

If you fail to prepare.....

..... then you should prepare to **FAIL!**



Every student realises just how difficult it is to balance learning the sheer volume of information in limited time period along with the pressures of sitting exams where so much depends on the results. Although few students recognise that their revision is inadequate.

Being able to reflect on your approach to revision is essential, critiquing your methods honestly, will enable you to view your strengths and weaknesses and enable you to improve how you prepare for your exams.

Here are 12 questions to ask yourself about your revision, which will help you reflect on your approach and allow you to make the necessary changes to maximise your chances of success.

## 1. Have you spent enough time revising?

Students generally do not reach their full potential in examinations primarily because they have simply have not spent enough time revising over the content.

You must not allow yourself to fall into this obvious time trap. You can prevent yourself from running out of revision time by;

**a) Creating a revision timetable** - The forward planning of how many hours you have available per week for each exam will allow you to divide up the information you have to learn into chunks that will enable you plan effectively so that you can cover everything for your exam. It also allows you to gauge roughly how much time you to revise.

For help designing a revision timetable see our '12 tips for creating a successful revision timetable'

**b) Starting earlier** - There is no time like the present. Putting off starting your revision will not make the task go away. In fact you will make the effort of revision much more difficult. The longer you leave it the less time you will have to revise.

**c) Small steps** - Often the idea of revising is worse than the actual revision itself. By just making a start, even if it is only organising you notes or creating a revision timetable, you have got the ball rolling. This makes the visualisation of the task much less daunting.

Starting your revision early, will give you an edge on all the other candidates that are taking your exam and it will also allow you plenty of time to discuss areas of poor understanding with your teacher with enough time afterwards to learn the information.

## 2. Does your revision only consist of reading over notes?

Students are rarely taught how to revise, or in fact given any strategies on what successful revision should incorporate. A common strategy of revision by students is just reading over the textbook and/or class notes. Students generally use this strategy as they rationalise that it is successful for GCSE and A-Level exams because it was a successful technique in their earlier years at school when revising for class tests.

Firstly, GCSE and A-Level exams will require a lot more effort from students than class end of unit or end of year tests as they examine a much broader knowledge base. It is not acceptable to believe that a strategy that has worked to date will continue to work when the breadth and depth of what is being examined has increased greatly.

Secondly, reading over the information alone does not create strong connections between neurons, and therefore memory. You must work with the information if you want to build connections quickly that are long lasting. You can actively work with the information by creating mind maps, spider diagrams, writing out revision notes from memory, drawing, labeling and annotating diagrams to name just a few.

## 3. Does your revision consist of writing out neat revision notes and then not using them to write out over and over again?

How many of you actually evaluate your revision, asking yourself 'Is the method of how I am revising helping me learn this information?'

Many students believe that more time revising equals more revision done. This is simply not the case. Yes! More time revising is essential but only if the method of revision is effective.

Spending time creating neat, tidy revision notes with lots of labeled and annotated diagrams is essential for success, but more importantly it is what you do with these notes that are important.

It is the error of taking the path of least resistance. A lot of students will spend hours creating revision notes, which if not used correctly are no better than simply reading over your textbook or class notes. Making revision notes allows students to feel that they are making progress as the notes that they create can be misinterpreted as a measure of how much revision they have done. This is the belief that the many hours spent on this activity must have been useful as they were carrying out work on the subject's information and have produced something to show for the hours slaving away. The reality is however, students have not performed any task that will help them remember the information.

Students should create revision notes, but more importantly, once they are created, students should be writing them out over and over again on rough pieces of paper to actively learn the facts to memory.

## 4. Do you fail to read the question?

A lot of students complain of having poor exam technique, when the reality is that the students are not reading the question.

At GCSE and A-Level exam questions will not ask you a question in an obvious way. This is stressful and a challenge for the students mind. The student then makes a split second choice;

- a) Answer the question being asked or
- b) Substitute the question in their mind for a very similar but easier to answer question.

This happens almost instantly in the students mind and it is very energy demanding to be vigilant against it. It is essential that you do not fall into this trap and below is a simple effective technique that will help you guard against misreading the question.

Firstly, you read the question through once, then a read the question a second time highlighting the command and key words watching out for describe, explain, suggest, how, what and why, and finally read the question a third time emphasising in your mind the keywords and command words.

Spending time working through past exam papers is an essential practice, be vigilant that you do not assume that the exam question in your actual exam is asking the same as a similar exam question that you have already worked through in preparation.

## 5. Have you spent enough time working through past paper questions?



Would you ever dream of attempting your driving test, having only read the theory books and created revision notes without ever sitting in a car with an instructor?

The answer I am sure you all come to is NO! An essential part of success is exposing yourself to scenarios that will enable you to get a feel for the exam questions and the conditions under which you will be tested.

It is essential that you apply the same logic when revising for your exams.

The exam boards for every subject will post past exam papers and mark schemes on their websites. You can visit these pages and download the relevant papers. These are a great way of testing your knowledge and you can also get a sense of what level you are currently performing at.

