

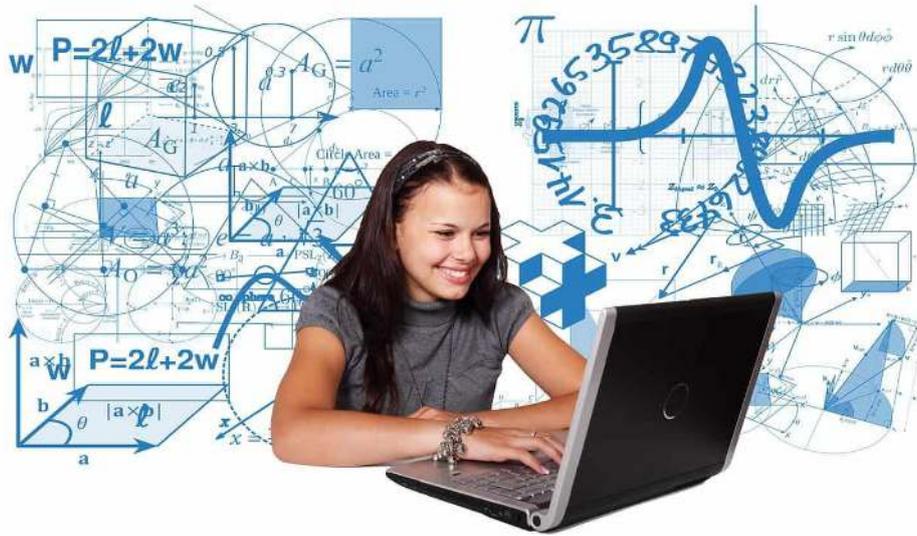


## Study and Exam Tips



**Denise Taylor, Career Psychologist  
with Amazing People  
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# Study and Exam Tips



*Are you getting the most from your revision time? Read this to check you have the right study environment, learn the importance of planning and get guidance from a psychologist on the best way to revise. Read also the key tips to use on the day of the exam. Denise has taken over 20 exams as a part time mature student (BA, MSc, MBA) and has finetuned what works.*

## 1: Where do you study?

You need an environment that is conducive to study so ask yourself the following questions:

- Does it have **adequate lighting**? (A light bulb in your face can cause eye strain).
- Does it have **adequate ventilation**? (Lack of circulating air can make you sleepy).
- Does it offer **space and comfort**? (You need a clear desk for writing and a comfortable chair for reading).
- Is it too **warm or too cool**? (Both extremes of temperature can make you sleepy). Are there too many **line-of-sight distractions**? (Some students cannot work with a bed or pictures from home in view.) On the other hand, does it feel like a sterile prison? (Some students work more efficiently with their doors open.)
- Are there **too many audio distractions**? (Some music may be fine, but loud rock with lyrics is usually distracting).
- Switch off social media and other online reminders. You can switch them back on as a treat when you have finished your revision session.
- Do **friends find and distract you easily**? (Tell them you must study and arrange a time when you will see them).

**Activity:** Am I happy with my study space? If not, what changes can I make?

## 2: Create a plan

Do you have a plan – you might not want one, but it will make your parents happier if they can see a plan on the wall.

A plan keeps you focused, especially when you have many courses to revise – there can be a real danger in concentrating on either what you are good at or your worst subject and to forget about everything else.

Work out how much time you are going to study across how many days and weeks. You can then divide the time between the number of subjects and schedule 1-hour slots.

**TIP:** Let your parents know of your plan and how you are doing. Otherwise they will worry or nag! Be happy to tell them what you have done. This will help you, as through describing what you have learnt to someone else you are reinforcing your own understanding.

Activity: Do I have a plan? Take time to create one now.

## 3: When do I start revising?

**Now!** However early or late it is it is going to be the right time to follow your plan. The closer to the exam, the more time you need to spend on revision.

**When do you feel most productive?** Some people will study best in the morning, others prefer the evening. Think about when you work best and allocate more of your revision time then.

