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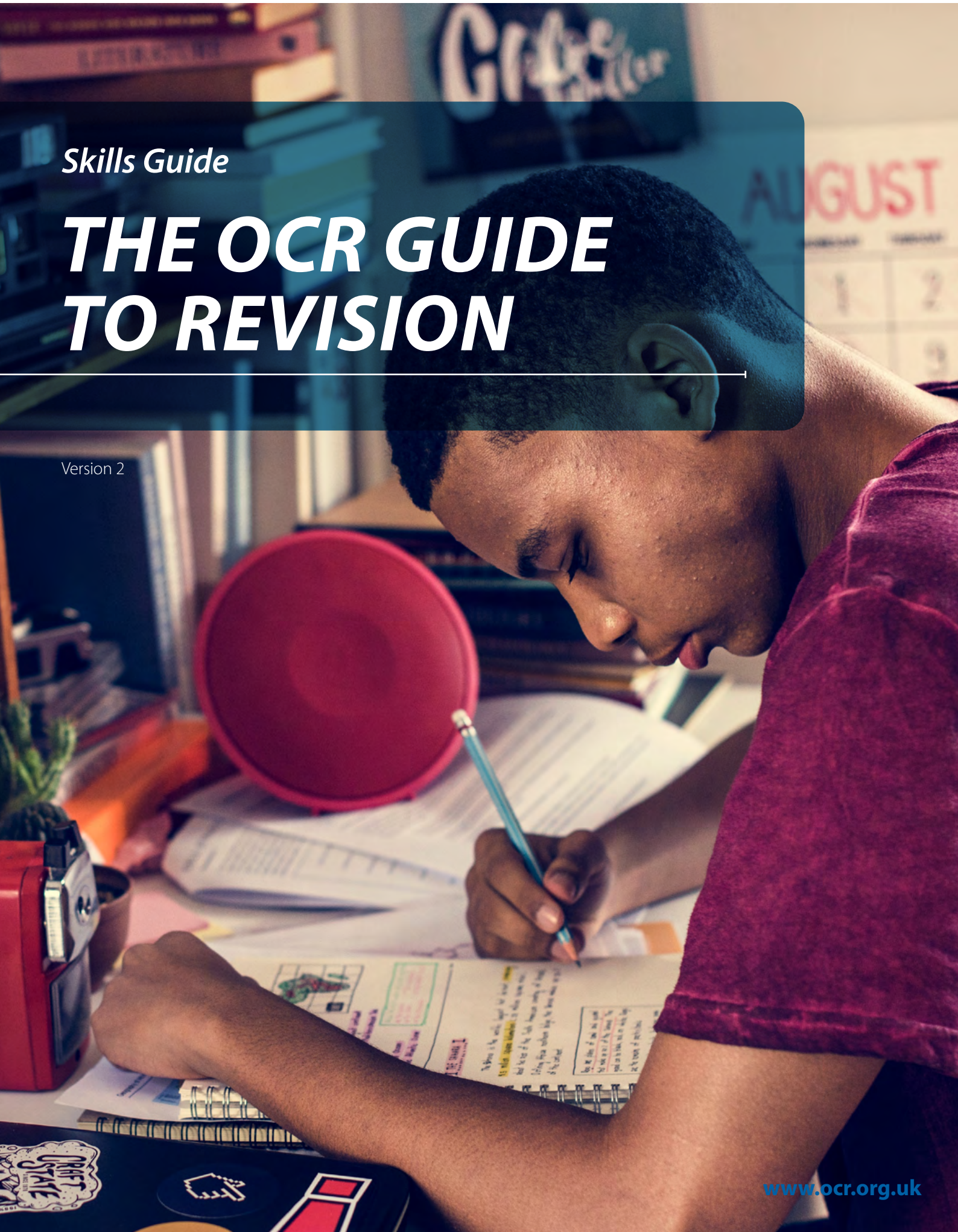

Skills Guide

THE OCR GUIDE TO REVISION

Version 2

www.ocr.org.uk

This revision guide has been produced by OCR to help you to revise for examinations and internal assessments in your chosen qualifications. This guide has not been written to accompany a specific qualification but focuses on general revision skills and techniques to consolidate your learning and help you to prepare for your assessments. We suggest that you make use of the links to the exercises provided to practise and improve your knowledge, in order to make your writing more accurate and skilful in a whole range of contexts. Other skills guides are available at www.ocr.org.uk/qualifications/skills-guides/.

