



Coping with exams

The aim of this leaflet is to give practical suggestions on how to manage the time leading up to exams, as well as tips about the exams themselves. Many of the suggestions are simple or obvious, yet at times when we are under pressure we can easily forget these basics. If anxiety or particular difficulties with study skills are a problem, read the leaflets in this series on Anxiety and Panic, Procrastination, etc.

Preparing for exams

Start a revision programme in good time before the exams. While you don't want to 'peak' too early, leaving revision too late is an excellent recipe for stress.

Organising your space

- It might help to think about where you work. Try to separate out the places where you work from the places where you relax. Even if this all happens within one small room, you could create a 'working place' which contains your papers, books, etc. and everything you need for your work.
 - Can you identify where you work best? If it helps, change work space during the day - your room, the college library, or working with a friend and then by yourself.
 - You could experiment with moving all distractions out of your work area and putting these into your 'relaxation areas'. Similarly, keep work out of the latter, so that when you are relaxing or sleeping your work does not intrude into this space.
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- Get used to working when you are in your work area, and 'switching off' when you get up from there. Creating a physical separation of this kind can help you to do the same mentally.

Organising your time

- Draw up a weekly timetable putting in everything you need to do: meals, sleep, lectures, supervisions, exercise, shopping, laundry, etc. Then allocate time for revision, and time for relaxing and enjoying yourself.
 - Try to be realistic. If you divide the week into 21 units (one per morning, afternoon and evening) you should aim to work for no more than 15 units per week, as your ability to work effectively over a prolonged period often decreases above this level. We suggest you aim to leave 6 units to do other things.
 - When revision plans go wrong, it is often because they were planned too tightly and didn't allow for sufficient flexibility. So plans need plenty of blank space to allow for the unexpected.
 - Allowing yourself time for relaxation, recreation, socialising and rest is not wasting time. It will help you feel less stressed and work more effectively. Actually, research shows that you need to rest to consolidate your learning.
 - Would it help to plan how you will use your time during your revision periods? You might want to list all the topics you want to revise, decide what order to learn them in, and how much time to spend on each, as well as any other tasks you have to complete (e.g. reading, note-taking).
 - Try to be realistic about what you can achieve and stick to your deadlines. If there's more work than time available,
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prioritise: Which are the most important topics? Which subjects do you know best already, or are easiest to get 'up to scratch'? Which topics are compulsory? For which subjects do you already have the most information/ research/material? Being strategic in your revision is important and prioritising tasks can be helpful in drawing up your plan.

- Set specific goals for each revision period. Make a list of your goals, keep them realistic, and tick them off as you achieve them so you can see what you've done. Allow more time for subjects you find difficult. Check out what you don't understand.
- Some people find it helpful to work in groups - perhaps arranging to meet a few friends to discuss particular topics. You can use this to test each other's memory or talk through aspects you haven't understood.

A CBT approach to motivation

- Begin with easier/more interesting subjects.
 - Plan rewards for yourself when you have achieved your goals.
 - You can start by setting yourself a small, manageable goal. When you've achieved this, give yourself a reward. Keep repeating this goal setting and rewarding yourself. As you achieve your goals, gradually increase what you set out to do. (This approach can also be used as a technique to train yourself to concentrate more effectively.)
 - Try to establish a work routine - once started, a routine becomes easier to maintain.
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- Remind yourself why you have chosen to do these exams - if you do not want the qualification, you do not have to do them!

Improving concentration

- Taking regular, short breaks when you are working (e.g. 10 minutes out of every hour you work) is likely to help you concentrate for longer.
- You can: make notes as you read; keep questions in your mind as you work; speak out loud; record yourself
- Have you experimented with mixing topics frequently? Mix easy and difficult topics, as well as interesting and dull topics.
- Try to work in a comfortable environment (not too cold, hot, or noisy) and remove distractions if possible. Find out where you work best e.g. in the library with a friend, or alone in your room - see the earlier section on 'Organising your space'.

Active learning

- Don't just read notes through - make a list of key points, or draw a spider diagram (writing reams of new notes is very time-consuming and probably not an effective method of revising).
 - Test your memory as you go along and try to devise questions/answers concerning the information you're learning.
 - Some people find it helpful to use memory aids such as memorising a trigger word which is associated with a 'chunk' of information, making a trigger word out of the
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initial letters of key points or names, or finding a way of visualising information.

