

EXAM PREPARATION GUIDE



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Introduction

Examinations can be a stressful experience. It is safe to say that everyone gets nervous on the day of an exam – the trick is to make sure you are prepared beforehand. An exam should be about what you have learned, not just what you have memorised. To be prepared you should have revised well, understood your subject, and developed good exam techniques.

This guide will help you prepare for exams in advance and help keep your stress levels to a manageable level on exam day. It covers planning your revision; memorising techniques; managing your time more effectively; and tips to help you as the exam approaches and on the exam day itself.

There are 5 steps to successful exam preparation covered in this guide:

1. selecting which topics or information to study (sometimes suggested by your lecturer or in past papers)
2. preparing your notes for revising the topics you've identified (this makes the subject easily understandable for you)
3. reviewing and revising your notes over time (this helps store information in your long-term memory)
4. using memorising technique(s) to help you to remember information and understand your topics
5. presenting your answers on the exam day.

There are tips and suggestions for revision and study prior to exams – try these out in advance to see what works best for you then stick with it. This will help you to improve your study skills prior to the exam period and give you confidence in your study techniques before you start to feel the pressure of exam time.

Good luck!

Planning Your Revision

Many courses have exams as part of the assessment process and this section aims to provide you with a simple guide to the best ways of preparing for exams.

First, find out as much as you can about your exam:

- ❖ How long is it – 1 hour, 2 hours ...
- ❖ When is the exam and where is it being held?
- ❖ What is the format – multiple choice, short questions, or essays?
- ❖ How many sections are there?
- ❖ How many questions do you have to answer from each section?
- ❖ Are past exam papers available?
- ❖ Has your tutor highlighted any areas you should revise?
- ❖ Do you have more than one exam? If so, write down when and where these are taking place.

Once you've done this, read over your notes and any past exam papers if they are available, and make a list of the areas you need to study. Remember to focus on your strengths i.e., topics you've researched for an assignment, report, or presentation.

Timetable (write down dates and times) when you are going to study/revise each of the topics you've selected – you will have to do this for each exam if you are sitting more

than one. Stick to your timetable – make sure you cover all the topics you've identified, prepare summaries, notes etc. to aid revision – and make time to periodically look over these notes and memorise them (more about [memory skills](#) on page 6).



Get Organised

Now you know how much you need to revise and how long you've got – get organised and get started:

- ❖ If you have lots of notes everywhere, the first thing to do is get them organised, perhaps in a folder, then identify any gaps you have in your notes - get copies from your tutor, fellow students, or Moodle/Teams.
- ❖ Doing “lots of work” before any exam will help, but it must be in a structured and planned manner – weeks or months in advance, not a couple of days.
- ❖ How much time you spend revising is a personal choice. It depends on your time available (personal commitments such as family and part-time work), and your style of revision (either short intensive study sessions, or longer more sustained periods). Try to study for up to 40 minutes then have a quick 5-minute break – even if it's a walk around your room, cup of tea, or relaxation technique. This helps you digest what you've learned in preparation for the next “chunk” of learning.
- ❖ When you study is also a personal choice and depends on your commitments but try to organise your study time to suit your preferences – if you are a morning person, try not to study late at night and vice versa.
- ❖ Draw up a timetable for revision – studying the course work, doing practice questions, mock exam – based on how much time you can spare each week.
- ❖ Organise your study space – a large enough area to spread out your notes which is comfortable, well lit, and with as few distractions as possible.

Revision – tips

- ❖ Use old exam papers or specimen exam papers to practice answering exam-style questions. Once you have an idea of what's being asked and what you need to answer for different questions, have a go at a mock exam, i.e., do a complete paper within the time limit and see how you get on. This will help your timing and get you into the exam mind-set.
- ❖ Focus on what is most likely to appear in the exam. However, if you need to answer 4 questions from 12 for example, then don't just focus on 4 areas. You may be surprised if something isn't asked, and you will be unable to answer something else instead.

- ❖ Exams aren't about what you can repeat back to an examiner – it's about understanding what you have learned, so concentrate on remembering issues, points etc. and how these are linked, rather than memorising your notes. A good study aid is to summarise your notes in a condensed manner as you read – using headings and sub-headings – to help you remember your course work in the exam situation.
- ❖ Go along to any tutorials running prior to exams as it helps to talk about your worries and keeps the forthcoming exam in perspective. If you are unsure about anything, make sure you ask your tutor about it.
- ❖ Talk to other students to compare study strategies and keep each other calm.
- ❖ Talking about the topics for your exam can help you understand it more and help make the key themes clearer to you. Why not try a group study session with classmates where you ask each other questions?



