The quick and easy guide to...

How to Stop Panicking and Start Learning at School and University

Eileen Tracy

Some good news to start

If you're reading this guide because you're anxious about your work, let me start by reassuring you that you can stop feeling so stressed, and quickly.

Most frequently, school pupils and university students describe the following difficulties, which cause them anything from mild to extreme anxiety:

- **I feel I've left it all too late**
- **Other people get their reading done/organise their work/revise/concentrate/sit exams (etc) and I feel I'm the only one struggling**
- **I work hard but don't get enough reward for my effort**
- **I just keep panicking all the time**
- **I can't even look at my books**
- **I failed last time and I'm worried I'll fail again**
- **I can't sleep**

These and other study problems are normal and can be resolved: you can do it too.

To this effect, Chapter 1 helps you to develop some incredibly useful study priorities to boost your work and save you enormous amounts of time.

Chapter 2 scrutinises some wide-spread beliefs about the value of good grades, helping you to develop a very level-headed, sanguine approach to assessments and exams… because if you're not careful, these challenges can often make your head spin with unnecessary worry.

And finally, Chapter 3 shows you a few strategies for coping when all logic fails.

1 Study priorities

As you'll see, good study practice is not about trying to attain perfection, but more about adopting a series of strategic short-cuts. If your priority was ever to try and learn everything on your syllabus by rote, that will have changed by the time you finish reading this chapter.

USE STUDY SKILLS

Many people think they sound a bit dull, and rather hard to learn, but study skills are a lively lot of techniques, ranging from simple time management strategies to more complex memory tools. It's thought that students who learn in conventional ways use only the left, logical side of their brain; many study skills engage the right side of your brain through use of colour, drawing and story-telling – with the result that they help you to double your brain power.

Not only do study skills enliven your work, they can give you an extraordinarily wonderful sense that you are at last progressing in your work. They also boost grades.

Many of these skills are surprisingly quick and easy to learn. For instance, you can learn to double your reading speed in just fifteen minutes. Here is a shortlist of some popular skills:

Timetabling and time management

The aim of timetabling is balance time off with time working, and to spread your workload so that you meet deadlines without stress.

Essay planning

With a little technique, you can write essays that are well introduced, well concluded and that flow properly.

Speedreading

Speedreading means reading faster and increasing intake as you go. Most people imagine that in order to understand the content of what you read, you need to go slowly. In fact the opposite is the case.

Keywording

Keywording enables you to summarise quickly as you read, saving you the effort of re-reading your texts.

Mnemonics

Mnemonics are memory tricks that help you remember:

- Lists of key words (in this way you can remember entire chapters)
- Facts and figures
- Dates

Most mnemonics are quick to learn and enjoyable to apply.

Mindmapping

This is the speedy version of writing index cards. It's a way of summarising your notes but in drawing form – a very memorable and colourful way to revise.

It's also a powerful brainstorming and essay-planning tool.

Exam technique

There are a number of ways in which you can boost your chances of success in an exam, be it an oral presentation, an essay exam or a multiple choice exam. Exam technique consists of time management skills and point-scoring skills.

Reading this list may have given you a few ideas of ways in which you could make your work easier and more effective. As you can imagine, it's beyond the scope of this guide to teach these study skills: they fill the pages of my book

The Student's Guide to Exam Success. You can also find out more on my website or on the Internet. And read on: the pages that follow offer you some foundational learning theory that may revolutionise the way you set about learning and preparing for your exams. And the good news is that exam preparation may not be as hard as you think – as Adrian taught me.

Adrian's tip

Who was Adrian? Adrian was a fellow student of mine at Oxford University. He was academically gifted. Nonchalantly, he announced to me one day, as he basked in glorious sunshine, that he was sure to get a First in his oncoming Finals exams. (He did). When he had finished his soliloquy, he asked me how my own revision was going. I was about to take my first year exams. I told him I'd fallen so far behind that I had given up trying to work. Trying to match his cool, I explained that I was heading for certain failure but that I didn't care.

At university, conversations about failure are rife and many people like to boast about how little work they've done. Their declarations of impending disaster aren't usually taken seriously – I'm sure you've noticed how often those students who advertise that they have appalling work habits and dire prospects get curiously good grades. An enormous amount of posing goes on, many students intent on underplaying the time spent at their desks in order to make their results seem more impressive.

However, I was telling the truth. I hadn't done enough work and there's no doubt that I was jeopardising my university career. Failing my first year exams meant doing autumn resits, or else dropping out.

I expected Adrian to crack a joke and carry on sunning himself, but instead he looked at me quite carefully. "Eileen, how much time have you got left before your exams?"

"I've got a week," I said. "You see, it's quite hopeless." And I waited for him to confirm that I was doomed.

That's when Adrian passed on his little study gem, which I'm now passing on to you:

"You can do a lot of useful work in a week."

YOU CAN DO A LOT OF USEFUL WORK IN A WEEK

After thanking Adrian, I went the library. I drew up a loose revision plan. I prioritised certain topics based on the information I got from my syllabus and from past exam papers. And then I went about learning the most important aspects of that. I didn't work more than four, maybe six hours a day. Once I started working, I felt more relaxed. It was a good week. And I passed into the second year.

The key concept that I want to convey to you is about the value of **useful** work. Notice how much people admire hard work, as if it bore intrinsic rewards – it doesn't. The study advice that follows will enable you to learn effectively, not hard. You may have to work hard at times, but this shouldn't be the rule. As a rule, the more effectively you work, the less time you'll spend at your desk. You too can bask in the sun, even just before your exams.

But in order to do that, you need to know a few simple facts about the way your mind works. This is because you may be one of many students who makes things harder for yourself, working too much, for too little reward, out of ignorance – not knowing how to use your brain.

Fortunately, you're about to discover how easy it is to redress this problem.

40 MINUTE STUDY BURSTS

Luisa is a 35-year old studying Business at university. She complains: "My whole life is dedicated to my BA. I work full-time, then study. I've taken holidays from work to study. I've lost my social life."

It's difficult to juggle study with other pursuits – no argument there. But still, Luisa could be working less hard if she knew this:

After 40 minutes' study, concentration decreases measurably.

Her main study mistake is to treat breaks as an unaffordable luxury. This means she's wasting hours of her time studying unproductively, without realising it. Students who work in this wasteful way often complain, "I worked hours last night but I've forgotten most of what I learnt."

This is extremely stressful and can make students cry with frustration. But it's easily remedied. To maximise her intake of information, Luisa should simply switch to **40-minute study bursts punctuated with short breaks.**

Breaks also help by creating beginnings and endings, which we remember much better than all the stuffing in the middle.

This strategy can double or triple your intake of information.

It doesn't matter if you take a break when you're in the middle of something. In fact, leaving your work incomplete will make it easier for you to go back to it after your break. Psychologically, it's easier just to finish something off than it is to start a whole new topic. In fact, I recommend that you take a break at an interesting point, as this will motivate you to carry on afterwards.

5 REVIEWS

After each break, Luisa should review earlier material for a few minutes. Why? Because:

To maintain permanently high recall, material needs to be reviewed five times at increasing intervals of time.

Here's a reviewing guideline:

WHEN TO REVIEW WHAT YOU'VE LEARNT

1. **Review your material shortly after learning it – in other words, after a break.**
2. **Review it a second time after a day.**
3. **Review it a third time after a week.**
4. **Review it a fourth time after a month.**

5. Review it a fifth time after a term.

The last, fifth review will ensure that the material goes into your long-term memory.

These reviews are brief, occupying at most about 10 minutes.

These five 10-minute efforts will save you hours of re-learning.

It's not hard to organise these reviews – don't worry that you'll never be organised enough to implement them. The timings are flexible: if you're a few hours late for your first revision, a day over the second, a week over the third, a month over the fourth or a term over the fifth, it won't matter much. Yes, there'll be a penalty, but it won't be huge – you may just have a little more re-learning to do, re-learning that you'd otherwise been able to avoid.

You may not even need to open your files to do these reviews: with this system, the information may be so present in your mind that you may find you can just run it through your head at the appropriate intervals. So really it's very easy and you'll work out your own approach once you see how effective the method is.

It's not useful, and may even be counterproductive, to revise in between these five reviews. Our brains process material when we take breaks and also in our sleep. So don't keep trying to test yourself during the intervals as the time is better spent relaxing.

So far we've looked at how to space out your learning and your revision. That will make a huge difference. The next basic study tip has to do with the actual quality of your revision – the method by which you try to take in information.

MAKE IT ACTIVE

There's a difference – an important difference – between active and passive revision. Active revision engages your brain. Passive revision doesn't. Unfortunately many students are deeply attracted to doing passive revision

precisely because it doesn't mean having to think. It just assuages their guilt because passive revision chains people to their desks. Sadly, they're not busy doing anything very useful.

Passive revision will always let you down in an exam.

What's passive revision? Anything that's secretarial. For instance:

- Re-reading your notes
- Highlighting your notes
- Copying out your notes (e.g. onto the computer)

These activities can convince you that you're doing useful work. But once you get to the exam, you may discover that you just can't remember your material. Why not? Because your revision didn't include reproducing and testing your knowledge. This is why students complain, "I went blank in the exam". There's nothing wrong with their memory, but their revision methodology is all wrong.

Active revision involves reproducing, usually in summary, what you've learnt.

EXAMPLES OF ACTIVE REVISION
Writing index cards summarising your notes
Drawing up mindmaps
Sketching out what you see in your mind's eye
Writing out key word summaries in the margin of your notes
Reducing your notes to a page of A4
Teaching your material to someone (even the cat)
Summarising out loud what you've just learnt
Creating exam questions out of your notes
Answering past paper questions
Drawing up essay plans to exam questions in timed conditions

These active strategies are often resisted by students because they involve real thinking and can therefore be quite challenging. It's astonishing but true that many students avoid doing past papers altogether for fear of facing the reality of the exam. If they happen to come across a past paper, they push it away nervously – 'I'll deal with that in the exam,' is a common escapist rationalisation.

But answering past paper questions is one of the most active forms of revision that you can do. It trains you in the art of turning your knowledge into a point-scoring format. It's a dress rehearsal, if you like.

You may need a few dress rehearsals to prepare yourself for the exam. Exam preparation means practising the following four exam skills:

1. **Interpreting the question correctly.** It's worth practising paraphrasing exam questions so that you put in your own words what you think they mean. You also need to know the meaning of standard question instructions like 'Discuss' or 'Compare'. These aren't 'fancy terms' meant to 'confuse' you, as students often grumble. On the contrary, they indicate specific tasks that the examiner wants you to carry out. You can download my *Quick and Easy Guide to Understanding Question Instructions in Assignments and Exams* from my website.
2. **Planning your answers in timed conditions.** Planning mustn't be skipped, particularly in exam conditions where it's important that your answer is tailored to the question. You can't just think as you write, as you risk losing your sense of purpose and your train of thought.
3. **Writing out your answers in timed conditions.** This gives you an idea of how best to revise as you'll see how much or how little writing you can produce within the exam time limit. Usually it's much less than you imagine, which is good news as it means your revision doesn't have to go into all kinds of unnecessary detail (as I'll explain next).
4. **Checking your answers effectively.** You need to practise looking at your script from the examiner's point of view. Is it legible? Does it make

sense? Are facts and figures correct? Good checking can add points to your answer. Integrate checking into your revision and you'll find that you start to develop a mental checklist of your most typical mistakes.

THINK 'MARMITE'

Marmite is famous for the fact that 'a little goes a long way'. When you spread Marmite on your toast you don't need a lot. If you spread it carefully, you'll get a good result. The same is true of learning: a little can go a long way.

Firstly, as I've mentioned, once you're in the exam, you don't have as much time to write as you think. Try working out your exam timings now and you'll see how little opportunity you have to show off the erudition you hoped to acquire through elaborate revision. For the sake of argument, you have a 3-hour essay paper with 3 questions. That's only just over half an hour's writing per question. Why? Well, deduct 10 minutes from your 3 hours to read the paper and make your question selection; deduct another 15 minutes to check all your answers; deduct 5 minutes spent losing concentration and going blank (normal in exam conditions by the way and remedied by focusing on your breathing). That leaves 150 minutes. Subtract at least 30 minutes planning time (I'm allowing a minimum of 10 minutes' planning per question because planning is so important in an exam). Total writing time left: 120 minutes, in other words 40 minutes per question. Max. That's time to cover the basics and not much more.

Secondly, you can never know everything about a subject, and the higher you go in your education, the more you'll see that exams are about making the most of what you know. Analysis, for instance, is as important as fact.

Remember too that the more you know, the more you'll realise you don't know! There comes a point when you have to accept defeat and abandon your revision. It will never be finished. Your revision mustn't be about accumulating endless knowledge. Adopt instead two simple aims:

1. **To know enough about your subject.** You possibly know enough already to answer many exam questions very well. Instead of making

yourself panic by asking yourself, 'How much History do I know?' be more specific: 'What do I know about the Russian Revolution?'. If you still draw a blank, narrow the question down further: 'What do I know about the causes of the Russian Revolution?' until the answers start to flow.

2. **To convey what you do know in a point-scoring format.** That's where the exam practice that I recommended earlier comes in. As a rule of thumb, start doing exam practice (in the form of timed essay plans) before you feel quite ready for it. You may be pleasantly surprised.

In short:

'MARMITE' ADVICE

Gear your revision towards making the most of what you know by developing good exam technique.

That means developing your ability to plan, analyse and explain, and making educated guesses where necessary.

Time spent practising this is more useful than time spent swotting up on facts, quotes and figures. Unless you know how to explain them and analyse them effectively, facts, quotes and figures don't necessarily score points.

This is why the proverbial swots don't do well in exams. They learn everything, indiscriminately. Then, when they get to the exam, they try to dump the mass of information in their heads onto paper. They may distort questions so that they can splurge out everything they've revised, never mind its relevance. They may also cram their answer with facts, figures and theories, at the expense of argument, explanation and analysis. Having accumulated lots of knowledge, the temptation to answer everything but the question can be irresistible! And indeed…

Examiners' top complaint is that students don't answer the question.

Conversely, students who don't revise very much for their exams can do surprisingly well. Because they can't rely on very much stored knowledge, their only option is to **think** about the topic. This often produces relevant, well argued, logically ordered, imaginative responses, rich in analysis.

So stop accumulating lots of knowledge. Your hard work may not bring you any reward. Aim instead to learn actively, which includes doing past paper practice. Prioritise wherever possible, and use the strategies I've outlined to help you learn some carefully selected material fast and efficiently. This will give you more free time too.

A note about free time: it is not wasted time. On the contrary, it has three major benefits:

1. Sleeping and breaks enable you to consolidate your learning on an unconscious level (as mentioned earlier). While you are taking time off, your brain continues sorting and saving.
2. Sleeping is good for your brain: people who are deprived of the recommended eight hours' sleep lose significant IQ points. (My *Quick and Easy Guide to a Better University Brain* goes into some depth on the issue of sleep, IQ and sleeping pills.)
3. Breaks keep your spirits up.

Now that you know how to stay mentally alert, keep your concentration going, remember what you've learnt, and tailor your revision to score points in the exam… are you still feeling anxious? If the answer to that is 'yes', it's time to address another key issue.

2 Exploding myths about grades

The aim of this chapter is not to discourage you from getting good results. On the contrary, it's to unlock your potential by removing the pressure you feel to perform. In small doses, pressure can motivate people. But in larger doses, it starts to destroy their capacity to flourish. In the words of Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, "Stress makes people stupid". I intend to remove as much of your stress as I can in these pages in order to raise your IQ.

THE PRESSURE COOKER

If you're in school, at college or at university, you're in a grade-producing pressure cooker. Our educational environment is overly preoccupied about good grades. This anxiety comes from all sides. The government keeps telling us that it's churning out better SAT, GCSE, AS, A level and university results every year. That's because the government wants to be re-elected by anxious parents. Anxious parents fret about their children's results. That's because they keep hearing (partly from government) that good results are essential for survival. Schools and universities pressurise students to 'work hard'. That's because they themselves are under financial pressure to produce ever-increasingly good results.