## DO'S and DON'TS of using past paper questions

### DO'S

- Do make sure you complete each question under time conditions. Whether you are completing an entire exam paper or just a question, it is important that you adhere to the time constraint so you can fine tune your timings as well as your exam technique.
- Do be tough on yourself with the marking. Giving yourself the benefit of the doubt when marking your answers will inflate your result and will lead to disappointment when results day comes around.
- Do consider going through the answers in small groups so that you can discuss the marking point.

### DON'TS

- Don't look at the mark scheme until you have given the question your best effort. In fact if you do not know how to answer the question you are better to revise again the content that the question is targeting and then try the question again before turning to the mark scheme. Once you have looked at the mark scheme it is highly likely that you will remember some of the marking points or at the very least you will remove the challenge of knowing what the question is asking.
- Don't work through questions in small groups. You will be sitting the exam by yourself so you should get used to the idea of having to rely on your own knowledge.

## 6. Have you updated your revision notes with marking points from mark schemes?

As discussed previously, going through past paper questions is an excellent way of getting a feel for what your exam will be like, building up exam technique and also testing your current subject knowledge.

Most students, who practice with past exam papers, will complete the questions, mark their answers and then move on. Top students will go one step further, when looking through the marking points will question why a mark was given for each piece of information, and if they come across any marking point that they do not have in their revision notes, they will add the marking point to their revision notes so they will not miss that mark in future exam questions.

## 7. Do you believe that understanding the content is the same as knowing the content?



This is probably the biggest stumbling block for students. It is all too easy to believe that understanding the subject content is the same as knowing the subject content. Let me use this simple analogy to highlight this point.

An actor/actress is handed a script for a play, they read over and over the lines until they are fairly confident they know the story and have a good grasp on their character and how they should be played. They are able to discuss the play with the director and fellow actors/actresses. They feel prepared.

On the first night of the performance all is set, there are no scripts to read from and all the hard work is cumulating on tonight's performance. The cue is given and the actor/actress walks onto the stage.

..... silence.....

The actor/actress is speechless. How can this be they think, I have read over and over the lines, I was able to talk about the play to the director and my fellow actors/actresses, I even know exactly how to play my character.

What has happened?

The actor/actress has only familiarised themselves with the content of the script, they were able to discuss general details, they were able to follow what was going on, but they haven't sat down and actively worked with the lines, saying them out loud, writing them out, spending time to engage with the content, and recording the lines to memory. They have made the common mistake.

Understanding is NOT the same as knowing. Your exams expect you to know the details, not simply be able to follow them.

- Understanding is being able to follow a textbook, your teacher or your notes.
- Knowing is the ability to recall this detailed information without any support.

## 8. Do you use a specification to ensure you have covered all of the information needed for the exam?

Your teacher and your school should ensure that they progress you through the content allocating sufficient time for completing the entire specification. However, it is very important for you to remember that these are YOUR examinations. It is very important that you take on the responsibility of ensuring that you have covered the entire specification, rather than leaving it up to your teacher alone.

The specification is posted on exam board websites and it lists all the content that you will be examined on. You should use this as a checklist to make sure you have revision notes on all the points and also as a checklist to ensure that you have covered everything in your revision.

## 9. Do you only learn the general points?

Students do not achieve to the level that they hope because they only learn the general details, while the examiner will award marks for the fine details.

In my classes students often say 'Do we need to know how to spell that term?' or 'I didn't think that we needed to know that!' Let me make this clear. If the information is asked on the specification then you need to know it.

To give this a bit of gravity. When you complete your exams (A-Levels) you will be probably be going off to carry out further studying at University. All A-levels

- Your A-levels will gain you access to study at the top Institution around the world
- Your A-Level results will start you on the road to careers such as medicine, pharmacy and dentistry to name a few where diagnoses, which if lacked detail would end with serious consequence.
- Or prescriptions where there where spelling mistakes would end up with jail sentences and fatalities.

I could go on .....So, do you think that the examiners are being unfair expecting you to memorise the fine details now?

You need to memorise the details and be able to spell the terminology correctly, so just get your head down and LEARN THEM!

## 10. Do you believe that the time allocated in exams is for writing purposes only?

You must start viewing exams as puzzles that need time allocated to understanding the question asked before writing your answer. On asking my classes what they thought time in an exam was allocated almost all students reported that they believed that time in exams was for solely writing their answers. This shocked me as it was clear how little attention students paid to the actual exam question. Although I have not done a wider study I would confidently state that I would say that the majority of students would believe that time is weighted for answering questions also.

If you believe that you do not fall into this category, let me say that although you would not believe it the odds are that you do.

It is essential that you must change how you view examinations, if you want to make improvements to your results. You must think of exam questions as puzzles that must first be given appropriate amount of time to understand before putting pen to paper. When you have understood the question and come up with the correct answer the writing part should be relatively quick and easy.

Viewing exams this way you are more likely not to misinterpret the question, not to drift off topic, Be able to put a sound answer even if you are unsure, be able to gain all marks available, be able to interpret graphs and tables.

Change how you view exams.

## 11. Are you unwilling to change your revision approach?

If you are unwilling to change your revision approach from that which you have used for previous exams. You must recognise that if these old methods have not worked then repeating them will not bring you anymore success.

I'll leave you with a quote of one of the greatest minds the world has known, so if you won't listen to me then maybe you will take notice of him.



Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

Albert Einstein (1879-1955)