

**ACADEMIC LANGUAGE AND LEARNING SUCCESS PROGRAM**

# Revision Strategies & Preparing for your Exams from the Beginning of Semester

## Aim

To develop skills in the following areas:

1. preparing and planning for exams
2. understanding and practicing for exams
3. knowing what to do on the day of exam
4. techniques in the exam room
5. writing exam essays.



## Reflection 1:

1. How do you feel when you are preparing for exams? What do you do during the revision week?
2. How do you feel during exam week(s)?
3. How do you feel when you are doing an exam?

## **Self-Assessment Checklist: How well are you prepared for exams?**

	Yes	No
1. I have a separate folder for each unit.		
2. I spend at least one hour per week revising each unit.		
3. I use a highlighter pen to highlight main points. That way, I can locate them easily when I revise a text.		
4. I summarise the main points of new information (readings etc.) and make notes of any links I can find to other points I have covered in the unit. In other words, I try to build up the big picture.		
5. I am aware of the thoughts and influences that provoke negative feelings in me toward revising and sitting for exams, and replace them with positivity.		
6. I am familiar with the standard essay structure.		
7. I write model essay questions for myself, based on past assignment questions, and practice doing the task within a time limit.		
8. I write the essay in the exam that I have rehearsed, regardless of the question.	*	
9. I get past exam papers from the library.		
10. I look carefully at the instructions before I read the questions.		
11. In the revision week, I cancel or postpone all but essential activities.		
12. I practice certain techniques to relax and focus my mind for revision and exams.		
13. I take care of my physical health in the lead up to exams.		
14. I eat a healthy meal before exams.		
15. The night before the exam I gather together everything I need to take to the exam room.		
16. I try to have 8 hours sleep the night before the exam.		
17. I stand apart from others before the exam and avoid their nervous talk.		
18. If I can't answer a question, I write a few key words and move on to the next		

question.		
19. If I run out of time, I use point form to summarise what I intended to write.		
20. I write neatly.		
21. I use the final 5 minutes to check that I have filled in my details (name, student number etc.), make sure I haven't missed any questions, and re-read my answers.		
22. Once the exam is finished, I move onto preparation for the next one. I don't let thoughts of doubt and remorse about my performance in one exam undermine my preparation for the next.		

***\*(If you wrote 'yes' to Question 8 you are in danger of failing essay based exams!)***

If you answered '**yes**' to these questions, **\*except for question 8**, then you should be well prepared for your next exams. If not, don't worry, it's never too late to develop good study habits. Perhaps after your next exam period you will revise this checklist and find that you can now change some of your 'no' answers to 'yes'.



## 1. Preparing and planning for exams

### Organisation is the key

From the beginning of the semester::

1. make a semester plan that allows 10 hours (at least) per week per unit, **including 1 hour for revision** (see points c, d, & e)
2. have a folder for each unit, and put all your notes and relevant materials into it
3. as you learn new information from your lectures, tutorials, Learnline and the texts you read, see how it fits into the whole so that you're developing a full picture
4. practise picking out the important points in the texts you read and paraphrasing them
5. keep summaries and notes in your folder so none of your study will be a waste of time.

### Reflection 2:

1. *How well are you building your new knowledge in each of the subjects?*
2. *How active are you in identifying the most significant research/texts for each topic?*



You are expected to read a wide range of books and articles to deepen your understanding of the subject. The exam will determine whether or not you can apply what you have learnt. When the lecturer reads your responses to exam questions, your reading will be evident in aspects such as:

1. the examples and details that you refer to in your exam answers
2. the way you link material
3. the quality of your analysis.

### Remembering/retrieving information

Psychologists have studied how people remember (and forget) things; some of their findings can be of use. For example, we can recall only about 20% of new information within 24 hours of learning it. If we revise that information within 24 hours we can recall up to 60-80% of it. Revising actively by using a pen and highlighter to make notes improves your chances of recalling information. Create a semester plan to ensure you revise within 24 hours of the lecture, tutorial or reading. This dramatically increases your ability to remember and apply new knowledge in the future.

Have you ever felt that you know something or it's 'on the tip of your tongue' but you just can't say it? That's a retrieval issue. You know it, it's stored in your mind, but you can't find it. Check out (c) above (under 'Organisation is the key') again. When you learn a new piece of information, if you see where it

fits in the big picture, you are actually storing it in that logical place in your brain, and you'll be able to *retrieve* it easier. If you understand it, you won't have to memorise it because it now makes sense to you.

### Making a weekly study timetable.



Being organised and managing your time is crucial, and having a weekly timetable is particularly important as exams approach. Although revision should start early in the semester, it is never too late to start.

Map out what tasks have to be completed. Write in your exam dates. Also, include major personal events in your life that will impact on your studies. Include work, sleep and family commitments. Don't forget to allow for hobbies/recreational activities. For each study session, ask yourself what you want to achieve, and write that in your semester planner.

