

The quick and easy guide to...

*Surviving
Revision and Exams
at School*

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The Secret

If you're wanting to do some preparation for your oncoming exams (or not exactly wanting to, but being told to), you might be wondering about the best way to set about this somewhat daunting task. It's perhaps all the more daunting if you've noticed a fact that perturbs many people in the run-up to exams: that some people work hard only to get average grades, while others apparently do well on hardly any revision.

This suggests that revision alone isn't the key to exam success. So is there a secret? And if so, what is it?

Let me start off by telling you what it isn't:

The secret of exam success has little to do with knowledge or IQ.

This rather startling fact will become clear in a minute. But first, see if any of the following four statements describes you accurately:

1. I'm not as capable as some of the others in my class or in other classes.
(True/False)
2. If someone criticises my effort it puts me off trying again. (True/False)
3. If I had to decide between playing just one computer game right now, or playing two computer games later in the day, I'd choose the first option.
(True/False)
4. I'm quite a lazy person. (True/False)

Why, you may well ask, might this rather odd quiz be relevant to your exams? Because of a simple law of success, which you've probably never heard before because it's often kept hush-hush:

In the long run, attitude matters most.

And that's the secret of all success, including exam success.

What kind of attitude are we talking about, exactly? Well, various studies of groups of productive people reveal that they share the following key traits:

- 1 **They don't compare themselves unfavourably to others.** They consider themselves to be no better or worse than anyone else.
- 2 **Criticism and setbacks don't stop them** because they don't condemn themselves for their failures. They regard mistakes as a necessary part of every learning curve, and bounce back.
- 3 **They make occasional short-term sacrifices** in order to win long-term rewards.
- 4 **They tend not to label themselves negatively** (for instance, as 'lazy' or 'unmotivated') because they recognise their ability to change and evolve.

In other words, they enjoy considerable emotional freedom. And people who are emotionally free succeed better at what they do, exams included.

Of course, I'm generalising. Some people get top grades through gritted teeth (though there is a price to pay – usually, burn-out). And others may have a brilliant attitude and yet fail their exams (though they'll bounce back quickly – you'll see some examples in a minute). After all, exams don't measure attitude, exactly: they measure your ability to answer the question. For that, you need some knowledge. But without attitude, how do you acquire knowledge? Painfully. Laboriously. Traumatically. Tearfully. Angrily. Resentfully.

EXAMS ARE YOUR FRIEND

Some lucky so-and-so's are born or bred with an incredibly liberated attitude. They are so free that they wouldn't recognise themselves in any of the four statements in that quiz. For them, every statement would be 'False'. Look back at your own answers to the quiz: how free are you?

Don't worry if the statements rang 'True' for you: it's perfectly possible to change your attitude. In fact, you can practise doing that now in your exam preparation.

That's why, strange as it may seem, exams are not your enemy. They're your friend. They challenge you. And the best way to meet challenges is with emotional freedom. The most useful preparation you can do for your exams is to practise freeing up your attitude – particularly in the areas where you answered 'True' to the quiz.

Do that, and you'll find you start reaping many rewards, not just at school, but also far, far beyond. Not only will your academic performance undoubtedly be boosted, because you'll find it easier to revise, but you will also become more capable, more confident and enjoy your life more fully. Read on and you'll start to see what I mean.

The swot and the rabbit

I've seen pupils suffer terribly from exam pressure, to the point of total meltdown. Studies show that people under stress underperform to the point where they may start behaving quite stupidly. Under stress, highly intelligent people are as much at risk of becoming stupid as anyone else. And when it comes to revision, most people under too much stress tend to behave like 'swots' or 'rabbits'. Let's remember what we established earlier, that labels never describe people accurately since we are all capable of change. But let's just see whether either of these two identities describes the way you are behaving now.

ARE YOU BEING A SWOT?

You're a swot if you work long hours without breaks and feel that nothing is going in. You feel very worried all the time about your grades.

Unfortunately, swots often get praised for 'working hard'. This reinforces their destructive behaviour, especially as swots like to please and be praised.

With the techniques outlined in this guide, you may find that you can stop working 'hard' because you'll learn more, in less time.

ARE YOU BEING A RABBIT?

You're a rabbit if you freeze with terror and don't do a spot of work. When they are caught in the headlights of an oncoming car, rabbits don't run away. They're just paralysed by fear.

Rabbits often get called 'lazy' or 'unmotivated' (and a whole lot else besides) because, unlike swots, they don't look or act scared. They spend a lot of time doing displacement activities like surfing the Net, colouring in their timetables, or talking to their friends on the phone.

This guide will show you simple steps you can take to stop feeling overwhelmed by your workload.

THE SAME COIN

Of course, it's possible to be a swot some of the time, and at other times to behave like a rabbit. That's because swotting and freezing are opposite sides of the same coin. Swots and rabbits share in common a desperation for success. This desperation arises from pinning their sense of identity to their external accomplishments. To compensate for this lack of inner confidence, swots and rabbits think in extremes:

- I want to do the **best** I can
- I'm going to start working **as hard as possible**
- I haven't managed to do **anything** useful
- There's no point in doing **any** work so late in the year
- I might as well **give up** if I'm only going to get D
- I'll work **all day**
- I'll work **all weekend**
- I've got to get **As**
- I want to go to the **best** university

Some even set their hearts on becoming multi-millionaires, winning the supermodel competition, flying by Concorde, becoming stars...

There's nothing wrong with having ambition. Unfortunately, the ambitions of swots and rabbits are hard to fulfil because they're 'all-or-nothing'. Swots and rabbits tend not to like small goals. To make matters worse, they often feel that nothing less will do.

So, paradoxically, because of their overbearing need to succeed, swots and rabbits often set themselves up for failure. And even more unfortunately, when

failure hits them, these people may be particularly ill-equipped to deal with it because of their terror of becoming losers.

THE WINNER-LOSER MYTH

There is a widespread myth that the world is divided into two camps: the winners and the losers. Nothing could be further than the truth, because people are complex and capable of change (have I said this before?). However, swots and rabbits are sold on this winner-loser myth. They look upon failure as a death-sentence. If you recall, people who have a more liberated attitude understand failure to be part of the cycle of life. Failure provides an opportunity to learn. But swots and rabbits don't see failure like that. They fixate obsessively on results because they think that exams have the power to sort out the high achievers from the low achievers.

This is nonsense.

Plenty of people have succeeded in their careers despite poor academic performances. For instance, ex-education secretary Estelle Morris failed her A levels. She says this failure made her more determined in her life. Ex-Prime Minister John Major governed the country on three O-levels (that's GCSEs to you). Channel Four newsreader Jon Snow had to resit because he initially failed one A level out of two. (Later, he got kicked out of university.) My *Quick and Easy Guide to How to Stop Panicking and Start Learning* gives other examples of people, famous or ordinary, who prove, time and time again, what I alluded to earlier:

In the long run, attitude matters more than grades.

Oh, and by the way:

There are no winners and no losers in life – just different kinds of people.

If you've always believed that you needed good grades to prove you weren't a loser, what are you to do now? You've nothing left to worry about! You might even become so clear-headed that you finally get some useful revision done...

THE 'GOOD ENOUGH' PARADOX

As I said, there's nothing wrong with having ambition. You don't need good grades to prove you're a winner, but you might still want them. So, why not try aiming for 'good enough'? If you're a swot or a rabbit, you won't like the sound of that at first, but think about it: 'good enough' is a much safer way to go about studying. It gives you permission to value what you've achieved so far, rather than to rubbish what hasn't scored a top grade. It also enables you to set yourself achievable goals. For instance:

- Instead of aiming to be the best student and work all day, you can just aim to work well enough by doing a few hours a day – or whatever you can bear. And because people generally work more efficiently when they have a time limit, paradoxically, you'll probably do more useful work that way... and so get better grades.
- Instead of giving up on your revision because you think you've left it too late to get the best result in your exams, you can aim instead to get a good enough grade. And because people generally get started more easily when they aren't too daunted by their goals, again, you'll probably cut down on how much you procrastinate... and so get better grades.