## 4: How to revise

To many people revision means sitting with their books open and reading it through, but this is passive and is not the way to remember. You need to give a sense of purpose to the task or else you will get bored. So, **decide in advance what it is you are going to achieve from the session.**

You can't study for hours on end without a break, so have a **time limit of 40-50 minutes and then take a 10-minute break.** Perhaps you could use a timer to make you stop? If you find that your mind starts to wander after 20 minutes, or so, you will want to structure your time into shorter blocks.

**The breaks help you to retain information.** It's not a case of just stuffing your brain full of information (into your short-term memory) but in connecting the new material with what you already know (in your long-term memory). You need to relax to allow this to happen.

As you get closer to the exams you will be studying for most of the day but continue to take the regular breaks. And make sure to **take a longer break every 3 hours.** During this

break, you want to give your brain time to work, so don't start playing online games, or looking at your social media accounts. Give your brain a chance to settle! Going for a walk or doing some sport is ideal.

You don't have to revise in silence; **background music can help because it shuts out distracting noises.** It's the complex rhythms of classical and rock music that can help by coordinating the part of the brain that controls rational and creative thought. However, make sure the lyrics don't distract you.

Our brain finds it hard to concentrate on the same topic for long periods, so make sure you **switch between subjects over the day** and don't spend the whole day on e.g. Science but break it up with different subjects. You will also want to **switch between reading and answering questions. Don't spend all your time reading.**

Researchers from Chicago University have found that it can help to use your imagination and remember the classroom scene when you were taught the subject. Your imagination and visual memory will then enhance your recall in the exam room. So, as you read, for example through history, see yourself in the history teachers room and read out loud using the teachers voice and mannerisms.



## 5: For each topic

**Make sure you know the main themes** – get an over view by reading the introduction, headings, principal themes, sub headings, charts, graphs, diagrams, conclusion and summary. As you then start working through the material you have a framework for how it all fits together. Maybe using word association and mnemonics can help your memory.

Having an understanding of the headings and sub topics gives you order that can help you in retaining the material.

You may like to **write out a course summary** because this will help you to remember the overall content of the course.

You can't remember everything so **skim through the material** and decide what to focus on. Your teacher may be able to help by telling you what is most important.

Rather than read passively through the material, you can **make notes and reduce and reduce them so a whole topic is summarised in a few points**. You may like to take this summary page to the exam centre. You can't use it in the exam room, but you can keep looking at it while you wait and as soon as the exam starts you can try to remember as much as possible and copy it into the back of the exam booklet so you can refer to it as you write your answers.

**When revising, make sure you spend time answering questions.** Whilst reading is good, you must be active. Include in your revision schedule, time spent answering questions, writing essays, explaining and applying terms and answering past exam questions.

**Write some questions on the left hand side of the page, and the answers on the right hand side.** You can then review the material by covering the page and answering the questions. **Testing yourself on what you have just learnt is a much better way of embedding this knowledge in your brain.** Researchers at Washington University found that the group who had tested themselves recalled 61% of a passage, against 40% of those who had read the passage through 3 times.

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*If you are outgoing and sociable you'll be happiest revising with others,  
but if you are more quiet, do your revision alone.*

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If you can, do read a bit beyond the set books. If you can add something in to the exam which is outside the usual you are likely to get bonus marks.

## **6: When you don't understand the subject**

As you start thinking about the exams you may be aware that you don't really understand a topic sufficiently and need some additional help. Firstly, talk with your teacher/ tutor as they may be able to explain some of the more difficult aspects for you.

You may also be able to get some help from an older student or friend to help mentor you.

Sometimes it can be worthwhile to choose a paid tutor.

## 7: Look after your health

Extensive study can put a lot of stress on our bodies, you need to look after yourself to avoid infection.

**Sleep** – make sure you sleep for 6-8 hours a day.

**Eat nutritious food** – get your 5 portions of fruit and vegetables

Take some time out in the **fresh air** each day and take time for **exercise**. A 10-minute walk between study sessions may be perfect.

If you are feeling stressed or anxious, talk with **friends and family**. They can then think how best to support you.



## 8: The night before the exam

- Review your notes but DO NOT try to learn anything new, you want to reinforce what you do know not scare yourself with what you don't.
- Stick to key points and summaries.
- Go to bed at a reasonable time and get some sleep.
- If you begin to panic, say STOP out loud to break the pattern.

