



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## **Student Counselling Service**

# The Step by Step Guide to Exam Success\*

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*\*Also available in large print format*





# 1. Introduction

This brief guide is intended to give you some ideas about how you can get the marks you want in your exams with the minimum of stress and panic! Few people like exams, but if you think carefully about how to approach them they can be easier to handle than you might imagine. If you still feel stuck once you've read this guide, then have a look at the section on 'Further Sources of Advice'.

You might be wondering why we've felt the need to write this guide when many of the students studying at Edinburgh have been very successful in exams in order to get here. Part of the reason is that studying at university can be quite different from many peoples' prior experiences. You may have more responsibility for your learning, a greater volume of work, or different kinds of exams. So, although it's possible to draw on your past experiences, many students find they need to adapt their learning. Even for students who are already doing well at university there's often room to improve.





## 2. Preparing for exams

When students struggle with their exam preparation, it's often because they're not clear about:

- What to revise.
- How to allocate their time.
- Which learning strategies to use.

It can be really tempting to plough straight into revision without finding out the answers to these questions – especially if you are a bit worried about facing up to any study problems – but good planning can make the whole revision process much less stressful. Also, the more you practice planning and organising your revision the better you will get at it.

### Working out what to revise

For university exams you may find that there is more material available than you could possibly cover and it may not immediately be clear what to focus on; in effect you may have to work out a 'syllabus' for your revision that will help you to target your efforts. Here's a list of some of the things you might need to know to make an effective plan:

- What kinds of questions there will be in the exam.
- How long you'll have to work on each question.
- Whether you'll have a choice of questions.  
(You can usually find these things out from past papers on the library web site, but do check that the format of the paper hasn't been changed).
- What clues there are in your course materials, like lecture outlines, learning outcomes or exam guidance.
- Whether there are any differences between what's expected in a good exam answer here, as compared with your prior learning experiences.

Once you have all of this information you are a good way towards working out what topics to revise and in what depth. The next step is to look at how much time you have available.

### Making the best use of the time available

Although there's no one way of time planning that will suit everyone, there are some broad guidelines that many students find useful. Remember that no one manages their time perfectly so don't worry if things don't go exactly to plan.



A good first step is to count up how much time you actually have and to look at how the tasks you want to get done will fit in; often this throws up some real surprises. To do this you will need to:

- Make a note of all of your upcoming deadlines.
- Allow time for things you find enjoyable and relaxing.
- Leave some 'slack' in case something goes wrong.
- Then count up roughly how much time you have available for studying.

This can help you to work out the total amount of time you can realistically give to the revision for each exam. If you are less experienced at university exams this may involve a bit of guesswork.

Once you have an idea of the time available, you can put this together with what you have learned from your exam papers and course information to work out a revision plan. How detailed a plan this is will depend on your own personal preferences. What is important is that you ask yourself whether what you plan to do is realistic; for example, if it takes you 2 hours to work through the notes from each lecture and you have 60 lectures to cover, but only 50 hours to revise for the exam then you need to think again.

As you are making your plan, remember to block out some time to work with past papers. This is one of the things that people often miss out, yet it is something that can really make a big difference to your marks, even if you don't spend very long doing it. How you might use past papers is discussed below.

## Developing effective revision strategies

You may well have good ideas about revision from exams you've sat in the past. So developing effective revision strategies at university may simply involve thinking over what you've done before and adapting it. One key thing to remember about revision is that it should be an active process.

Revising actively implies making a real effort to understand what you are learning, rather than simply memorising by rote. Even if your exams require you to remember a lot of facts, you are much more likely to retain detailed information if it is related to an underlying understanding. There are many ways to achieve this; here are some suggestions you might like to try:

- Looking for underlying themes or principles.
- Thinking about inter-relationships.
- Relating what you are learning to 'real-life' situations.
- Thinking how the solution to one problem may help you solve others.

