

1. Summarise your notes on a topic from the various sources you have collected together.
2. Draw the main points from these notes, using headings and key points.
3. Try to reduce these notes further to one side of A4 paper or even a small file card, using only the main headings and a few associated key words.

Note that the mind-map we described above captures all these techniques in an economical way.

Assignments can be a very useful starting point for producing summaries. It can be very useful to look through them as you revise, and compare exam and assignment questions on the same topic. How do the questions differ? What would the key differences be between an assignment and an exam answer on the same topic? Think how you could use these ideas in an exam answer. Reduce the assignment in the way we have described above and use this in your revision later on.

Making learning posters

You may find that, rather than reducing notes to small summary cards, you prefer to produce large posters detailing key points on particular topics. Use pattern, colour, diagrams and drawings in your posters, and display them in parts of your home where you might have an opportunity to gaze at them for some time and absorb the information. One

student we know put them around the bathroom! If you have a strong visual memory, then lively posters really help the remembering process.

Making audio tapes

Why not try recording material from your summary sheets, or cards, onto audio tape? Students who have a strong auditory memory find information sticks if they hear it rather than read it. You could play the tape back to yourself when travelling by train or car.

Using a computer

Besides other things, a computer offers the opportunity to organise, reorganise, and delete material, without having to write everything out every time you make a change. It also allows you to make notes as you go along, file them easily, and add and update them in your revision period.

You may even find that one of your software packages supports a facility for making notes. You will certainly have a range of layout facilities and graphics to enhance your notes.

Activity 7

Allow approximately 10 minutes.

Make a list of what programs or ways of making notes you could use.

Self-help groups - revising with others

There is a great deal to be said for working with another student, or group of students, when you are revising. Other students can help you keep the whole revision process in perspective, rather than letting it make you over-anxious. At another level, there is no reason why you shouldn't share marked assignments, revision tips and plans with members of a revision group. You may find that one of your group is good at devising a manageable revision timetable, and another can share some valuable ideas about content for a tricky past exam question. Working together to produce condensed revision notes, or to brainstorm answers to questions, can be particularly fruitful. What one person forgets, another may remember. You are not in competition with other students taking the exam, so sharing revision is not cheating.

Teach to learn

One of the most successful ways to learn something well is to teach it. Select a topic that you feel you know well and try teaching it to an imaginary person. As your teaching proceeds, you will quickly realise where there are gaps in your knowledge and understanding. Immediately you will begin to identify clearly what it is you are explaining. You will become aware of any aspects that you are less clear about, and can focus on those. Imagine you are explaining something to someone who keenly and urgently wants to understand. It feels like a much more positive and purposeful activity. Sometimes you can even do this to an interested partner, friend or fellow student. Try preparing a topic with which you do not feel familiar, in order to explain it clearly to someone who wants to know about it. You may find this simple method works well for you.

3.6 Memory and Understanding

Memory and understanding

Exams are rarely tests of memory, but much more to do with the selection, presentation and interpretation of materials. When you have understood what you have read, you can think about it and use it. Nonetheless, you may still be concerned about your ability to remember the information you are revising in a way that will allow you to use it in an exam.

Understanding the way you prefer to learn can prove to be very helpful in helping you with this.

Look at these two groups of statements. Do you feel more in tune with one set or the other?

1. I like to get everything sorted before I start.
 - I don't have any trouble remembering numbers and codes.
 - I tend to make lists to organise materials.
 - I prefer to write things down.
2. I can often follow a map more easily than written instructions.
 - Sometimes my best ideas come in quite unexpected ways.
 - I tend to have a good 'feel' for what I am doing, but it doesn't look very organised.

The List 1 represents some of the feelings that are associated with the logical, sequential, left side of the brain. List 2 includes some of the more intuitive, spatial, and holistic qualities that are associated with the right side of the brain. If you feel more comfortable with List 2, then you might like to try allowing yourself to study in a whole variety of ways. Some of them are described below. If you feel that List 1 describes you better, then it can still be useful to experiment with other other ways of studying. This is because the most effective learning seems to take place when both sides of the brain are engaged together.