It all boils down to a simple paradox that swots and rabbits really need to understand. You want the best? Lower your sights a bit. Then you won't be so stressed. Then you'll perform better.

Very ambitious and conscientious students, who put themselves under tremendous pressure to succeed, should lower their expectations significantly and aim for D, not A. Why? Because once they stop cramping their style with worries about outcomes, they can start working. The result? Good grades.

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

When do your exams start – in a week? Well, a week is long enough to do some useful work. You might not get A (but then again, you might); however,

perhaps that doesn't matter. Remember that plenty of people have succeeded in getting very good careers despite an unimpressive academic track record.

EXAMS HAVE LIMITED POWERS

Let's demystify exams for a moment and consider what they actually do. They score how you've answered the question. That's it. They don't state whether you're a winner or a loser. They don't have such powers. They don't predict your future – that depends much more on your attitude than on your exam results.

All you have to do is to acquire sufficient knowledge to answer the normal run of questions that arise in your subject. That involves practising past papers. End of story.

YOUR CAPABILITY IS UNLIMITED

You can learn, easily. Think how much knowledge you've already acquired in your lifetime. From the moment you learnt to hold up your own head (earlier, in fact) – you've been learning constantly. Now you can do quite sophisticated things, like recite all the names of the footballers in every team in the Championship. Your brain is vast. Scientists tell us that we only use a fraction of our memories. You will never, never run out of memory space. So – you can start filling it, easily. But... wisely. Here's how.

Organisational tactics

Read the following questions carefully and note how you react:

- Do you know what the dates are for your various exams?
- Exactly what topics are you going to be revising for each paper?
- When?

FACING THE MONSTER

If you felt slightly panicked reading these questions, then I'd say you need to be making some kind of timetable for yourself. Even a very loose plan will ensure that you do some regular work, never mind that you don't stick to it exactly (nobody does). It will take the stress and the feeling of helplessness out of exam revision. Working at random is incredibly stressful.

A monster you don't look at is far more frightening than one you face. But because timetables make people face the monster, swots and rabbits don't usually do them. They make excuses like:

- What's the point – I'll never stick to it.
- I don't work well to a timetable.
- Timetables don't work.

Or they draw up completely unrealistic timetables that chain them to their desks all day, and then... give up.

Well, I'm going to give you a very nice reason to draw up a timetable. But keep it secret! Your timetable is going to give one of your favourite things:

Time off !

Free time

One of the major purposes of timetabling is to ensure that you don't work too hard. Free time is as important as time spent working. Students suffer badly and get low marks from working too hard – a balance is best. Remember, it's not good to swot, even if you get lots of praise for working hard. The hard work might not pay off.

Yet students are remarkably reluctant to allow themselves free time (and this includes 'lazy', 'bad', 'unmotivated' students). They think that they should be working flat out. They have an idea that it has to be 'all or nothing'. Wrong!

CUTTING UP THE MONSTER IN TWO STEPS

There are two types of timetabling worth doing:

1. A **weekly timetable** ensures that you successfully juggle homework time, revision and free time through the week.
2. A **revision planner** helps you to decide what you're going to include in your revision.

Let's start with the first.

1 Weekly timetable

Take your weekly school timetable. At the risk of patronizing you, I'm going to suggest that you also take some of your favourite coloured pens. This is because your timetable needs to be not too ugly to look at.

TIMETABLING THE WEEK

- 1 ***Write out your lessons in one colour.***
- 2 ***Write out your homework time in a different colour. This will take some thought. Maybe you always get an essay for a Tuesday morning lesson, for instance. So, when is the best time to do it? Decide, and go through all your homework in this way.***
- 3 ***In a third colour, mark out the time you'd like to have off. You***

probably shouldn't be doing more than four hours' revision on any one day, and you also need at least one day off plus one afternoon off every week. Time off improves recall (as I'll explain later).

- 4 ***Use a fourth colour to timetable some short but frequent revision sessions around the time that's left (avoid timetabling long and heavy sessions which you'll never want to repeat).***

Note that I suggest marking out your free time **before** putting in your revision sessions. This is because revision can be an endless task and can swamp your free time if you let it. Hard though this may be to believe, the point of a timetable is to make you happy!

Is it realistic?

Check through your timetable and imagine living it day by day. Students often make the mistake of trying to do too much and then feel very disappointed in themselves. You mustn't make yourself feel bad. If you're not used to a scheme of work, expect to build up your timetable slowly, so start with small goals. Do whatever is necessary to give yourself a sense of achievement. This means setting goals that you can accomplish easily.

If you're stuck, find someone who can work it out with you – but not someone who'll put pressure on you to cram in lots of work. I normally spend about an hour with students on their timetables and we make adjustments in the days and weeks that follow. It takes time to get it right.

Here is what students tell me after they've started their new routine:

- I don't feel guilty any more whenever I'm not working.
- Well – to my surprise, I'm sticking to it and getting a lot of work done.
- Yeah.

2 **Revision Chart**

It takes courage to face exam deadlines, so be courageous. Take the revision chart at the back of this guide – or a blank calendar. Now take a deep breath and find that scrap of paper that you’ve got somewhere that tells you all your exam dates. If you’ve lost it, google your exam board (‘AQA’, ‘Oxford & Cambridge’, etc) and you’ll find all your exam dates online.

REVISION PLANNER

- 1 ***Put in your every exam. Use one colour per subject.***
- 2 ***Decide what topics you want to revise in the weeks leading up to your exams. Use the same colour codes. If you don’t know where to start, plan to revise for your last exam first. Make your tasks as varied as possible – e.g. Maths am, Art pm.***
- 3 ***Include some time each week – say, half an hour – to review what you’d revised the week before. (Read on and you’ll see why.)***

Here is what students tell me after they’ve drawn up a revision planner:

- I didn’t want to look at what exams were coming up, but now I’ve done it I can see it’s ok, I’ve got enough time to prepare.
- I’ve prioritised topics and that has really reduced my workload.
- Phew.

FIVE REVIEWS

Why make time to review? Well, research has shown that it takes, on average, **five** brief revisions, or reviews, before topics go into your long term memory. If you don’t make time to review what you’ve learnt, you’ll start to forget it very quickly. That means you’ll end up having to re-learn it, which is not only time-

consuming, but discouraging too. Fortunately, you can keep your knowledge at your fingertips if you follow this simple 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. Each review is brief – five or ten minutes.

You don't need to be a champion of organisation to achieve this: with regular review times in your timetable, you'll be looking through your notes and you'll know roughly what you need to refresh in your mind. Sometimes you won't even need your file: for instance, after you've learnt your notes once properly, you'll find that you can run them through your head the next day.

REWARDS, NOT PUNISHMENTS

I suggest that you think up ways of congratulating yourself for work done. This is something most students find hard to do, perhaps because they think they don't deserve anything for what they've achieved. Why not? If you're the kind of person who puts off working till the last minute, and you manage to do a couple of hours one evening as planned, then you deserve a reward.

Punishing yourself for work not done, for instance by staying in when you wanted to go out, will just make you miserable. And guess what? If you're miserable, you won't work.