## Use the power of psychology

Successful sport people will day dream about winning, they visualise themselves achieving their goal. You can do the same – each evening, when you go to bed, make a movie in your head of the exam, imagine you are having a really great exam. What do you see? What can you hear? What can you taste or smell? Notice how calm you are! You have been successful, how does this feel? Run this movie through your head again – make it bigger, brighter, sharper. Think about how great that feels. Pinch your finger and thumb together each time you feel it.

On the day of the exam you can pinch your finger and thumb together again and remember this feeling of confidence – now you are ready to go!

### 9: The day of the exam

Arrive at the exam centre with time to spare, allowing for possible hold ups. However, you don't need to wait outside the exam room, Perhaps you can listen to music in the car, and glance at the one sheet summary you have produced.

You can get to the exam room just on time and leave afterwards. You don't want to get sucked in to someone else's panic beforehand or to take part in the post mortem where people seem to want to outdo each other on how bad it went or try to guess who got it right. You will probably have another exam the next day, so best to do all you can to stay calm.

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*Remember the examiners are on your side and are looking to give you marks not to take them away.*

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**Don't panic** – if you find yourself getting tense and worked up, **focus on your breathing**. If it's quick and shallow, breathe deeper and slower and allow any negative thoughts to drift away.

Chewing gum can also help to calm you down, so take a packet in to the exam room with you.

If you have a lucky toy or pen then take it with you, it can help to decrease anxiety.

## 10: In the exam room

**Read the paper**, highlight the number of questions you need to answer and divide your time accordingly. If one question gives you 50% of the marks, you will want to spend 50% of your time on it.

Read through all the questions and identify those you know you can answer and those you will struggle with. Answer the ones you can do first, it will increase your confidence, and you don't need to answer questions in order.

Spend the first 5 minutes or so planning what you are going to write. This will help to give structure to your answers.

Make sure you are answering the question and not doing a brain dump. Do not write every thing you know, but do what it asks you to – compare and contrast etc. **Highlight the key words** to keep you focused.

**Show you understand the question by restating it, and never assume anything is too simple to include.** If you don't have time to finish, make sure you attach any rough notes, with the question number clearly stated.

If you don't know the exact date, it doesn't matter. Make sure you describe the key points. If you were studying history, knowing the date of a key battle in the War of the Roses (1471) is less important than being able to describe the reasons for battle and its impact.

For the questions you aren't sure about, take a few minutes to note down what you do remember against each. Breathe deeply, make a choice and go for it. Write out the question at the start, and weave what you do know against the question rather than waffling on about things that do not relate.

It helps to allow some time at the end to read through what you have written in case you have made a silly mistake.

If you mess up on your time and find you only have 15 minutes left for the last question, its is better to put down what you were going to say in bullet points as you will get more information on paper this way.

After the exam, forget about it. Whether you have done well or not, it's over. So relax as you will probably need to get focused on the next one.

### Multiple choice questions

- Be an active reader. Anticipate the answer to the question and then look for it.
- If you have no idea you can leave it blank, but do go back and add something, you may be right.

## 11: Waiting for the results

The exams are over, now you need patience till the results are out.

What can help for next time is to make a note of what worked for you, and what didn't. What do you want to do next time? You can make a note and read it through next time.

I'd suggest that you now enjoy yourself and get on with your life. It's probably gone fine but if not, you can re sit or reconsider.

**What may help is knowing how best you learn.** Some people learn best through reading – they can read articles and text books and have a good recall of what they have read. Other people find that the words just don't go in when they read, but they are more likely to remember things that they hear. So they should go to lectures, and record their notes so they can play them back. Some other people have much better recall through using mind maps and should use this technique at every opportunity. If you would like to know more on this, you may be interested in the [Highlands Ability Battery assessment](#).

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**Brought to you by Denise Taylor: award winning career psychologist and personal branding strategist with [Amazing People](#).**

For 20+ years she has helped clients understand who they are and make effective career choices through **cutting-edge innovative careers coaching**. Her career books include Find Work at 50+ , Now You've Been Shortlisted and **Winning Interview Answers For First Time Job Hunters**.



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