Revision Notes

Revision is key to pulling your course together into a cohesive and organised body of work, i.e., your notes, where you can understand it in the context of all you have learned. This will help you prepare for exams.

Your notes help you remember wider issues and information and therefore it's important to have good notes for revising. So, remember that when you are reading and taking notes – don't try to copy down everything. Focus on understanding and summarise it in your own words. You only need to get the gist of the information, so don't try to memorise lots of dates, facts, and figures. Write them down if you feel they will be important.

How your final set of study/revision notes looks will depend on your learning strategy or preference – you need to discover what works for you. This is why it is important to plan ahead and discover the best way of studying for you before the exam period starts. For example, the final notes might be:

- ❖ a set of 'Mind Maps' – or one enormous one
- ❖ a mixture of writing and pictures, all in distinctive shapes
- ❖ a set of annotated diagrams
- ❖ a set of charts
- ❖ a set of cards of information that has been 'chunked' and organised
- ❖ sheets of different coloured paper, according to topic
- ❖ pages highlighted in different colours
- ❖ an audio recording played repeatedly on a smartphone or in the car
- ❖ a folder containing a single page of notes for each topic that might come up
- ❖ a set of problems, each one an example of one that is likely to come up in the exam
- ❖ a set of memory joggers – such as little rhymes or easy to remember slogans
- ❖ sheets of paper with key information stuck all over your room/house
- ❖ a question bank, with all the answers you have come up with

Each of these would involve you in different processes, using different skills or senses and certainly different learning preferences. Try different ways of collating and presenting notes to see what works best for you.

See our guides on [note taking](#) and [Mind Maps](#) for guidance on those topics.

Memory Skills

Once you've organised your revision notes, you now need to memorise them. There are many memorisation techniques which can help you and some of these are outlined in this guide. Try them out and see what works for you.

Memory aids

- ❖ **Mnemonics** (a way to help you remember things) such as rhymes, phrases, spelling acronyms, and list order acronyms (see below for more detail)
- ❖ **Visual impact:** a strong colour, an unusual item of clothing, a funny cartoon, a bright image, etc. Using visual impact in studying, try using coloured paper, coloured highlighters, coloured underlining, or bullet points in your notes
- ❖ **Mind Maps or visual/pattern notes:** not only useful for planning an essay, but these can also help you remember a complex topic by breaking it down in a visual manner
- ❖ **Sound impact:** loud noises, music, variation in tone and sound, etc. Using sound whilst studying can work for some. For example, you can remember a song which you listened to whilst reading and studying a particular topic. But beware – it is usually a distraction!
- ❖ **Emotional impact:** where emotive factors such as anger, horror, shock or surprise

makes a strong impact on memory. Using emotional impact in studying means becoming involved with your topic – don't see it merely as a distant topic to be studied. It helps to see the issue more deeply and understand it better.



Episodic memory

- ❖ This is when you remember what you were doing when... i.e., relive the episode to trigger the memory e.g., what were you doing when you heard about the typhoon which hit the Philippines? Have you ever walked into a room and forgotten what you went for, but remembered when you relived the actions you were doing previously?
- ❖ Using this, you can remember the setting of where you read a book, heard a lecture, or even thought about the topic, then the associations of how you made notes, the content etc. can be triggered.

Primacy and recency effects

- ❖ The primacy effect is where you remember what you saw or heard first
- ❖ The recency effect is where you remember what you saw or heard last
- ❖ Use this in writing essays – have a strong introduction and conclusion, which leaves an impression on your reader.

Systematic memory

- ❖ A cognitive psychologist named George Miller¹ coined the phrase “seven plus or minus two” to describe our short-term memory. This is where people comfortably remember 5 things, can usually remember 7, but the maximum number that people can remember is 9 things at any one time
- ❖ So, try grouping notes in groups of 5 – break down notes in a structure using 5 subheadings under a heading to help you remember information
- ❖ This is also known as “chunking”. It is the oldest method of memorisation and is most useful in remembering lists where order is not important.