Action, not anxiety

Max honestly wanted to do some work because he wanted to make the grade. However, something strange happened every time he sat at his desk. After getting out his file, piling his books around him, sharpening pencils, filling ink pens and generally making himself comfortable, his eyes would glaze over. He just could not get started! However hard he tried, his mind simply refused to switch itself on. Instead, a little voice from inside would pipe up:

- I'm lazy
- I don't care if I get a low grade
- I don't want to do this work now, I can do it later
- Homework's boring
- I hate my teachers, they're always giving me work
- I want to watch Eastenders. It's on in 20 minutes
- There's no point in doing any work in just 20 minutes
- I'm hungry

We all react like this to a greater or lesser degree when there's work to do. Even the greatest masters have to psych themselves up to 'knuckle down'.

AN HONEST CONTRACT

Here's a way of producing action, not anxiety. Imagine that you have a split personality: one is you the adolescent, the other is you as a small child. That child part of you wants distractions (food, TV etc). If the child doesn't get them, he or she will start yelling. The sentences above express some of the things a child might say. That's because children don't think long term. Remember, though, that productive people do.

To help you develop a more long-term attitude to your work, you could try a little negotiation, as this works well even with small children. Why not suggest an attractive deal that suits both parties? For instance, you could work for 20 minutes (or less – whatever feels bearable) and then take a 5-minute break. That way you'll be able to get started.

At the end of that 20 minutes, stop working. Even if you're just getting into your work and you really want to carry on, take the break that was part of the deal. Why? Well, would you negotiate a second contract with someone who had broken the first?

When you get back to your work after your break, cover the page and quickly recap everything you learnt. Uncover, and check.

This method has many benefits:

- It gets you started quickly and painlessly.
- It offers breaks as regular deadlines to focus the mind on getting the work done.
- It ensures you keep revising as you learn.

OH NO! IT'S BREAK TIME!

You'd think students would leap at any opportunity to take breaks. I have found the opposite to be the case. Here are some typical objections:

"I simply can't afford to take breaks!"

Oh yes you can. The 'I'm going to sit here until I've completed the syllabus' is a hopelessly inefficient revision strategy. It gives no sense of urgency – just a sense that the next three hours or so are going to be mindlessly dull. Enough to drive any inner child to distraction! Pages will simply get stared at... and any work will, at best, only get done in the last half hour. You will never want to repeat the experience.

To work efficiently, have a stop time before starting.

“Why, breaks waste precious learning time!”

On the contrary, short breaks help you to learn more. First of all, they cut up your workload into smaller pieces, creating more beginnings and endings. That’s useful because we remember beginnings and endings better than all the stuffing in the middle – so taking breaks will improve your overall recall.

Second, although you may not have noticed it, your brain needs breaks to file all the information being piled into it. You may be having a cup of tea, but your brain isn’t taking time off: it’s sorting and saving. Sleep provides one opportunity for your brain to process information (scientists have had brainwaves upon waking up). Breaks provide the other. Working for more than forty minutes without taking a break is likely to make you daydream, which is your brain’s somewhat sneaky way of achieving the same result.

Studies show that after 40 minutes’ revision, people start to lose concentration, though they may not notice it.

So long revision sessions aren’t good for your exams. Nor are they good for your body. Your shoulders will hunch up and reduce blood flow to the brain. Your back may ache. Your eyes need to focus on long-distance objects from time to time or they will strain and your eyesight will suffer. Breaks are an opportunity for you to draw your attention away from your mind and back into your body.

Take a five or ten-minute break every 40 minutes when you revise, even if you’re pushed for time.

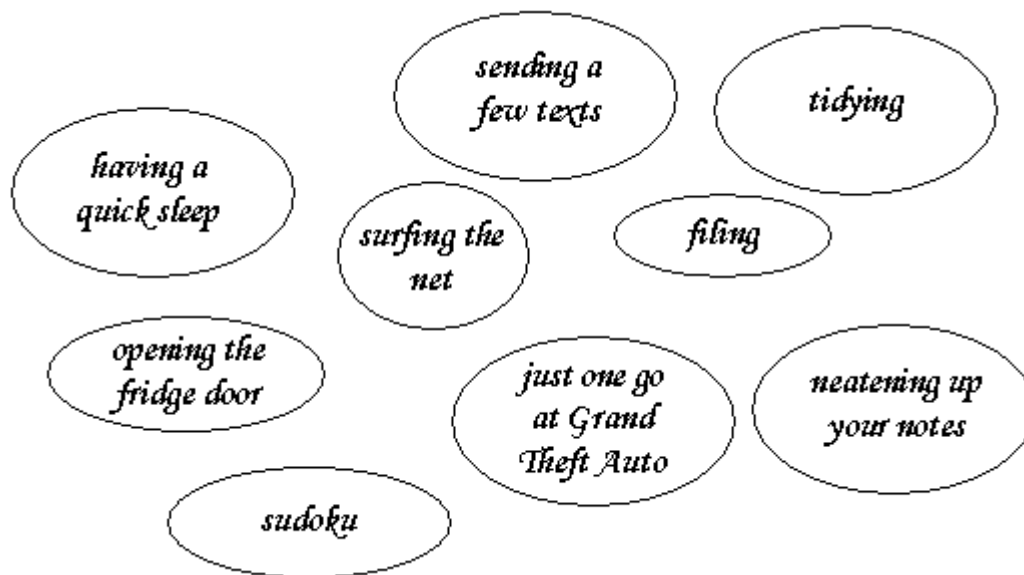
“It’s impossible to stop in the middle of things!”

Actually, this is a good time to stop: you’ll be much more motivated to get back to your work if all you have to do is just finish something off; your mind will also be fresher, giving you a better overview when you return. The author Roald Dahl used to force himself to take breaks every time he reached a cliffhanger. There may not be many cliffhangers in your biology but you can still apply the principle, which is to stop when the going is good.

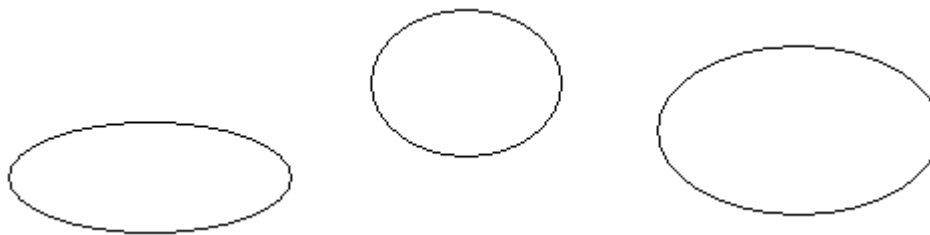
Take a break even at an interesting point.

“I’m never disciplined enough to make it a short break!”

It’s true that it’s very easy to sabotage a timetable. Breaktime activities that might be worth resisting include:



I’m sure you’ve got a few tricks of your own. You can nail them down here...



Give yourself time and space to get into new working habits. You may need to persevere as it can take nine repetitions for a new action to become a habit. So don’t expect to get it right first time – instead, aim to keep getting back on track.

The 'Honest Contract' suggested earlier may also help you to keep control of your time off.

MOODY BREAKS

So far I've suggested a contract that involves working for 20 minutes, followed by a five-minute break. When you have lots of heavy learning to do involving much learning of facts and figures, that's quite a good way to keep going without losing concentration. After your break, it's useful to spend a minute or two reviewing what you learnt before the break: that's the first of your five recommended reviews out of the way.

But you can work differently. You can do 40 minutes' work followed by a ten-minute break. Or if you're very fed up with your work, you can do ten minutes' work followed by a 15-minute break. Some people might protest that no one gets any work done that way, but then they've never put themselves in the shoes of a student who's so sick of learning that he or she can't bear to look at a book for more than ten minutes at a time.

So there aren't any rules about how often your breaks should be, or how frequent – as long as you're not working for more than 40 minutes without breaking, you're likely to be doing well.

