

Loudoun Academy



Study Skills for Students

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Introduction

Revision? Study?

Everyone feels nervous about taking exams. Some pupils instinctively know how to study and get the best out of themselves and the resources they have for revision. For the rest of us though, the concepts of revision and study can be difficult to grasp – where do I begin? What activities help? How does everyone else do it?

Perhaps you may know someone who has the same ability as you in class but who keeps getting better grades than you in tests. The difference may be that they were willing to put themselves through the revision process.

It was hard, maybe boring, time consuming and meant they missed out on some more enjoyable activities but despite having no greater ability than you they have ended up with better results.

This guide hopes to provide some support for both pupils and parents alike. It has a wealth of handy tips and ideas that you can use to help you revise more effectively. Revision involves doing something with the information we are trying to learn.

It's important to remember that an examination is a test of learning, not memory. Examiners want to see evidence that you have drawn on your knowledge to develop a reasoned argument, rather than replicate course notes and textbook facts. Revision should be a process of consolidating understanding rather than cramming as much information as possible before the morning of the exam.

General Tips

1. Time Management

Recognise that you will have to give up some things. Mostly time: time online, time on your console, time away from your friends. But remember this is only for a short time in your life. The benefits of improved results far outweigh the loss of some of your leisure time.

Don't leave revision until the last minute. You might know someone with the talent to be able to recall information without doing any work but most are not that fortunate! You need to plan ahead for your SQA exams.

2. Prioritise

Don't keep revising things you are already very confident about. Although it is nice to comfort yourself with knowing something really well, your time would be better spent on the areas you are less sure of.

Find out what you're going to be tested on. Your teacher is your best resource and should be able to give you course specifications, or a course outline they've worked out. Revision guides can also be found at: www.sqa.org.uk.

3. Environment

Find the right place to do your studying. It should be a quiet space that allows you to focus. If you're lucky that may be at home. For others the best place may be your local library which has fewer distractions, or at a friend's house where you know you'll challenge rather than distract each other.

Make sure you have the tools – the pens, the paper, the highlighters etc. – don't waste time stopping every five minutes to look for this or that.

4. De-digitalise

You should turn off your computer, laptop, iPad, etc. as it's simply too easy to get distracted and spend ages watching YouTube videos instead of focusing on the studying that you set out to do. It is also imperative to turn off your mobile phone as messages and updates buzzing all the time will be a huge distraction.

5. Study leave

It's called that for a reason. At Easter or during official study leave make use of the time you are given. Many pupils set themselves a timetable for each day set up like their school day with breaks and lunch hour. They give themselves the night off if they have completed a school days' worth of study.

6. Reward Hard Graft

Reward yourself when you have made progress. Recognise that you are putting in a lot of effort to improve your grades and give yourself a pat on the back when you see results. For example, after working for an hour you could have a drink and a chocolate biscuit to celebrate, or go for a short walk to clear your head. If you've worked well for a day, reward yourself by doing something you enjoy like watching something on Netflix, getting in touch with friends or playing on the Playstation. By planning rewards in, it will reduce the chance of getting side-tracked by these things when you had planned to study, as you know you will get to do them when the study is done.

7. Target Setting

Always have a goal for each session e.g. "By the end of this session I'll have listed the key points for the Computer Applications unit" or "We'll have worked through the first 3 questions of the 2007 past paper"

8. Stuck?

Get help! Your teachers are always at hand to help you out so there is no need to suffer in silence, and don't forget about your friends who may be able to help you out. Or even your parents!

9. Getting Started

The SQA website is a good place to begin. www.sqa.org.uk

Download the most recent years' past exam papers and marking instructions for every subject studied- FREE of charge.

The SQA exam timetable is available here and includes the ability to build and personalise your own exam timetable.

MyStudyPlan – FREE Mobile application for learners.

Making a Plan



Being organised may not be a habit that you have had up till now but it really can make a difference to how well your revision goes.

The top tip for successful revision is to make a plan; otherwise it is easy to waste your precious revision time. We recommend that you start your revision at least 8 weeks before your final exams begin. It is helpful to look at your exam dates and work backwards to the first date you intend to start revising.