Simple mnemonics

- ❖ **List order acronyms** (using initial letters) – where the start of each word reminds you of another e.g., Richard of York gave battle in vain which stands for red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet (the colours of the rainbow)
- ❖ **Meaningful acronyms** (or spelling acronyms) – where initials stand for words, but create a word in themselves e.g., HOMES which stands for Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, Superior – the great lakes of North America

¹ Miller, G.A. (1956) ‘The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information’, *The Psychological Review*, vol. 63, pp. 81-97

- ❖ **Meaningless acronyms** – a jumble of letters which stand for words, but have no meaning in themselves e.g., GIGSEILM which stands for General, Individual, Genetic, Social, Educational, Industrial, Legal, Medical (branches of psychology)
- ❖ **Rhyming jingles** – rhymes which remind you of information e.g. 'I' before 'E' except after 'C'
- ❖ **Associative mnemonics** – where a rhyme is used to remind you of information by association e.g. A woman has ants in her pants, the mites go up and the tights come down (stalagmites = mites up; stalactites = tights down)
- ❖ **Play on words** – where alternative meanings are used to remind you of information e.g., spring forward and fall back (to remember clocks go forward in spring, and back in the autumn).

Visual memory

- ❖ It may help your memory to imagine the ideas, things, or information as part of a story which you make up to connect each chunk of information
- ❖ Another variation of this is to imagine yourself in your home with the thing or a representation of the idea on the chair, then another next to the table, another by the window and so on around the home. Then when you need to recall the information, you can imagine yourself walking through the home and recall the items at each point.

Tips

- ❖ Be relaxed and focused when studying which helps you recall information
- ❖ Use as many senses as possible when studying to aid recall – write the information down, read it, say it aloud, even sing it if it helps!
- ❖ Repeat the process several times during the day – this will help the information transfer from your short-term memory to long-term memory
- ❖ Remember to keep hydrated – drinking lots of water helps your memory and your brain to stay alert
- ❖ Also remember to eat well – being well nourished (i.e., not snacking on junk food) helps your concentration and memory retention.