State schools used to be relatively immune from all this pressure – it used to be only private schools that needed to churn out good grades in order to keep attracting fee-paying students. But ever since the introduction of SATs, state schools have been placed under extraordinary pressure to perform – to the point where it is commonplace for some headteachers to cheat for fear of not doing well on league tables – either by leaking out questions to pupils or by altering their answers. The pressure to produce results comes from high up: a colleague of mine who marked SAT papers in the late 1990s told me that her department had been sent a government memo instructing markers to upgrade

all Level 4 results to Level 5. Another colleague who was headteacher of a small primary school and who considered SATs a totally pointless exercise, admitted nonetheless to putting relentless pressure on her school pupils to swot for them: “You see, if we don’t perform well in SATs, we lose funding and the school could be closed down’.

And now universities, like schools, are also at ever-increasing risk of losing government funding. They too need to keep churning out good scores in order to survive. So the pressure to perform starts from the very first years of schooling and continues unabated until the last years of university. It’s an anxiety passed down even by thoughtful people like my two colleagues who disagreed with the system yet complied.

MOTIVATIONAL TACTICS

Like it or not, you too are a product of this fear-ridden system. You too have probably been told by a parent, teacher or tutor to work hard ‘or else’. That’s simply an attempt to motivate you by use of threat. Some people use emotional blackmail and tell you that if you don’t get a certain result, you’ll be letting other people down. Another motivational tactic is to give you an inferiority complex if you fail to better a rival’s grades. Praise for high scores, and public humiliation for low scores, are other ‘carrots and sticks’ to get you to work for extrinsic, not intrinsic rewards. You may have been told that it doesn’t matter what you do ‘as long as you do your best’ – but since ‘best’ is a limitless concept, suggesting the need for infinite effort, this doesn’t let you off the hook, though it seems kind.

The person trying to motivate you with these and other tactics may not be aware of putting pressure on you. Often, people speak out of ignorance, simply repeating mindlessly what they have heard or read. The mother of one of my pupils, a boy who was predicted to get Bs and Cs at A level, tried to impress upon me that her son urgently needed to improve his academic performance. I discovered that she’d been warned by his form master that the boy would be ‘in trouble’ otherwise. When I asked her what exactly those words meant in

practical terms, she replied that she had no idea and had rather wondered. Still, she hadn't dared to challenge the form master's authority; the words struck fear in her heart, and she took them home with her. (It seemed to us, upon reflection, that the person most likely to be in trouble was the form master himself, as his elitist private school depended for its survival on good results.)

If you're nervous about essays, exams, assessments, marks, grades and degrees, it's important that you scrutinise where your stress is coming from. Perhaps there is a genuine reason to feel that you need to get minimum grades – more about that later. But perhaps your grades are for someone else's benefit, not yours!

Watch out particularly for vague phrases like 'in trouble', 'won't be successful', 'bad job' or 'might not go to a good university'. Ask people to specify what they mean. Other vague expressions are 'loser', 'failure' or 'drop-out'. They are impossible to define and really mean nothing at all, but such terms spread panic. I repeat Daniel Goleman's words: "Stress makes people stupid". Motivational tactics don't work as a rule, because they make people too stressed.

The best motivation, one that will bring about the best outcomes for you, springs from your inner impulse to do what you most enjoy.

With this aim in mind, let's look a little more closely first at the value of school grades, and then at the value of university degrees, so that we can separate out fact from fiction. Throughout this process I shall keep asking you whether you can be sure that what you've heard is true.

THE QUESTIONABLE VALUE OF SCHOOL GRADES

Perhaps you're anxious about your grades because you believe what you've been told: that you need good A level grades to get a good job; to go to university; or to go to a 'good' university.

So let's scrutinise these beliefs each in turn.

Can you be quite sure that you need good A level grades to get a good job?

First, we need to be clear about our definitions. Let's take the term 'good A level grade' to mean Grade C or above. It's harder to define a 'good' job. Is a 'good job' a stimulating job like that of a journalist, a job in business or finance that pays you a six-figure salary, a physically invigorating job like that of a sportsperson, a job in which you wield enormous power like a top politician or in which you enjoy celebrity status? Is it an intellectually satisfying job like that of a scientist, an academic or an IT specialist?

If it's any of those, then poor grades need not stand in your way. You can become a journalist, a businessman, a sportsperson, a politician, a scientist, an academic or an IT specialist (and more), on poor A level grades. Others have done so, as you'll see.

In fact you may not need A levels at all. Libby Purves, who seems as exasperated as I am by the hype surrounding academic accomplishment, comments:

> The parrot-cry that degrees mean high earnings is a generation out of date; 8.4 per cent of graduates are now unemployed after six months. The same does not apply to qualified tradesmen and women. A furniture company reported last week that it currently has 100 vacancies for carpenters and upholsterers, and the British horological Institution is wooing school leavers to replace a vanishing generation of artisans in clockwork. Plumbers earn more than university lecturers. I know at least one industrialist who likes his young executives to have "actually mastered something" because it gives them a can-do approach. "A very good hairdresser is a better manager than someone with a rubbish degree".
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> *Student Weekly, March 2002*

Lacking good A levels need not restrict you to the trades, however. You can pursue a more intellectual career if you prefer. Writer Emma Forrest had her

own column in the Sunday Times at the age of 15. Columnist and writer Julie Burchill started her career as a journalist on the NME, aged 17, and dropped out of school before sitting A levels: “I did OK at my O levels and then stayed on to do A levels simply because I didn’t fancy working an a factory or an office, which was the dazzling choice that awaited me. Then I got the job at the NME three weeks into the new school year which was a relief as it was really boring. I’ve never regretted not going to university.”

Business entrepreneur Richard Branson made his millions on three O levels.

Ex-prime minister John Major governed the country on three O levels.

Estelle Morris, now Baroness Morris of Yardley, failed her English and French A Levels. She became Education secretary, no less!

Ellen MacArthur got glandular fever before her A levels and underperformed so badly that she gave up her plans to go to university. At 24 she became the youngest woman to sail the globe single-handed.

In case you think such people are exceptionally lucky or talented, here’s a more ordinary example. Emma from Haywards Heath didn’t want to go to university. She found a job straight after her A levels (A, C and D) doing bar work at Gatwick Airport. “I like meeting people and having fun. But eventually I would like to work my way up into management. Really with jobs it’s just a case of being in the right place at the right time and being lucky.” Her words may reassure you: “You’ve got plenty of time. You’re still young. Get to know as many people as you can – I got all my jobs through contacts. It all comes down to who you know and luck.”

This echoes the words of Channel Four newsreader Jon Snow, who eventually got his first broadcasting job despite initially failing one A level out of two (more about him later): “Toil in hope and you’ll get there.”

The career success of these academic ‘failures’ is due to one law, totally overlooked by the educational system that is putting all this pressure on you to succeed. It is a law so simple yet so crucial that I must put it before you in very big letters and ask you to read it over and over until it sinks in:

In the long run, attitude matters more than grades.

You're a human being, not a grade-producing robot. This means that you have strengths that an employer may be looking for over and above your grades – and you probably totally undervalue these since they don't get graded. However, they can be worth a thousand A's.

Two of them are:

1. **Personality strengths** – e.g. imagination, reliability, humour, emotional intelligence, persistence, initiative, sensitivity, tact, social skills and so on.
2. **Experience.** This may be work experience, but it may be some other personal experience. That experience might not be a positive one: a difficult experience turned to good use can make you very employable. For instance, Estelle Morris attributes her career success to her experience of failing her A levels. She thought it became a great source of motivation. She also argues that if she had passed her exams and gone to university as planned, she wouldn't felt compelled to get a B.Ed at Coventry College of Education and to embark on the 18 year teaching career that eventually led to her government post.

Consider also that your prospective employer's attitude may matter more than your grades. The following anecdote, which a newspaper editor told me a few years ago and which I recount from memory, illustrates this:

> When I starting working for the papers, I worked for an editor who had a huge pile of job applications to sort through. They were post-A level applications for a job in his office. He didn't have the time to plough through them all. So I came up with an idea. I suggested rejecting every candidate who had followed the fashion and spent a gap year in India. And that's what we did.

You might also like to know that this man, who later became the Parenting and Education editor of a major broadsheet, trained in newspaper typography after

his A levels. He claims that this experience gave him a head start in his editorial career because it offered him an insider's understanding of the technical possibilities of the job – so unlike other editors, he was not put off by technicians telling him that certain things couldn't be done.

