

Student SkillPack

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Revising and Examination Techniques

STARTER LEVEL

REVISING AND EXAMINATION TECHNIQUES Starter Level

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Examinations are a common form of assessment at university/college. You may have considerable experience of them, or very little, depending on your route into university or college.

University/college exams may differ from those you have experienced to date, as may the type and amount of material to be revised. Given the importance of exams for most final qualifications, it is well worth considering how to improve your performance. Doing well in exams not only depends on your knowledge, but also on how good you are at revising and handling the exam itself.

Even if exams in the early stages of your course do not count towards final grades, they are important in helping you develop your revision and exam techniques. It is helpful to have developed effective strategies before your final exams.

If you have a disability which may affect your exam performance, speak to your lecturer as early as possible about alternative arrangements.

We suggest you use this SkillPack:

- when you have an exam coming up to help you plan the revision for it and then to perform successfully in it.

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When you have completed it, you should be able to:

Agree targets

Revision techniques

- review your current expertise
- identify which material to revise and prioritise
- identify possible revision techniques
- identify the purpose and format of the exam and what the examiners are looking for
- make a revision plan – identify tasks with deadlines, resources and support needed
- identify any factors that might affect your plans (eg *family commitments, workload, difficulties*).

Examination techniques

- identify your own usual responses to exams and plan for this
- identify techniques to deal with the exam
- plan time allocation in the exam.

Use a plan

Revision techniques

- identify and use possible revision techniques which work well for the subject, the exam format and you
- monitor revision plans and amend them as needed, dealing with any difficulties and using feedback and support.

Examination techniques

- identify what questions mean and what is required
- identify which questions to answer in which order
- plan answers including appropriate evidence.

Review progress and achievements

- identify what influenced the outcome of the exam
- identify ways of improving revising and exam techniques in the future.

(Based on QCA Key Skill specifications, QCA 2000)

1 Your current expertise

Think about the last exam(s) you took.

- Did you do as well as you deserved?
- What did you do which worked well/less well?

In the following box please focus on how you carried out your revision and how you handled the exam, rather than on how well you dealt with the subject matter.

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<p>Revision</p> <p>Did well</p>	<p>Less well</p>
<p>The exam itself</p> <p>Did well</p>	<p>Less well</p>

It might help to discuss your replies with (an)other student(s). What did they do which was different from what you did? You can then consider:

- what aspects of your revising and exam techniques are effective and can be built on?
- what aspects of your revising and exam techniques are not effective and need improvement?

2 Coping with exam nerves

Exams are stressful – but stress is not necessarily negative. You may be more mentally alert under stress, which is why you can produce so much in the short space of an exam. Research indicates that you will perform better if you view stress as positive and exams as a chance to demonstrate your abilities rather than as a way of tripping you up.

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To help you reduce anxiety, you could:

- prepare thoroughly and do enough revision to make you feel confident
- find out as much as possible about the exam (eg *when/where the exam will be; how long it will be; how many questions there are, how much choice there is; what the arrangements are if you want to go to the toilet, or if you have a problem during the exam. What happens if you are ill or if you fail?*)
- find out about the assessment criteria. Do all the exam questions carry equal marks? What will get good marks?
- spend the first 10 minutes in an exam planning how to deal with it and then try to stick to the plan. It avoids the 'flitting about' or 'getting stuck' that nerves sometimes induces.
- swap experiences with others after an exam to release tension. This can be helpful in acknowledging that most people experience exam nerves, and in discussing how to avoid problems.
Others may find this makes them more anxious. If this applies to you, leave as soon as possible after the exam.
- Use relaxation techniques, eg yoga, avoid too much alcohol, eat sensibly and get sufficient sleep. See the Starter Level SkillPack on 'Coping with Pressure'.

3 What is the exam for?

In order to revise and then to perform well in the exam it helps to identify what the examiner is looking for. This may vary from subject to subject and also between levels in a subject eg *between years 1 and 2*.

In the following box, tick what you think was looked for in the exams for a subject you studied in the past, and what you think the examiner will look for in your next exams.



What did/will the examiner look for?	Previous exams you have taken	This course
The amount of work you have done		
The amount you can write in a given time		
How you cope with the pressure of the exam		
The factual information you know		
How well you grasp what the exam question is aiming at		
Accuracy		
Your writing style, eg <i>spelling, grammar, how you express yourself</i>		
Ability to apply conventions, eg <i>correct references, ways of presenting graphs or diagrams, use of scientific terms</i>		



What did/will the examiner look for?	Previous exams you have taken	This course
The presentation of your exam paper		
Being able to apply knowledge to a particular situation		
The underlying concepts/principles you know		
Being able to argue a particular point of view		
Being able to criticise and analyse information		
Other. Please list		

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If you are unsure how to complete the final column of the above box in relation to your current course you can:

- look at previous exam papers. You may find examples: in your learning centre/library; in your course/programme guide; by asking your lecturer.

What does the **format** suggest about what they are looking for? For example, many short questions may mean knowledge of factual information is required, or a case study may mean being able to apply knowledge to a particular situation.

What do the **type of questions** suggest about what they are looking for? For example, do the questions ask you to repeat the knowledge you have or to do something with it (eg *to present two sides of an argument, to analyse etc*)?

- ask your lecturer what is expected both by her/himself or by an external examiner.

It is worth checking out your assumptions (eg *at university/college the examiners will not be as concerned with how much you write in a given time as with what you write*).

Each exam may have different expectations (eg *some may look for an in-depth knowledge and how you apply it, others for how well you argue a case*).

What are the formal requirements? You could look in course handbooks, in a Student Handbook or ask your tutor.



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Questions to ask	Your notes
Will it count towards your final degree classification? If so, by how much?	
What do you need to do to pass? What are the assessment criteria? What is the pass mark?	
What happens if you are ill, or have serious problems which could affect your performance?	
What happens if you fail? When are resits?	
What are the regulations about cheating and plagiarism?	

4 What should you revise?

How can you choose what to revise? This may depend partly on:

- what is likely to be covered in the exam
- what will maximise your marks.

What do your responses to Section 3 'What is the exam for?' imply about choosing what to revise? Have the selection methods you have used in the past worked? What are their advantages/disadvantages? Will this be appropriate for your next exam?

- How do you normally choose?
- Which other methods could you try instead?

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Selection method	In the past	Could try
Work through the material from beginning to end and try to cover it all		
Cover all the material to some extent but identify particular areas to focus on		
Focus on topics which seem difficult		
Focus on topics which seem interesting or easy		
Look at previous exam papers to identify what might crop up		
Ask the lecturer what is critical and likely to crop up		
Memorise as much factual information as possible		
Focus on the main principles/concepts and also the factual information which provides evidence for them		
Base your selection on the format of the exam (eg <i>will you only have to answer three long questions on three topics or 50 short questions on a wide range of topics?</i>)		
Others. Please specify		

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In thinking about what will prepare you well, you could consider:

- what is likely to come up in the exam
- what will get good marks (eg *factual information or understanding principles and concepts*) – the assessment criteria
- how much time you have to revise
- what the exam format is (eg *if you need to answer three long questions on three topics, you will need to know those three topics in depth; 50 short questions mean you may need to cover a broader range of material, but perhaps in less depth*).

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See the revision plan in Section 6.3

5 What revision techniques can you use?

5.1 What helps people remember?

The best revision techniques are active. Just reading through notes is insufficient to make you remember them. Even if you could recite them, it is unlikely to be enough. In university/college you rarely have to just repeat information in an exam, you also need to demonstrate you can use it in some way.

People are more likely to remember something if:

- **it is relevant to them.** How can you make the material more relevant to you? (eg see revision technique (e) below)
- **it is associated with something else** (just as we remember a person's name by remembering where we met) (eg see revision techniques (f), (h) below)
- **they remember things in sequence**, where one thing triggers the next element (like an actor's/actress' cue) (eg see revision technique (k) below)
- **they do something with the information.** All the following suggestions involve actively doing something.

5.2 Suggestions for revision techniques

You could consider which of the following revision techniques are best suited to the subject and form of the exam, as well as to your own way of working.

- a) Before you start revising, sort out your material for each subject, so you know how much and what material you have.
- b) Keep notes and other materials well organised. Go through your material each week, making notes clearer, putting in headings, checking on what you don't understand. Use coloured/highlighting pens for different topics, or coloured dividers in files. See the SkillPack on 'Note Taking' for ideas on how to improve your notes.
- c) Try to identify the central questions/issues at the heart of each subject and plan how you would answer them.
- d) Test yourself. Look at some material and then jot down what you can recall. Go back to the original material and see what you remembered.

Look at some material and write questions on it. Leave it for a few days, then try to answer the questions and 'mark' yourself.

- e) When you recall your material, try to link a topic with other elements on your course, rather than revising as if the subjects are unrelated. Produce a card for each topic with notes about other topics it refers to.



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- f) Use patterns. Write a theme word on a page and connect it through lines to related topics. This can be more memorable than a list because it has visual impact. You can practise reproducing it from memory and if an exam question contains one of the words in the pattern you could reproduce the image in rough as a starting point.
- g) Look at a section of the material and jot down a summary of the main points. Keep the summaries to use as a brief reminder.
- h) Flash cards. Read your notes, make summaries for each topic and then further reduce them to a few words on a card. As the exam approaches reading through the flash cards can serve as a quick reminder.
- i) Work with a friend. Test each other or summarise a topic you have just revised for each other. Explain a difficult concept to a friend and check s/he understands what you mean. Discuss what questions might crop up and how you might answer them.
- j) If you don't understand your material when you come to revise, clarify it. Use a learning centre/library. Ask friends, the lecturer or tutor.
- k) For science, technology or maths, go over tutorial sheets/assignments and work again through the calculations/problems, to ensure you understand each stage and can use the techniques.
- l) Make lists (eg of important sequences, vital points, steps in a process).
- m) Practise in advance. Think of likely questions and make outlines answers. Try to answer previous papers in the time allowed.
- n) Tape record information and listen to it while driving or cooking.
- o) Ask friends how they revise. They may have useful suggestions.
- p) How long can you concentrate for? Build in breaks. Revise different subjects in one day.
- q) Avoid distractions. Being tired or hungry can affect you. If you are distracted by thoughts (eg *what to have for tea*), write it down and look at it later. If your mind wanders you may need to stop for a while.
- r) Identify the environment you work best in (eg *quiet/warm/cold/alone*). Where could you work?
- r) Revising is hard work. Give yourself treats.

Which of these revision techniques would work well for your subject, the format of your exam and for you personally?

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You could note below the ideas which you intend to use.



6 Planning your revision

6.1 How much time have you got to revise?

Many people put off revising and panic when they realise time is running out. Panic can mean you think less clearly and it interferes with memory. Identify what you could do in advance. For example:

2 months in advance	<i>eg sort out notes, ensuring that they are understandable</i>
1 month in advance	<i>eg make summaries of notes</i>
1 week in advance	<i>eg test self</i>
1 day in advance	<i>eg use flash cards</i>

6.2 Make a plan

You are expected at university/college to be responsible for your own learning. You will need to decide for yourself what to revise, how and when. You may receive very little direction about this. One of the aims of Further and Higher Education is to encourage students to be independent.

A plan might include what you are going to revise, how and when. Listing the topics you need to revise within each subject/unit means you can tick them off as you go along. You could produce a day by day revision timetable. A plan can:

- indicate if you are spending too much time on one subject
- alert you to what still needs to be done
- be a psychological boost by showing what you have already done.

What do you need to allow for in your plan?



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Will you need to consider:



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Personal factors	Your notes
revision for other exams at the same time?	
paid work?	
family commitments, relationships, friends?	
possible illness?	
not understanding material?	
your need to take exercise?	
how much sleep you need?	
your need for leisure activities and fun?	
Others? Please list	

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Will you need to consider:



External factors	Your notes
not being able to get hold of lecturers or other specialists?	
equipment breaking (eg computers, cars)?	
books not being available?	
the exam format?	
any particular techniques associated with your subject?	
Others? Please list	

You are more likely to cope with pressure if you are physically fit and keep things in perspective – look at the Starter Level SkillPack on 'Coping with Pressure'.

6.3 Revision plan

- What are your priority areas to revise? Mark these on your plan.
- Check your plan regularly, to see how well you are doing. You may need to change it (eg *for something unexpected, revision takes longer*).
- You could check with others how you are progressing. Could anyone help you stick to your plan? Could anyone give you feedback?

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Subject/what to revise	
Revision techniques	
Support/resources needed	
By when?	
Progress/notes of further action needed	

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7 Taking exams

7.1 Your responses in exams

Think about the last exam you sat.



How did you spend the first 10 minutes of it? What did you do?

How did you feel during the first 10 minutes?

What did you do during the middle part of the exam?

What did you do during the last 10 minutes?

How did you feel during and at the end of the exam?

Section 8 will help you focus on what you can do to build on strengths and improve on weaker areas.

7.2 Types of examinations

An unseen exam

This is any exam where you do not know what it will contain in advance. Examples might be:

- **essays/problems.** Usually these require you to apply your knowledge to a particular situation (eg *to answer a particular problem or to present an argument from a particular standpoint*).
- **short answer questions.** Here you are given a number of questions which often require factual knowledge.

Tip. It may be best not to waste time on those you cannot answer. Answer those you can and return to the rest if you have time. Avoid wasting time by giving more information than is asked for. If there are only 2 marks for an answer you won't get any more by writing more.

- **multiple choice.** Here you have to choose between several given answers.

Tip. Answer those you are sure of and return to those which require more thought.

- **phase tests.** These are short tests of usually no more than an hour. They test that students have grasped the essential elements of a specific and small section of material (ie that covered in one 'phase' of the course).

A seen exam

This is where you are given material or questions in advance. The focus is less on remembering information and more on what you do with it (eg *analyse it, present arguments etc*). Examples might be:

- **open book exams.** Here you can take material into the exam.
- **take away.** You may be given a question in advance, to complete and return by a given date, or you may be given a question to prepare in advance but answer it under exam conditions (eg *you are given a case study in advance, on which you answer questions in an exam room, within a time limit*).