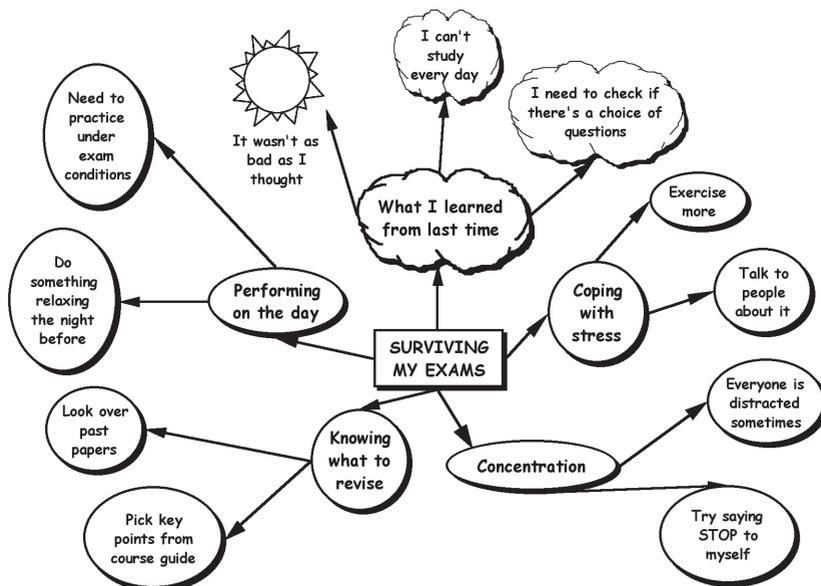
- Organising material into a hierarchical structure.
- Creating a diagram or chart to represent a topic.
- Looking for similarities or differences.
- Looking for points for and against an argument.
- Trying to really understand how formulae work.
- Critically evaluating what you are learning.
- Discussing topics with a friend.

Many students approach their revision by condensing their notes down. This might involve summarising your notes from your classes and readings onto index cards. Alternatively, you might create a list of headings and bullet points. If you have trouble summarising your notes within the time you have set aside, you might find it helpful to decide that each set of lecture notes will be condensed onto, say, no more than one page or a small number of cards.

Some students also find it very helpful to do 'mind maps' or 'spider diagrams'. These involve:

- Writing your study topic in the middle of a page.
- Drawing branches and twigs out from the centre for key themes.
- You can have words, pictures, diagrams ... whatever seems to help.

Here's an example of a simple mind map –



If the facts you need do not seem to be sticking, even when you think you understand the topic, then you might find it helpful to develop a mnemonic, or trick, to help you remember. One of the best known mnemonics is this one for learning the colours of the rainbow –

‘Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain’

Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet

If you get a chance to talk to more experienced students in your subject area they may be able to tell you about memory tricks or strategies that have worked for them.

## Checking your progress

It can be much harder than you might imagine to have a good sense of how well your revision is going, especially if you are revising for a new kind of exam. Regularly checking your progress, and adapting your revision if there are any problems, is a really important part of successful exam preparation. The sooner you start doing this the less scary it will be. If you discover any problems early on then you’ve got more time to fix them. Here are some ways you can check your progress and develop better exam technique:

- Keep an eye on your time plan, so that you don’t spend too long on some topics.
- Test yourself as you are going along. (This may involve no more than putting aside your notes for a few minutes and scribbling down what you can remember from them).
- Bring together all of the past exam questions on one topic into a ‘question bank’. This can give you a sense of what to cover and how much depth to go into.
- Sketch out rough answers to exam questions.
- Write full exam answers. This may help to build up your confidence for the exam. (Practising examples is particularly important for exams that involve calculations).
- Write some practice answers under exam conditions. It may be that a member of staff would be able to read over some of your answers to help you see if you are on the right track. You may also surprise yourself by discovering that you can write less in the time than you thought, so you might not need to learn as much material as you had first imagined.



## Final preparation

As the exams come closer, there are some things that you can do to help you arrive at the exam in a fit state to do yourself justice. There's more about relaxation later in this booklet, but for now here are some suggestions about what you might want to do as the exams get nearer:

- Double check the exam times and locations; you don't want to be panicking about this on the day.
- Check what materials you are allowed to take into the exam and what will be provided for you; for example, if you have to use a particular kind of calculator, it might be a good idea to practice with it.
- If possible write yourself a time plan for each exam paper in advance.
- Try to resist the temptation to over work. If you do too much you will be worn out and won't work efficiently.
- Think about what routine would help you relax before the exam.
- Think through how you might avoid any additional stresses. Can you prevent, or put off, any difficult situations that may arise?
- Keep doing things that you enjoy and that relax you; for example, sport, meeting friends, going to the cinema.
- Try to keep to a sensible diet and sleep patterns.