So... you've done a timetable, you've prioritised your revision, you're taking regular breaks – great. Now let's address the actual quality of your revision.

Skilled revision

BE CHOOSY

What are you revising from? Your class notes? A textbook? The Internet?

There's no point trying to learn from a source that doesn't make sense to you or that's incomplete. Nor in using your friend's notes if you can't really read the handwriting. Or learning a whole chapter (or book!) if only smatterings of it relate to your exam syllabus. It's worth seeking out a source that you find really helpful for your purposes.

Talking of your syllabus, do you remember where you put that flimsy piece of paper? You need it to guide your revision: it tells you what major topics you need to brush up on for the exam.

If you've lost it, google your exam board ('AQA', 'Oxford & Cambridge', etc). Not only can you download your syllabus online, you can also print out past papers and even some examiners' mark schemes. These are useful sources of information on how to score points in your particular exams.

START AT THE END

Do you open a textbook and start reading from Page 1, Line 1? Skim through it instead: you may find a summary at the end of the book, or the chapter. Indexes and lists of contents are unbeatable for looking up key points.

GET ACTIVE

By what method do you revise? For instance...

- Do you re-read your notes?
- Do you learn them by covering up the page and trying to recall them?
- Do ask someone to test you on what you've learnt?
- Do you copy things out in neat?

Work out whether you do active or passive revision. Active revision involves engaging your brain. Passive means making, at best, an uncreative, mechanical effort that won't get you anywhere at all but is tempting precisely because it is so mindless.

Passive revision will really let you down in an exam. You may even find you can't remember a thing despite having spent hours at your desk.

Passive	Re-arranging
	Reading
	Copying out (e.g. onto the computer)
	Highlighting
	Making notes, comments, summaries in the margin
	Speaking or writing summaries (e.g. on index cards)
	Doing spider graphs
	Adding charts and drawings to summarise or make sense of text
	Getting someone to test you
	Teaching the notes/textbook in detail (e.g. to an imaginary listener)
Active	Doing past papers



Do you love working to music?

Fine, but keep it background. If you know when the track comes to an end, you're doing active listening and passive work.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH HIGHLIGHTING?

A highlighter is a great favourite of most students because it requires no effort at all other than to realise: 'Ah – important bit. Must learn that some day.'

That's not very useful at all. Better to consider why it's important.

One way to do that is to make new notes and comments in the margin as you revise, as doing this forces you to think about the content. That's the first, and sometimes, the only necessary step towards learning it.

For instance, in History you read that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour in 1941 and that the Americans were caught by surprise. This attack prompted America to enter World War II. Don't get the highlighter out. Write a comment. Anything that makes sense to you will do: "YANKS CAUGHT NAPPING" or "LAST STRAW" or "JAPANESE-PEARL-WW2" are a few examples. So always read with a pencil in hand, I'd say.

A GOOD PICTURE SAVES A THOUSAND WORDS

You can also draw the events. You don't have to be artistic: in fact a very bad drawing can be extremely memorable. Sketch in whatever way you like to make facts and events stand out, and your notes and textbooks will come to life. That means that you'll remember them better. **Colours, drawings, charts, jokes, pretend headlines, cartoons** represent what you see in your mind's eye, better than words. Your notes, by the way, don't have to make sense to anyone else; in fact, the more original and personal they are, the better you'll remember them. So don't waste any time making your class notes look very neat and tidy or copying them onto the computer.

INDEX CARDS

Many students like using index cards. That means writing summaries of topics or of parts of topics onto cards, and in this way a frighteningly large topic can be divided into sizeable chunks. Index cards are quite small so they're easy to pull out of a pocket and revise at any time. They're good for equations, charts, points of grammar, quotes, definitions, spellings and other such things. Add a few drawings, colours and symbols too if you can.

MINDMAPS

Mindmaps offer yet another way to summarise information on a piece of paper, starting with a central concept and branching outwards. Personally, I prefer

them to index cards as they're quicker to produce, involving key words only. However, many students complain that 'mindmaps don't work'. My experience is that some people learn mindmapping best in a one-on-one setting.

If you've never seen a mindmap before, and would like to try your hand at it, I include a sample mindmap at the end of this guide, on major problems associated with living in a capital city (a theme we will return to when we look at essay-planning, which mindmaps can also be used for.) Try doing a mindmap of your own on a different theme, but if it's your first try, don't start with your revision notes. Start with something simpler, such as 'My hobbies' or 'The Things In Life I Most Hate' (yes, yes, Exams can be your first branch. And don't forget Spinach.)

For successful mindmapping, try to follow these three rules:

1. Write just one word per branch. This forces you to summarise.
2. Lines should flow to and from each other. Gaps between branches make the mindmap less fluid and less legible.
3. Use colours and draw pictures and colours wherever possible to stimulate the famous right side of your brain. This makes your mindmap much easier to memorise.

The dreaded essay

If you want to write good essays in your exams (or indeed in your coursework) you need to learn to plan. Oh yes.

Planning doesn't take very much time, yet the majority of students cry out that they haven't possibly got the time to do a plan, particularly in exam conditions. This means that in an exam they are willing to leave it all to fate. In order to save themselves five minutes of planning effort, they are willing to endure 45 minutes (at least) of the most stressful and dangerous kind of writing, the kind where they make it up as they go along, hoping it will all hang together – the kind of work which is guaranteed to get them a lower grade. The student who refuses to plan is quietly making the following points:

- I'm going to say what I like about this topic, never mind the question.
- You'll have to pick out the relevant bits yourself – that's if you can find them.
- I think I've digressed. But I'm not sure – I don't really understand the question.
- I won't paragraph because I don't want to consider what categories my ideas fall into. In fact I might make my whole essay one lovely, long paragraph.
- Any important points I might make will be brief. But, to compensate for this, I'll make my most banal points occupy pages on end.
- I reserve the right to change my mind halfway through and make my essay about something else that's a bit easier.
- I'm bound to contradict myself because I like to work things out as I go along. You don't mind my rambling stream of consciousness, do you? It's rather poetic.

- I refuse to answer the question. But I'll make it look like I'm always about to.
- My essay will end so abruptly, you'll look everywhere for a missing last page. Gotcha!
- Quotes? Dates? Oooops.

Yes, planning is an effort. It requires thinking now, not later. You need to work out first of all what the question is asking. Then, to decide what you're going to answer and in what order. If you don't do that, your answer will probably be a mess.

Therefore, it makes sense to plan **especially** in exam conditions where you have no time to redraft.

ALL RIGHT, ALL RIGHT, I'LL PLAN! ER... HOW DO YOU PLAN, THEN?

If you're not used to planning essays, ask your teacher for confirmation that you're doing it properly. Planning takes a bit of practice. But first, an example to help you get started.

Here's a really good plan. The question was: **"Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of living in a capital city."**

Introduction	Talk about pollution etc
Main	Say why capital cities are good Say why capital cities are bad
Conclusion	Capital cities are good and bad

Actually, I was just testing you. I was hoping you'd see that this plan is absolutely useless. (You don't believe that students would ever write this? Believe me – they do.)

So what's wrong with it?

- 1 It doesn't answer the question. This asks about **living** in a capital city.
- 2 It's not precise. Words like '**etc**', '**say why**' and '**talk about**' are too vague.
- 3 It doesn't inspire. There's no information in it, indeed almost nothing that will help you write the essay.

This plan is indicative of someone in a horrific hurry to start writing.

But... **Examiners don't actually want you to WRITE. They want you to THINK. Writing is just the medium by which they can get hold of your thoughts.**

Now for a better plan to the same question.