Most of us also seem to have a preference for the way we perceive information through one or more of our senses. Look at the lists below and make a note of the suggestions that seem to be most suited to you. Try some of them out in your revision.

Visual - you tend to say: Try:

I see that	designing an exciting poster or a colourful mind-map
I get the picture	drawing a cartoon with facts attached to the picture
that seems clear	colour-coding different categories of information

Aural - you tend to say: Try:

that sounds great	repeating out loud as you read / revise
I hear what you're saying	turning facts into a rhyme or rap
that strikes a chord	making a tape of information

Kinaesthetic - you tend to say: Try:

that feels right	walking around reciting the points you want to learn out loud
------------------	---

it slipped my mind	making any drawings as large as possible so you feel the word as you write it
let's start from scratch	making gestures as you speak or read

Whatever technique you use, the key is to make something memorable by exaggeration, by association, by colour, or by humour - creating a vivid picture, sound or feeling.

Finally, practise reviewing information. You remember best the information received at the beginning and end of a learning session. So, you learn more in a 60-minute learning session if you take two breaks, because you have three beginnings and three endings, so less is forgotten. When you take each break, quickly review the key points. Review them again one hour, one day, two days later. The reviewing is vital to reinforce the memory links.

Try out at least three *new* ideas taken from [Section 3](#). Make a list of the strategies that work best for you.

3.7 Stage 6: Rehearsing answering exam questions

Just like assignment questions, exam questions should be read carefully, because you need to demonstrate in your answer that you have understood the question. Examiners frequently complain that students lose vital marks through failing to read and interpret the questions properly.

Play the examiner

Activity 8

Allow approximately 15 minutes.

Take a particular question from a past or specimen exam paper and imagine that you are the examiner who set it. Note down which particular part of the course you set the question to test, and how you would distribute the marks. Also, note the potential pitfalls in answering the question, and what you would be looking for in an exceptional answer.

The examiner is looking for relevant and concise answers, which show that you have grasped the main concepts and can both explain and use them in your own words.

Analysing and answering essay-based exam questions

For the following activity, you can use questions from a specimen paper, past papers or even questions you have devised for yourself.

Activity 9

Allow approximately 15 minutes.

Exam questions for essay-based courses often contain 'process words'. These require you to organise what you know about a topic in a particular way. The mark you obtain

for your answer will, to a large degree, reflect your success in interpreting the instruction contained within the question's process words.

Using Table 1, check out your understanding of a selection of 'process words'. These are frequently found in essay-based exam questions. Note down what you think each word means. The meaning of the first process word is filled in as an example.

Table 1

Process word	Meaning
Account for	Explain, clarify, give reasons for
Analyse	
Assess	
Compare	
Contrast	
Compare and contrast	
Criticise	
Define	
Describe	
Discuss	
Distinguish / Differentiate between	
Evaluate	
Examine the argument that	
Explain	
How far / To what extent	
Illustrate	
Justify	
Outline	
State	
Summarise	
What arguments can be made for and against this view?	

When you have completed the table, have a look at Table 2 in the next section on 'Process words'. This shows a completed version of the table. You can use it to compare with your answers.

3.8 Understanding process words

Table 2

Process word	Meaning
Account for	explain, clarify, give reasons for

Analyse	resolve into its component parts examine critically or minutely
Assess	determine the value of, weigh up (see also Evaluate)
Compare	look for similarities and differences between examples perhaps reach conclusion about which is preferable and justify this clearly
Contrast	set in opposition in order to bring out the differences sharply
Compare and contrast	find some points of common ground between x and y and show where or how they differ
Criticise	make a judgement backed by a discussion of the evidence of reasoning involved about the merit of theories or opinions or about the truth of assertions
Define	state the exact meaning of a word or phrase, in some cases it may be necessary or desirable to examine different possible or often used definitions
Describe	give a detailed account of
Discuss	explain, then give two sides of the issue and any implications
Distinguish/Differentiate between	look for differences between
Evaluate	make an appraisal of the worth/validity/effectiveness of something in the light of its truth or usefulness (see also Assess)
Examine the argument that	look in details at this line of argument
Explain	give details about how and why something is so
How far / To what extent	usually involves looking at evidence / arguments for and against and weighing them up
Illustrate	make clear and explicit, usually requires the use of carefully chosen examples
Justify	show adequate grounds for decisions or conclusions and answer the main objections likely to be made about them
Outline	give the main features or general principles of a subject, omitting minor details and emphasising structure and arrangement
State	present in a brief, clear form
Summarise	give a concise, clear explanation or account of the topic, presenting the chief factors and omitting minor details and examples (see also Outline)
What arguments can be made for and against this view?	look at both sides of this argument

Mathematicians use process words with slightly different meanings, as in Table 3.

Table 3

Process word	Meaning
Write down, state, give	write down without justification

Find, calculate, determine, explain, derive, solve, evaluate	work out and show your working
Prove, show, deduce, explain	you must justify each step and provide a convincing argument

3.9 Thinking about the exam

It is worth noting the difference between exam answers and assignments. Inevitably, a much lengthier and more polished answer can be produced in an untimed assignment. In the short time available in the exam, you need to move quickly through your main points, without paying too much attention to your style. Examiners are fully aware of the constraints exams place on the writer. Focus on the question you have chosen, and underline or highlight the process words or instructions in the question. Some questions do not have obvious process words, but you can usually 'read between the lines' to find the instruction (an implicit process is involved).

Activity 10

Allow approximately 15 minutes.

Refer to the list of process words provided in Table 1 and Table 2. Look at the questions on your specimen exam paper, or past papers, and see if you can identify the 'process word (s)'.

Now you need to think about the scope of your answer, and the parts of the particular topic you will use in answering the question. The three-part essay structure - introduction, main body and conclusion - is a useful one to adopt when tackling an essay-based exam answer.

The introduction

At the beginning of your answer, you should:

- summarise what you are about to argue and briefly describe why
- explain how you interpret / understand the actual question
- define terms or explain the key words to demonstrate you have understood the question.

The main body

You should then go on to:

- include the key information and arguments, and their relevance to the question
- give examples to illustrate why you see these as important.

The conclusion

Finally, you should:

- briefly sum up and evaluate your argument, for example, indicating whether the evidence is convincing or insufficient
- wherever possible, refer back to the question.

Most students find the introduction and the conclusion the hardest parts to write. Don't spend too long on getting the words perfect. Keep sentences simple. The bulk of the marks fall in the middle section, according to the quantity of information and argument presented there. As you write, space your words or sentences so that you can go back and insert a word or phrase without making it illegible. You may even like to leave a gap of several lines where you sense you would like to reword a paragraph later, if you have time.

Now move on to Activity 11.

Activity 11

Allow approximately 15 minutes.

- Write down one of the questions from a past or specimen exam paper. Underline the key words - the words that indicate the kind of content expected - and the process words. This will help you to identify the topic and the instruction in the question.
- Make some notes on what you would include in the introduction, main body and conclusion of an answer to this question. Try writing an introduction quickly, as you would need to do under exam conditions. If you haven't revised the topic yet, try to remember as much as you can from when you were studying the material.

3.10 Other ways to practise for the exam

Answering multiple-choice questions

Multiple-choice questions usually involve you in selecting the right answer from several possible responses. The questions are frequently short, and your answer requires no writing. However, finding the right answer may require you to do calculations on paper or, in some cases, check back through an extract of material very closely to see which is the correct of two possible answers. In the *Sciences Good Study Guide* there is a good example on pages 265–68, which shows the series of calculations you need to make in order to identify the correct answer. It points out the need to check through notations to ensure that you have not found the right answer by coincidence. Above all, keep going, try not to slow down and have a go at all the questions. Educated and even random guesses may add a few vital marks to your total.

