Top Tips on Coping with Exam Pressure

Ten Golden Rules for Exam Revision

Students study and learn in different ways. No one best way suits all students. We suggest ten golden rules for exam revision, but like all rules they need to be interpreted flexibly.

Rule 1: Take a positive attitude towards your exams

Start with the right psychological frame of mind. Remind yourself why exams are necessary (to measure student performance and to assess student potential), and why you are going to do well (because you’ve been reasonably conscientious and have prepared diligently).

Rule 2: Reduce stress and increase self-confidence

Make yourself familiar with the form of the exam. They nearly always offer a choice of questions, based on the syllabus that has been taught. Make sure there’s no plan to change the exam format this year. Study past exam papers, noting the exam format, the choice of questions, and the all-important time limit.

Examine the style and wording as well as the content of questions. Don’t assume that questions will be worded in the same way every year. Examiners enjoy finding new ways of asking old questions.

Rule 3: Review your study material systematically

Go through your entire stock of learning materials (lecture, reading and tutorial notes, handouts, essays, newspaper cuttings, etc), making cross-references. Once you begin your revision, it’s generally not a good idea to undertake new reading. Last minute reading is often poorly absorbed and ‘blocks’ your memory.

Rule 4: Revise actively, not passively

Revision means more than ‘re-writing’ or passing your eyes across pages of lecture notes. Active revision means ‘engaging’ your material in a questioning approach: do you understand what your notes mean? Identify concepts, theories and writers. Follow up points you don’t understand. Summarise your notes on cards under key headings and sub-headings.

Revise from cards at odd moments and don’t always revise in the same place.

Rule 5: Learn how to retrieve and use your knowledge

Practise the art of retrieving ideas and making use of your knowledge. Learn to ‘string’ ideas together by making connections between concepts and theories from different areas. Use concepts across the frontiers of knowledge. In that way, you get the best return on the time and effort you put into revision.

Rule 6: Practise structuring effective exam answers

Good exam technique only comes with practise. Candidates who come to grief in exams often lack practise in structuring their thoughts into an effective exam answer. One page of well-structured answer is worth ten pages of unstructured ‘waffle’.

Rule 7: Practise writing some complete exam answers

Get used to writing continuously for say, forty minutes without a break. This helps you to develop writing skills and to manage your most important exam resource: time. Don’t give up half way through. Keep
going. You can always fill in the missing details later. Be kind to yourself in judging your first attempts at answering exam questions under a time constraint. Don’t panic!

**Rule 8: Don’t daydream or drift into negative frame of mind**

Maintain good morale and keep fit during your revision. Remember to take regular breaks to fresh air, exercise and refreshment. Keep hydrated and avoid excessive tea, coffee and alcohol. Take no drugs unless prescribed by a doctor. After a break, see if you can capture key points of the last topic you revised.

**Rule 9: Consider the value of co-operative revision**

Most students revise alone. Some become anxious and depressed because they fall behind. Others find it best to work in a revision group. Tackling revision questions with fellow students reminds you that you are not alone; it allows you to comment constructively on one another’s outline answers; it saves time; it is mutually supportive and helps you maintain good morale.

**Rule 10: Maintain a balanced revision timetable**

Don’t revise a few topics to the exclusion of all others. Spread your revision over two or more subjects each day. Take a day off now and then as a reward. Remember, you’re building yourself up to peak performance on the day of the exam. Take regular physical exercise and get sufficient rest throughout revision.

**Key Words in Exams**

- A NALYSE - Examine the detailed constituents of
- COMPARE - Look for similarities and differences between
- CRITICISE - Give your judgment about the merit of theories or opinions or about the truth of facts, or about the merit of a work of literature, and back your judgment by a discussion of the evidence
- DEFINE - Set down the precise meaning of a word or phrase. Show that the distinctions implied in the definition are necessary
- DESCRIBE – Give a detailed or graphic account of
- DISCUSS – Investigate or examine by argument, sift and debate, giving reasons pro and con
- EVALUATE – Make an appraisal of the worth of something, in the light of its truth of utility – include, to a lesser degree, your personal opinion
- EXPLAIN – To make plain, to interpret, and to account for
- ILLUSTRATE – Use a figure or diagram or quotation to explain or clarify, or make clear by the use of concrete examples
- INTERPRET – Expound the meaning of; make clear and explicit; usually giving your own judgment also
- JUSTIFY – Show adequate grounds for decisions or conclusions
- OUTLINE - Give the main features or general principles of a subject, omitting minor details, and emphasising structure and arrangement
- RELATE - To narrate. More usually, in exams to show how things are connected to each other and to what extent they are alike, or affect each other
- STATE - Present in brief, clear form
- SUMMARISE – Give a concise account of chief points or substance of matter, omitting details