Introduction	<p>Define capital city (CC) – seat of government, no.1 city</p> <p>Question relevant cos CCs getting larger – out of control?</p> <p>18C, Johnson: 'He who is tired of London is tired of life' true today?</p>
Main	<p>Benefits of living in CC</p> <p>Opportunities – careers (why people left country)</p> <p>Services – best shops/open longest. Harrods.</p> <p>Culture/theatre/museums</p> <p>Ethnic, multi-racial (sometimes big problem though e.g. Brixton/Greenwich racism & violence^{***})</p> <p>Increasing problems</p> <p>Violence^{***} – suburbs, poor housing</p> <p>Jobless/homeless</p> <p>Pollution – cars/rivers/noise/traffic/litter</p> <p>No space. Crowding. Tourism.</p>

Conclusion

Suited to some who love city life but many now deserting to countryside so need action to make CCs less polluted & violent. London Mayor. Cycle/bus lanes/congestion charge a start. Benefits for poor; education. Future of CCs shaky without strong leadership.

(*** indicates a connection between points. You can draw this connection in your essay and/or use it as a hinge to connect one paragraph with the next.)

This plan took only five minutes to write. (Mindmaps also make quick essay plans, as you'll see if you turn to the end of this guide.)

A FEW PLANNING TRICKS

- Blank your mind of what you've learnt, just while you're working out what the question is asking you to do. I don't care if you memorised all kinds of impressive data the night before! The temptation to reproduce your notes mindlessly must be resisted. Think of yourself as a slave to the question and carry out only and exactly the instructions in the question. If you have a gap in your knowledge, try to bridge it with common sense, working it out logically; don't throw in any old scraps of information in the desperate hope that your reader will be lenient. So really think about the question: it helps to circle instructions and key words like this:

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of living in a capital city.

Or rewrite the question in your own words on a separate sheet of paper (e.g. 'What are the good and the bad aspects of living in a city like Paris or London?'). This paraphrasing effort should focus your mind.

- If you don't understand the meaning of question instructions like 'Discuss' or 'Evaluate', then you can download my 4-page *Quick and Easy Guide to Understanding Question Instructions in Assignments and Exams*. A brief summary is also included in the Appendix to this guide.
- You can leave the first parts of your plan blank (e.g. your introduction) and do them last.
- Give yourself lots of paper space so that you can easily insert extra points.
- Don't write sentences, just enough key words for your plan to make sense to you.
- Sort out ideas into major groups, which in turn will be a new paragraph in your essay.
- Any questions in your plan need to be answered in your plan.
- Develop your ideas by asking yourself, 'Why?'
- Use quotes and/or dates and explain what they mean or why they're relevant.
- Imagine telling someone your essay, to check that it flows properly, like a good storyline; i.e. that one point leads naturally to another. If not, take the time to rearrange your points. It's time well spent that will ensure you don't stall in the middle of writing the essay.

THE TYRANNY OF INTRODUCTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

It can be hard writing introductions and conclusions. Remember: you don't have to do them first: you can plan them last, after you've worked out your main points. After all, it's tricky to introduce something you haven't yet worked out in your mind.

Introductions and conclusions aren't necessary in all subjects and it's worth checking with your teachers to see if you need to spend time on them or not. For instance, if you're doing philosophy, you may be advised to go straight to the point.

As for how to do them, there's no set way, but here are some useful ideas (and you can see a few in action if you refer back to the capital cities plan):

Introductions: ask yourself, 'Why bother with this question?'

- Explain why the question is interesting/important. Maybe something has happened that makes it relevant/topical.
- Explain the main issues involved.
- Set the question in its historical/geographical/other relevant context.
- Define words or ideas in the question that are subject to debate.
- Quote.
- Explain how you're going to answer the question. But do be careful with this for two reasons: first, it may make you repeat yourself and make your essay quite dull; second, you may be tempted to write "I" and some subjects don't favour the use of such a personal approach in essay-writing (if in doubt, ask your teacher).
- Paraphrase the question.
- Ask a related question that leads to the main points.

Conclusions: ask yourself, 'So what?'

- Answer the question!
- Consider what may happen in the future.
- Does it throw light on the question to mention other systems/countries?
- Give your opinion if you've been holding it back (but beware of "I" as explained above).
- Give whatever is the accepted or current view on the question.
- Consider the implications of agreeing or disagreeing with the question. Maybe it changes the conclusions you draw about a character or event, or maybe action needs to be taken.

- Quote.
- Answer the question that you asked in the introduction.
- Sum up what you've said in the essay. (This can be dull in an arts subject.)

Strategies for exam failure

By now you're probably getting a little weary of receiving so much positive, grade-boosting advice from myself and countless other well-intentioned adults. Aagh! So, for a change, here are some tips on how to fail your exams. Tried and tested.

- Make sure you've done no past papers beforehand. Avoid all timed exam practice in your revision.
- Throw a wild party the night before your exams. Try to get no sleep at all.
- Be late for the exam and turn up very flustered.
- Get angry with the exam and give up.
- Believe fervently that getting A in your exam is your only life goal, that you're a star if you get A* and a failure if you fail, and consequently make yourself fall apart as part of your preparation.
- Convince yourself that everyone else in the exam room is a competitor, and is writing more, and better, than you. There's no surer way to start despairing early.
- Start writing immediately. In fact, make a point of being the first to start writing. You'll feel better; everyone else in the room will see you and panic; and as you'll have spent no time choosing the best question or planning your answer, you'll be sure to write lots of rubbish.
- Forget about the time. Don't have a watch you can check, or if it's out on your desk, ignore it. This is an excellent way of throwing away lots of marks.

- Forget to turn the pages. This technique has been tried by the crème de la crème (that means the best) of students and it's guaranteed to prevent you from seeing the questions you've prepared.
- Write out the questions in full instead of just their number to waste more time.
- Don't plan your answers. Just go with the flow. It might be your lucky day.
- Don't move on if you get stuck: let whatever's perplexing you waste you lots of time when you could be getting on with another question and coming back to it later with a fresh approach.
- Do really difficult questions first so that you run out of time for the easy ones that you could otherwise have done very quickly and earned marks for.
- Waste lots of time perfecting a few answers, just to show how good you can be. This will leave you no time to clock up easy, basic marks on other questions, which means you'll lose points but in a dignified way.
- Ignore or contradict the number of marks per question: for instance, spend lots of time on questions not worth very many marks, while producing very thin answer to question worth lots of marks.
- Contradict question instructions. Give only one side when asked to 'discuss', show similarities only when asked to 'contrast' and elaborate when asked to be brief. That will keep the examiner on his toes.
- Misinterpret the question. Mistake it for a look-a-like question that's in your revision notes. You'll probably fail outright.
- Completely leave out a question or two: that's bound to get you a fail.
- Don't check anything. If you insist on checking your work, then at least make sure to do no more than glance over it approvingly. Don't look for mistakes – you might find some. The most efficient way of checking, which you must avoid at all costs, is to have a checklist and to go

through your work point by point. But be careful because this method carries the risk of many extra marks.

- Make excellent use of spare time by leaving early. In fact, why not be the first to leave! That will really make everyone jumpy. Turn round before you leave and sneer at those who are staying till the end. They're trying to expand an idea, go through a working again, add a quote, check the dates, the spelling, the legibility, number their pages, or add a list of bullet points where they haven't got time to finish properly; but they're missing the opportunity of being useful somewhere outside the exam hall.

Are you having a hard time?

Although I've given you a good deal of information on how to revise effectively, you might still be having a hard time in the run-up to your exams. This may be for reasons that lie outside the scope of this guide, and so if reading these pages doesn't make you feel better, you may need to speak to someone who can help you with your particular concern. However, a few major reasons for anxiety are listed here.