He wasn't educated beyond A level. Nor was he a parent. But he had a refreshing 'can-do' attitude.

I repeat, he became Parenting and Education editor of a major broadsheet.

So can you be quite sure that you need good A level grades to get a good job? The answer has to be a resounding 'No'.

But perhaps you've got your heart set on going to university. You've been told that in order to accomplish this goal, you need to satisfy your prospective universities' conditional offers. Well, is that really true?

Can you be quite sure that you need to reach your target A level grades to go to university?

The government intends to continue increasing the number of university places available to school leavers, hoping that by 2010, 50% of young people will be in higher education. With the benefit of Clearing as well, there never has been an easier time to get into university even if you miss your target grades.

You can even fail your A levels, and still go to university if you're prepared to resit. This has always been the case. Claire is a 29 year old graduate from Sussex University who, at school, wasn't interested in academia and consequently got two Ds and a U when she took her A levels first time. No university would have her then. Yet:

> I don't regret failing my exams – I took a year off and went to Asia. One year off became seven; I spent two years in South America and lived in the USA for a year and a half, worked as a waitress, moved to Brighton, enjoyed life and generally grew up… When I was 25 I decided to go to university and took two A Levels in one year to get in, although an Access course would have been easier… I was a much more interested

> and critical student than I would have been at 18 and enjoyed the stimulation of education. I eventually got a First.

Once Claire had found her own motivation, suddenly, her grades improved. If you recall from my advice in Chapter 1, people perform well in exams who are prepared to think. Claire became more 'critical': her searching attitude yielded good academic results.

I mentioned earlier that Jon Snow failed one A level out of two. With just a C in English, he chose to resit at a technical college, but still only managed to acquire a D in Economics and E in Law. Like Claire, he too gave up on academia after that point, and spent a year in Uganda teaching English, and also found this change of direction a liberating experience: "I was a sort of compressed unimaginative Tory when I went out there and I came back a rebel." On his return to England he had to visit the university admissions service in person to find out which universities he could go to. He persuaded Liverpool University to take him on to read Law (though that academic path, as we shall see later, did not end smoothly either).

Andy, now 35, whose undergraduate years and subsequent career we will follow quite closely in this guide, also managed to get into university despite an initial failure:

> I'm quite a nervous person. In an exam, it's borderline whether I can cope. I go to jelly and I'm so nervous that all I can think about is being scared. I can't recall anything… so I got two Ds and an E, not enough to get into university. I wanted to go to Liverpool. It was terrible not getting in. I really worried that I was not going to go anywhere… I decided to resit my A levels at a sixth-form college and reapply to Liverpool. In fact my retake year turned out to be really helpful… I made new friends. I could also relax, knowing that I only had to do a little bit better, which made me less nervous in the exams. Liverpool were good: they liked the fact that they were my first choice university and they gave me another chance. I got in on two Cs and a B.

So can you be quite sure that you need to reach your target A level grades to go to university? Again, 'No'.

The next question is for those of you who are anxious about making the grade to get to a high ranking university.

Can you be quite sure that you need to get to a 'good' university?

'Good university' anxiety is very particular to Great Britain (though it also exists in the US). By and large, other European school leavers don't suffer such pressure – universities don't discriminate between candidates and people usually attend whichever university is closest to home. But in Britain, every university has a ranking on a scale of prestige. Oxford and Cambridge preside over the top end of the scale of prestige, and tend to make high conditional offers, in contrast to 'new universities' (old polytechnics) which lurk at the bottom of the scale and are less choosy about their student intake.

It's true that some universities have better reputations than others. Does this necessarily make them 'good'? No. The quality of your experience at university depends rather less on the establishment's reputation and rather more on your preferences.

I spent four years at Oxford University in the 1990s, and saw many glum faces there (all white, by the way). Yes, Oxford and Cambridge are said to be the 'best' universities. They also have the highest suicide rate, up to ten times higher than the national average. Granted, Oxford and Cambridge are exquisitely beautiful places (if hordes of tourists, traffic, the constant peal of bells and the lack of ethnic diversity don't put you off). Yes, they're among the longest established and most traditional of all of Britain's universities (provided that wearing gowns, sherry with the Master and Latin before meals are traditions that inspire you). Indeed, they confer status (as long as you don't mind putting up with three years of Toad-In-The-Hole while others – who have, rightly or wrongly, been singled out as being cleverer and more deserving than you – sit at 'High Table' in extra-long and fluffy gowns amidst platters of Lobster Thermidor, knocking back the College Port).

But aside from these superficial matters, academically, are these top universities any better? I would strongly contest this. They certainly put tremendous emphasis on academic achievement. But if they have a reputation for delivering quality in education, this is largely because they recruit high achievers in the first place. My own experience as an arts student reading English was of having to educate myself, by talking to tutorial partners and cobbling together scraps of useful knowledge acquired through intense effort from sources of information that I and my fellow undergraduates found, by and large, to be incomprehensible and irrelevant. Before taking my Finals exams I remember trying to read through three files of dutiful lecture notes and realising that my best revision policy was to discard them. I was not alone in finding helpful information scant on the ground: a fellow Politics student tried to get through his first year exams by reading *Politics Made Easy* (and failed).

Yes, some of the most erudite specialists lecture at Oxford and Cambridge, but this can be a problem for undergraduates if their area of expertise borders on the esoteric. Yes, Oxford and Cambridge boast world-class libraries – prized for holding in their coffers some exquisite medieval treasures; meanwhile the dog-eared undergraduate texts you need on the shelves are so often out! Yes, Oxford and Cambridge offer a unique and much lauded one-on-one tutorial system, but today's budget cuts mean that this privilege is being phased out. Perhaps that's no bad thing: one-on-ones are indeed a joy if you're lucky enough to get an inspiring tutor, but a curse if you get lumped with a snob, a bully or an eccentric. (Mine had a well-earned reputation for sexual harassment.) Unfortunately, at the prestigious end of the university scale, not all tutors are motivated to teach or indeed capable of it, and there is no proper screening process. Many are wholly engaged in their research, and consequently show little or no interest in their students (aside from a possible extra-curricular interest in some cases). In a 2003 address to the Royal Society, its President, Lord May delivered a public critique of high-ranking university staff attitudes, deploring that it appears to have become a mark of status to avoid much engagement with undergraduates. Such uncurbed

indifference – dare I say contempt – may not seriously set back the more independently minded and highly motivated undergraduate who can cope with the pressure. But others suffer a good deal – as the suicide rate confirms.

My aim isn't to discourage you from applying to the 'best' universities, but merely to impress upon you that the adjective 'best' only reflects reputation and league-table ranking. Make up your own mind whether you'll be happy there. A lower ranking university may offer you better student support services, a more diverse student population, friendlier staff, teaching adapted to your needs, a wider range of study options and a more modern, up-to-date syllabus.

Andy remembers his days at Liverpool University with much affection:

> I got in on two Cs and a B... Overall I had a fantastic time. I got to live the fun life of a student, away from home, mixing with like-minded people and people from very mixed backgrounds. There were mature students, or people who'd never got A levels but whose studies were being sponsored by their company. One of them worked for a power supplier, and he just had a City & Guilds qualification. Then at the other end of my corridor there was another guy who was a top student reading medicine. Some people sneered at my academic record but the majority didn't care – theirs wasn't any better. So what I'd imagined was really important in life, the expectations I had about how things should be, turned out to be totally wrong. That gave me confidence…
>
> Also, I got support from university that I never got from my school. It makes a big difference when people have time and inclination to help you out, and Liverpool made a real effort that way. It's a university that prides itself on taking people from all walks of life and local people especially. Once you're in, it doesn't matter who you are or what you're doing, they'll do what they can for you. The lecturers were always willing to offer information if I asked them after lectures, and there was one-to-one help available from my personal tutor.

So, back to our earlier question: can you be quite sure that you need to get to a 'good' university? The answer depends on your personal preferences and values.