## 3. Sitting exams

A surprisingly high number of students lose marks through poor exam technique, rather than what they know. Do you think any of these suggestions might improve your performance?

- Starting off the exam by taking some time to settle down and look through the paper carefully.
- Starting with the easiest question to calm you down, or getting the hardest question out of the way first.
- Taking care to read questions right through before you choose; perhaps the second part of the question asks for something you don't know about and you'd be better to make another choice.
- Underlining key words in the questions.
- Being very careful to fully answer the question asked. While you may be able to tailor what you know to answer a given question, it's important to resist the temptation to answer the question you hoped would be asked, or to write down everything you know that's vaguely related to the question.
- Writing a brief plan for longer answers, so that you stay on track.
- Taking care to answer the right number of questions and to share out your time effectively between them, according to the number of marks they are worth. Remember that it's almost always easier to get the first 50% of the marks for each question than to get the next 50%. This means it's usually a bad idea to neglect one question in the hope that your marks on other questions will be so high that they pull your grade up.
- Trying to leave some time at the end of the exam so that you can check your answers over. A little time spent checking can sometimes save you quite a lot of marks.

### Troubleshooting

If you have had problems with exams in the past, it's important to bear in mind that many students struggle at some point but most do just fine in the end. Often simply refining your exam preparation strategies can do wonders for your marks. And remember that you don't need to sort everything out on your own, you can ask for help.

One thing you need to do, if something has gone wrong in an exam, is to work out exactly what the problem was. If possible, ask a member of staff in your subject area to tell you what the main faults were with your paper (they probably will not



be able to give you the script back). It could be that you made an easily corrected mistake, like not answering the question asked. But unless you know what the problem was, it can be hard to sort it out.

If you have exams coming up soon and you feel you haven't revised well then try not to panic. Even if you only have a few days left you can still do a lot to improve your chances. The important thing is to be really focused as you will not have time to do everything. Have a good look at your past papers and try to focus on a few key things that seem most likely to come up.



## 4. Procrastination

Procrastination is a problem for most people from time to time. But if you find you're putting things off a lot and that it's really affecting your life, then it's time to take action. Look for information on the Institute of Academic Development (IAD) or Student Counselling Service (SCS) web sites. For additional material on procrastination you can download hand-outs from the IAD web pages (see further information below).

### Why do people procrastinate?

- Problems with time management.
- Overload of tasks at a particular time.
- Feeling overwhelmed.
- Fear of failure or not meeting your own standards.
- Fear of success and its possible consequences.
- Perfectionism often associated with unrealistic standards.
- All or nothing thinking where the setback is seen as a catastrophe.
- Being bored.
- Avoidance of things which are disliked or difficult.

### Are there any benefits to procrastination?

(Or why students keep doing it)

- It can give a sense of urgency which lends impetus to work.
- It involves working intensely which can give a sense of accomplishment.
- It covers your tracks in case you do poorly in an exam, essay or piece of work – you can tell yourself you didn't work for it so any failure is not down to your own inability.
- Last minute working can be a Herculean task which can temporarily boost your self esteem or prove something to yourself.

### Understanding the reasons for your procrastination

It's important to have the reasons for your procrastination out in the open – so that you can challenge them or take some action to get support if there is a personal or emotional issue underlying it, such as fear of failure. Thinking about when you procrastinate and when you don't may help you to understand this.



Practical suggestions for dealing with procrastination.

- Accept you will have to do the task!
- Change the language you use to describe the task. From “have to” to “choose to” and “can’t” to “choose not to”.
- Time planning can help but don’t let it be another way of procrastinating.
- Identify goals and make realistic decisions.
- Break down tasks into manageable bits.
- Set small goals, have regular breaks.
- Put some limits on the task, decide it’s only going to take a certain amount of time, or you’re only going to cover some of the material.
- Create more structure in your day by planning in other activities, like exercise or realistic amounts of part-time work.
- Give yourself treats as you go along.
- Just do something, even if it’s a small step forward and you’re not sure it’s right.
- If you get stuck, rather than stopping work, try a different strategy e.g. mindmapping.
- If uncertainty about what is wanted for an academic task is stopping you, you might want to start by looking for clues about what’s expected.
- Quite often procrastination is connected to anxieties about the quality of the work. It’s worth remembering it is better to produce something rather than nothing!