DREADING EXAMS

Students give plenty of reasons for dreading exams, but here are the standard ones:

- I won't be prepared enough.
- I've failed before – why not again?
- I'm worried I'll get a horrible paper.
- I'm worried I'll get stuck even though I've worked hard enough.
- I'm worried I won't have enough time.
- I'm worried I'll fail.
- Listening to classmates worrying makes me worry even more.

Some things, like what paper you get, you can't control; but others you can. If exams frighten you because you're unprepared, then you have a problem you can solve. Therefore, spend time addressing the issue of timetabling and revision technique... and learn to plan your essays.

If you've done that and you still think you hate or desperately fear exams, think rationally for a minute. What do you think an exam is going to do to you?

Remember that an exam has limited powers. If you've applied the principles in this guide and you still feel very worried about your exam performance, I

suggest that you read my *Quick and Easy Guide to How to Stop Panicking and Start Learning at School and University*. This offers a step-by-step analysis of why you can stop worrying about grades. Remember too that once you stop worrying, you will naturally perform better.

You can also download my *Quick and Easy Guide to Boosting Your Studies and Your Morale with Emotional Freedom Techniques*. EFT is a very effective stress-busting technique and I use it with many of my students. It's easy to learn, costs nothing and often works in minutes.

NAG, NAG, NAG!

The revision season introduces serious conflict into many a household! Perhaps you feel, like many students, that your parents are constantly on your back, watching your every move and nagging far too much. Yet, generally, people nag because they care. Many adults over-value grades, overlooking the importance of attitude. In your parents are worried about your grades, they too might benefit from reading this guide, or my *Quick and Easy Guide to How to Stop Worrying and Start Learning at School and University*.

Parents often nag because they fear that unless they did, their children would never do a spot of work. Unfortunately, this creates a vicious circle. Being nagged can make people feel ultra-rebellious, because it removes the personal incentive that's the most useful spur to revision. So the student who feels nagged often makes a point of not working, which makes matters worse as it only increases the nagging. It's like a nasty game that neither party enjoys one bit, and can cause many tears and slammed doors, but which keeps going on and on.

Games only work, though, if both parties play them: all it takes is for you to stop playing the game and it will come to an end. Therefore, if you're being nagged, you should, in principle, be able to break the pattern, by communicating how it feels to be in the situation you're facing. Try to avoid yelling, "You always say a, b, c and I can't stand it!" as it can be counterproductive at a time when, if anything, you need help and support. A

helpful way of rallying the support you need is the “x, y, z” method used in Non-Violent Communication, short for: “When you did x I felt y and I’d rather you did z – are you willing to do that?” “When you said I was lazy I felt upset and I’d rather you noticed the times when I do work and encouraged me – are you willing to do that?” Spelling out how you feel is useful, as many parents can be unaware of their teenager’s inner conflicts, especially if their teenager happens to be a ‘rabbit’ who appears to be totally unconcerned about exams.

It also helps to inform your parents that you need to take regular breaks in order to learn better, and explain why time off is important too. Many adults believe that students should put in a nine-to-five day – and indeed, if you’re at school, you’re already doing that. When you’re at home revising, it’s madness to try and work that long. Revision is emotionally and intellectually much more demanding than a desk job: if you’re working effectively, you shouldn’t need to be putting in such long hours. I don’t recommend revising more than four hours a day. As I mentioned earlier, you should also have at least one and a half days off every week when you don’t think about work at all.

Bear in mind too that the importance of revision is also often exaggerated in people’s minds: if you’ve been learning well enough through the year, then your revision need only involve brushing up on subjects you don’t know so well. No need for an intensive fortnight’s cramming.

So even if people keep encouraging you to work ‘hard’, remember that it’s effective work, and not hard work, that scores points in exams. If they say that they don’t mind what you do ‘as long as you do your best’, understand too that this may unintentionally put quite a lot of pressure on you, as ‘your best’ is an all-or-nothing concept that suggests working an unlimited amount of time. A little pressure can be a good thing, but excess pressure is the most common reason for exam underperformance: once the pressure is off, you’ll find you can work more freely.

Sometimes parents need to be told what to do! They want to help, but they don’t know how. Perhaps you can suggest a few practical things that your

mother or father stop doing or start doing to help you revise – keeping the house calm, organising a space in the house where you can work, reminding you to take breaks, making you good food and so on. Talking of good food...

Diet and lifestyle info

You may not realise it, but your diet and lifestyle can make the difference between feeling stressed or calm in the run-up to your exams. To some degree this depends on your levels of sensitivity. I mention here the normal run of foods, drinks and also illegal substances that many young people take. The following information does not cover all known short term or long term ill effects of harmful substances, nor indeed does it list all possible benefits of healthy substances. It merely offers a short and perhaps rather startling account of how different approaches could hinder or help you in the exam season.

UNHEALTHY

Soft drinks

Soft drinks, fizzy drinks and cola drinks, can have harmful effects on your mood and on your academic performance, in three ways.

Firstly, many of them, particularly the 'Diet' drinks, contain artificial sweeteners, and these are all controversial. For instance, Aspartame (also known as Canderel, Nutrasweet, Equal, or E951) converts to formaldehyde in your body. Can't picture what formaldehyde is? Think of the pickling liquid in those jars of dead lizards in your biology lab. The health implications of Aspartame are such that Dr Roberts, author of *Aspartame Disease: An Ignored Epidemic* connects today's increased world-wide rates of Alzheimer's Disease to this substance: "I have observed severe intellectual deterioration associated with the use of aspartame products. It was usually manifest as great difficulty in reading and writing, obvious problems with memory and grossly impaired orientation to time, place and person."

Even switching to the sugared versions of these drinks, in order to avoid artificial sweeteners like Aspartame, can cause problems: sugar, in high

doses, can lower immunity (making you more prone to illness) and can cause hyperactivity, memory and concentration problems. And many canned drinks contain large amounts of sugar: the average cola drink, for instance, contains ten teaspoons of sugar.

Secondly, many soft drinks and cola drinks contain other harmful additives, such as caramel colouring (E150) which disrupts attention by disturbing neurotransmitter function, and phosphoric acid (E338) which strips the brain of hydrochloric acid, an acid essential in absorbing nutrients such as magnesium and calcium. Magnesium deficiency causes learning disabilities and restlessness; and calcium deficiency causes anxiety and neurosis.

Tartrazine (E102) in fizzy orange inhibits the absorption of zinc, causing irritability and mood swings.

Thirdly, many soft drinks, fizzy drinks and cola drinks contain between 34 and 150mg of caffeine per can, the equivalent of nearly two cups of brewed coffee. (A cup of coffee can contain, depending on brewing method, anything from 80mg up to 175mg of caffeine. A cup of tea contains 60mg of caffeine. A 40g bar of dark chocolate averages 30mg. An energy drink: upwards of 300mg.) Caffeine is an addictive psychoactive substance, which means that, like all drugs, it affects the way your brain functions. In excess, it causes headaches or migraines. Withdrawal from caffeine can also produce headaches or migraines.

What's the safe limit of caffeine for an adolescent? There aren't enough studies to determine this figure; but my guess is that one soft drink contains enough caffeine for one day. Certainly, a 5-year 2003 Israeli study by Hering-Hanit and Gadoth of children and adolescents suffering from headaches found the cause of their problem to be that they were drinking 1.5 litres of cola drinks per day, averaging nearly 200mg of caffeine daily. That may sound like a lot, but 1.5 litres is only just over four cans a day. These young people needed to be weaned off their cola-drinking habit very slowly in order to avoid withdrawal symptoms.

And a 1981 study of coffee-drinking college students, by US researchers Gilliland and Andress, found that drinking upwards of 200mg of caffeine a day – shall we say two cups of coffee – raises levels of anxiety and depression. High coffee consumers who drink 400mg or more of caffeine a day – shall we say four cups – manifest relatively high levels of psychophysiological disorders and relatively low academic performance.