THE QUESTIONABLE VALUE OF A DEGREE

Many university students believe what they're told, that anything less than a 2:1 (high Second Class degree) spells future career ruin. High achievers are not immune from degree-classification anxiety: research from the University of Georgia in the US found in the late 1990s that academic pressures cause more than one in ten exceptional students to suffer a higher rate of depression than the average student. We've seen that Oxbridge students suffer a rate of suicide up to ten times the national average. How, you might ask, can anyone possibly get as high on the academic ladder as Oxford or Cambridge and then want to kill themselves for fear of being an academic failure? Again, the answer lies in the widespread and murderous myth, put about by government, the media, parents, teachers and others involved in the education system, that students don't survive unless they get top results. It's even in print. So it's official.

For example, on 5th September 2003, the Times Educational Supplement produced an article attempting to analyse why Cambridge University (and also Oxford) had suddenly stopped awarding as many Third Class degrees as it used to. Cambridge's deputy academic secretary Duncan McCallum made the following attempt to defend his university from accusations of 'dumbing down'. The italics in line 3 are mine:

1. Competition for places has increased massively since 1960, pushing up the quality of the candidates.
2. Students are better taught and enjoy improved facilities compared with their predecessors.
3. ***Having a first or upper second is critical for getting a good job*** so students perform better.

This is terrifying. He's *almost* saying that you can't get a good job unless you get 2:1 or more. But does his statement bear scrutiny?

Can you be quite sure that Duncan is correct and that you need at least a 2:1 to get a good job?

Notice again the looseness of the terminology. What does he mean? By 'good job' he may be referring specifically to some restricted 'hard' professions where minimum degree requirements do often (but not always) apply, such as the law, medicine, academia and some areas of finance. (See my next section for a more in-depth discussion on this topic.)

University academics can have very distorted views about the value of the degrees they confer. The following anecdote, recounted by film director Mike Newell, whose work includes *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Dance With a Stranger*, portrays a fairly unique level of self-parodying awareness on the part of one university tutor:

> He once asked, "Aside from work, what do you want to do with yourself?" I said, "I want to play around in the theatre." He said, "Oh God, you'll get a 2.2" I got a 2.2.

Newell's tutor appears to have been unusual in understanding that poor academic performance may indicate competence and enthusiasm in other fields.

I wonder if sometimes a little envy creeps in along with the more usual narrow-mindedness. Mick Jagger was discouraged by his faculty adviser at the London School of Economics from forming a band. He was warned that he wouldn't make much money. Would Jagger have received such a warning had he expressed an interest in becoming a cash-strapped UK don?

Certainly, university staff may have their egotistic and materialistic reasons for pressurising students to get a good degree. I haven't seen much evidence that anyone else is very bothered about Finals results.

Let me offer myself as an example. I've published a book called *The Student's Guide to Exam Success.* You would have thought that, to do so, I should need to have proved excellent university results myself. Has anyone ever checked? No. My publisher never asked me anything about my degree when they asked me to write it. They approached me on the basis of an article I'd published in a broadsheet paper. Did I get the commission for that article on the basis of my Finals result? No. The editor didn't even check that I had a degree. He just liked my article idea.

I have appeared on television and radio to give grade-boosting advice. One television show was quite selective, but it wasn't my grades they wanted to check. They wanted video footage to see if I could perform on live television. Only one journalist (Matthew Banister on BBC Radio 5 Live) has ever concerned himself with my results – and it was an afterthought. As an experiment, I was evasive and he didn't insist. I now make it a point of principle not to reveal my degree classification, since I have learnt through experience that it makes no difference to anyone.

What about you? Before picking up this guide did you check my results? Or was your priority to work out whether I gave helpful study tips? Overall – and I'll discuss the exceptions soon – people look at what you do, not at a piece of paper saying what you've achieved.

I must repeat for university students what I have said to school leavers:

In the long run, attitude matters more than grades.

Let me illustrate my point with further examples from a diverse range of impressive careers. Ex-foreign secretary Douglas Hurd got a Third Class Degree. The co-founders of Apple computers, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, walked out of university. So did Bill Gates. Many students are heartened to discover that TV personality Carol Vorderman got a Third Class Degree – she seems so bright (and indeed she probably is; but exam results don't always correlate with IQ measures).

You'll recall that Jon Snow managed to get into Liverpool University by the skin of his teeth. In his second year, he got kicked out for anti-apartheid activism. He worked for a while in London and then got a job on LBC radio as a talk-show host. This eventually led to his current position in Channel Four. Now he interviews politicians trained in the 'best' universities.

Millions of people, some of them extremely high-profile, have thrived even in the most intellectually challenging careers, and competed with comparative geniuses, despite getting less than 2:1 at university.

Andy's testimonial gives further evidence that there's life after a 2.2:

> I hoped for a 2.1 because it feels like that's the dividing line between success and failure. I got a 2.2 [and] after graduating I was unemployed for a year. Then I was fortunate to get onto an MSc course in Information Technology… That changed everything: suddenly I was hot stuff.

This led him to the IT department of an investment bank, where he became team manager. He reflects back on his earlier anxieties:

> Different careers have different expectations of your academic performance. In my experience, that hard bit is getting a foot in the door, and also when you change jobs your grades matter a bit, but after that, what counts is how you do the job. As if to prove that, my bank gives staff private access to a digitised copy of their CV on computer, and when I looked up mine, I noticed that all that they took account of was my subjects, not my grades: 'Degree – yes; Further degree – yes'. They use a formula to work out your market value and your pay packet, according to your age and experience. I had it in my head that I'd get paid less because I'd only got a 2.2. I was wrong.
>
> I'm in constant competition with colleagues who have very strong academic backgrounds. Generally I'm fine… I don't reveal my own background. I've hired people from all backgrounds, many of whom

have praised me for what they assume to be my academic achievements. I let them carry on believing it.

I realise now that my working life is cyclical, with ups and downs. You can ride a wave of success – it's self-fuelling, and then you just keep getting better; whereas if you stumble and stall it can be hard to recover and stop that backward trend. I've experienced both first-hand.

I've learnt another thing: work offers further opportunities to learn more, beyond your degree. When you get your Finals result you think, that's it, that's my badge, but you can progress beyond that and acquire specialist skills that increase your professional standing. It takes the pressure off your degree, but I didn't realise that at the time.

So must we believe our friend Duncan from Cambridge who tells us that a 2.1 is the minimum necessary requirement for a good job? Andy's bulging wallet is one small piece of evidence to the contrary. My next section offers additional testimonials by other equally happily employed graduates who also discovered degree classification to be irrelevant in most professions.

Of course, you need to get your foot in the door first. Andy was unemployed for a year: perhaps a 2.1 would have got him an immediate job. Although as I have pointed out, attitude matters more than grades in the long term, you too may (or may not) find that, in the short term, your Finals result affects how quickly and easily you get started in your chosen career.

THE 'HARD' PROFESSIONS

Certain professions are renowned for only taking on students who have at least a high 2:1. These are the Law, Finance, Medicine and Academia.

Nonetheless, even in these most competitive fields, Finals are still not final. Other factors may be taken into consideration:

1. **The law of supply and demand.** Market forces underpin every decision made by every employer in every line of work. However

selective a firm may wish to be, if the market is scarce, they'll take on a lesser performing candidate.

2. **Personal qualities.** A good reference from a tutor pointing out that you are hard-working, committed, punctual and reliable may count in your favour.
3. **Contacts.** You may be selected on the basis of knowing people in the business. This is particularly common in Finance but may also apply to other careers.
4. **A back door.** It may be possible to get into a competitive company at a lower level and work your way up.
5. **Work experience.** You may be selected if you have relevant work experience proving to your employer that are up to task.
6. **Further study.** You can take another degree to boost your employability.

These considerations are weighed up in the extracts from conversational threads which I reproduce below. Taken from Internet academic forums, they contain contributions by undergraduates and employed graduates on the topic of recruitment as a whole but also particularly in the 'hard' professions. In addition to offering useful practical information on what you can do to compensate for a 'bad degree', these extracts also express contradictory stances and relate contrasting experiences, underlining the inexactness of the science behind degree valuation.

In order to allow you to gain your own impressions of different contributors, I have refrained from correcting their grammar and spelling mistakes and I have not standardised terms. Bullet points indicate a change of speaker.