- List all your exam subjects and the amount of time you think you will need for each one. It is unlikely that the amounts will be equal. Many people find it advisable to allocate more time to the subject or topics they find the most difficult
- Draw up a revision plan for each week
- Fill in any regular commitments you have first and the dates of your examinations
- Use Revision Checklists or Syllabuses for each subject as a starting point. Look at what you need to know and try to identify any gaps in your knowledge. A good way of doing this is to look at the results of past papers or tests you have worked through.
- Revise often; try and do a little every day

- Plan in time off, including time for activities which can be done out in the fresh air. Take a 5 or 10 minute break every hour and do some stretching exercises, go for a short walk or make a drink
- You may find it helpful to change from one subject to another at 'break' time, for example doing one or two sessions of maths and then changing to Geography, or alternating a favourite subject with a more difficult one. It helps to build in some variety
- Write up your plan and display it somewhere visible
- Adjust your timetable if necessary and try to focus on your weakest topics and subjects
- Don't panic; think about what you can achieve, not what you can't. Positive thinking is important!

Go public

Make a detailed revision timetable on a large piece of paper (A3 at least) and post it up somewhere that everyone can see it. That way, everyone knows what you are meant to be studying and when. Strangely enough, letting other people know your plans actually lightens the load, because then it's not just down to you to motivate yourself.

Set up a timetable in much the same way you see your school timetable. As you get closer to your exam leave you'll need to plan for which exams come up first so that they receive more attention.

Some pupils like to create their plan on computer – try Google Calendar or a spreadsheet program.

If you have a part time job that may have an impact on your weekend or your evenings you have to bear this in mind when planning your timetable – is the job more important than the revision which could improve your future? That will be for you and your parents to decide.

How to use the time

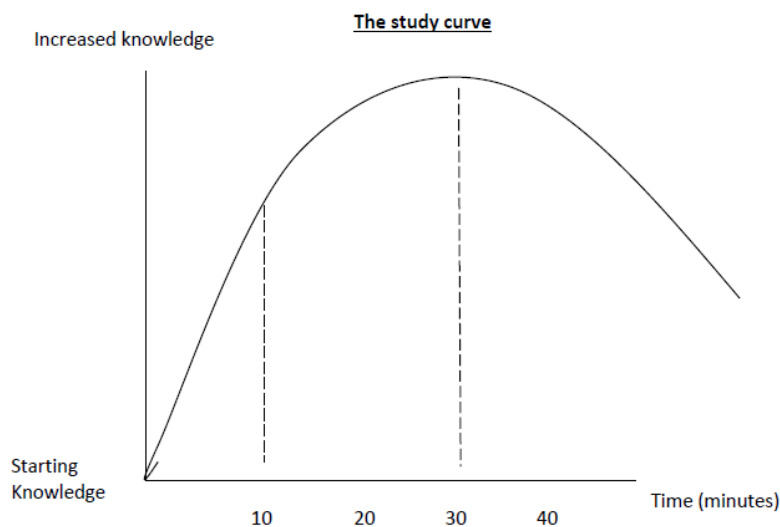
Your own learning efficiency drops over time. By organising your time effectively, you can maintain your learning efficiency at the same or near to your peak. Here's how to do it.

Try to keep to timings and build in planned breaks. So for example, revise for 30 minutes; take a ten minute break, go back for another 30 minutes etc. The break helps your learning efficiency. You may be able to work for longer than 30 minutes before you need a short break.

When you have visited a subject, take 10 minutes the next day to go back over what you did and what you learned. Three or four days later give another 10 minutes to review it. Revisiting will help to keep the knowledge and understanding in your brain!

It is important that as you go through your revision programme, you stop and ask yourself how you are getting on. Are some techniques working for you and others not? Do you need to look again at your timetable? Don't be a slave to the plan if it is not working for you. Remember, if you are struggling, seek help from your parents, friends and teachers.

Most, if not all books concerning study techniques will have a diagram showing the study curve. It should be clear from this diagram that your brain can take in new knowledge for about 30 minutes but then starts to discard some of this knowledge if you continue to study without a break. You actually unlearn some of your previous work if you continue past this optimum time.



Past Papers

Teachers will always recommend that pupils use past papers to prepare them for the format and range of questions that they are likely to meet when they go into the exam. This is sensible advice – but how to use them? Here is the best advice.