So if 200mg of caffeine – the equivalent of two cups of coffee/four cups of tea/four cans of cola – are enough to provoke anxiety and depression in adults, I would assume that caffeine has harmful effects on younger people in even smaller doses.

Junk food

Crisps, chewing gums, tinned foods, take-aways, delicatessen items like sausages and salami, ready meals, just-add-water meals and other junk foods contain large amounts of MSG, or monosodium glutamate. This is a flavour enhancer that whets the appetite and is added to low quality or old food because it deceives your taste buds into thinking the food is much more delicious and fresher than it really is. Scientists don't really know how it does all this, but it masks bitterness, 'off' flavours, sourness, and the tinny taste of canned foods. Unfortunately it's probably responsible for all manner of reported adverse effects (many of which are played down by the food industry) which range from the typical 'MSG headache' to heart palpitations, alongside memory difficulties and cumulative brain damage.

MSG goes by many other names such as 'E621', 'hydrolysed (vegetable) protein', 'textured protein', 'glutamate' and 'yeast extract'. Avoiding MSG means reading labels quite carefully on what you buy. If you eat out, it's hard to avoid MSG altogether as it's contained in the sauces and stocks that restaurants and food outlets put together from powders, though many Chinese restaurants are willing not to add it if you ask.

Aside from MSG, junk food contains other additives notorious for causing problems in people, particularly young people. These are Amaranth (E123) and Sunset Yellow (E110), which strip the body of zinc and magnesium, causing restlessness and anxiety.

Highly processed foods such as cakes, pastries, biscuits, fried fast foods and battered foods also contain trans fatty acids. These are implicated in learning difficulties ranging from dyslexia to autism.

Alcohol

The harmful aspects of getting drunk are often played down in adolescent social circles, yet did you know that alcohol kills brain cells? It does it in a dose-related way (the more you take of it, the more brain cells you harm). This has particular repercussions for the under-24s as, until that age, the brain is still growing! Regular binge drinking in the under-24s (five beers or five glasses of wine) has been found to shrink the hippocampus, one of the brain's major learning and memory centres, by ten per cent, and it's not yet known whether the brain can repair the damage. The part of the brain that develops last and is therefore at greatest risk of being stunted by alcohol is the prefrontal cortex. This governs 'mature' behaviour: it controls impulsive urges, regulates the emotions, and enables moral reasoning.

What's more, under-24s who binge on alcohol on a regular basis have been found to perform less well in vocabulary and memory tests. Statistics suggest that they perform less well in employment, education and are less able to take financial responsibility for themselves or family members. Alcohol has also been found to cause depression.

Cannabis

Like alcohol, cannabis is also perceived as a harmless drug, but it was 20 to 30 times weaker in the 70s than it is now – a 'spliff' today can contain as much as 260mg of cannabis and yet it takes only 0.7mg of cannabis to produce an observable effect in the brain. (By contrast, it takes 2,000mg of alcohol to

produce an observable effect.) It can cause irreversible changes in the brain after three years – changes greater than those produced by three years' alcohol abuse (according to research cited by Professor Hardin Jones in his book *Sensual Drugs*).

Although cannabis has few short-term effects, other than to dull the mind and produce a feeling of relaxation, the active ingredient in cannabis, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), takes so long to be eliminated from the body that its mind-dulling effects can persist for up to a month.

THC and its by-products certainly inhibit intellectual performance and general co-ordination, though this impairment is not noticeable to the cannabis user. Five studies ranging from 1974 to 1991, collated by NHS healthcare journal *Bandolier*, tested pilots using flight simulators and found that, following a modest use of cannabis, their ability to learn and to memorise and their motor skills suffered measurably, though they did not realise it, for at least 24 hours.

Nicotine

Nicotine is a poison of which eight drops will kill a horse! So although smoking gives the illusion of well-being, a stress response is in fact triggered when a smoker lights up. Adrenaline is released, blood sugar levels rise, and the pulse quickens. A smoker's heart beats 10,000 times more per day than that of a non-smoker.

Smoking weakens cognitive processes because the carbon monoxide gas that is inhaled by smokers starves the brain of oxygen. Memory tests show that non-smokers out-perform smokers.

A 2007 US report by Columbia University, gathering scientific data on how smoking, alcohol and illegal drug abuse in adolescence connects with addiction and mental health, found that teenagers who smoke are nine times likelier to meet the medical criteria for past year alcohol abuse or dependence and 13 times likelier to meet the medical criteria for abuse and dependence on an illegal drug than teenagers who don't smoke. In other words, smoking can

possibly start an unhealthy ball rolling. The CASA analysis also found that among teens aged 12 to 17, twice as many smokers as non-smokers suffered from symptoms of depression in the past year. Adolescents who reported smoking from a young age were more likely to experience serious feelings of hopelessness, depression and worthlessness in the past year.

The report also notes that smoking at a young age is related to panic attacks, general anxiety disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder.

HEALTHY

Brain foods

Your brain is the greediest organ in your body. Feeding your brain means eating whole foods, organic wherever possible as organic food is richer in nutrients and poorer in toxic chemicals. A good diet is based on starchy foods like bread, potatoes, rice and pasta and contains moderate amounts of dairy products and meat, fish or vegetarian alternatives. It also includes five portions a day of fruit and/or vegetables in order to meet your daily vitamin and mineral requirements. Fresh, frozen, dried and tinned all count towards your five a day, and both juice and pulses can count for one portion a day (but no more).

Teenage girls need to watch their iron levels as iron levels can plummet with growth spurts, menstruation and poor diet. Research in Australia by the Iron Advisory Panel has found these three factors to cause iron deficiency in one in nine teenage girls... Low iron levels can make you too tired to concentrate. Non-animal sources of iron are dark leafy greens, whole foods, cereals, pulses dried fruits and nuts. Vitamin C aids iron absorption. The tannin in tea inhibits it, so it's not advisable to drink tea straight after meals.

Eating a protein-rich breakfast within half an hour of waking stabilises your glucose (blood sugar) levels. Your brain needs to be fuelled by a steady supply of glucose, so it's not a good idea to skip meals. A mid-afternoon snack also helps. Glucose is a sugar, but don't imagine that sugary snacks or fizzy drinks do the trick. Research conducted in 2003 by Barbara Stewart from the

University of Ulster in the UK found that children whose breakfasts consisted in these high-sugar foods and drinks performed at the level of an average 70-year old in tests of memory and attention.

Water

Dehydration can lead to poor concentration, tiredness, headaches and can impair mental function. Just a two per cent loss in body water can reduce energy levels by 20 per cent. What's more, you can be dehydrated and yet not at all thirsty. Thirstlessness is one of the symptoms of dehydration!

The general recommendation is to drink one litre of good quality, plain water daily for every 50 pounds of body weight. Juices don't count as part of this regime. For every cup of tea or coffee, you need an additional glass of water, as tea and coffee are diuretics which make you urinate more and so dehydrate you. Fizzy drinks and cola drinks also dehydrate you. So does alcohol and, of course, exercise and hot weather. Dr F. Batmanghelidj, author of *Your Body's Many Cries for Water: A Revolutionary Natural Way to Prevent Illness and Restore Good Health* believes most Western diseases, including depression, to be caused by dehydration.