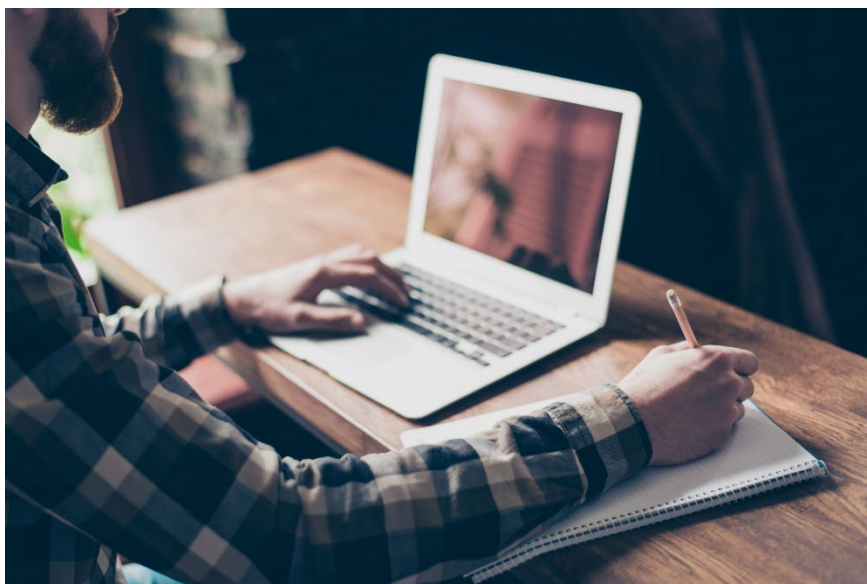
Time Management

Getting Organised

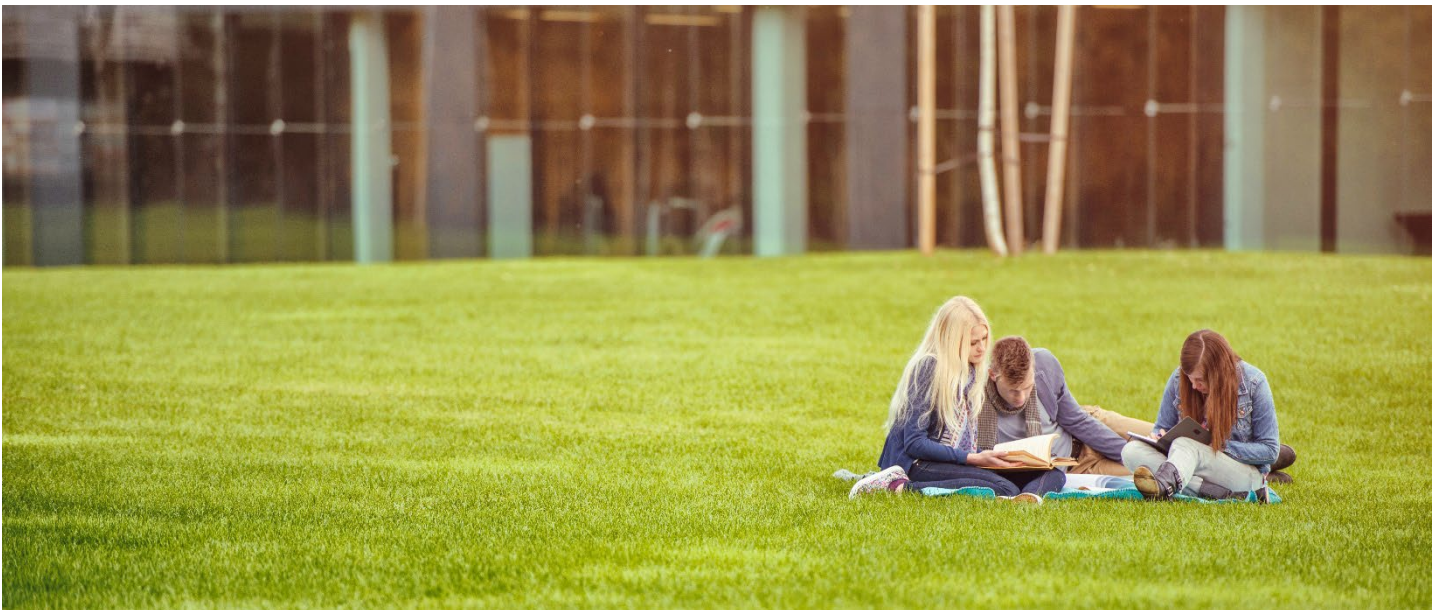
- ❖ You need to organise yourself and be realistic in planning your time. Don't allocate 5 hours of study all at once – you'll never have that due to other commitments.
- ❖ Note things you **must** do, then list those that you would like to do, then prioritise the list and allocate time to each item. Limit your list to 5 things at a time so that you can achieve them. Setting targets is important; you can see yourself progressing when you achieve them.
- ❖ Have a plan/timetable and try to stick to it – but don't worry if you slip a little! It's just as important to relax a little.
- ❖ Review your plan and "to do" list at regular intervals – this will show you what you have and have not achieved and may help you think of ways to improve your planning in the future.

Allocating study time

- ❖ Plan at least 8 hours study over 7 days – best to spread it out to reinforce your learning.
- ❖ Study time of less than 10 minutes is not much use – allocate at least 30 minutes.
- ❖ Planned breaks are essential in successful study. You should not study for longer than 45 minutes without a 5-minute break, even if it's just to walk round the room for a few minutes. This helps you digest what you've learned in preparation for the next "chunk" of learning and give your eyes a rest if you're reading from a screen.



- ❖ Pace yourself – spread your study out over several days, not all in the one day.
- ❖ You should study when you are fresh. Avoid late hours – working late makes you a tired learner and you won't feel any benefit. Unless, of course, night-time is when you study best – just make sure you aren't too tired before you start.
- ❖ If you are easily distracted, set small tasks in your plan so that you can achieve them and not become disheartened.
- ❖ Make sure your study area is tidy, comfortable, and well lit – you won't need to spend time getting it ready to sit down and study if it's already tidy – no distractions!
- ❖ Remember to eat well – junk food may seem like a quick option, but nutritious foods help concentration and memory.
- ❖ Experiment with different note taking techniques to find one that suits you.
- ❖ Practice your reading skills to make effective use of your time.
- ❖ Remember the 3 Ps – **p**lan ahead, **p**ace yourself, **p**rioritise.



Examination - basics

Anxiety

- ❖ It's only natural to be anxious and it can help motivate you to study. However, if it means you are not sleeping, or your health is suffering due to exam stress, then you should visit your GP. Do not suffer!
- ❖ Breathing exercises, meditation, or physical activity may help relieve anxiety, so find out what works for you.
- ❖ Don't harangue yourself about what you should have done after you leave an exam. Focus on the next exam and learn from your mistakes.
- ❖ Failing an exam is not the end of the world, even though it may feel like it. Try and keep it in perspective and stay positive.