For each exam, note down:

1. what kind of revision you want to do and where you will start
2. how many days are there between now and your first exam? Decide how much of this time you can use for revision
3. using the notes you have made, work out a revision plan for yourself
4. consider factors which will affect you in following this plan. Make two separate lists: one of helping factors, such as membership of a study group or enthusiasm for the course; and the other of hindering factors, such as noisy accommodation or a tendency to panic.

Now, look for ways of boosting the helping factors and reducing the hindering factors. Write them down.

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### Exam revision quiz

Which describes you? Read each statement and respond with *never (N)*, *sometimes (S)*, or *always (A)*.

1. I find it hard to settle down to study .....
2. I keep well-organised notes from lectures and tutorials for my subjects. ....
3. I summarise suggested readings and include these as part of my notes in my topic folder. ....
4. I often do homework and revision at the last minute .....
5. I worry about my studies .....
6. I find it difficult to concentrate on my studies .....
7. I understand my notes when revising .....
8. when I'm finished, studying I close my books and think about something else .....
9. I learn some things by heart, going over and over them until I have them memorised. ....

Which aspects of revision do you need to work on?



### Triggers for negative attitudes about revision

Some circumstances and things provoke a change in our attitude, despite our best intentions. If you are aware of these triggers, you can be alert to them and minimise them so they don't destroy your motivation.

Consider whether any of the following things make you feel negative or distracted

1. getting bored with revising
2. getting overwhelmed by how much there is to review
3. putting too much pressure on yourself to succeed
4. thinking about how clever other people are
5. worrying about letting other people down
6. studying in the evening
7. missing your friends
8. thinking about times when you didn't do as well as you had wanted
9. letting yourself get discouraged by rumours about the exam
10. losing faith in yourself
11. feeling hungry
12. others.....

What can you realistically do to change the negative situations?

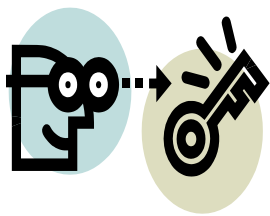


## 2. Understanding and practicing for exams

You have to know how exams work. In an exam, you need to:

1. answer only *exactly* what you've been asked
2. present your knowledge in the way you've been asked, e.g. short answer or essays
3. do it fast. You have limited time to think, plan and select during an exam
4. do it from memory
5. allocate time for each question, as well as time to review your answers. Keep an eye on the time and stick to the time you have allowed.

How do you prepare for these particular strategies?



1. **Know your weak points** and work on them.
2. **Understand the key terms** to help you interpret the question
3. **Allocate time appropriately**
4. **Do practice exams** if possible, (see the CDU library site). Practise working quickly in planning, writing and checking answers. Practise becoming focused quickly.

### Reflection 3:

1. What would you gain by doing exam practice?
2. What stops you from doing exam practice? How can you overcome this?
3. What do you need to know about your own exam performance that you could find out by

*doing practice exams?*

### Understanding exams quiz

Which describes you? Read each statement and answer with *never (N)*, *sometimes (S)*, or *always (A)*.

1. I feel I know what the examiners want .....
2. In an exam, I read the instructions I before start answering questions .....
3. In an essay exam, I read through all questions before I start writing .....
4. I plan my time during an exam so I can attempt all the questions .....
5. I make a brief outline of my essay answers before I start writing .....
6. I make sure I know how many marks each question is worth .....
7. I carefully note the wording of each question .....
8. The first questions I answer are those that I am most likely to find easy. ....
9. I take special note of instructions like 'evaluate', 'discuss', and 'outline' .....
10. I spend more time on questions that are worth more marks than questions to which I know the answers .....
11. When I don't know the answer to a multiple-choice question I look for words or phrases in the question which might give a clue to the answer. ....
12. In a multiple-choice question, I read all the alternatives even though I think one of the first alternatives is correct. ....
13. If I finish an exam ahead of time, I use the time to review my answers and check that I have actually answered the question. ....

These are all good exam taking techniques. If you answered 'N' or 'S' to any of these, you should revise your exam strategies.

### 3. On the day of the exam

This is an important day. You need to feel rested, calm and confident in your preparation. You should:



1. have a good breakfast because exams don't have coffee breaks
2. wear comfortable clothes
3. check that you have several pens and everything else you are allowed to bring with you into the exam
4. re-read your summaries but don't try to cram new information
5. leave home in plenty of time so that you will arrive early and avoid last minute panic
6. expect to feel a little nervous; nobody is immune from exam anxiety. Some adrenalin can be useful if you use it to lift your energy
7. outside the exam room, stand apart from the crowd. Don't be a part of other people's nervous talk. Visualise yourself in a peaceful place.
8. as you walk to the exam room
  - o think tall
  - o breathe deeply and slowly
  - o relax your neck and shoulders
  - o relax your jaw: check you are not clenching your teeth
  - o relax your facial muscles. Smiling helps
  - o relax your hands and fingers.

### 4. Exam techniques – in the room



Even the best student can fail an exam by ignoring the basics of exam techniques once they are in the exam room.