The first conversational thread is taken from http://www.digitalspy.co.uk/forums/showthread.php?t=741830. It was inspired by this pertinent question from 'Holly' about the implications of getting a 2.2 rather than a 2.1 in Law:

I'm a Law student. To get a 2.2 would be undesirable, but not a complete disaster. I realise that to get a 2.2 will make it more difficult to gain a traineeship, as Law is very competitive, but if I manage to secure a traineeship with a semi-decent firm, and I perform well and I stay on at that firm successfully for a few years, I'm curious to know how relevant my degree classification would be on applying for another job. How important is degree classification in the long run? I know that it probably varies a bit, depending on the degree and the field in which you work. Does the weighting of it dilute with experience gained?

- Never been asked my classification - even when entering my training contract at a solicitors. It's never mattered to me.
- In Law nowadays, the degree you went to and getting a 2:1 are very important. A lot of firms will not even look at 2:2 applications, that's the reality. However if you're more creative in looking for a training contract and are willing to try for a long time and you make up for the 2:2 in other areas it's still possible.
- I knew someone who got a 2:2 in law and went on a trainee course after her degree. At the end of the day if you've not done well in your degree then thats life. It doesn't have to be a disaster, hard work and determination will help you.
- In law the degree classification is pretty important. If you don't have a training contract already then you'll find it much harder with a 2:2. Unfortunately there's too many universities offering law degrees now and they're saturating the market so where you went and what you got is how law firms tend to differentiate between all the applications flooding in. But a 2:2 isn't the end of the world. Getting onto the diploma won't be an issue because they look at 1st and 2nd year grades and once you've got the diploma you'll find a legal job with a small firm or the government. But you probably won't get into one of the bigger firms with a 2:2. Of course, you

could always go to a smaller firm, get the experience and move to a bigger firm later.

One of my friends was borderline 2:1/2:2, did a vacation placement with Thorntons, applied for training contracts and got offers from both Thorntons and Blackadders and she ended up just missing out on a 2:1.

Join the Childrens Panel, Citizens Advice, Dundee North Law Centre or something like that and get some experience and get applying for training contracts ASAP and you should be able to find something.

- A family friend graduated in 1991. He went into accountancy and not only did the big 5 (Arthur Anderson has since dropped out - so now it's the big 4) demand a minimum of a 2.1 they also asked for his A level grades! Of course supply of graduates was outstripping demand at the time…
- I feel that in the short term it matters a great deal, in the long term not at all. For final year students, the II.I is the holy grail and there is a reason for this. The general consensus is that the huge companies do the 'milk round' recruiting bin applications from people who get a II.II or lower. As you say yourself, securing a good training contract becomes more difficult the lower your grade. Same with post graduate funding, you need to have a first or high II.I for consideration.

  That is not to say that there aren't ways round this. There are always people who will be able to argue their case and convince employers there are good reasons why they didn't gain the expected grade. Another trick is to bag the job/training contract/post-grad funding before your result come out. If you've been offered the position on the understanding that you get a II.I and you end up with a high II.II and you look like you're going to be competent, they're unlikely to take it away from you. It's a lot of administrative hassle for them.

  In the long run, your degree matters very little indeed. You'd be surprised how quickly it loses importance. Once you have a job, you will be judged entirely on your performance and whatever professional

exams/development you undertake. And bear in mind that academic success and achievement in the workplace actually require a totally different skill set. 'Softer' skills, such as good communication, an ability to get on with your workmates, networking etc, etc take on huge importance. Plenty of people who are not academic stars end up being highly successful in the workplace.

- It might matter straight after uni for getting into certain jobs, for example the graduate schemes the big companies run. But they're a complete nightmare anyway, and most people leave as soon as they can.
- I'm secure in my 6 figure salary and my position as a senior quant to know what a good career is. Would we take on anyone with a 2:2? You have to be joking.
- (*Reply to the above*) Oh, I see the problem - different definitions of "successful", and in fact "good career". Yeah, I'm not going to agree with you on this - you couldn't pay me enough to make me want to work on the London financial scene, and I'd see myself as a failure if I ended up there.
- A 2.2 from a prestigious uni. can be as highly regarded as a 2.1 from elsewhere.
- Basically, something like 90% (perhaps even more) of Oxbridge students can expect to leave the university with a I.I or a II.I. This is a phenomenally large percentage, much higher than any other UK university. They seem to work on the assumption that if you've been good enough to get into Oxbridge, then you are worthy of a good degree classification. Which is fair enough, I suppose. The only problem is that Oxbridge's recruitment procedures are far from perfect and there are students there who basically shouldn't be.

  You have to perform pretty badly to get a II.II from Oxbridge, so personally, I wouldn't be giving them any benefit of the doubt, unless they were able to demonstrate mitigating circumstances. To get a II.II from Oxbridge

corresponds to finishing in the bottom 10% of your class. In another institution, it might correspond to the bottom 40%.

- don't think it matters personally. Unless, that is, you're going for something highly competetive. On my course, there are so many people who just NEED to be better than everybody else. When we get work back, it's not enough that they got a 2:1 along with several other people, they need to know the exact marks. They can't rest until they get 68 and everybody else has 66.
- I HAD to get a First in order to get where I am today - five years of residency training that included a year of training in general surgery, three years of training in clinical urology and six months of training in urology!!! Sometimes I wished I'd settled for an English Degree and became a freelance writer, like the hubby!
- Depends on what degree you do..... Maths, English, Law etc etc..... Are looked upon as "definitive" degrees. Whilst a degree in Creative Writing isn't looked upon favourably by most employers.
- It's easier to get very high marks in a maths/science degree than in an essay or folio-based one. Unless I'm completely out of date and tutors will now grade essays at 90% or whatever! But that just didn't happen when I was at uni.
- I don't know about Law degrees but people in the sciences have achieved a 2.2 and then got a masters went on to do PhDs and became top scientists in their field. If you really need the 2.1 is it possible to do a masters in law to achieve the grade needed or can you do an extra (although costly) year in University to maybe do new modules/couses to push your grade up further. I am sure a lot of employers would look highly on someone who went back to University to put up with more debt and was determined to get that 2.1. I would speak to a careers officer. Might be able to advice you more! Just don't give up!

- Two points here. Firstly I'm not convinced that the classification is particularly important when it comes to the employment market. After I gained my degree and was looking for a job, potential employers were only interested in the fact I'd got a degree. It might as well have just been a pass degree. Many other factors came into the decision as to whether they set someone on or not. In my first job, I didn't even have to prove that I'd got the darn thing. HR were supposed to follow it up, but they never did. [Second,] Once into a job, the level of your academic attainment previously quickly loses importance, and you are judged purely on results in the job. That's been the experience of this 2.1 BA economics guy, anyway.
- It might matter for certain careers, but in general it matters not a jot, by the time you've got a couple of jobs under your belt. The question was about the long term after all. I really feel for young people these days. It all seems so important, but by the time you reach my age, people couldn't care less whether you've got a good degree or not. It's just not relevant to anything. I went to the university of life...of course, back then it was just a polytechnic.
- I got a third (due more to ill health than lack of effort, but a bit of both) but I don't recall ever having been asked to provide more info than "BA(hons) English and Psych". I went on to do a postgrad diploma in IT and could have converted it into an MSc if I wanted. I've got a damn good job that's relevant to both my degree and my diploma, and like I say, I don't recall ever being asked what class my degree was. So basically, don't worry about the degree snobs' scaremongering, they have to believe it's vastly important in order to justify all the work they put in.
- I know someone who went Leeds university and I'm pretty sure he got a third in the end. But he still ended up with what he calls 'the perfect job' working for a worldwide organisation writing software for Airlines around the world.
- Looking through the find a Masters website there is lots of courses one can do if they haven't got a 2.1. The only problems graduates wishing to apply

for a Masters would have - they may not qualify for grants but can still apply for Adult Credit Loan - only problem with that is I believe interest rates are terrible. But then I am talking about Science masters I know nothing about law qualifications.

- I'm not sure a BA/BSc on its own means anything much these days really in any case. As long as whatever classification you get is enough to get you on to the next stage of whatever you want to do it shouldn't affect things in the long run.