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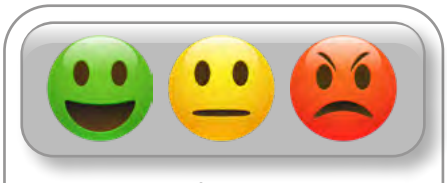

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What is revision?

Revision can be seen as 're-vision' – a way of re-viewing, re-seeing, and re-visiting your learning, in preparation for assessment. The process of revision involves revisiting, but the best revision also involves re-seeing facts in a different way, to consolidate and contextualise learning.

Revision prepares you for the rigours of formal assessment or examinations and it is therefore an intense learning experience which enables you to demonstrate your best knowledge and skills when it really matters.

Why revise?

Revision will help you in exams but most importantly, it will help you retain the knowledge you have learnt. No matter how good your teacher is you are likely to forget much of what you are taught without revision. There are many theories about why this happens.

Why do we forget?

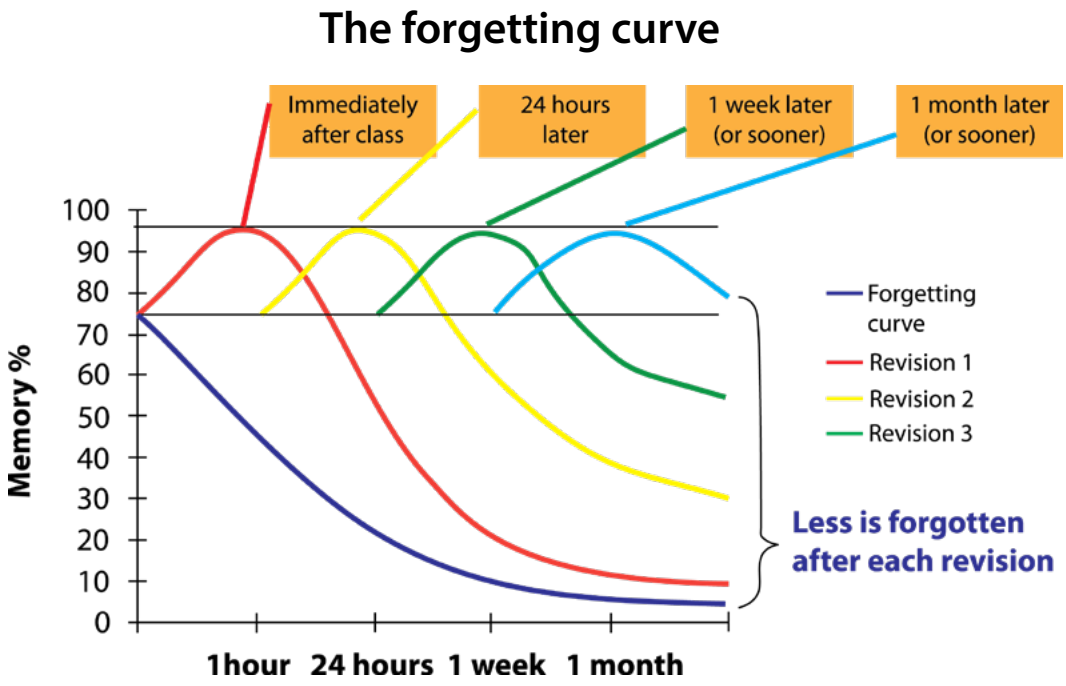
Interference theory says that if an old memory is too similar to a new memory, one may corrupt the other, either proactively, where the old memory obscures the new, or retroactive, where the new memory becomes dominant. In instances where concepts appear to be similar, it's easy to see how they might become mixed up and create confusion.

Cue-dependency describes the failure to remember key facts because other cues that were normally there, in the classroom for example, are not there anymore. This is a particular issue when exam questions appear in unexpected formats.

Failure to store theory suggests that we only remember the things that are necessary. Experiments where people are asked to describe the detail of incidents find that the detail of their accounts can vary wildly. It seems the mind doesn't bother retaining detail that doesn't appear to be relevant or functional. Following this logic, if a student doesn't see the importance of a piece of knowledge or a concept then they might have difficulty retaining it.

Decay theory states that if the learning isn't used or rehearsed it simply fades away. Hermann Ebbinghaus (1850 -1909) experimented on his own memory and recall by rehearsing nonsensical words until he had remembered them. He then recorded the rate at which he lost the learning. As a result, he recognised and named 'The forgetting curve', describing how memory decays most rapidly in the first hour after learning and continues to decay more slowly until it levelled off after about a month.

He also discovered that, when he was certain he had entirely forgotten everything, he re-learned the same list much more quickly. The theory of interrupting the forgetting curve suggests that, by regular revision, decay will be arrested and retention will improve.



Learning and memory

Effective revision relies on effective learning and remembering.

When you are learning, you store information in your short-term memory. During this stage of your learning you should be able to understand a concept in relation to what you already know. However, in order to ensure that this learning stays with you, you have to actively ensure that it becomes part of your longer term memory. There are four stages to effective learning and remembering: linking, committing, recalling and reviewing.

Link your learning

To be able to learn something and remember it, the most important thing is to understand it. If you do not understand what you are learning, your brain cannot make the connections it needs to fit in with your prior learning and make sense of a concept or fact. So ask questions if you're not completely clear on something you've been taught. It can really help too if you can fit facts or theories into a bigger picture: relating groups of facts or ideas, understanding how one idea builds onto another, recognising how concepts work in the real world, having an awareness of a timeline of ideas or events. When you do this, you are creating a web of knowledge that you're much more likely to remember than a series of isolated facts.

Commit to memory

You can only commit information to memory if you revisit your learning. Repeating a piece of information means that you are more likely to retain it. For example, when you tell someone a story someone else has told you, you are more likely to commit it to your long-term memory through the re-telling to someone else. If you re-tell the story more than once, you are more likely to remember detail and have immediate recall.

There are many ways to commit information to memory and the more active the revisiting the more likely you are to retain your learning. Learning passively, through simply listening, is less effective than learning actively by using more than one of your five senses, and reading, writing, discussing, problem-solving and playing games for example.

You are far more likely to retain your learning if you revisit it in a way that is more meaningful to you. Everyone has their own preferences. The following page has some popular examples.

Techniques to engage your memory

There are many ways in which you can help commit your learning to memory. These are just a few suggestions. It's important to find the methods that suit you as a learner, so experiment a bit until you find the best system for you.

Team up

Some students prefer to discuss learning before or during note taking. When they explain their thoughts, actions and understanding of a topic to others they feel it really helps embed the learning more deeply than if they had simply written notes.

If you want to try this, you will need to find a study buddy or two from your class to work with either during the lessons or after school. Try dividing the learning up, then each of you re-teaches different elements of the learning to the others. Really question and challenge each other's understanding. The more you grapple with the subject in this way, the more confidently you will be committing it to memory. If you get truly stumped or disagree, though, you need to refer back to the teacher.

Creating flash card summaries

Summarising key facts on cards is a popular revision technique for many students. By creating snappy written summaries, students find it easier to identify and organise the main points.

By creating your own descriptions, you are re-learning topics. Summarising, however, is a sophisticated skill that needs some practice. It's worth sharing your summary cards with another student, or maybe working as a group to critique each other's understanding of the key points. If there's disagreement, you can refer back to your teacher for clarification.

Learning journals

There can be little opportunity to create vibrant revision material in exercise books. Often you work so hard in lessons that your exercise books in some subjects may just be pages of calculations or reams of notes. However good the learning in the lesson, what remains in the book can look somewhat sterile by comparison. Some students prefer to create their own journals, alongside their exercise books. It can be as creative or ordered as you like – it's your journal. Taking the time to retell yourself the lesson on a couple of pages of your journal can really help you to commit the learning and be a great reference for revision.

