Effective Revision

Revising effectively is the key to achieving a sense of control over your work and a clear, calm head; in short it’s the key to maximising your exam potential.

Planning and preparation is where effective revision begins...

Planning your revision

1. KNOWING YOUR OWN STYLE:

How do you typically revise? Do you plan methodically? Do you cram at the last minute? Be honest about this, and then ask yourself whether the way you have revised in the past has served you well. If not, what aspects need changing?

2. ORGANISING YOUR WORK:

In advance of actually settling down in front of your books, there is a lot of really valuable preparation that can be achieved that will set you in good stead for starting your revision proper (this is especially useful over the Easter break, when it may feel too early to begin revising, or impossible to concentrate exclusively on it because of other outstanding course work). Strategies include:

- Sorting paperwork (lecture/essay notes) work into broad topic areas
- Deciding which topic areas to prioritise, which to revise as back-up and which to leave out.
- Identifying gaps i.e. is there a need for new/further work on any topic area?
- Drafting a provisional timetable for revision
- Time-permitting, re-working and/or replenishing existing notes where they are illegible, weak or have gaps.

3. TIME-TABLING:

Whatever your personal style, always work to some sort of timetable, even if you are constantly reworking it.

- DON’T be panicked by the shortage of time left, into thinking that there’s no time for a timetable. In such a situation it’s even more important.
- A timetable is calming! Its purpose is to prevent against imbalance i.e. where one paper consumes disproportionate revision time over another, perhaps because it comes first etc.
- Draw up a broad timetable for the whole period remaining (including gaps between exams after they’ve started).
- Break your timetable down day-by-day, as you work through it.
- DON’T be over-ambitious about what you can squeeze into a day. It’s much more valuable to concentrate on smaller amounts over shorter periods and revise effectively, than to labour very long hours because you set your sights too high at the outset. Setting your sights too high will simply end in your not achieving your
goals, thus making you feel you’re already slipping behind, failing etc. and ultimately panicking and throwing your timetable out!

- DON’T be afraid of reworking your timetable on a regular basis. Occasionally you will be over-ambitious or, conversely, work through a piece faster than you envisaged. Tweak your timetable day-by-day.

Getting down to it!

1. MAKING THE HOURS COUNT:

Rate the effectiveness of your revision NOT in terms of the sheer number of hours you've slaved over your notes, but by how much you’ve taken in and understood relative to the time you've spent.

Long hours count for little if you're falling asleep over your work, or your mind is constantly wandering, or you're having to re-read the same page several times over etc.

2. STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING CONCENTRATION:

- Work intensively for shorter periods, say 2-3 hours at one sitting, then take a decent break, say ½ hour minimum. Plan your break in advance and make sure you let yourself take it! This way your head knows there's an end in sight and it will work in a more concentrated way.

- If your revision necessarily entails re-reading endless notes (and sometimes poor notes), re-working them as you go can help kill two birds with one stone i.e. the actual process of reworking ensures your active concentration and you end up with easier to understand, better-made, briefer notes for the days to come.

- Re-work your notes...

3. REWORKING YOUR NOTES:

- RE-WRITING: is a good way of reducing your notes, improving their layout i.e. using bullet points, new headings etc., thus making them increasingly effective revision tools. Think about doing this if your original notes are poor, your original ‘scribble’ difficult to understand, if there are gaps in your notes, if they are very dense i.e. essay-style etc. Also very useful if you have difficulty concentrating (i.e. when simply reading your notes through). This is NOT time wasted, as the process of re-writing and re-structuring is a good way to absorb information.

- HIGHLIGHTING your notes: if you don’t want / need to re-write your original notes, you may find this helpful instead i.e. with a marker pen or ruler, stress important headings / sentences / quotes etc. in your notes by highlighting or underlining them. This makes your notes more visually accessible and is a way of re-structuring without re-writing.
• COLOUR-CODING: Try this when you’re highlighting to distinguish between, say, section headings, bullet point headings, quotations etc. Be systematic and consistent though – don’t highlight randomly!

• REVISION CARDS: not exactly re-writing your notes, but creating brief memory-joggers, especially useful for the later stages of revision. These cards contain headings, key names, dates, theorists, theories etc. Namely, whatever memory-joggers make sense and work for you.

Using past exam papers

1. BECOME FAMILIAR: Copies of past exam papers for all courses are kept in the Resource Room. Familiarise yourself with these for each of your respective courses. This way their typical look and layout won’t be alien to you when you come to the exam proper.

2. IDENTIFY ‘TRICK’ QUESTIONS: Actually there are no such things as trick questions. But there are types of questions which occasionally catch students out, especially in the context of nerves and pressure of time. The EITHER/OR question is one instance, The example given below (SC201, 2001), instructs you to answer ONE response ONLY i.e. it would not be permissible to answer both (a) and (c), or any equivalent combination.

   EXAMPLE: EITHER
   
   1. Critically explore Durkheim’s concept of the ‘social fact’, illustrating how this applies to particular social phenomena.
      
   OR
   
   2. (a) How useful is it to see social solidarity in modern societies as ‘organic’ in character?
      
   OR
   
   (b) Can Durkheim’s account of the ‘elementary forms’ of religion provide any insight into the nature of religion in modern societies?

3. USEFUL EXERCISES:

   • Take an exam paper and read through carefully. Decide the 3 (or appropriate) questions you would choose. Think about what each question is asking and how you could best apply the material you have to construct an answer. Remember, a typical weakness in many exam responses derives from a failure to adequately answer the question. Often this is a result of the tendency to ‘regurgitate’ rather than ‘apply’ the learnt material.

   • Take each chosen exam question in turn and spend 5 minutes planning a response in note form. Time yourself:
– List the key points you want to get across
– Order them (e.g. by allocating each a number) to present the most logical argument / progression of thought
– Define the main concluding point/s you want to reach, if any.
– List the key texts you want to make reference to

In the immediate run up...

1. ONCE YOU HAVE YOUR EXAM TIMETABLE:
   • Re-work your revision timetable to take account of your exam schedule
   • Don't make the mistake of prioritising revision for your first exam/s to the exclusion of those remaining
   • Pay particular attention in this respect to revision planning for exams which fall on consecutive days, or morning/afternoon of the same day.

2. ONCE THE EXAMS HAVE STARTED...
   • By the time the exams are underway, you should - ideally - have worked through all the relevant material for each exam at least once.
   • Try to be reducing the bulk of your revision material by this point significantly (e.g. using revision cards etc.), so that you can effectively refresh your memory over a wide range of material in the much shorter periods of time remaining.
   • Return to your extended notes to clarify forgotten points, but otherwise move away from ploughing through them systematically.