- Papers can usually be bought from bookstores such as Waterstones or WH Smiths but the Scottish Qualifications Authority offer many free question papers (with answers), usually for the last three years at <http://www.sqa.org.uk/pastpapers>
- Use the practice papers against the clock, giving yourself the same time as will be available in the real exam.
- Use the marking scheme to mark your own paper – incorrect answers help you figure out where your knowledge is weak. Make a note of these areas and revise those more closely – it’s easy to revise the stuff we already know!
- Work with a friend or a group of friends and answer questions together. Each of you writes their own answer and then you discuss everyone’s solution before checking the marking scheme. Make sure you don’t end up just chatting and gossiping. If that is all your friends want to do then they are the wrong people to study with.
- You can complete the same paper several times. When you do, if you have been noting your weak areas from last time and have been revising these, you’ll notice your mark gets better.
- Don’t forget to look and see how many marks are given for each question. The more marks available, the more points your examiners want you to make.
- Questions that begin with the words “Describe” or “Explain” mean that the examiner wants more than just one word answers!

Making Notes

Gather all your material for a topic. You need to convert notes that you have (either in your jotter or textbook) into brief, clear notes.

Begin by trying to condense the information into key facts. Some pupils use a highlighter to highlight the key words or phrases that are important to remember. You're trying to make shorter versions of your main notes. These will be easier to remember and for many pupils, the process of writing and thinking about what they are writing helps them with their understanding.

Shorter notes are more manageable and can be used in connection with other techniques.

e.g. Using your shorter notes.

- Create a mindmap of that topic
- Highlight key words in the notes and then create a bullet point list
- Read the notes out loud and record them on your phone and play them back

When you are using a class textbook or revision guide try to rewrite some of the material using your own words and in your own way – after all, when you are in the exam you'll be writing answers using your own words because there won't be a textbook to copy from! So get into this habit early.

It can be a satisfying feeling knowing that you have condensed 5 or 6 pages of information into a single page or less - a single page is much more manageable.

When you've simplified a topic – test yourself.

1. Cover everything up.
2. Get a blank sheet of paper and write out as much of the sub-topic as you can.
3. Use your simplified notes to add things you missed and correct things you got wrong.
4. You won't remember everything yet, probably just the headings and a few details

Flash Cards

Many students use flashcards when they have a lot of facts to remember. Flash cards are really simple. You can pick up blank Record Cards up at most stationary stores and supermarkets – WH Smith, Tesco, Asda. The cards are blank on each side. Simply write a statement or question on one side of the card with the answer or fact on the other side.

3 reasons for choosing robots over manual labour in a factory?

1. Can work 24 hrs a day
2. Accuracy
3. Efficiency

Create a pile of these cards for a subject and use them to test yourself

- Begin by going through the cards several times, reading the question and the answer on the opposite side.
- Now take each card and read the question on the first side.
- Try to answer the question in your head.
- Check the answer on the other side – were you correct?
- If you were right, put the card on your desk – we'll call this the correct pile.
- If you were incorrect, put the card into a different pile – the incorrect pile.
- Once you have gone through all the cards you'll have a correct pile and an incorrect pile

- Re-read the pile of incorrect cards both front and back.
- Take a break.
- Go back to step 2 and keep repeating the process until you have no cards in the incorrect pile.

This works wonders for many students. Going through this process several times you will find you may get to a stage where you get every card correct.

Many students use the cards to write important bullet points which summarise a topic or your revision notes. Looking at them often helps to keep the important concepts and ideas fresh in your mind. An even better use of flash cards is working with your friends to test teach other. They may have created their own set too.

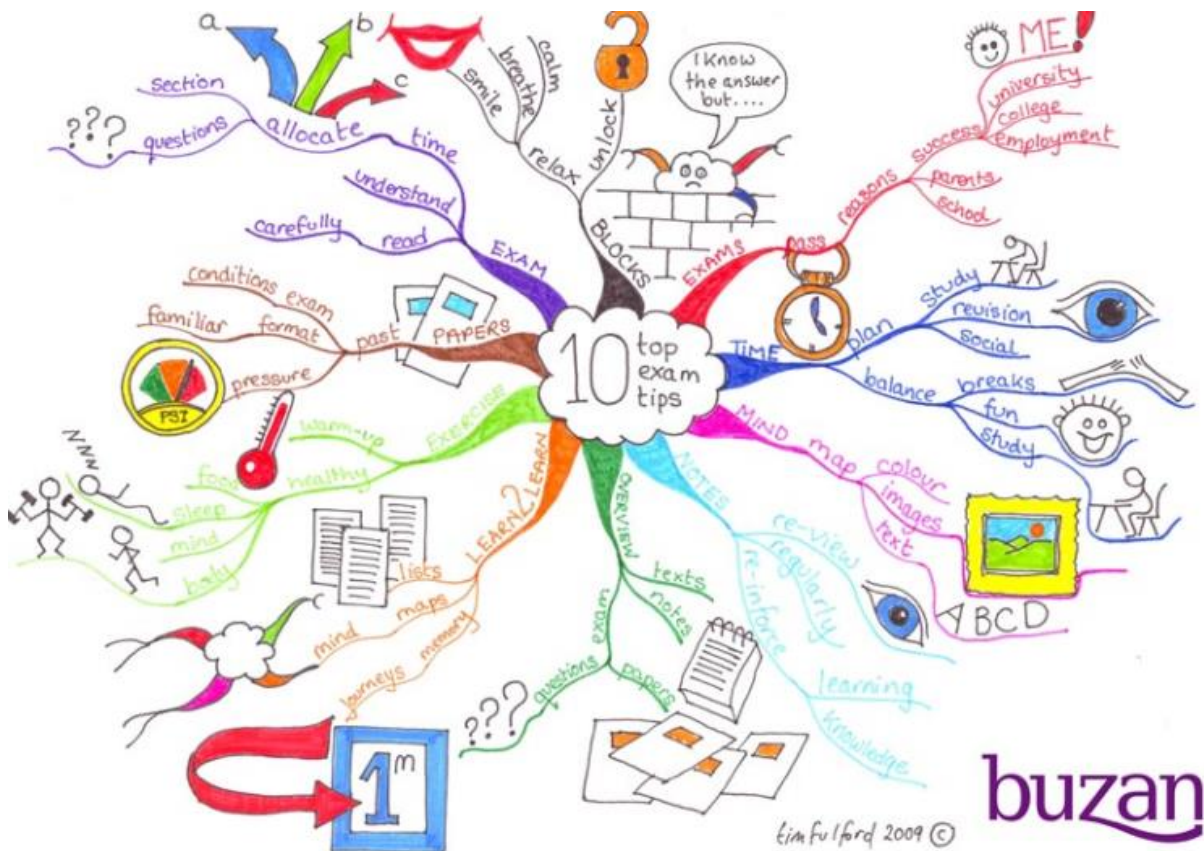
Using flash cards to test with your friends is a pretty powerful study tool.

Mind Maps

A mind map is a graphical way of making notes by organising topics using keywords, abbreviations, lines, drawings, symbols, colours and numbers. Because it is a much more visual way of linking and organising how a topic is structured many pupils prefer it to re-writing notes.

You may want to begin by using your notes or textbook to select a topic at the centre. From there you use branches and lines to organise the information for that topic, giving each important section its own branch. From there you can keep adding branches off the main branches to further expand and categorize the knowledge.

This is active learning – being engaged in creating work which will help you understand and remember information. You can be as creative and colourful as you want.



Improving your vocabulary

Your standard of English and your understanding of what words mean could make all the difference in many exams. For example if the Modern Studies exam asked you to

“Describe how a shop steward may infiltrate management negotiations” and you do not know the meaning of “infiltrate” or “negotiations” then answering that question is going to be difficult.

If you are more confident about your vocabulary you’ll feel more confident about answering questions or understanding the text you have to read in an exam. The best way of improving our vocabulary is to read more.

Reading a tabloid newspaper is unlikely to contain a range of vocabulary that will improve yours. All the words will be familiar and will not challenge you. You need to read a newspaper or book that will.

We advise you to ask your parents to buy you a quality newspaper, for example, The Times, either every other day or at the very least the Saturday or Sunday editions.

Read the paper or a decent book with a Thesaurus. As you read and come across an unfamiliar word, look that word up in the Thesaurus and find a word that you do understand. Re-read the sentence, with the new word in your head. Hopefully the sentence will make more sense.

What will happen is that you will begin to learn new words and what they mean. You will also be exposed to better writing and how arguments are made. You benefit in many ways. The reports and stories you read may not always be interesting but, it is the process that is important for you – trying to improve your capabilities with English and literacy in order to benefit your potential in all of your subjects.