One student said:

'The problem with the multiple-choice section was that I got really stuck on one of the questions and didn't manage to complete the section in the time available and the individual questions were not worth enough marks to justify my delay.'

Answering a question in exam conditions

Write out a few exam questions on pieces of card, shuffle them and then pick out a question at random and try to answer it in the time the exam allows. Doing this can give you a sense of the amount you can reasonably write in an exam. You should also get an idea of whether or not you are being too ambitious about what you can cover within the time constraints of an exam. You should be wary of overshooting the timeslot for an exam answer, and not leaving enough time to complete the remaining answers well. A good number of valuable marks can be lost this way. The mock exam exercise also leads some students to realise that they will have to write a little faster, and less neatly than usual. You may need to compromise presentation standards in order to do the required number of reasonably full answers.

You may find, if you use a word processor for producing your assignments, that you will have become accustomed to the luxury of the marvellous editing opportunities it provides. Adding, deleting and moving parts of the text becomes second nature, so much so that you can become quite unused to writing a reasonable first draft first time round. It would be a good idea to produce some hand-written work in the revision period to remind yourself of the different demands of handwriting to time.

Maths, sciences and technology

The additional points we would want you to be aware of as you plan your revision in these subjects relate to the different ways in which you are called upon to present your answers. These might be:

- short reports
- multiple-choice answers
- different use of diagrams.

If you can get a copy of the *Sciences Good Study Guide*, Chapter 3 'Working with diagrams', offers an excellent guide to the ways these methods can be used in presentation, study and revision. The most useful overall revision activity is to practise with examples, and work on previous exam questions.

Modern Languages

In modern languages courses, as you would expect, the emphasis includes listening and speaking skills as well as reading and writing skills. To learn to be creative and spontaneous in the language you are studying, you need to practise listening and speaking throughout the course and in revision. Working through the course materials, which have carefully interwoven audio materials, is one of the most useful ways of practising these skills. The following additional activities are all recommended:

- listening to foreign radio
- regular conversations with a native speaker of the language
- using a self-help group, in particular to work effectively on conversation practice.

3.11 Stage 7: Checking and making arrangements - a week before the exam

Mistakes often happen because students are anxious and pressured for time when preparing for an exam. We suggest that, a week before the exam, you check and make notes along the following lines.

1. The date and time of the exam.
2. The whereabouts of the exam centre. If time is going to be at a premium on the day of the exam, it would be well worth checking how to get to the exam centre, and how long it will take. You can then decide on your mode of travel, and look into parking arrangements if you are going in your own car.
3. Do the items you can take into the exam - texts, dictionaries, calculators etc. – have a particular specification? Your exam guidance should give these details if you are unsure.
4. It is usually permissible to take light refreshments, sweets or drinks into the exam room, as long as you respect the needs of others. Decide what to have with you.

4 The exam itself

When you arrive at the exam centre, you may prefer to stay quietly on your own, rather than chat to other students. Do what suits you best and helps you to feel calm and positive. Once you are in your seat, try not to look around. Your senses can be heightened by tension and can fasten on irrelevant details, such as what other students are doing or wearing. Try visualising a relaxing scene, or relax using breathing exercises. Visualisation and relaxation exercises are described in [Section 5](#).

Getting off to a good start

You may find it useful to plan the way you will start your exam. Having a routine can be calming when under pressure. This is from a student who recommends a checklist:

'I have a mental checklist of what I need to do once I've turned over the paper. I do this because I used to rush in and answer the first question that looked at all familiar, only to find that there was a much better question further on. I would spend ages on this first question and not leave enough time for the rest. I tended not to plan, and so the facts were all jumbled and I realised, when the exam was over - too late - that I had left out some really good material in the heat of the moment. My checklist makes me stop and think.'

Activity 12

Allow approximately 10 minutes.

Using a specimen or past exam paper, give yourself 10 minutes to do a mock start to the exam.

What sequence of activities did you go through? Could you make this into a checklist? If you have a revision partner, ask them what they do at the start of an exam. You might not have as clear a checklist as you would like. You may find our checklist a useful starting point.

