

Calderhead High School



**SQA exams, what can
you do to get better
exam results?**

What you can do to get better exam results

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New demands on you as you prepare to sit your exams you are likely to include:

- **Being more self-motivated** and taking more responsibility for your own learning - this can be a big change from earlier years, with most teachers viewing it as the student's responsibility to attend and make the most of lessons.
- **Asking when you do not understand.** (I know this not always easy but you need to!)
- **Developing your abilities** to overcome frustrations, and strategies for persisting when you are learning material that you find challenging.
- **Organising yourself** as well as organising notes, handouts and information for separate subjects, and different topics within these.
- **Completing more work** at home, independently.
- **Organising** and planning your time over longer periods.
- **Understanding the structure** of each exam
- **Planning** and carrying out your revision.
- **Perfecting** your 'exam technique'.

Perhaps the hardest demand on you is that of understanding the long-term importance of doing the best you can, and learning to shelve short-term fun at times in the interest of long-term benefits (not easy even for adults).

Interest and effort in education and the long-term benefits this can bring often competes with friendships, the 'right' clothes, social life, romantic concerns, **only you can get the balance right.**

Key tasks for you

- **Don't stop going to, or working in, lessons you find hard or dislike** - talk to someone about any difficulties you are having - there is always a solution!
- **Revise your homework schedule** if necessary and stick to it - even when you don't feel like it. Don't wait until you are in the mood - the further behind you get the less you will be in the mood. (Agree the schedule with your parents for a hassle-free life.)
- **Resist the temptation** to bury your head in the sand if things are getting out of hand - talk to your parents/ Pupil Support teacher/subject teacher/Head of Year.
- **Ignore what friends and others are doing** or saying - you are working for an easy life

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for YOU now and later - let them have the hassle of redoing courses and the last-minute panics.

- **Keep yourself going** by making a list of topics you are going to revise. Remember to celebrate and reward yourself when you complete a piece of work.

Doing the revision

- Go to all lessons and make them work for you - especially the ones you don't like or find harder. In the past your work might have depended on how much you liked the teacher - but now you are working for **YOU**.
Make the most of their knowledge about the subject, revision and exam techniques.
- One suggestion is to reduce the notes you work from to a single A4 page by the night before the exam - look briefly at the notes you make a day later, a week later, and just before the exam.
- Match the revision notes you make to the sort of questions you will be asked in the exam. (Get hold of past papers from the school or from the SQA).
- Have clear and specific goals for each revision period, for example - 'at the end of this two hours, I will be able to label a diagram of the heart and answer a question on how the heart works'.
- Have a start and finish time and stick to them.
- Get into the routine of following your revision plan - if you really don't feel like it tell yourself you will do it for fifteen minutes and then decide whether to carry on. At least you will have done fifteen minutes. Set your aim for the session and get right on with it - ignore the impulse to suddenly tidy your room for the first time in three years.
- Clear your head before you begin - give yourself two minutes to write down anything on your mind and tell yourself you will deal with that later.
- STOP and take a break if you are becoming frustrated, angry or overwhelmed. Put aside the problem. When you have had a break and feel less stressed, think about what issue is causing the problem and talk to someone about possible solutions.
- Don't waste time struggling - note down anything you are finding hard or don't understand when you are revising and take it into your next lesson.
- Don't be influenced by friends who talk about how little work they are doing and get your head down - your results don't matter to them, but they will be crucial for you. Tell yourself it's not for long and think of that long summer holiday!

Last-minute revision

Yes it is worth it! By the day before the exam, your revision notes should be short enough to read through in one session. The final read-through will help key words and concepts to stick in your mind.

Focus on revising your notes for one or two key areas immediately before the exam.