Visual approaches

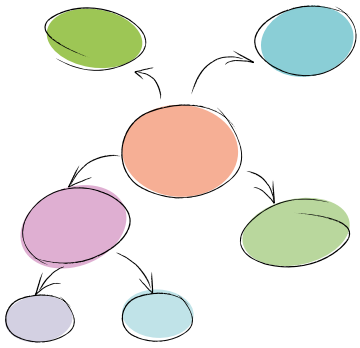
Try to think of a really memorable event. How would you describe it to someone else? The chances are your description might include a lot of sensory information – sounds, smells, tastes even, but probably you will mostly describe what you saw. Many people believe that your visual sense is a great asset to your memory. One theory is that it enhances the integration and organisation of facts and ideas. Not everything you learn will have an easy visual reference, though, particularly complex and abstract theories, but where you can use visual prompts you might find them really useful.

Dynamic Display

Try building a revision display in your bedroom. A display that grows and changes with a topic can help you locate the ideas or facts in the wider scheme or topic. Whether it is a mind map, a chart or a timeline, if you refer it and add to it regularly, it will help you to order the learning and commit it to memory. You could turn the display into a PowerPoint or Prezi for revision. You could deliberately leave blank areas out for testing yourself.

Mind Maps

If you like mind-mapping, it's worth spending time creating a few. Like a personal display board, mind maps can be a useful revision activity in order to support your understanding of how the various elements of learning interconnect. The strength of your mind map is dependent on your ability to break subjects into component parts, imagine suitable imagery and create something that you enjoy looking at. Beware: some students might spend a disproportionate amount of time creating beautiful images at the expense of understanding their own work. There are programs that can help you make mind maps, but if you don't enjoy making them, perhaps they just aren't for you.



Total recall

The proof is in the pudding and you won't know how well your memory techniques are working until you try to recall what you've learnt.

While tests can be stressful, they are really the best way to check that the learning is in your memory and readily accessible. The key is to get lots of practise so that when it's time for the real exam, you'll be comfortable with the format and there's unlikely to be any nasty surprises.

Pop Quizzes

For subjects where you have to recall a lot of concepts, facts and figures it might be worth making a quiz using flashcards. You can get anyone to test you but its best with a study buddy or someone who has an understanding of the subject.

Past papers and mark schemes

Your teachers will often create mock exams using past papers. They are a really good way to get familiar with the format of the exam and, alongside the mark scheme, you get an understanding of what the examiner is looking for. They are available online but it's better to ask your teacher for some pointers; firstly, because examinations can change quite significantly over time and you want to be sure your practising on a current style of exam, but secondly, and most importantly, if your teacher is planning a mock exam it is best that you come to it with fresh eyes as you would the real thing.

Open Book and Mock Testing methods of using past papers

The purpose of mock tests is two-fold: to simulate the real exam experience and to get an accurate indication of how well you would perform, flagging up your areas of strength or weakness. You might also get the experience of formal exam conditions, which will help you to remain calm when the time comes for the real exam.

Open-book tests have a very different function. If you can work through a paper in collaboration with a study buddy, or in a group, with all the reference material to hand, the result is an effective revision session.

If this is the answer….?

Another variation on the open book method is to have both the questions and the answers. The challenge here is to try to work out the process that gave this result. A benefit of this activity is that it takes away the temptation for you to look at the answer, or just copy someoneelse's answer.

Upgrading answers

A further variation of recall revision for longer answers is to work with a partner or group to improve some anonymous answers, from low to medium grade or medium to high grade. The benefit is that you get to discuss and become familiar with the qualities of good answers and learn how to model them.

Regular returns

However you choose to revise, you need to make sure you revisit your work regularly. There's no point in making great flashcards or mind maps only to let them gather dust in a drawer. Every time you return to your notes you will find you have retained more information. You need to come back to your notes at least three times to commit them to long-term memory.

Spacing

Current theories suggest that if you space your revision carefully you will maximise your chances of retaining your learning.

- The first time should be straight after the learning probably when you're taking notes in the lesson.
- The second should be twenty-four hours later, for example when you're with your study buddy or making some flash cards or an entry in your learning journal.
- The third time should be within a week of the lesson. Perhaps your teacher will recap the learning before moving to another topic.
- The fourth time should be within six months of the original lesson, for example in readiness for a mock exam.

Review and Refresh

The last part of a good revision cycle is the review. You should be monitoring how well you are recalling information, which topics you are confident and less confident in and which kind of questions are tripping you up and why.

Self-assessment and monitoring

The ideal outcome of revision sessions is that, when you uncover areas of weakness, make a note, go home and refer back to your revision notes and exercise books until you feel you have confidently mastered this area.

Traffic Light Tracking

One effective method is to have a 'traffic light' tracking document on the front of a revision folder on which you can record your level of confidence or expertise in the topics covered.

This means that the teacher, rather than planning to skim over all the coverage in revision sessions, can shrewdly select just the topics that are flagged by you and your classmates as causing concern.

Your plan

The most effective start to revision takes place during the learning stage.

Plan your revision for assessment

As suggested in the previous section, the most effective start to revision is during the learning stage, so that you understand and consolidate as you study, rather than leaving it all to the end.

However, in the period leading up to your assessment and examination, you will need to assimilate all of your learning and accelerate your revision, in order to achieve the best outcomes you can.

Planning and preparation for your assessment can be divided into:

- identifying what you need to revise
- familiarising yourself with the assessment requirements
- preparing a revision timetable
- deciding which revision strategies you will use.

Identifying what you need to revise

Spend some time making an overview of what you need to learn. Perhaps you might identify areas where you are confident and need to do very little revision. It is important to acknowledge the subjects or aspects of subjects which you are finding difficult and allocate extra time for them. Prioritising areas of difficulty is effective, but break them up with aspects you enjoy – and take a break if you are finding a subject difficult. Assemble the different topics so that you can include specific goals in your plan. You will be able to compile these more efficiently after familiarising yourself with the requirements of the assessment (see the next page) and reviewing what you already know. It is much more effective to be goal-oriented (setting specific targets to achieve in the near future) than time-oriented (covering topics to fill the time available) and to give yourself daily targets based on your goal or learning task.

Familiarising yourself with assessment requirements

Your teacher will have discussed the requirements of your assessment with you. It is important to review these and have a clear idea of what you will be assessed on. In particular, at the revision planning stage you need to know the mark scheme for your assessment and be able to identify the content and skills you will need to demonstrate. For example, if the mark scheme asks you to 'compare and contrast', are you able to understand and apply this concept? If the mark scheme asks you to show 'knowledge and understanding' of a subject, are you confident that you will be able to recall and communicate this to the assessor? If not, these topics need to be added to your revision timetable.

Take a look at exemplar material, which gives you examples of answers and assessments, often with comments and allocated marks, so you can see what makes a good response and what you need to work on. These are freely available on awarding bodies' websites, categorised under the subject of the qualification. Also have a look at the examiner's reports for your subject – these will give you an indication of the most common reasons examiners give for students not gaining marks.

Allow time to plan a revision timetable and how you will revise.

Preparing a revision timetable

Investing time in your plan ensures you feel organised and is a commitment to your revision. Put your timetable where others can see it and share it with your parents and friends – the more people who know about it, the more likely you are to follow it, or to have to explain yourself! You could even fit it in with a friend's timetable, so you can sometimes vary your study by working together.

It is important to consider where you will revise – a comfortable environment is essential for you to concentrate. Medical research has also shown that allowing time for exercise and plenty of sleep aids in concentration and learning, so build these in to your revision timetable.

You will need to work out how long you have to study before your assessment.

If you have followed the revisiting suggestions in the Learning and memory section (page 7), you could prepare a more intensive four-week plan leading up to your assessment, for example.

You then need to identify the amount of time you can make available in each week. The time you spend revising will vary, depending on the level and number of subjects you are studying, but it is important to make it manageable and to incorporate time for relaxation too.

A good starting point may be:

- on weekdays - one session of two to three hours in the evening or after school
- at weekends - 4 sessions of two to three hours throughout the day and one session on either Saturday or Sunday evening.

Research has shown that we learn better in the morning, so try to timetable more of your revision earlier in the day. The brain needs regular rest periods and you will revise much more effectively if you do a few hours each day, rather than cramming it all in on a Sunday, for example. Take regular breaks and during your breaks try not to process new information, which can interfere with your learning. Have something to eat and think about something completely different.

Give yourself goals in your timetable. Ticking off the completed revision of an identifiable subject or topic will give you a sense of accomplishment at the end of your session, and building in rewards for yourself will also make you feel positive and confident about your achievement.