1. Check the instructions.
2. Read the whole exam paper through carefully.
3. Choose the questions and order them.
4. Plan your time.
5. Plan your answers.
6. Start writing.

4.1 The exam paper

- Check the instructions:

Check the instructions first to make sure that they are what you expected from looking at the specimen paper. Misreading instructions can lose more marks than poor revision!

- Read the whole exam paper through carefully:

Students often describe feeling that everyone else starts writing confidently, straight away. Make sure you allow yourself at least 5 minutes to read calmly through the paper. It is tempting to grab at familiar questions, possibly even misreading them and turning them into the questions you want to answer. If you carefully and steadily unpack the questions, you will inevitably make a better selection.

- Choose the questions and order them:

During your first read through the paper, put an asterisk or star sign (*) in pencil against the questions you think you could possibly answer. Then read through your starred questions and put an additional star against the ones that you prefer. Choose the questions with the highest star rating.

- Plan your time:

When planning to use the time available, you should:

- make sure that you are answering the right number of questions
- divide your time according to the weighting of the questions
- write down the finishing time for each question
- try to allow for 10 minutes checking time at the end.

Stick to your plan. Evidence indicates that two half-answered questions obtain more marks than one completed question and one unanswered one. This is especially vital where you have to answer a certain number of questions from different sections of the exam paper. If your timing goes wrong, you could end up with less time than you would wish to finish the last question. If this happens, plan your answer as described below, and write out the main points in note form. This will earn you a few extra, valuable marks.

- Plan your answers:

Using the ideas outlined in [Section 3](#), mark the key words in the question to make sure you identify the topic correctly. Then mark the process words to help you to understand the instructions within the question.

Jot down the main points you can recall which might be relevant, along with examples and evidence you can use. Work fast and uncritically at this stage, possibly using a mind-map. You can always cut out unwanted material later. Be ruthless about cutting out material you know well but which doesn't really answer the question. If you have jotted down points just as they occur to you, you can then number them to indicate the order you want to put them in.

- Start writing:

Using the format of introduction, main body and conclusion outlined in [Section 3](#), write up your answer to the question.

- Read through to check your answers:

When the end of the exam finally approaches, use the last few minutes to check you have numbered all the questions, crossed out rough work that you do not want the examiner to mark, and filled in all the details required on the front sheet.

If you have time before these last few minutes, you may like to reread the answers, tidying up some words, making the meaning a little clearer or rewriting the occasional word that is very hard to read. If you decide to add brief comments, use a numbered

asterisk (*) in the body of your writing and write the additional comment, with a similarly numbered asterisk, at the foot of the page.

- After the exam:

When you come out of the exam try to forget it. Going over what you have written with other students can make you worry about areas you haven't covered. Go and enjoy a planned treat as a personal reward for all your hard work.

5 Managing exam anxiety

You may find that exams provoke levels of anxiety which are highly uncomfortable, and that you do not produce your best work under such pressure. If you tend to be a perfectionist, an exam can be particularly stressful because it has a set time limit which limits lengthy planning, rewriting and checking. Even revision can be difficult if you are constantly worrying about whether you will remember and understand your material when you are in the exam room.

Anxiety management techniques will be more useful if you practise them early, since you can use them alongside your revision, in the final run up to the exam, and in the exam itself.

5.1 Anxiety management techniques

You can guide your thinking away from general worry and self-doubt by turning negative self-statements into positive ones. This strategy is useful in all aspects of life. Figure 5 relates to an unsuccessful job interview and illustrates the process.



Figure 5 Positive and negative self-talk

Adapted from the *Exam Stress Pack*, The Open University in the South

5.2 Technique 1: Self-talk

Activity 13

Allow approximately 15 minutes.

Now try to construct an example for yourself, in relation to a past exam or test experience, in order to identify your pattern of self-talk.

In recalling this past experience, ask yourself the following questions.