The following extract from a different thread on the same topic expresses exasperation felt by many employed graduates at the snobbery behind the concept of unviable degrees:

- My degree is from TEESSIDE POLY for f***'s sake and yet I'm now head of a research group in a proper university. I can only assume nobody even f***ing read my cv.

Precisely because of the differences in opinion that exist about how to evaluate degrees, employment markets, subjects, universities and jobs, there is general consensus among most of the participants in such forums that in the long run, attitude matters more than grades.

The debate about whether it is possible to do a Masters after a 'bad degree' is dealt with succinctly on www.postgraduate.com, in answer to this query:

What business or finance masters can I do with a third class honours BSc. degree in Physics?

- You can do any of them provided you get a place. However it may be a bit difficult if you have a 3rd class degree as most masters require a 2nd class degree (2:1 in some cases especially for more popular ones.) But you never know if you can convince them that you are serious and committed you may get a place.

- some courses will take students on as a Diploma (same as Masters but without the thesis at the end). If you reach a certain level during the course they will allow you to upgrade to a Masters by doing the thesis
- well the worst thing you can do is not apply!! i was in the same boat as you and thought that i would never get in to a uni but a few rejections lateri got a place on a masters! so give it a shot.

The same site contains another useful debate on academic life beyond a Third. This unfolded over one year and was sparked off by the following question from Tammy, who was stuck in a bad job after a Third and had been told by 'experts' that she had no future. (The thread reveals a happy ending).

I'm 26 and recently have finished with a third class honours in Human Biosciences. I recently had a job in admin in pharmaceuticals and hated it. it was little more than data entry. I really don't know what to do next as i consulted Prospects and they basically said i couldn't hope for better than the job i had. Is further study or grad schemes possible? At the moment my degree seems a big waste of time and money.

- i have a third and have over the years have applied for 3 masters and been accepted for them all, however i only took up the one im currently doing.

  even if the stated entry qualifications for a course rule you out, dont let that put you off, as the requirements for my course was a minimun 2:2 yet i still managed to get in and i do know i am not unique in this respect.

  the best advice i can give if your going to do this, is to try and speak to the course/admissions tutor before applying, i done this and i beleive it made the difference.
- I received a third class for my undergraduate degree and I thought it was the end of the world. I did some enquiring to potential schools I wanted to attend for a Masters. Lo and behold, two Masters (with a Distinction in one of them) later and I am a Research fellow at Harvard Medical School with plans of embarking on a Ph.D. next year. I guess what I'm saying is don't give up hope.

Clarifies: undergraduate degree in Chemistry with Biochemistry at Queen Mary (University of London). Then I undertook a M.Sc. in Medical Molecular Gentics at the University of Aberdeen before enrolling on an M.Sc. in Neuroscience at King's College London. As to my major, I am about to commence my Ph.D. in Behavioural Neurobiology with an emphasis on psychiatric illness.

- I too have a third class degree and very much gave up the hope of going further. I had been working in the food industry for about seven years when I have the change to do a part time MSc which I have now passed and am currently putting a proposal together for a PhD. The course tutors were initially worried about my academic qualification but the industrial experiance is what got me on the course.
- that's nonsense, in order to get onto a masters you need at least a 2:2 (if not a 2:1). And when appying for a PhD the undergrad classification is taken into consideration.
- (*Reply to the above*) Right. I must be hallucinating my two friends with 3rds who got accepted onto Master's degrees.
- My supervisor was passing as I read your message and he gave some thoughts: that, obviously, if you had applied for a PhD straight after graduating with a 3rd, you would probably not be able to compete with 1st class applicants. But a 3rd with work experience in the pharmaceutical field - even admin - is a different matter… [It is true] about the Masters: even if you have to pay fees, it's better to be short of money for a couple of years now than do a job you don't like for the long term.

  Two people in the Pharmacy school here got 3rds originally, but topped it up with Master degrees and now they're Drs, no-one cares about the 3rd class Bachelors anymore.
- After talking to course tutors on courses i have been interested in, it is difficult to get on to Masters without a 2:2 but not impossible, there are post

grad diplomas that lead to masters or a lot of work experience and committment can persuade admissions of your merit too.

Tammy, 1 year on: **Thanks for all your comments. After spending a very unrewarding six months as a global studies assistant and trying a completely different career I have finally decided to do a post-grad diploma in Nursing. Having worked part time during my degree as a nursing assistant I have chosen to pursue this further. It will also help later on if i do decide to pursue a masters as well as a fullfilling career. Thanks for all the advice, your comments all proved that a 3rd isn't all that bad.**

THE UNQUESTIONABLE VALUE OF ATTITUDE

If you have believed what you've been told throughout your school and university career, that you can't get a good job unless you have good A levels or a good degree, the time has come to reassess. While it does help to have an educational qualification that's relevant to your aim; while some jobs require a minimum number of A levels; while some professions require that you have a degree; while if you want to be a lawyer, a doctor or an academic, you may need a 2.1 (though you may manage on less if you're lucky, smart or retrain); while in the short term, the qualification you get may impact on your career (though it may not); nonetheless, in the long term, your attitude is your best asset. If you are positive and persistent, and willing to develop skills and experience, you will succeed in what you do.

Undergraduates, I have reassured you that you will survive whatever your degree classification; but I appear to have side-stepped the awkward question of what you would do were you to fail your degree outright. Ooops. The time has come to let out what must be the world's most closely guarded secret:

Even if the worst comes to the worst and you fail Finals, in principle you are able to resit.

Isn't it curious that no one at university ever tells you that?

3 Strategies

Having come this far, and seen that it is possible to get a great job whatever your academic track record, you should now be able to knuckle down and do some useful work without being plagued by destructive worries about failure. This will greatly increase your chances of performing well in your exams.

However may will be times when it all gets too much, and logic fails you. If so, this chapter are a few simple strategies to get you back on track.

LET GO OF THE OUTCOME

Given that you don't need a top set of GCSEs, A levels or a top university degree to be professionally fulfilled, I now suggest that you relax and just enjoy your course. Let go of the outcome: focus on the process instead. Learn for learning's sake, and stop thinking about your grades.

This advice may shock you, and give you the impression that I'm encouraging you to underperform. Quite the opposite: I repeat, this will increase your chances of performing well in your exams. I wish to set up a four-fold sequence of events in your psyche:

PERFORMANCE PARADOX
1 By relaxing your expectations, you reduce the pressure to perform.
2 By reducing the pressure to perform, you clear your head of stress.
3 By clearing your head, you can think better.
4 And the better you think, the better you can perform in your exams.

It boils down to this paradox:

By relaxing your need to perform, you can perform better.

Because it is a paradox, albeit a simple one, this concept so eludes people that they continue to insist that more pressure should be put on students in order to squeeze better results out of them. The result is usually mediocrity and underperformance.

BE GOOD ENOUGH

You too may be at risk of underperforming if you keep raising your expectations of yourself and make promises to:

- Work harder than ever
- Never waste time any more
- Try and be the best in your class or tutorial set
- Go to every lecture
- Earn praise from your parents or teachers
- Make your siblings or cousins green with envy

Underlying these aspirations is a notion that you need to aim for perfection in order to avoid imperfection. But this strategy can backfire. It can turn you into a swot or a rabbit.

The swot and the rabbit: two sides of the 'best' coin

A swot works constantly to satisfy the urge to be the best. A rabbit freezes, as if caught in the headlights of an oncoming car, rooted to the spot by the magnitude of the task. Both are flip sides of the same coin. And both can lead to exam failure and drop-out, the swot from exhaustion, and the rabbit from paralysis.

It's safer to aim to be good enough. Instead of trying to be the best (or feeling that you ought to try to be the best), lower your expectations. This means that you no longer have to try and make yourself read all your books cover to cover, learn your entire syllabus, revise every spare minute and so forth. You can allow yourself weak moments, get ill, fall in love, play badminton, have a

week off, and yet still stay on course. You'll find it easier to work if you develop a more forgiving attitude.

'Good enough' is a much healthier attitude to adopt towards your studies. Paradoxically, it also scores more points.

AIM FOR D

If you're really getting stressed, lower your sights even more and aim for D. The more ambitious you are, the more you may need this advice! Remember that research has shown high-performing students to be at greatest risk of performance anxiety, to the point of suicide. I have noticed in my years of teaching how often ambitious students woefully underperform. This is because the pressure to succeed wipes them out physically, mentally and emotionally. They spend nights up revising when they should be sleeping. Or they become incapacitated by the realisation that they cannot possibly reach their self-exacting goals.