There is an online Thesaurus at www.thesaurus.com

What helps you learn?

If you're not the greatest fan of reading and prefer diagrams, sketches, charts and colourful information. Try to:

- Rewrite your notes as mind-maps
- Use colour to highlight important things
- Draw diagrams and sketches to help you remember points.

If you always get the best out of lessons that involve discussion, listening and talking – try to:

- Read your notes aloud
- Record yourself reading key points of your notes aloud, then listen to the recording afterwards
- Revise with other students if you can
- Teach what you know to an imaginary or real audience

If you get a lot of understanding by reading textbooks, using websites and writing notes.

Try:

- Copying out your notes
- Reading your notes silently
- Rewriting the key points using different words
- Writing down key points from memory

Come up with mnemonics

The word stands for Make Names Easily Memorable by Organising Nominated Initial Characters. The website Student UK suggests My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nine Pizzas as a way of remembering the nine planets in order of distance from the sun (Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto).

You may wish to use mnemonics to help you remember key facts?

Ideas from Students

Here is a collection of ideas from some pupils for how they approach their studying.

- Make sure you look at how many marks the question is worth in the exam – write your answer based on this e.g. don't spend too much time on a 2 mark question then leave yourself out of time for an 8 mark question.
- Get a friend or a family member to test your knowledge of a subject after you've revised it.
- Meet with friends and make up a quiz on a topic you've been revising.
- Use different coloured post cards to write up formula or KU you must learn for each subject. Use them as flash cards and learn the content.
- Type up or re-write notes topic by topic for each subject.
- Time yourself to complete past paper questions – then correct them, or get your teacher to correct them.
- Try to open up the revision book, look at it for 2 minutes and then close it. Jot down everything I can remember.
- Make a PowerPoint presentation each and use to teach your friends, family or your mentor about a topic you find difficult.
- Record yourself reading out notes and play it on your phone.
- Scour the internet for other people's revision notes/ tips!
- Put post-it notes around the house in different places and go for a walk round the house reading them.

- Use revision websites - BBC Bitesize Scotland website for National 5 and Higher, and Scholar for Highers.
- Try to make what you learn mean something to you. Imagine yourself as an elderly person or as a politician for Modern Studies. In Chemistry imagine you are a particular chemical and what happens to you in a reaction. I know, it sounds ridiculous!
- Create pictures in your mind as you're reading. Visualise what you're learning.
- Meet friends for a few hours to go over a past paper. Complete the past paper the night before and then discuss the answers.
- Make a rhyme or a new word from the topic you need to learn.

You'll perhaps already have your own ideas which work for you. Talk to your friends about how they study.

Sitting an Exam

Find out what is involved in the exam:

- where and when it will take place
 - how much time is allowed
 - how many questions you need to answer.
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- The night before the exam go to bed and get a good sleep. Cramming into the wee small hours is unlikely to get you extra marks. Feeling well rested as you sit the exam usually will.
 - Relax – remember you have done everything in your power to prepare for the exam and today will be the day you will be able to demonstrate your knowledge and hard work.
 - Nervousness is absolutely normal – the extra adrenaline helps you concentrate.
 - Make sure you have everything you need. Bring along a pen you like writing with, scientific calculator, ruler etc.
 - Leave for the exam in plenty of time
 - Make sure you bring a watch for timing and switch off your mobile phone.
 - Look at the marks available and read the questions carefully, following instructions given in the paper (e.g. to show all workings etc.).
 - At the beginning of the exam you could take the opportunity to write down any formula, facts or quotes you may need.
 - For longer answers, take a few minutes before you begin to produce a short plan of what you are going to include in your answer/ essay.

- Keep an eye on the clock – if you have practised past papers at home you'll be able to manage your time better.
- Don't panic or give yourself a hard time. Think positively – even if you are finding the exam difficult remind yourself that others are probably feeling the same way.
- If a question is causing you difficulty you can move on and come back to it later.
- Cross out anything you do not want the examiner to read (e.g. an earlier answer to a question)
- A few minutes from the end of the exam take a quick review through the paper and make any changes – many pupils have picked up a mark or two just by doing this.
- At the end of the exam give yourself a pat on the back – you've done it!