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Quick tips for revising

- Make yourself start however much you don't want to - the hardest bit is over with then!
- Build in short breaks.
- Do frequent short exercises - stretches, neck and shoulder rolls, walking around...
- Drink water and get fresh air. Keep the temperature cool.
- Eat 'brain food' - avoid sugar and have lots of healthy snacks around to eat little and often.
- Don't leave the difficult bits to the end.
- Do something relaxing between revising and bedtime.
- STOP and take a break if you start feeling frustrated, angry or overwhelmed. Make a note of the problem to take to your next lesson, and move on to something else.
- Focus on what you have done, not all the things that you haven't - every little helps.
- Promise yourself little rewards after each session - a favourite TV programme or going out with friends.
- At the end of each session, file away your notes and clutter so that your work-area is clear for the next session.
- **Why revise?** The aim is to reduce the amount of information relating to a subject to a series of key-points, any of which you can expand upon in an exam answer. The key point, phrase or word prompts your brain to retrieve the information stored in it. At the end of your revision for each topic or sub-topic, aim to end up with a card or A4 sheet with the key points for that section.

The structure of revision sessions.

Good revision techniques always include:

- **An aim** for the session, e.g. 'By the end of this two answer questions on photosynthesis'.
- **Thinking** about what you know already and identifying the bits you need to spend more time on (usually by doing some sort of self-testing - many revision aids include opportunities for self-testing).
- **Breaking down each topic** into 'do-able' chunks.
Revise each section - not just reading the information but doing something active with it (see below).
- **Producing notes** (shorter each time you revise a particular area) - noting key points, phrases or words.
- **Testing yourself** to see what you have learnt.
- **Ticking off the subject** on your 'overall list' so that you can see regular progress.
- **Revisiting your notes** briefly after one day, one week and one month, as well as just before the exam.

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The key to effective revision.

- Useful revision involves **DOING SOMETHING** with the information you are trying to learn and remember. This is **ESSENTIAL** to allow your brain to learn, make connections and remember. Different people find different activities useful, and you need to find out how you revise best. Some ideas are:
- **Drawing 'spider maps'** on large pieces of paper - to show how different parts of a subject hang together.
- **Use pictures and big flip-chart sheets** and colour to make posters with key points and display these on the walls or where you will see them regularly.
- **Put revision aids up** around the house - especially for any 'rote learning' - chemical or mathematical formulae.
Foreign language verbs - read them when sitting on the loo, brushing your teeth or eating your breakfast.
- **Record yourself** making 10 key points about a particular topic and then play it back when you are travelling or exercising.
- **Highlight key areas** of notes or books (if they belong to you), picking out the key points or summaries.
- **Listen to recordings** of e.g. books and plays and discuss them with another person.
- **Watch revision videos** but don't just sit back passively - pause them and make notes of key or difficult areas, test yourself or get someone to watch with you and test each other.
- **Read a page and shut the book** - what can you remember?
- **Tell someone** about what you have learned - explain how the heart works over a meal (or perhaps stick to something less gory).
- **Have people** around you to test you on your knowledge, that is what family are for!

Memory techniques.

Find out what helps you to remember stuff. Some ideas are:

- **Acronyms** (using the first letter of each word to make a word to prompt your memory) e.g. you may find it hard to remember this sentence 'Wholly Inadequate Needless Damned Outrageous Waste of Space'. However, turn it into an acronym and it becomes much easier: **WINDOWS**.
- **Picture stories** (thinking of a strong visual image to associate with each word and linking them together in an unlikely and silly story) e.g. you may find it hard to remember the facts in this sentence, simply by reading it through.
- 'The great Plague struck London in 1665, followed by the fire of London in 1666, starting in the shop of the baker to King Charles II in Pudding Lane'.
- **Try this out:** get a picture (for example) of a large rat (the plague) running around before being burnt (plague year before fire) in a bread oven (bakers shop) with the flames curling up around it like the curls of the numbers 666 (1666), and then being put into a pudding eaten by two King Charles spaniels. Go through the picture sequence a couple of times, and then see if you can remember the 7 facts in the sentence. Ask