My advice to aim for D has liberated many trapped students. So that you hear this from the horse's mouth, here's an extract from a message of thanks sent to me by a high-achieving student who needed a 2.1 to qualify for further study:

> After a number of panic attacks and having to move back to my parents' house to recover, I realised I couldn't take anything in any more. I was just too stressed. So I decided to follow your advice and 'aim for D' – accepting that I'd never get accepted to do a PhD. My friends got downgraded (moved down a year) but I got a 2.1! I couldn't believe it…

REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE NOT YOUR GRADES

It's very tempting to connect your self-image to your grades because that's what educators – and society at large – often encourage. This is discussed in Chapter 2. A child may be praised for being 'good' when he or she scores high in a test. Some schools carry out the wholly unethical practice of putting up league tables of their pupils' performance, so that the miserable wretches at

the bottom of the list feel like dirt every time they walk past the school noticeboard. A parent who says to a child with a bad report, 'I'm very disappointed in you' also sets up unhealthy and unnecessary connections between grades and identity.

Consequently, many people grow up to believe the following myth:

You are your grades.

They believe that a fail makes them a failure. We know, from the chequered experiences of people with nonetheless successful careers outlined in Chapter 2, that nothing could be further from the truth. Nonetheless this belief can be very entrenched in people's minds, giving them a sense that life is not worth living without good grades. It is also a life sentence to believe, as many high-achievers do, in the importance of always being the best. This takes all the pleasure out of ordinary achievements. Many top scorers often feel like failures despite their successes, berating themselves each time they fall short of getting the superlative grades that they have come to expect of themselves. One prize-winning student put it succinctly to me: 'I just realise that I've spent my whole life trying to justify my existence on this planet through top grades'.

Conversely – and this is also dangerous in its arrogance – many people like to imagine that their first class grade (or six-figure salary) makes them superior to others. If humankind could be so neatly divided by exam results into A people, B people, C people, D people and failures, life would be very dull.

Fortunately this isn't the case. There isn't any connection between the quality of your grades and your value as a human being. But it can be hard to shake off a belief that you've held all your life. I am going punish you for your mistake by giving you some 'lines'. Write out thirty times:

I am not my grades. I am not my grades. I am not my grades.

I am not my grades. I am not my grades. I am not my grades…

TREAT SUCCESS AND FAILURE AS THE IMPOSTORS THAT THEY ARE

Remember that success and failure are totally hyped concepts in today's world and have very little meaning. Success can come of total fluke. Failure can be the outcome of temporary bad luck. In fact, success and failure can be closely connected, as opposites attract: failure can show you the path to success; conversely, success can come before a fall. Millionaires have been bankrupted overnight; others have made millions in one day. The fact that you are successful or unsuccessful in one thing one day doesn't mean that your experience will always be that way. Life is a fluid process in which people learn and circumstances change. Remember Andy's words in Chapter 2, that life is cyclical.

In this light, it's unwise to let failure discourage you or to allow success go to your head.

Better to treat success and failure as the impostors that they are, and to just go about your studies as normal, so that you remain undisturbed by the noise they would otherwise create in your head.

BEFRIEND YOUR EXAMINER

Close your eyes and 'see' your examiner in your mind's eye. Do you see Darth Veda? If so, make an effort to alter your perception of this person. Substitute the image of one of your friendliest teachers or tutors. Consider that examiners are human beings trying to earn a bit of spare cash by marking exam scripts.

Remember that the examiner looks for points to award. He or she isn't going to be poring over your exam script trying to catch you out. Examiners work using mark schemes. These outline what points you need to in order to score points so that they can reward your effort appropriately.

At higher levels you're likely to be marked twice by two separate markers and an average taken of your two grades. This is in an effort to be as fair as possible. The system isn't trying to catch you out. Therefore, befriend the examiner and befriend the system.

RESITTERS' VISUALISATION

Our minds work in pictures and build on past experience. If you failed a previous exam, maybe you're now picturing future failure. There may be sound reason for this fear if you haven't a clue why you failed first time round. Where possible, try to find out the cause of your mistake, so that you have a chance to learn from it. Apply also the methodology outlined in Chapter 1.

Aside from this practical step, you can also help your chances by practising giving your brain positive images.

SEEING SUCCESS

Make yourself comfortable. Take a few deep breaths.

Imagine sitting the exam. See yourself turning over the paper and seeing questions that you like. Engage all your senses – imagine what it feels like to take the time to think up good answers. Hear the scratching the pens around you and allow yourself to feel comfortable with the presence of other students engaged in the same activity.

Keep practising this until you can visualise success.

Visualising in this way gives your powerful unconscious mind an image that it will try and follow. It will also make it easier for you to do positive preparation for your resits.

However, if this visualisation arouses too many disturbing feelings in you, I highly recommend tackling this discomfort with EFT (see below).

EMOTIONAL FREEDOM TECHNIQUES (EFT)

With a success rate estimated at 85%, EFT is one of the best self-help techniques you can use to treat all types of anxiety, exam phobia included. It takes about ten minutes to learn.

EFT is like an emotional version of acupuncture, but without the use of needles. It is based on new discoveries about the body's subtle energies which suggest that emotional distress results from a disruption in the proper flow of the body's energy system. This disruption is usually triggered by a difficult experience or past trauma. It can be released by tapping key acupressure points with the fingertips.

For more information visit my website where you can download my *Quick and Easy Guide to Boosting Your Studies and Your Morale with EFT.*

ACCEPT THE ANXIETY

If you're feeling anxious no matter what you do, acceptance may be your best policy. Many capable people feel as anxious as you do. Anxiety bears no relation to ability.

Michael Crichton has sold more than one hundred million copies of his books, plus various film rights, among which *Jurassic Park* and *ER*. You might think this would make him a confident man – and you'd be wrong:

> I never have a sense when I'm working that I'm succeeding. Never have that sense. All I feel is that what I've put down isn't awful, it isn't a disaster. I don't know how to avoid self-doubt. There's inherent anxiety for me. This book [Timeline] I wrote three times over: it can be disheartening when you see how much doesn't fit.

Just as you fret about your examiner's assessment of your work, so too Crichton worries about his readers' response to his books:

> What if they don't like it and slam it shut after reading three pages and throw it against a wall?

If you can't get rid of your self-doubt, comfort yourself with the notion that this puts you in the same boat as America's highest-paid writer.

YOUR POWERS OVER THE CHATTERBOX

With its three very different chapters tackling study stress from three different angles, this guide will sustain you through your studies, enabling you to develop sound academic priorities, a more sanguine attitude towards success or failure, and some trouble-shooting strategies. These new powers should bring you greater peace of mind.

But there may be times when you cannot escape the pressurized atmosphere, and your nerves get the better of you. At such times you will notice the presence of an insecure voice somewhere in your head that keeps trying to undermine you. Aptly named 'the chatterbox' by Susan Jeffers, author of *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*, this voice will start blowing everything out of proportion at the slightest opportunity. It will listen to the media and the politicians, to your parents, teachers, tutors and supervisors, and try to reignite your terror of exams. It will tell you that you're incompetent and useless, that everyone else can do exams but you, that your second cousins twice removed are much more capable and talented and bla bla bla.

Recognise that this is just the chatterbox, that it is a fool, and tell it to go away and leave you alone as you've got some work to do.

About Eileen Tracy

Eileen Tracy works with students, in the UK and internationally, in person or by telephone and email. She offers EFT and teaches study skills developed in her own exam preparation at Oxford University. She writes for the national press on education and parenting, and appears regularly on radio and television. For more information visit www.eileentracy.co.uk.

Other works by the author

- **The Student's Guide to Exam Success (Open University Press)**
- **The Quick and Easy Guide to a Better University Brain**
- **The Quick and Easy Guide to Surviving Revision and Exams at School**
- **The Quick and Easy Guide to Boosting Your Studies and Your Morale with Emotional Freedom Techniques**
- **The Quick and Easy Guide to Understanding Question Instructions in Assignments and Exams**

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