8 Exam techniques

The following cover a range of exam techniques, some of which will be reminders of what you already do, while others will be new to you.

Before the exam

- a) If you have a disability which may make it difficult for you to perform well in an exam, you need to discuss any special arrangements with your tutor in advance, eg *Braille or large print exam papers can be made available.*
- b) Arrive at the exam in plenty of time to avoid panicking. On arrival, will it help to chat to others, or will this make you feel anxious? If so wait outside until it is time to go in.

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- c) Make a list of what you will take into the exam (eg *calculator, spare batteries, pens, pencils etc*). Check in advance what is allowed
- d) If you are used to short exams, like phase tests, and you now face a long exam (eg *3 hours*), think what you will need to do differently (eg *in a long exam you may need to spend more time planning at the start*).

Choosing questions to answer

- e) Spend 5 minutes reading the exam paper, deciding which questions to answer. Make sure you answer the correct number of questions. (If you only answer three instead of four, for example, you automatically lose 25%.)
- f) What do the questions mean? Underline the key words in each question to identify exactly what is being asked, eg:
- *compare/contrast* (implies looking at two or more different perspectives)
 - *evaluate* (implies offering criticisms or making judgements)
 - *analyse* (implies asking why, looking at two underlying factors)
 - *explain* (implies laying out each stage in a process or argument or each aspect of an object in a logical way).

A common reason for losing marks is not answering the question asked. You will not get credit for an excellent, but irrelevant answer. It is easy to misread things if you are nervous, and it can help to put the question into your own words.

- g) Try to avoid questions which contain a word or phrase that you don't understand. If you guess wrongly you may get few marks.

Planning and monitoring time

- h) Decide how long you will give to each question, then monitor your timekeeping. Allow 10 minutes at the end for checking.
- i) Spend a few minutes planning your answers. Jot down notes and then cross them out, so the examiner knows not to assess them. You may get better marks for coherent and logical arguments than a list of ideas on a topic.
- j) The first 50% of marks for a question are easiest to obtain. The next 25% are harder. The last 25% are very difficult to achieve. If you are running out of time two half answers may be worth more than one whole.

$$\text{eg } 15/25 + 15/25 + 12/25 + 10/25$$

is better than

$$20/25 + 18/25 + 10/25 + 1/25$$

If you do run out of the time you have allocated for a question, jot down in rough notes the main points you still need to include while they are fresh in your mind and move on to the next question. If you have time you can return to it.

- k) You could plan your answers to subsequent questions after you have finished your first answer. At this stage you are over the initial tension of the exam, but you still have time for planning.



- l) Spend the last 10 minutes checking your work (eg *how you have numbered your answers, spelling, handwriting, ensuring that all the steps have been shown in a calculation etc*).

Writing answers

- m) For an essay type answer, write a strong introductory paragraph showing that you understand the question, and a strong last paragraph where you draw conclusions, returning to the question. This will demonstrate to the examiner that your answer is purposeful and relevant.
- n) Write clearly! A model answer will gain no marks if the examiner cannot read it. Examiners are influenced by how well work is presented (imagine marking 100 exam scripts!). Make sure you number your answers correctly, especially if you do them out of sequence.
- o) At university/college, answers are expected to show a rigorous understanding of the subject. Avoid unsupported opinions and include evidence to demonstrate your points. Unless specified, this will usually not mean personal experiences, but rather evidence from research or from the literature on the subject.
- p) Quantity will not gain marks. It is more important to make relevant points than to include padding, which takes valuable time to produce without improving your grade. If you think you have covered all the main points in an answer, move on.

9 Improving your revision and exam techniques

After the exam, it should help to ask yourself if you did as well as possible and what affected the outcome. This can be the start of your preparation for your next exam.



In what way was your exam performance affected by:
what you revised?
how you revised?
how you used your time (eg <i>when you started revising, effectiveness of your plan</i>)?
what you did in the actual exam? How (eg <i>not doing a plan, waffling</i>)?
What else influenced it?

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What can you do to improve your skills? You could refer back to the action plan below when you are revising and preparing for another exam.



What do I need to improve?	Action I could take	Resources/ support needed	By when?

10 References and bibliography

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10.1 Student skills product list

Having worked through this SkillPack you might like to know that similar structured, straightforward guidance is also available on the following topics:

- Identifying Strengths and Improving Skills
- Organising Yourself and Your Time
- Note Taking
- Gathering and Using Information
- Critical Analysis
- Essay Writing
- Report Writing
- Oral Presentation
- Visual Communication
- Solving Problems
- Group Work
- Seminars, Group Tutorials and Meetings
- Negotiating and Assertiveness
- Coping with Pressure
- Improving Your Learning
- Reflecting on Your Experience
- Action Planning

The Student Skills Guide Second Edition

All of the SkillPacks listed above are gathered together and are available as a paperback workbook (0 566 08430 9).

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