

Effective revision: Avoiding the pitfalls



Ten common pitfalls in revision... ...and how to avoid them

1. Leaving revision until the last minute

Exams are about what you *understand* not what you can remember. Your revision strategy should be based on pulling your understanding together, making links and connections between ideas that you have learnt in preparation for the exam. It is vital to allow yourself enough time in order to revise fully. You can include and plan for revision from the beginning of your course. Here are some examples from the beginning of your course that will help you to revise effectively:

- Make your notes readable, attractive and visually compelling as you go through your course—this builds memory.
- Start to over-learn (active learning) names, dates and key points early in the year. Even if you forget them, they will be easier to learn the second time around.
- Begin intense revision about 4 weeks before the exam.

2. Reading through notes over and over again

- Use creative and interactive strategies. This keeps your mind alert, and helps to integrate information.
- Instead of just reading, read in order to *find out*. The best way to do this is to use material that is related to possible exam topics. Ask your tutor for advice and guidance – they may be able to direct you to a specific area of your course to focus on. Use past exam papers to help you identify topics that might crop up.
- Identify the central issues with each topic. In order to help you decipher what these issues are you may need to ask fundamental questions about the topics involved. Some questions you may ask might be:- What is so special about this method? What are the key points about this theory? How does one thing affect another?
- Discussing past exam questions with classmates on your course will make this process more interesting.
- Time yourself writing some answers to exam questions/essays without looking at your notes. This shows you areas that you need to work on and the helps you to increase your handwriting speed and your ability to think under pressure.

3. Writing notes out again and again

- This can be a good strategy if you learn through 'motor memory'. Working to *different* essay plans keeps the information fresh and develops your thinking about the subject.
- Organise your course materials – grouping or filing them by section or topic can help.
- Alternatively, some people prefer to develop a comprehensive set of revision notes including flashcards to help focus your revision. Carrying condensed or summarised notes on a single sheet of paper or on flash cards makes them more portable and easier to read in spare moments.
- Reduce information to a series of memory triggers. This series of memory triggers can be narrowed to one keyword or image.

4. Writing out essays and learning them off by heart

This is time-consuming and counter productive. It is unlikely that the identical questions will occur in your exam. It is better to reflect on and practice a range of answers, so you over-learn the topic. You will then be able to work with this information flexibly during the exam.

5. Finding ways of putting off revision (such as 'urgent' things to be done, watching TV, or chatting to friends and family)

Draw up a revision timetable, identifying the hours you have available for revision between now and the exam. Don't forget to leave spaces for any urgent tasks you may have to do as well as giving yourself time to relax!

- You could include your favourite TV programme or meeting a friend for coffee as rewards.
- Involve others in your revision e.g. Explain a subject to them and see if they understand, or ask them to test you using your memory triggers or notes.

6. 'I can't force myself to study'

- Bear in mind what your motivation is behind doing your course - what are your ultimate goals?
- Encourage and entice yourself to revise rather than forcing yourself to it. Use methods such as studying alongside your classmates as a support system. You could share revision strategies or test each other on key ideas.
- Check your timetable has enough breaks for rest.

7. I start to panic. I feel I'm never going to get through it all or remember it'

- Work with positive-minded people.
- Use stress management techniques and memory techniques to help overcome panic.
- Work steadily, revising a subject in manageable, bite sized chunks.
- Seek help if needed from University support services.

8. 'I can't cope with the boredom of it. I start daydreaming or wondering why I am bothering'

- Work in short spells rather than long revision sessions.
- Use a variety of learning techniques to inspire you and avoid long periods of doing the same thing.
- Stretch yourself to increase your interest, e.g. read a more advanced article on the topic.

9. 'I have too many responsibilities to make revision possible'

- Utilise short spells of time e.g. when travelling on public transport to revise.
- Always carry a small section of your revision material with you, so you can take advantage of these 'spare' moments.
- 'Carry' an extra exam question in your head and jot down ideas as they occur to you.

10. Stop revising before having thoroughly covered a subject

- Keep going over what you have learnt. Reduce your revision material to shorter key words to use as memory triggers as your recall of the subject improves.
- Keep asking yourself how you will use the material to help answer exam questions.