*With thanks to:* Cambridge Counselling Service  
Eileen Tracey, *Student Guide to Exam Success.*





## 5. Concentration

Many students worry that their concentration may not be good enough. Although it's common for our minds to wander from time to time, if you feel you lose concentration a lot when you're revising then some of the suggestions in this section may help.

### How do I combat boredom, saturation and fatigue?

Many students in this country think that good work is uninterrupted hard work and that they should not disconnect their eyes from the page! However, regular breaks are essential.

Some good reasons to take breaks while you are working.

- Breaks refresh your mind and aid concentration.
- It's easier to contemplate working when you know you'll have regular interruptions.
- Breaks help learning and offer fresh insights because we absorb information and make links during breaks.
- Breaks create an opportunity to revise after each break – it is useful to recap earlier material.

### How often should I take breaks?

Some study skills books give very directive guidance about exactly how long to work for before you take a break, but actually it's better to think about what rhythm of working suits you best; everyone is different.

Think about whether you find it easier to work in longer or shorter blocks, whether you like to focus on one topic or switch between them, and at what times of day you work best.

### Daydreaming and becoming distracted are a problem

Anxiety or boredom are often reasons why you start daydreaming when you sit down to study. (If anxiety persists you may need to take more action-see further sources of help). You might like to start with this strategy. When you notice your thoughts wandering say "stop" to yourself and then refocus your attention to where you want it to be. To begin with this could be several times a minute. Each time say "stop" and then refocus. With practise you will find it becomes easier and the length of time between your thoughts wandering will increase.





## I find I am always worrying and this stops me from concentrating

Give yourself some 'worry time' each day. This is a period of time specifically set aside for worrying. Allow yourself a set amount of time each day and if your anxiety and distracting thoughts crop up in between save it for your 'worry time', when you can check out their reality. If you notice that certain worries keep reappearing then it is almost certainly time to do something about them.

### Active learning

Earlier in this guide, we mentioned the importance of active learning. If you are having trouble with concentration, you might want to think about whether you could focus more on understanding and organising what you are learning and less on rote memorisation.

### Where and when should I work?

Do tasks that need most concentration when you are mentally and physically alert – you need to know the time of day you work best. Ensure your environment is comfortable but without too many distractions. You might want to try out some of the different University libraries and study spaces, to see whether there is a particular location that suits you.

*With thanks to:* Cambridge Counselling Service  
Eileen Tracey, *Student Guide to Exam Success*.



## 6. Relaxation

Many people feel stressed about exams, so if you're feeling a bit anxious that's absolutely normal. In fact stress can help you to perform better. Planning your revision carefully and finding effective learning strategies may help you to feel calmer, but there are also some more holistic approaches, which may help you. Allowing yourself some time each day to relax or exercise will improve your wellbeing and performance.

### Centering

If even the thought of sitting down to work makes you anxious, try this relaxation while sitting in your work chair before starting.

Centering is a way of giving yourself some of the benefits of relaxation when you don't have the time or opportunity to lie down for a full relaxation session. Once you become familiar with it, you can take a few minutes at a convenient point in the day to reduce the build-up of stress and tension and restore your energy. It can be of value before you go into a situation which you anticipate will be stressful, e.g. a meeting. You can also adapt it for situations where you have to sit and wait, e.g. on a bus or train.

Sit with your feet flat on the floor, legs uncrossed, your arms comfortably supported on your lap. Let your shoulders drop and move apart and check that your lumbar spine is long. Allow yourself to receive the support of the chair and the floor.