Practising

- You can spend some time going through past exam papers and practise answering questions within the allotted time. Practising will give you a good idea of the format of the exam, the sorts of questions you could get, and experience in planning and structuring answers under time pressure.
- Remember that under exam conditions you're not expected to produce an essay which looks like it took a week to carefully polish. Try to keep focusing your attention on the task in hand i.e. answering the question, rather than being distracted by your worries.

Sleeping better

- Try not to work in or on your bed - keep bed for relaxation and sleep.
 - Lean to 'switch off' before going to bed. Stop working at least an hour before you intend to sleep and spend the time doing something more relaxing e.g. listening to music, talking to a friend, having a bath, doing relaxation exercises, taking a stroll.
 - If you have difficulties sleeping, see if staying away from electronic devices an hour before going to sleep makes a difference.
 - If you stick to a regular bed time and getting up time it might make it easier to maintain good sleeping patterns.
 - Too much alcohol can prevent you from sleeping properly and tends to make you tired the next day.
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- Try not to 'catastrophise' about not being able to sleep well i.e. stop telling yourself that you'll not be able to do anything the next day if you can't get to sleep. Even when you're not sleeping much, you are still likely to be able to function well, think logically and do difficult mental tasks.

On the day of the exam

- Looking after yourself i.e. getting enough rest and eating reasonably, is likely to be more important and effective than trying to do some last minute cramming. This is a day to have planned beforehand and to take things gently in order to conserve your energy for the exam(s).
 - Think if getting up very early is likely to make you more tired. Eat breakfast, if you can. If you have spare time, would doing something you find relaxing help, such as having a bath, or going for a stroll? Keep away from anyone whose stress level is contagious.
 - Rather than trying to learn any new material, perhaps just look over a few key points.
 - Arrive at the exam hall comfortably in time but not too early; the tension hanging over this short period of waiting just before the exam can feel contagious so it can help to minimise your exposure to it.
 - It's natural to feel some anxiety when you go into the exam room. Use the few minutes before you are allowed to begin to do some simple relaxation and breathing exercises; sit back and separate yourself mentally from those who are getting stressed.
 - Read the exam paper through slowly. When you've chosen your questions read them through twice to make sure you've understood and not misread the question. If you're
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allowed to do so, underline key words or phrases in the questions.

- Answer the correct number of questions and divide your time equally between them - or according to the marking scheme if questions have different weighting. With essay questions, you'll get more marks overall by doing three (say) average answers, than by doing two brilliant ones but leaving the third question undone.
- Some people write out essay plans to all the questions they need to answer at the beginning, so they can add things as they occur to them while working on other answers; others take each question in order. Which method works best for you, or is most appropriate to the format of your exams? After doing your plan, look back at the question and check you're answering the question asked.
- Take regular 'micro-breaks' - whenever you pause at the end of writing a paragraph or stop to think for a moment, put your pen down and sit back, even if just for a moment.

If you start to panic during an exam

In an exam situation it's not uncommon for one's mind to go blank for a moment, or to be confused by a question put in an unfamiliar way. It's easy to begin to panic. This could take the form of doom-laden thoughts as well as physical symptoms such as feeling your heart racing, feeling faint, hot or sweaty. Although these symptoms are disturbing, perhaps even frightening, they are in fact very common and are not at all dangerous.

First, pause for a few moments - put your pen down and sit back; slow your breathing down a little. Let your body relax. Relaxation and breathing exercises will help to reduce these symptoms. Reassure yourself that you're not going to collapse

or lose control. Try to consciously push upsetting thoughts to the back of your mind and refocus your attention on relaxing, and then back on the exam itself. No matter how bad the anxiety feels, aim not to leave the exam, as the anxiety level usually falls within a short space of time. Panic is always time limited and the symptoms do reduce in a short while.

When you're able, get back to work - remember that it's better to put something down rather than nothing.

After the examination

- Try to avoid an exam post-mortem. If you're meeting up with someone and 'have' to talk about the exam, agree that you'll only do so for five minutes.
- Get food or sleep, or do something physical, if you have a lot of adrenaline, such as going for a run or a swim.

Further support is available

The suggestions in this leaflet may be enough to remind you of some common-sense good practice and you can look at the self-help resources available on the service website: www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp

However, if you feel that you need further help, you could approach your tutor or Director of Studies, your college nurse or GP. Help is also available at the University Counselling Service - you might consider signing up for one of our exam preparation workshops.

University Counselling Service
2/3 Bene't Place, Lensfield Rd
Cambridge, CB2 1EL

Tel: 01223 332865

Fax: 01223 760990

Email: counsellingreception@admin.cam.ac.uk

Web: <http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk>