

# Exams and revision

**What are exams for?**

**Revision techniques**

**Maximising memory, minimising stress**

**Taking exams**

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## What are exams for?

Exams are just one of many different types of assessment that you will encounter on your programme at university. Just like other assessments they are designed to help you consolidate and further your learning as well as to give you an opportunity to demonstrate it. Exams will vary according to what it is that is being tested. For instance you may be asked to write one, two or three essays in a given amount of time, such as two hours. This aims to test your knowledge and understanding of the subject, and your ability to present and express ideas logically and coherently. On the other hand, short answers and multiple choice exams test your ability to recall more specific information from a broader knowledge base.

## Why is revision different to other kinds of learning?

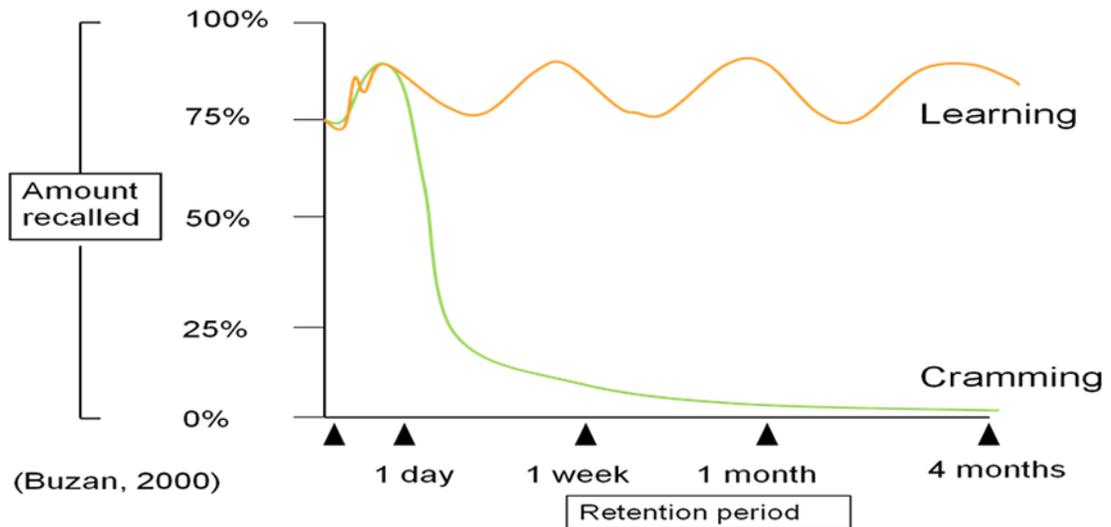
Revision is the process of consolidating your learning. It is a way of *reprocessing* your knowledge and understanding by, literally, 'seeing it again' from different angles and contexts. This process should lead you to a fuller understanding of the material and will help you to remember important details and principles on a long-term basis.

## When should I start preparing for exams?

NOW! All the learning you do on your course prepares you for your exams, so exam preparation really starts when your course starts. Get into the habit of regularly revising topics soon after they arise. Little and often is best for both learning and recall. Consider setting

aside a little time every few days, or at least every week, to write, draw or map summaries of the new material you have learned.

**Figure 1: The longer term effectiveness of regular learning**



## What do I need to know about my exams?

The date, time and place of the exam; the type of exam; organisation of the paper; timing; marks and their weighting; any supporting material required or allowed (e.g. trigonometry tables, textbooks) and equipment you need to take with you.

There are also a number of sources that can give you some idea of the likely content of the exam, try module handbooks, aims, objectives and learning outcomes, and/or assessment criteria. Past exam papers, which can be found on the library pages of the student portal are also a good source.

## What should I revise and how should I prioritise topics?

You will not be expected to know everything about your subject. Furthermore you may find that you can't revise *everything* that you have covered during the course, but do as much as you can. Prioritise the topics that seem to have been central to the course and the ones that interest or challenge you most. You will have noted what your lecturers consider to be the most important topics because of the time they devoted to them (or other clues). Follow any advice from your lecturers as you prepare for the exam. Be realistic about what you can revise in the time available to you, at the same time as recognising that this is a critical point in your studies, which is going

to contribute in a measurable way to your study success, so you may need to work extra hard for a short period.

## How should I revise?

Revision is not just about reading and memorising information, which is a relatively passive activity. If you try to revise actively, you could find that it helps your brain to take in the material either more easily or more permanently, so revise actively and creatively according to your learning preferences. Have a look at some of the strategies below.

## Revision strategies for effective learning and recall

- **Keep focused:** devise a study plan and stick to it but be realistic about what is possible if you have other commitments such as domestic or work responsibilities and ensure you allow yourself some free time too.
- **Time is your friend:** manage your time so that you know when your breaks will come and at what time you will have completed your revision for the day. When you are up against the clock, you may focus better than when your study time stretches out endlessly ahead of you.
- **Organise your material and summarise it in your own words:** create notes and mindmaps in a style which suits you. (See our study guide on Notemaking.)
- **Use index cards** to write or draw a brief outline or summary immediately after completing work on a topic.
- **Tighten up your reading technique** for speed, focus and efficiency. (See our study guide on reading effectively.)
- **Make revision meaningful:** attempt to link your material, in different ways, to what you know already or 'real world' examples such as events in your life, or current news. For example, try to learn the steps in a process by matching them to your own morning routine. Alternatively linking facts to humour can sometimes help you to remember them.

- **Use all your senses** to help you to remember: use a sound to remember a formula; a taste to remember a reference, a smell to remember the lines of a poem.
- **Learn general rules and principles** where possible, rather than masses of facts. Sometimes you need to have lots of accurate information at your finger tips, but often you demonstrate your academic competence through the way that you think, analyse, synthesise – through the questions that you ask, and by showing that you can apply rules intelligently.
- **Revise sociably**: Form a study group with other students on your course and try teaching and testing each other. If you can teach something, it usually demonstrates that you really know it. The support, encouragement and motivation will really help you all.
- **Make voice recordings of your notes** so you can listen to them on your MP3 or phone whilst doing other things such as travelling on the bus or washing up.
- **Practice the art of taking exams**: It's not just what you know that counts; it is also important that you are able to answer exam questions well, so do timed practices; interpreting exam questions; making quick plans, perhaps in diagram form; prioritising points to make (must know / should know / could know); writing neatly with flow and coherence; using the specialist language of the subject; working in uninterrupted silence and writing full timed answers.
- **Reward yourself when you meet targets**: plan your rewards and try to vary them to include a change of scene and some exercise where possible – a walk to the park or a swim at the local pool will really enhance your feeling of achievement and well-being.

## What if...

**...I don't understand what I am revising?** Ask questions about what you are doing and why you are revising it; think about how each topic fits into the rest of your course.

**...I'm late starting my revision?** Do your best, start immediately. Prioritise carefully. Begin with a small task on a subject that interests you.

**...I can't keep to my revision timetable?** Develop a schedule and experiment with it. Be flexible, allow contingency time, and change what doesn't work. (See our study guide on getting organised.)

**...I have a disability?** Make sure that you inform your Faculty early in your course if you have a disability that may make taking an exam difficult. Special provision may be possible, such as assistance with mobility or computing equipment, or writing/typing assistance. Get in touch with Disability Assist, [das@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:das@plymouth.ac.uk), for more information.

**...I panic and go blank during the exam?** Prevent this by being well prepared. Read the whole paper first making bullet points for each answer, then build on bullet points, develop a mindmap, use trigger words or images etc. Jot down a few words that have something to do with the question; this may stimulate your memory. If this doesn't work, ask basic questions about the subject, such as 'what?', 'who?', 'when?', 'why?' to get going. Try another question, or even allow a minute of rest. Slow, deep breaths can also be calming.

## **How can I improve my memory recall and minimise stress?**

We remember things best when we've learnt them on a deeper level, and this requires optimum concentration. Improve your concentration levels and avoid high stress levels by...

### **...creating a positive study environment**

- Ensure your lighting, temperature, chair and desk match your needs, making you feel comfortable but not too relaxed.
- Have a clock in the room so that you can keep to targets and work smart, not endlessly.
- Use motivating post-its.

### **...looking after yourself**

Everything in moderation - a stressed mind doesn't learn well so:

- Eat a balanced and healthy diet.
- Exercise releases frustration, helps relaxation, and lowers blood pressure.
- Sleep well and take time to wind down after studying and before bed.
- Talk to people who care about you – including staff at the university -if there's anything that's bothering you (Tracey, 2002)

### **...making study active**

Follow some of the suggestions earlier in this Study Guide

### **...taking just one step at a time**

Keep a manageably limited focus.

### ...thinking positively

If you believe that thought shapes energy and energy shapes action, then replace negative thoughts with positive ones and always remember that you have achieved great challenges in the past and so you can do it!

Refer to our study guide on getting organised for some preliminary ideas about dealing with stress. There are people who are available to help you when you are feeling like you can't cope, including tutors, counsellors and Learning Development advisors.

## How can I get better at memorising facts and figures and detail?

- **Spend time writing out the full workings of numerical problems** to ensure that you understand how you arrive at the answer. Consider using colour coding for formulae, and visual images to help recall.
- **If you need to recall** detail in diagrams and graphs, test yourself on small sections of the figure.
- **Use graphics to create visual memories:** diagrams, charts, tables, images, symbols, colour coding and mindmaps can all be used to plot topics in forms that aid understanding and create triggers for recall.
- **Exercise your memory regularly:** crosswords, Sudoku and other puzzles keep the memory in good shape.
- **Build up your memory little by little:** link each bit of learning onto what you have already learnt and understood.
- **Be positive:** believe that you can learn and remember material.
- **Be creative in your links** by using mnemonics and acronyms – and even tunes!

**Remember that the real key to remembering is understanding in the first place**, so question the material continually and work out the connections between the issues.

## What do examiners want you to do?

- answer the question that has been set
- demonstrate your understanding and its relevance to the question
- present your answer logically and coherently
- critically analyse the relevant material from your course
- answer all the parts of the questions and give appropriate examples and illustrations

## What don't examiners want?

- answers that are much too long
- all you know, descriptively, unselectively and uncritically
- illegibility and poor structuring
- confused and muddled answers
- unsubstantiated opinions, i.e. 'I think' or 'I believe' without adequate explanation or argument
- to be irritated by a lack of care in use of language.
- to fail you.

## What should I do the day before the exam?

Check that you know where and when the exam will be held don't rely on information from others. If you are unsure contact the programme administration. Visit the room and familiarise yourself with the surroundings. Check you have all the equipment and resources you need to take with you, including pens.

## What should I do on the day?

Do what's right for you. If you want to run through your notes, do so. Allow extra travel time and arrive early. Think about what causes you to feel stressed and plan ahead in order that you can avoid these situations before the exam.

## At the start of the exam

The first few minutes of an exam are very valuable, so:

- check that you have the correct paper for your course
- complete the details on the front of the paper: name, student number, module code etc.
- read the instructions twice and check all the pages
- establish how many sections or questions you need to answer
- decide how to tackle the paper, take a few moments to plan this. If it helps, answer the easy questions first; you may then find that the more difficult questions become clearer as you get into your stride
- analyse the questions just as carefully as you would for an essay (see the normal or extended version of the essay writing study guide).

## During the exam

- answer the question set, regurgitating text that doesn't answer the question is a common mistake that will earn you few marks
- show that you have understood the meaning and principles behind the facts rather than that you have just learnt the facts by rote
- write neatly, leave plenty of space, use clear and simple language
- where possible use and acknowledge the work of others.
- if time runs out, write an outline of your answer(s), showing the specific points you wanted to make
- cross out but do not obliterate rough work and planning, this could gain you marks: ensure it is clear how you arrived at your answer
- stay until the end – and use *all* of the time.

## After the exam

Review your performance after the exam and think about what you could improve for the next time. Did you find that you were sufficiently prepared? If not, why not? Do learn from your mistakes and be prepared to try new approaches until you find what works for you.

## What if I fail an exam?

You may have the option of retaking once or even twice – check with your Faculty Administration Office. Find out whether the re-sit will follow the same format. Assess your performance critically and honestly. If possible, seek feedback from a marker or tutor. Similar questions can appear in re-sits so spend some time on these topics.

## References

Buzan, T. (2000) *The Mind map book*. BBC Publications

Tracy, E. (2002) *The student's guide to exam success*. Buckingham: OUP (p. 86-91)

## Recommended reading

Cottrell, S. (2008) *The study skills handbook*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Press (p200-230)

Marshall, L. and Rowland, F. (1993) *A guide to learning independently*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Buckingham: OUP (pp.53-58).

### Learning Development

[www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn](http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn)

[learn@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:learn@plymouth.ac.uk)

Learning Gateway, RLB 011

01752 587676

Tutorials

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Taught sessions

Peer Assisted Learning Scheme

Online support