1. What were you telling yourself?
2. Was it positive or negative?
3. What were your feelings?

4. What did you learn from these feelings?
5. What were your actions?

If you described negative feelings and statements, try to change them into positive self-talk and consequent positive actions.

You may discover that you undermine yourself by negative self-talk. Keep re-wording negative statements into positives. Positive self-talk is a powerful tool.

Turning the negative into the positive

Here is a rewording of some of the negative student comments from [Section 2](#), which we have re-worded into positive comments.

Negative	Positive
I am no good at exams, I always let myself down.	The past is irrelevant. I am now working well and have planned techniques which will really help.
I leave revision to the last minute and then get in a flap.	I can get my work done in time if I plan a timetable and stick to it.
I might fail.	I am determined to pass and I am working to make that happen.

Make a list of positive statements that create positive feelings, and repeat them regularly. In the exam room, you could quietly say to yourself, 'It is okay, I can handle this', or 'I can relax. I am in control', or 'Now is my chance to put into action the things I have learnt'.

5.3 Technique 2: Relaxation

Here are three relaxation techniques, which you can use before and during the exam.

A relaxation exercise

This is an exercise that can be done during an exam without drawing attention to yourself, or disturbing others.

1	Pull in stomach muscles tightly.	Hold for a count of five.	Relax.
2	Clench fist tightly.	Hold for a count of five.	Relax.
3	Extend you fingers.	Hold for a count of five.	Relax.
4	Grasp below seat of chair.	Pull up for a count of five.	Relax.
5	Press elbows tightly into side of body.	Hold for a count of five.	Relax.
6	Push foot hard into floor.	Hold for a count of five.	Relax.

Adapted from David Acres (1987) *How To Pass Exams Without Anxiety*

The emergency stop technique

This exercise is an emergency relaxation technique to counteract panic and the build up of tension.

1. Say sharply to yourself STOP! (aloud if the situation permits).
2. Breathe in and hold your breath for a moment before slowly exhaling. As you do so, relax your shoulders and hands.
3. Pause for a moment, then breathe in slowly again and hold. This time, as you breathe out relax your forehead and jaw.
4. Stay quiet for a few moments, then go on with what you were doing, moving slowly and smoothly.

Adapted from Jane Madders (1988) *Stress and Relaxation*

A breathing exercise

1. Breathe in slowly through your nose for a count of eight. As you breathe in, imagine you are filling your stomach / abdomen area first, and then your chest.
2. Hold this breath in for as long as it is comfortable.
3. Expel the air out through your nose for a count of eight, expelling the air from your abdomen upwards through your chest.
4. Refrain from taking another breath until it becomes uncomfortable, and then repeat the process again.

5.4 Technique 3: Visualisation

Creating calming pictures or images in your mind, or 'visualising', can really help you to relax.

Method 1

First of all, do some of the relaxation exercises we have described above. Then imagine yourself in this calm state taking the exam. You feel purposeful and confident. You see yourself at a desk in the exam room environment. You feel entirely at home and attuned to that moment, working effectively and concentrating well.

Now practise visualising this positive, clear, realistic image over and over again.

Method 2

Create a scene in your imagination. Think of a scene - real or imaginary, from any time - that creates feelings of safety, warmth, security and peace, with no uneasy feelings. Make it vivid by feeling the breeze and the temperature, picturing the colours and hearing the sounds. Practise visualising this scene as often as you can. When you want to feel calm, think of this scene and stay imagining it for a short while. Then return your thoughts to the matter in hand. The sense of calm should stay with you and enable you to cope better with whatever comes.

Using visualisation

The important thing is to find out which technique works for you, and to practise it before the exam, so that if the need arises you can switch into the technique during the exam itself.

For a very small number of students with more persistent anxiety, medical advice can be very helpful. If this is the case, it is really important to talk to an advisor or tutor, to see what special exam arrangements are possible.

Conclusion

This free course provided an introduction to studying Education. It took you through a series of exercises designed to develop your approach to study and learning at a distance and helped to improve your confidence as an independent learner.

Acknowledgements

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