Sleep

The minimum recommendation of eight hours a night is important not just for your body, but for your mind too: according to neuropsychologist Stanley Coren, at the University of British Columbia, Canada, losing one hour's sleep out of every eight reduces your IQ by one point the following day: "For every additional hour lost, you drop two points. And it accumulates. So if you cheat on sleep by two hours a night over a five-day week, you've lost 15 points. If you take the normal run of people – who start with an IQ of 100 – by Friday they're borderline retarded'. Even those with high IQs underperform: 'Short-term memory goes, along with flexible thinking. You talk in clichés. Nor can you hold complex matters in your head or act on them sensibly. You go on autopilot.'"

Exercise

Not only does exercise provide a good outlet for the stress of taking exams, it also gives your brain an oxygen boost. Research by Angela Balding at the University of Exeter has found that schoolchildren who exercise three or four times a week get higher than average exam grades when they reach 10 or 11. Exercise also promotes cell growth. Fred Gage from the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, found that even adults can grow new brain cells and that one of the best ways to do so is through exercise. In excess levels, the stress hormone cortisol damages the hippocampus, and it is the hippocampus that appears to benefit most from the brain-building effects of exercise. In other words, it's possible that exercise repairs damage to the brain caused by stress.

However, exercise in moderation, not to the point of exhaustion. While a half an hour walk three times a week can boost your learning, your concentration and your abstract reasoning by 15 per cent, athletic exercise isn't useful and can weaken your memory and immune system.

A package of measures

If you've been feeling depressed or anxious about your school work and your exam performance, the information I've just given you may help you to put together a package of measures to lift your mood, increase your energy levels and boost your brainpower. I've described the impact of different approaches separately; bear in mind though that these can interact powerfully when combined.

Outside help

If you're regularly getting drunk, smoking, eating junk or even just neglecting your body, or suffering from insomnia, or having panic attacks, then you can be quite sure that something is upsetting you, even though you may not be consciously aware of it. In fact, if you were consciously aware of it, you wouldn't need to act it out in any way.

People often get out of addictive patterns by getting outside help. My experience is that young people often don't have anyone non-judgmental that they can talk to. Sometimes all it takes is someone to listen.

To help you break free, here are a few organisations (among many) that offer specialised help.

Diet: British Nutritional Foundation. www.nutrition.org.uk

Recreational drugs: Release. www.release.org.uk

Alcohol: www.wrecked.co.uk

Smoking: www.givingupsmoking.co.uk

Depression/Panic/Suicidal feelings: Samaritans www.samaritans.org

Finding a counsellor: British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy
www.bacp.co.uk

To stay calm: Emotional Freedom Technique, www.emofree.com

I also recommend visiting the website of Byron Katie, www.thework.com, which offers relief from all suffering.

GOOD LUCK

I hope you've found the information in this guide useful. I wish you a calm and clear-headed run-up to your exams and may your result, whatever it is, however good or bad, enable you to move on beyond school and to do something that you really enjoy in your life. Remember this:

In the short run, grades may make it easier for you to get a job or go to the university of your choice. But in the long run, attitude matters more than grades.

So stop worrying about the outcome of your exams: focus instead on what useful work you can do at this stage, even if you've only got a few days left. And remember that exams are not your enemy. They're your friend.

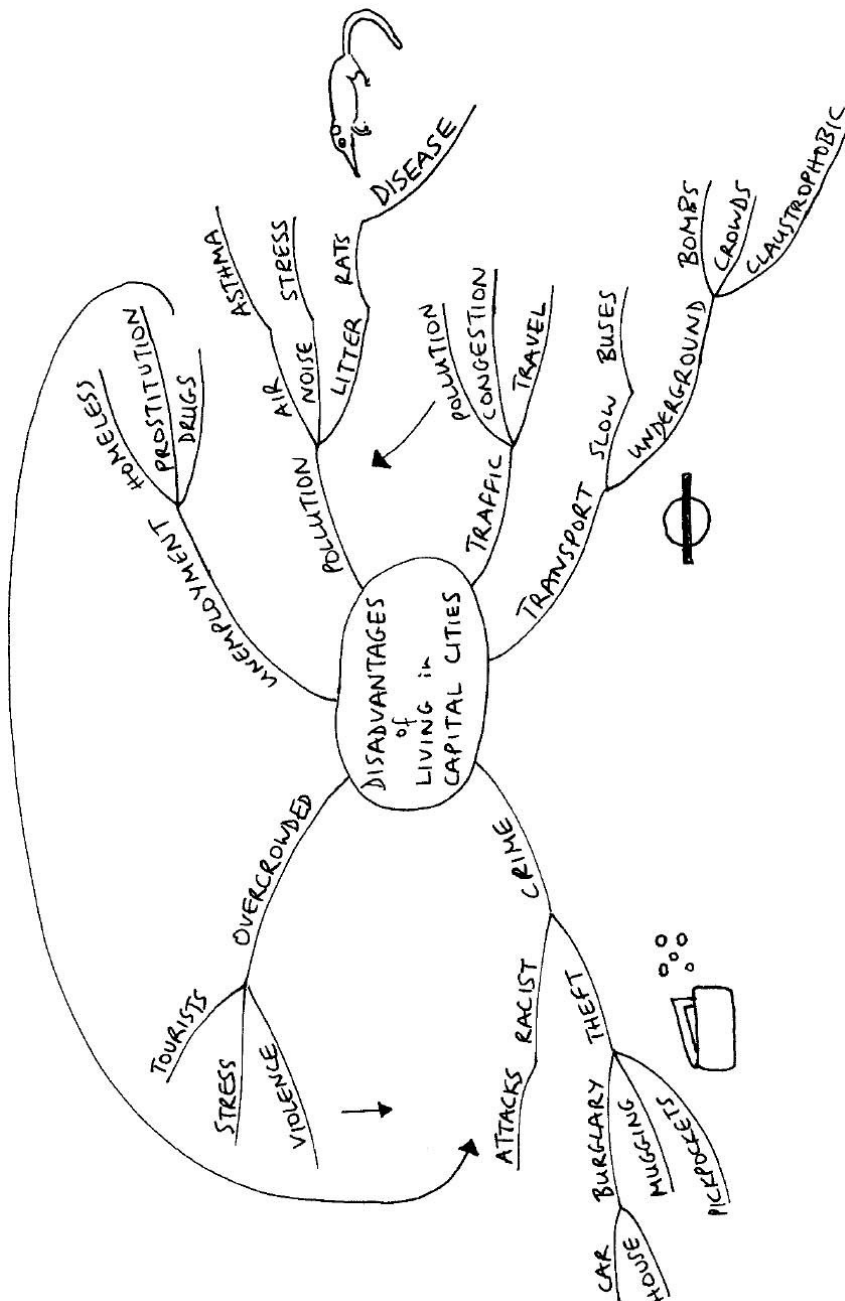
*Appendix***QUESTION INSTRUCTIONS** (GET FULL VERSION FREE ON MY SITE)

Instruction	Meaning
Account/Give an account of	Give reasons for
Analyse	Give a detailed description, separating into different parts
Assess	Show how important or successful
Calculate	Find the value of and show your working
Clarify	Explain simply
Compare	Find similarities
Contrast/Distinguish between/Differentiate	Find differences
Define	Give exact meaning of
Demonstrate	Show how, using examples
Describe	Give a detailed account of
Discuss	Examine important aspects of, showing pros and cons and giving your opinion
Evaluate	Weigh up the value of theory or idea in the light of evidence, giving your opinion
How...	In what way. Such questions are answered with 'By', not 'Because'
Illustrate	Show by giving examples, diagrams or drawings
Outline	Describe without detail; give main features
State	Present clearly but briefly

Revision Planner

Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun

Example of a mindmap



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 How to Stop Panicking and Start Learning at School and at University**
- **The Quick and Easy Guide to a Better University Brain**
- **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**

Visit www.eileentracy.co.uk to access these publications. The Quick and Easy Guides are downloadable and some are free of charge.