Let your eyes close. Listen to the sounds you can hear outside the room, and to sounds inside the room. Then take your attention inside yourself. Notice the thoughts passing through your mind. Notice how you are feeling. Go through your body from your feet right up to your head observing the sensations in the different parts – feet, legs, pelvis, chest, back, hands, arms, shoulders, neck, head, face. Notice sensations of warmth, coldness, lightness, heaviness, stillness, restlessness, any places where you feel pain or discomfort. Observe your breath moving in and out.

Without any forcing, take a deeper breath so that your stomach fills like a balloon. Exhale slowly and completely. Repeat a couple of times, and then return to normal breathing.

Again listen to the sounds you can hear in the room and sounds from outside the room. Start to gently move finger and toes, do any other moving and stretching that feels good and when you feel ready, open your eyes.



## 7. Exploring disabling beliefs

At times of stress, such as exams, we often actually increase our anxiety by the things we tell ourselves, e.g. "Other people have more ability than I have", "I must work all the time and not have a break". This produces a vicious cycle of increasing anxiety. You may recognise some of the following and/or have others of your own to add:

- It will be catastrophic if I don't do very well in all my subjects.
- Everyone else seems well organised and able to cope while I am struggling.
- My parents would feel devastated if I fail.
- If I fail, I'll know for certain that I am stupid.
- It's all too late, there's nothing I can do about it now.
- I can always do the resits.

### Challenging disabling beliefs

We can support ourselves during times of stress and anxiety by talking to ourselves in an affirming way. This includes reminding ourselves of our skills and resources. The following may be useful, or help you to create your own supportive statements:

- I've succeeded in exams in the past.
- I have done a lot of revision.
- I'm not alone in finding exams stressful.
- There are practical ways I can cope with anxiety.
- Being a bit anxious is helping me to stay alert and get on with my revision.
- I'll do better in the exam if I give myself proper breaks.
- There are people I can turn to for advice and support. (Check the end of this booklet for more information).





## 8. Dealing with exam panic

Panic in exams is unpleasant, can be frightening and interferes with effective work. The ideal way to deal with it involves preparation well in advance. Exercise, learning to use relaxation and eating sensibly all help and are worth using some of that precious time for. If you are someone who panics to the serious detriment of your performance in exams, seek additional help.

### What is exam panic?

At some time or other most people experience panic and when this happens we notice changes in our body. These are a series of physical and emotional responses to excess anxiety or strain. The responses interfere with the achievement of immediate tasks.

In an exam we may notice some of these bodily changes:

- We feel sick.
- Hands are sweaty and tremble.
- We feel alternately hot and cold.
- We are breathing quickly and shallowly.
- Our stomach is churning.

And we may also experience the following mental changes:

- We can't concentrate.
- Our thoughts are blocked or racing.
- Our memory has been "wiped".

The effect is that we can no longer work and the longer we sit looking at the paper the worse we feel.

### When does anxiety become unhelpful?

We all need a certain amount of stress to make us embark on tasks and want to perform well. Most people have experienced the "buzz" that comes from the anticipation of tackling and achieving difficult goals. Generally speaking, that alert, excited feeling disappears if the task feels overwhelming, if we feel under prepared, or if we can't see the purpose of what we are doing.



## Avoiding panic

Ideally, we should explore ideas for avoiding and dealing with exam panic before we get into a possibly tense situation and build these ideas into our daily life-style. In the long term, the best way of avoiding exam panic is to start preparing weeks ahead, with a helpful work routine, good revision strategies and reliable practical arrangements. However, despite our good intentions, we often don't prepare well and enter exams feeling unhelpfully stressed and in a panic. The following notes may help you to cope with such feelings if they occur.

### Stage 1

If you think panic is starting, allow yourself up to five minutes to deal with it. You probably feel tense, so concentrate on trying to relax some muscles, and use breathing to calm down. (See the "Stop" technique below.)

This may be all you need to solve your problem if you are feeling a generalised tension, but if this is insufficient, go on to Stage 2, and if necessary to Stage 3.

### Stage 2

Try to define the immediate trigger of anxiety. Is there a different way of approaching the problem? If you are completely stuck, it might be worthwhile attempting a new question, or a different stage of the problem question. Try not to think about the actual panic, once you have acknowledged that it is there.