1. Forget the outside world.
2. Make good use of your reading time by carefully reading, then re-reading each question.
3. The most common problem is running out of time. Ensure you set time allocations. according to marks. On the margins of your paper, write what time the clock should read by the time you finish that question. Plan to finish the paper five minutes early.
4. If you answer a question in less than the allocated time, but feel you have covered most points, move on to another question. You might need the extra time for a harder question.
5. If you come across a question that you cannot answer at all, leave it and move on to the next question. You can always come back to that question at the end.
6. Try to think like a marker. Markers might have hundreds of exam papers to read. They will usually have a standardised marking scheme; that is, they are looking to allocate a set number of marks if you have mentioned certain **key words**.
7. For written exams, try to write neatly.
8. Don't waste precious time including irrelevant or unimportant details/information or on re-writing the question. Use a quality argument.
9. If you don't know the answer to a question, write a couple of **key words** and move on to the next question. You can come back to it later.
10. Use the final five minutes to check your paper. Check that your name and student number are on the paper, including any exam booklets or answer sheets! Look for obvious errors, such as having skipped a question. Read your answers to see whether you have anything extra to add.
11. If you do run out of time, use point form as a way to summarise what you intended to write (it may earn you one or two extra marks).
12. Don't write a note to the examiner.
13. Don't use **colour**, CAPITALS, or underlining to make a point.

## 5. Essays in Exams

If your essay is well structured, you'll be able to write it faster and you'll get better marks. Practise writing brief essays using the following simple format.

- Introduction
- Body: 3 main points - 2-3 pieces of evidence or justification for each point
- Conclusion.

Here are 7 steps to guide you in writing an exam essay.

1. Analyse the question.
2. Write a quick essay outline.
3. Write an introduction.
4. Body. Write your first point as a clear first sentence in your next paragraph.
5. Justify the main point.
6. Repeat 4 and 5 for your second and third points.
7. Round off your argument with a conclusion, which may well be the introduction rephrased.

Examiners expect that:

1. you answer the question fully, without extra information
2. your main points stand out clearly (not just mentioned somewhere) you give some evidence or justification for each of your main points.

For more details of how to practice writing essay questions, refer to the Essay Structure and Format document.

Consider the skills covered in this document. Choose (✓) which ones you already use and which ones you will incorporate into your exam preparation.

Skill	I can do this	I need to learn this
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Know what the examiners want.		
Read the instructions before I start answering questions.		
Read through all essay questions before I start writing.		
Plan my time during an exam so I can attempt all the questions.		
Make a brief outline of my essay answers before I start writing.		
Make sure I know how many marks each question is worth.		
Interpret each question carefully.		
Decide which questions to answer first.		
Take special note of <b>key words</b> 'evaluate', 'discuss', and 'outline'.		
Plan to spend more time on questions that are worth more marks.		
Look for words or phrases in a multiple-choice question which might give a clue to the answer.		
Read all the alternatives in a multiple-choice question even though I think one of the first alternatives is correct.		
Review my answers and check that I have actually answered the question if I finish an exam ahead of time.		
Forget about the world outside the exam room.		
Carefully read, then re-reading each question during reading time.		
Calculate time allocations according to the marks for questions		
Write on the margins of my paper the time the clock should read by the time I finish each question.		
Plan to finish the paper five minutes early.		
Move on to another question if I believe I have answered it, even I have not used all the allocated time		
Leave a question that I cannot answer at all and move on to the next question. I can always come back to that question at the end.		
Try to think like a marker. Markers might have hundreds of exam papers to read. They will usually have a standardised marking scheme; that is, they are looking to allocate a set number of marks if I have mentioned certain <b>key words</b> .		
Try to write neatly in written exams.		
Use a quality argument. Don't waste precious time including irrelevant or unimportant details/information or on re-writing the question.		
Write a couple of <b>key words</b> and move on to the next question if I don't know the answer to a question. I can come back to it later.		
Use the final five minutes to check my paper. Check for: name and student number on any exam booklets or answer sheets I have used Look for obvious errors, such as having skipped a question. Read my answers to see whether I have anything extra to add.		
Use point form to summarise what I intended to write If I do run out of time. It may earn me one or two extra marks.		

### Remember!

1. Don't write a note to the examiner.
2. Don't use **colour**, CAPITALS, or underlining to make a point.



Modified from:

Cottrell, S (2007) *The exam skills handbook*. Palgrave MacMillan, Hampshire UK.

Berenyi, R (1996) How you can write great essays & fly through your exams. Peak Publishing, Warrimoo Australia.

<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/teaching-and-learning/surviving-first-year-exams.html>

<http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/llonline/study/exam.xml>

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/aw/lasu/examprep.html>

[http://www.deakin.edu.au/current-students/study-support/study-skills/handouts/exams.php#on\\_the\\_day\\_of\\_the\\_exam\\_10](http://www.deakin.edu.au/current-students/study-support/study-skills/handouts/exams.php#on_the_day_of_the_exam_10)