During your revision, it is important to ensure you are learning and committing information to memory, but also allowing a similar amount of time for reflecting and recalling. This will aid in the committing process, but also practising recall will enable more efficient and speedy recall during the assessment itself. Therefore each revision session should have a combination of committing and practising recalling. Answering practise questions or getting someone to test you on what you've just covered can be useful ways of doing this.

Strategies for success

A revision plan will only be successful if it is realistic. If you create a really challenging timetable for yourself and find you can't stick to it, you will probably abandon it.

Down-time

It's important to be good to yourself and factor in time to continue to do the things that relax you. If your plans allow you to take the time to see friends, play sports or read for pleasure you are far more likely to remain relaxed and in the right frame of mind to study.

Frequent, short breaks

When revising a lot of material, you will soon discover that your ability to retain information will become less efficient the longer you study. Most people find that after an hour's study their recall begins to diminish. The key is to take short, frequent breaks: go and make a drink or a sandwich, call a friend, take the dog for a walk. When you return to your studies you will have re-booted your memory and will be efficiently remembering again.

Mix it up

Prioritising areas of difficulty is effective, but break them up with aspects that you enjoy and are confident with. If you find that you get completely stumped by a topic, take a break and when you return you may find that you see the material with new eyes. If it isn't any clearer, you know you need more help from your study partners, your teacher or an online resource.

Online Resources

You can fnd excellent online revision tools for most subjects; films, animations and quizzes can be really useful to help you absorb a topic in a new format. They do not replace your own notes and teacher's resources but they can add a new dimension.

Know the format

This section will focus on preparing for the assessment itself.

In order to recall for your assessment you need to:

- be familiar with the mode of the assessment, for example, Will the questions be multiple choice or essay-type questions?
- practise applying your knowledge to sample assessments
- ensure you know the date and length of your examination(s).
- be aware of special instructions, for example are you allowed a calculator?
- ensure you are familiar with the specialist language which might be used in questions, for example terms like 'justify', 'explore' and 'evaluate'. Look at past papers so you know what to expect.

You should also look at the assessment objectives and mark scheme for your assessment. Try reducing them to key words on post-it notes and stick them onto your desk to keep you focused.

Practising the application of your knowledge in the form of the assessment is important preparation and should be done at regular intervals during your revision. You don't need to write up whole essays, but you do need to practise answering the kind of questions you will be asked.

Exercise on practising an essay question

- Recall facts relevant to the question and write them all down as fully as you can.
- Look back over your notes to see what you missed out.
- Compress to post-it notes so you have the facts most relevant to the question.
- You then need to practise responding quickly to a question.

Appendix 1

Timetable template

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
	Session 1	Session 1	Session 1	Session 1	Session 1	Session 1	Session 1
Time Focus Recall							
	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break
Time Focus Recall							
	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break
Time Focus Recall							
	Session 2	Session 2	Session 2	Session 2	Session 2	Session 2	Session 2
Time Focus Recall							
	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break
Time Focus Recall							
	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break
Time Focus Recall							

Remember:

- Decide on your goal/focus for your revision period
- Commit, using the strategies suggested
- Recall – practise recalling your learning every session
- Give yourself a break of about 10 minutes every 40–50 minutes to suit you
- Revisit learned concepts at greater intervals to ensure long-term memory retention

Appendix 2

Timetable sample

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
	Session 1	Session 1	Session 1	Session 1	Session 1	Session 1	Session 1
Time Focus Recall	am 7.00-7.30 French verbs Flashcards						
	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break
Time Focus Recall	7.40-8.00 Process of digestion Diagram						
	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break
Time Focus Recall	8.10-8.30 Character study Mindmap						
	Session 2	Session 2	Session 2	Session 2	Session 2	Session 2	Session 2
Time Focus Recall	pm 6.00-6.40 Poetry question Condense, note gaps						
	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break
Time Focus Recall	6.50-7.30 World War 2 Matching events to dates						
	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break
Time Focus Recall	7.40-8.00 Learn features of writing to advise mnemonic						

Appendix 3

Links to resources

Websites on learning and memory aids and theories

www.infed.org/thinkers/gardner.htm

For background on the theory of multiple intelligences and how they can be used to enhance learning.

www.learning-styles-online.com

For information on preferred learning styles.

www.ldpride.net/learning-style-test.html

Find out your preferred learning style.

www.braingym.org.uk

Includes activities which help improve brain function and learning.

www.mindtools.com/memory.html

Brain training ideas and techniques for improving your memory, using, for example, mnemonics and association.

www.wordle.net

A website where you can create word clouds on a theme or to focus on subject vocabulary, for example.

www.memrise.com

An innovative website which gives lots of ideas for enjoyable ways of learning languages and vocabulary.