**Taking that exam!**

- Arrive a few minutes early as arriving late only increases anxiety. Don’t discuss your prospects with other students.
- Allow up to 10 minutes to read right through the paper carefully and choose which questions to answer. Re – read these questions to make sure you know what they are asking.
• Try to relax and try to regulate your breathing – not always easy!
• Allocate your time according to marks per question, leaving 10-15 minutes at the end for checking. Make a note of the time you expect to finish each question.
• Plan your answers. Write down main ideas and outline first. Cross this out when you have finished your answer.
• Prioritise – Answer your best question first, this will give you confidence.
• Concentrate on main issues. Stick to your time budget. Answer all questions required.
• Remember that the first 50% of the marks for any question is much easier to obtain than the next 50%. The examiner does not expect the same length or quality as a paper you would write on your own during term time.
• Write simply, directly and to the point, grammatically and without misspellings and ensure it is legible.
• When you have finished writing check through all your answers.
• Don’t stay for the post-mortem discussions afterwards.

Strategies if things go wrong.
• If you run out of time, write in note form, explain that you ran out of time and that the notes indicate the points you would have gone on to discuss or the way you would have solved the problem.
• If you get stuck – allocate a short time to try and remember or puzzle out the answer. If at the end of that time you are still stuck – go on to the next question and alter your timetable so that you make sure you answer the necessary number of questions.
• If you panic/blackout – the best thing for this is to anticipate it long before the exam and discuss it with someone like a student counsellor who can help you to ‘desensitise’ yourself to this problem, which is probably of long standing. If it does happen in the exam try to ‘switch off’. Close your eyes and try to think of something pleasant and relaxing, and do nothing for five minutes. Then try and see how you would explain the problem in front of you to someone who knows very little about the subject – a school child for example. If that doesn’t work, try the ‘scribble strategy’ in which you write out words related to the subject which sometimes leads to other words...and other word ... and gets your mind thinking again.
• If none of these work – tell the invigilator immediately. If you have had severe problems previously, discuss this with somebody – a tutor or a counsellor for example – well beforehand.

Practical tips to reduce stress.
• Eat a balanced diet regularly
• Take regular exercise
• Take time to relax fully
• Go to bed at a sensible time
• Build up a support network i.e. list those around you that you can talk to and whom you trust – sometimes a new perspective can reduce stress
• Listen to what your body/insides are telling you e.g. an upset stomach may be due to tension
• Spend some time each day reflecting – allow your mind to wander – your mind needs a rest too as much as your body!
• Develop a positive attitude e.g. an error of judgement at work may be just ONE error and does not necessarily mean you are not good at your job!
• Identify the things in your life you CAN change and those you CANNOT
• Do something you ENJOY doing just for the pleasure of doing it e.g. go for a walk, join a drama club, develop a hobby
• Pace yourself – set realistic goals and keep to them – slow down, give yourself time to think and feel
• Once you’ve made a decision stick to it – the feeling of having achieved something can bring huge rewards
• Make a list of the areas that you FEEL are the cause of your stress – decide which ones YOU can do something about and those which need discussing with your friend/personal advisor/counsellor
• Meet new people or develop new interests – this can help promote positive stress
• Learn to breathe deeply and correctly – a great way to reduce stress and literally let off steam!
• Take a break during the day from your work – if need be go for a short walk
• Try not to make too many changes in your life at the same time
• Reduce your alcohol, smoking and drug intake (except prescribed drugs) – all of these block the real issue and cause of the stress
• Own your feelings – try and make more 'I' statements e.g. 'I feel angry when…' or 'I feel upset when you say things like that (specify) about me'
• Concentrate on one task at a time – finish one thing completely and then take a break before starting a new task.

Seeking help is not a sign of weakness nor is stress.

Further Help

This page is only intended to give you a few pointers to aid your exam preparation. These recommendations may not suit everyone but they are generally accepted as good common sense. It is worth considering what might happen if you become too tired or if your mental state is not affected well by an excess of caffeine. Can you afford to get ill during exam time?

The Student Counselling Service runs workshops and coaching sessions. For more information visit our website, call in to FW171 between 9-12 & 1-4 or e-mail counselling@rhul.ac.uk