Exam Day – main points

- ❖ Make sure before the day of the exam that you know where you are going and how long it will take to get there – add on some extra travel time to make sure you are not late (being lost or late will only increase your anxiety levels) – and make sure you have the time of the exam right
- ❖ Make sure you know exactly what you can take into the exam hall with you, then make sure you have everything you need e.g., pens, pencils, erasers, ruler, and for maths, a calculator, protractor etc.
- ❖ Make sure you have a good night's sleep and try to relax! Do not study late into the night – it will only exhaust you and you will feel you know nothing
- ❖ Make sure you eat a healthy meal before your exam, especially cereals, pasta, rice, or root vegetables, which are complex carbohydrates and provide slow releasing energy. Avoid sugary food as it may give you a rush when you eat it, but your energy level will crash in the middle of the exam
- ❖ Go to the toilet before going into the exam room
- ❖ Remember to fill in all details on your paper e.g., name, institution, candidate number, and put these details on any extra sheets you use.
- ❖ Listen to the invigilator, who will provide instructions for the exam.
- ❖ Finally, remember to write legibly.

Examination paper – organisation

- ❖ Read the questions carefully – these will examine what you have covered in your course, but the wording may not be as you expected, so look carefully at the questions to see where it links to your course work
- ❖ It may be a good idea to scan the questions and tick those you are confident in answering and put a question mark next to those you would attempt. You can then get an idea of which to tackle first. Check for any compulsory questions before you begin
- ❖ Plan your time – allocate time per question and stick to it. Try to have 10 minutes at the beginning to read the questions and decide where to start. Also try to leave 10 minutes for reading over your answers at the end. If you must answer 4 questions in 3 hours this is a suggested way to allocate your time: 10 minutes to read and mark the questions you will answer; 5 minutes planning for each question and 35 minutes for writing each answer; and 10 minutes to read over your answers and make any amendments
- ❖ If there's something you're not sure about, leave it until the end and go back if you have time. Don't waste time and energy worrying about what you are unsure of – do what you are confident with first and then go back and answer the other questions with the best answers you can. You may pick up a mark or two with an attempted answer, so have a go after answering questions you are surer of
- ❖ Structure is important in exam answers so make sure you have a beginning, a

middle and an end, using paragraphs – make notes using headings on what you will answer for each question to aid structuring your answer

- ❖ Leave a blank if you forget a word; come back to it later – but do remember to go back.



Examination paper – remember to...

- ❖ Make sure you have identified the key terms in the question and what these terms mean; if you don't understand it, avoid the question
- ❖ Ensure you identify the issues raised by the question, offer critical analysis, be objective, and remember to include a conclusion
- ❖ Show you have studied the course! Where appropriate, cite examples or studies from your course
- ❖ You are never asked to write everything you know about a subject – so don't! Make sure you are writing the information which answers the question and not just hoping you write something correct. It gives the impression that you don't understand your subject
- ❖ If you have to draw a diagram or graph, use pencil which is easy to erase if you make a mistake. Make sure diagrams are clearly labelled or titled, and all straight lines have been drawn with a ruler
- ❖ For science subjects, make sure you use the correct terminology and are precise when stating facts e.g., use units of measurement
- ❖ If you still find you have run out of time, make your main points in list form
- ❖ After your exam, don't rehash the whole paper with classmates and feel you should have revised more – if you have another exam to prepare for, forget the one you have sat and focus on the forthcoming one – but relax a little and enjoy the relief that one exam is over!

Multiple Choice

Multiple choice questions usually consist of one right answer and several plausible but wrong ones, known as “distracters”. The “distracters” often represent common errors in reasoning made by students. One piece of advice often given in relation to multiple choice is to work out the answer first and then look for it among the answers given. That way, the “distracters” have less opportunity to distract.

Remember, there is no order or hidden pattern to the answers so don't waste time trying to find it!

Further Help

- ❖ Library staff – we are happy to help, email library@glasgowkelvin.ac.uk
- ❖ Thesaurus or dictionary (including specialist dictionaries) – will help you find alternative keywords and ensure you know what any technical terms mean before you start your research.
- ❖ User guides – there are several guides to help you, check under [Study Skills](#)
- ❖ Online resources available in college are an excellent source of information as only reliable databases are included. These cover a variety of subject areas such as science, music, engineering, computing, health, business, and social sciences, and provide access to newspapers and journals, images, eBooks, and archive materials. Check our [Online Resources](#) page.
- ❖ You can search for books and eBooks using the library [Smart Search](#)
- ❖ For referencing use 'Cite them Right' online referencing tool - [Referencing page](#)



Useful Websites

H2g2 is a site full of discussions and tips on many topics – this page talks about written exam technique. http://h2g2.com/approved_entry/A520859

Helpful tips available from a lecturer at York University.
http://www-users.york.ac.uk/~dajp1/Exam_Hints/Exams.html

QS Top Universities site provides 10 top tips for exam preparation.
<http://www.topuniversities.com/student-info/health-and-support/exam-preparation-ten-study-tips>