Revision-focused websites

www.bbc.co.uk/education

Various revision activities, both audio and visual, to support the study of GCSEs, including learning games and a messageboard.

www.s-cool.co.uk

For GCSE and A Level revision support for all subjects – contains revision notes, tests and worksheets, with discussion forums.

Appendix 4

Teacher guidance

Learners can make a real difference to their outcomes through effective revision and study skills. As teachers, it is important that we allow time to teach these skills. This can be done discretely, as a skill for all subjects, but also specifically related to your subject and its requirements.

Learning will be more effective if skills and concepts are regularly revised and revisted throughout the course. The importance of revisiting is discussed in this guide, and can be modelled through starters and plenaries, homework tasks and opportunities to reflect and make links between prior and new learning in the classroom. Similarly, many of the techniques discussed here can be modelled and practised by learners. They can be encouraged to explore what kind of learners they are and which strategies work best for them. Practising these strategies through homework tasks will help develop independent learning and the ability to self-manage. In addition, these skills can be used across the curriculum and in future learning.

Tips for facilitating good revision practice

In your planning

- Be aware of, and share, the mode of assessment – is it modular, with a short study period? If it is linear, and not assessed until the end of the course, it is even more important that learners are encouraged to revisit learning points, as well as revising at the end. Include study skill strategies and revisiting in your scheme of work.

During teaching

- Share meta-learning with learners – explain your methodology and the theories behind learning, as well as sharing strategies arising from them.
- Be explicit - show links between prior and new learning and give opportunities to develop reflection on this.
- When a concept is learned and understood, encourage higher order skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation through discussion and problem-solving techniques, as well as reflective writing – this also necessitates the revisiting which enables learning to be stored in the long-term memory.
- Expose your learners to a variety of learning strategies to give variety to their experience and to allow different ways of accessing and reinforcing concepts and skills.
- Use formative assessment and resources, such as Active Results, to inform your future teaching.

Use any modular assessments, such as controlled assessment, to model and practise strategies for learning in an authentic context - for example, teaching essay-writing skills for a modular assessment can also prepare for a future end-of-course assessment.

Up to and just before an assessment

- Give opportunities for your learners to reflect on and assess their learning in order to identify personal goals and targets.
- Encourage the planning of revision and a dialogue about revision strategies and its importance, giving guidance on timetabling and the importance of the pattern of committing and recalling, with regular breaks.
- Familiarise learners with the form of the assessment, including time limit, assessment objectives, types of questions etc.
- Demonstrate the kinds of questions being asked and what they are assessing.
- Model, and give opportunities to practise the breaking down of questions, underlining key words etc, and planning answers through mind mapping and sequencing.
- Share exemplar material with learners – ask them to mark a piece of work against the mark scheme and compare with the mark awarded.
- Teach the mark weightings of questions and the importance of apportioning time appropriately. Provide opportunities to practise timings to individual questions, as well as sections or whole papers, again allowing learners to self- or peer-assess by focusing explicitly on the mark scheme.

Explicitly incorporating the importance of study and revision skills into your lessons will encourage independent learners who can identify and set goals and targets, and take responsibility for their learning. This is a valuable life-skill for all of us as we progress with our learning and future careers, and aim to achieve the very best we can.

References

1 *Memory*: *A contribution to experimental psychology.* Ebbinghouse, H (2010/2013).

2 *Multiple intelligences*: *New horizons in theory and practice,* Basic Books, 2nd revised edition. Gardner, H (2006).

3 *How to reach and teach ADD/ADHD children*: *Practical techniques, strategies and interventions for helping children with attention problems and hyperactivity*. Jossey-Bass. CA: San Francisco. Reif, S (1993).

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