### Stage 3

If panic persists or returns when you start thinking about its trigger, try again to relax your muscles and breathing, and try to clear your mind of the problem – either by blanking it or by imagining something pleasant for a minute or two. Once your mind is relaxed, bring it back to the immediate problem and just aim to do enough to get past the problem point, so that you are then free to get on with other parts.

## The "Stop!" technique

Feelings of stress are often reflected by increased muscular tension e.g. in the face, shoulders and hands. By deliberately relaxing muscles, it is possible to halt and reverse this process of increasing tension and stress. The "Stop" Technique is a quick and effective way of doing so. Its aim is not to achieve complete relaxation, but to reduce unhelpful tension to a manageable level. The technique takes less than a minute and can usually be done without other people noticing.

- Say "stop!" to yourself (out loud if the situation permits).
- Breathe in, and hold it briefly.
- Breathe out slowly, relaxing shoulders and hands.



- Pause.
- Breathe in again.
- Breathe out slowly, relaxing forehead and jaw.
- Support yourself with an affirming statement, e.g. "I can handle this".
- Stay quiet for a few seconds.
- Carry on with whatever you were doing, deliberately moving slowly. If you have to talk, speak a little more slowly and with your voice a little lower than usual.

You will find that, in spite of your feelings, the tension will lessen.



## 9. Further sources of advice

There are many different sources of advice and support available to help you cope with exams. We have provided this brief list to help you to work out who you might ask about particular concerns, or what further reading might be helpful.

### Academic Staff

Members of academic staff are an important source of advice in relation to exams. If you are not sure who to ask about a particular concern, your Course Organiser or Personal Tutor may be a good place to start. It's particularly important to tell your Personal Tutor if there is anything in your life that may adversely affect your exam performance. Ideally before your exams take place.

### The Advice Places

	Potterrow	King's Buildings
T	0131 650 9225	0131 650 5822
E	advice@eusa.ed.ac.uk	advice@eusa.ed.ac.uk

Run by the Students' Association, the Advice Places provide independent confidential help with a wide range of issues that might affect your revision, such as money worries, accommodation problems or academic concerns.

### Student Disability Service

T	0131 650 6828
E	disability.service@ed.ac.uk
W	<a href="http://www.ed.ac.uk/student-disability-service">www.ed.ac.uk/student-disability-service</a>

If you think that a disability might be affecting your exam performance, the Student Disability Service is an important point of contact.

### The Centre for Sport and Exercise

T	0131 650 2585 (general enquiries)
W	<a href="http://www.ed.ac.uk/sport">www.ed.ac.uk/sport</a>

Exercise can help you relax and improve your concentration. Just go along or if you would like a personal fitness consultation contact [cse.wellbeing@ed.ac.uk](mailto:cse.wellbeing@ed.ac.uk).

### Nightline

T	0131 557 4444
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This service, run by students, offers confidential emotional support from 8pm to 8am.

**The Student Counselling Service****T** 0131 650 4170**E** [student.counselling@ed.ac.uk](mailto:student.counselling@ed.ac.uk)**W** [www.ed.ac.uk/student-counselling](http://www.ed.ac.uk/student-counselling)

The service offers stress and relaxation workshops as well as individual help. Early referral is advised. Anyone seeking an urgent appointment should go to their GP.

**Study Advice****T** 0131 651 6662**E** [iad.study@ed.ac.uk](mailto:iad.study@ed.ac.uk)**W** [www.ed.ac.uk/institute-academic-development](http://www.ed.ac.uk/institute-academic-development)  
[www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/institute-academic-development/about-us/projects/talking-eds](http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/institute-academic-development/about-us/projects/talking-eds)

If you think you would benefit from some additional advice about effective learning, beyond what is given in your subject area, you could make use of the resource materials, workshops and individual advice provided by the Study Development Adviser, in the Institute for Academic Development.

**Useful books and websites**

Cottrell, S. (2003). *The Study Skills Handbook*.  
2nd Edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Chambers, E. & Northedge, A. et al. (1997). *The Arts Good Study Guide*.  
Milton Keynes: Open University.

Northedge, A. (1997). *The Sciences Good Study Guide*.  
Milton Keynes: Open University.

Rowntree, D. (1998). *Learn How to Study: A Realistic Approach*.  
London: Time Warner.