

Revision: from GCSE to A-level it is all about the scheme

Exams loom, and a timetable is vital for GCSE revision or A-levels. Fail to plan only if you plan to fail, the experts tell Andrew Marszal.

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Possession of a rich, nuanced vocabulary is one of the fundamentals of language skill. Photo: Samuel Wordley/Alamy

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It's a tactic beloved of students everywhere. Revision, they have been told by teachers and parents, can't begin without a carefully timetabled plan. So rather than plunge immediately into the intricacies of advanced trigonometry or chemical molar volumes, teenagers spend hours plotting, shading, tweaking and perhaps even laminating elaborate revision timetables.

In short, doing anything but actually revising. But what these would-be procrastinators may be surprised to hear is that they are doing exactly what the revision experts recommend.

"The most important time in a student's academic year is the two hours spent planning their revision," says Patrick Wilson, a former teacher and founder of private tuition firm Tutor Crowd.

"It can take a whole afternoon, but it's critical that they finish the plan. Because once they've made a physical commitment to that piece of paper, something inside them changes. Even when

they don't feel like working, they've got an unambiguous commitment – an invisible hand will drag them to that desk.”

If that sounds optimistic, one useful tip is for students to find someone, whether a parent, teacher or friend, to “mentor” their plan. The simple act of sharing your timetable with someone enormously increases the chances of keeping to it, says Wilson. And rather than telling your child they should be working harder, it is much more effective for parents to hold their children accountable to a plan already agreed upon in advance.

Create structure

A-level and GCSE exams come thick and fast, so the first thing to do is find out now which ones come earliest and plan accordingly, says secondary schoolteacher and Revise UK tutor Sally Sim.

“Oral exams for languages are early on, so during Easter you should be prioritising those at the expense of whatever exam comes last, whether it's religious studies or history,” she says. “Work out your timetable so once you're past that date you can ditch the subject and put a later one into that slot.” Exam dates should be available through schools, but students can also visit [education.gov.uk/comptimetable](https://www.education.gov.uk/comptimetable) to find out theirs.

Prioritise topics

Now is also the time to identify the subjects most likely to cause you problems. Visit your exam board's website and you should be able to access curricula, marking schemes and even real example answers from previous years, complete with the original examiner's annotations and marks. “That sets you up to decide what you can and can't do, and what you know you're good at,” says Sim.

More broadly, educational psychologist and founder of ELITE tutors Sati Kudhal suggests breaking revision periods into three separate stages: learning the material, practising applying it using exam-style questions, and finally exam technique.

“Between now and mid-April students should make sure they know all the academic material, learning, checking and consolidating as they go,” he says. “They should also get familiar with the various ways in which you can be assessed: will they ask you to use quotations, or to link between topics? Will the questions require short essays? Will they use diagrams?”

“Then from April until exams, they should be using past papers, which will help improve exam technique and inform them of any still-remaining weak points in their knowledge. There's only a finite bank of past papers available, so save them for the last four weeks to practise time management and working under pressure. No study aids or computers, don't mark it midway through, and when you do mark it, mark it harshly.”

Another theme stressed by experts is that revision sessions should be goal rather than time-oriented. Setting a tangible goal, such as memorising 12 quotations, improves learning efficiency: it enables students to focus on only the most relevant material, and exposes the information

they've not learnt. But there's another important reason. "In many ways a goal-oriented plan can be liberating, as you don't have to worry about the actual exams, just about your targets each day," says Wilson. "It is critical that you can switch off and forget about everything in the evening, knowing that you have achieved your goals."

Take a break

Planning your breaks can be just as important as scheduling the actual studying. Medical research has shown that the correct use of breaks boosts your ability to assimilate new information. This is crucial in the early stages of revising. "Taking in new information is very demanding, so breaks have to be much more frequent early on," says Kudhal. "Study for 30 minutes, then take a 10-minute break. In those 10 minutes – this is really important – don't process any new information. That includes going on Facebook, checking news feeds or reading news articles. Nothing new."

According to Kudhal, breaks are important because that is when the brain creates new neurological connections. Firing up Twitter during your break creates superfluous additional connections competing with those from the subject you've just been studying. This reduces your brain's ability, or "cerebral bandwidth", to process that information. So while it's fine to read an old email, for instance, anything unfamiliar will soak up valuable processing power.

"Later on when you're only consolidating information, memory recall isn't nearly as stressful as assimilating it in the first place," he adds. "By that point you should be able to work at least an hour without a break, usually two."

Eat well, keep fit

Factors such as getting enough sleep, keeping hydrated, eating well and taking daily exercise often get forgotten in the frantic days and weeks before an exam, but to the detriment of your ability to concentrate.

Having the full eight hours' sleep teenagers require has been proven to increase memory retention by up to 35 per cent. So by not staying up late, whether to cram or watch a movie, you'll be able to learn a third more the next day. Caffeine is not recommended for teenagers in any case, but managing your intake is vital. Asking a revising teenager not to consume energy drinks while cramming may be as much use as trying to ban them from Facebook, says Kudhal, but caffeine should certainly only be used sparingly and tactically.

"Nature has got it right. Sleep enough and drink enough water and it will improve your memory, and you'll feel more positive," says Kudhal. "It might be possible to study for longer, but you need to rest your mind and body. Besides, it wouldn't be much fun."

Plan your revision

- Share your plan with a mentor
- Prioritise tricky topics
- Use past papers
- Set goals, not amounts of time
- Use breaks correctly
- Avoid or strictly manage caffeine intake
- Sleep well

Revision techniques: The secret to exam revision success

Boost your revision by reading memory expert Ed Cooke's exclusive blog for Telegraph Education. This week, learn how to **keep things in your long term-memory with the least amount of effort by refreshing memories at the right time.** Visit [telegraph.co.uk/revisiontechniques](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/revisiontechniques).