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- someone to test you, and see if it works for them. It's magic!
- **Mnemonics** are also useful - make up a silly sentence to help you remember the order of something e.g. Never Eat Shredded Wheat (North, East, South, West). Some Old Hag Cracked All Her Teeth On Asparagus (SOHCAHTOA)
 - **Review.** Take time occasionally to ask yourself how well your revision techniques are working for you. How much have you covered? Have you stuck to your timetable? Are you ending up with notes you can use for last minute revision? Congratulate yourself for all the subjects you have covered. Change your timetable plan if necessary.
 - **Later on.** When you have revised and revisited each topic, have a go at some old exam questions. Make sure you set the appropriate time limit, and try to work under exam conditions. Don't do this too early (although it's worth looking at them early on to get an idea of the sort of question you will be answering - essays, multiple choice etc.). Do these in plenty of time so that your teacher can mark them.

The moment of truth - sitting the exam

Before the exam

- **Know your exam timetable** (put your exams in red on a wall planner).
- **Know where and when you need to be** each day and plan to get there early - leave plenty of time for last-minute crises.
- **Allow time for your brain to wake up** - have a shower or a relaxing bath and eat breakfast (or take a banana or other energy giving food if you really can't eat in the morning).
- **Before the exam**, check the exact subjects you will be asked about, and be familiar with the structure and marking system of the exam (e.g. 2 essay questions, one from Section A and one from Section B, each worth 30 marks).
- **Make sure you have EVERYTHING you will need**, including spares and any notes or books you are allowed to take in. Make sure these are in the correct format - e.g. type-written notes or handwritten? 1 page or 2?
- **Take a pen you enjoy writing with** - it will improve your performance no end. Take two, just in case.
- **Keep to your normal routine** - go to bed and get up at the normal time.
- **Keep anxieties at bay** by repeating to yourself 'It will be fine', 'It will all be over tomorrow by three', 'Nobody's going to die', or whatever works for you. If you have worried thoughts say to yourself 'STOP', and think of something positive.
- **Visit the toilet** *before* the exam begins.
- **Take water into the exam** if you can and sip it throughout - your retention and concentration will be up to 70% better if you are well hydrated.
- **Don't worry** if you feel that you can't remember anything at all before you go into the exam - if you have revised, the information will be there and will come back.

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During the exam:

- **Remember that nervousness is normal** and gives your brain extra adrenalin which will help you to make the final effort.
- **Take one or two deep breaths** and tell yourself something positive, such as 'I can handle this', or, 'If it's hard for me it will be hard for other people too'.
- **If your mind goes blank at any stage, don't panic.** Turn the paper over and take three deep breaths. There will be some of the paper that you can do. Reread it slowly and calmly.
- **Remind yourself of the exam structure.** READ the instructions and then through the paper. Don't pick up your pen until you have done this.
- If appropriate, **mark the questions you think that you will answer** and check again that you have marked the correct number of questions from each section.
- If appropriate, spend 5 minutes at the beginning of the exam **writing down any key formulae**, facts or quotes that you are going to need so that you won't forget them or leave them out.
- **Make, and keep to, a time-scale for each question** depending on the number of marks awarded. If you have only 3 minutes left for one question, finish it in note form - you will get extra marks for this **BUT MOVE ON TO THE NEXT QUESTION** at the right time...
- In exam papers where there are several questions to answer, **work on those that you are most confident about first**, and then tackle the harder ones. Do not spend too long on one question - you can come back to it if you have time.
- Allow a few minutes at the end of the exam to check through your work and make any changes. Experience has proved that you can up your score by one whole grade by doing this.

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Suggestions for revision planning

Step 1: Tasks and Time

For each exam, list the topics that have to be revised. Estimate how much time you will need to revise for each topic. (Ask your teacher for advice).

Step 2: Planning Revision Period 1

This is the main revision period. Work backwards from the date of your first exam (if you know it - if not, ask your teachers when your exams are likely to be) allowing 2 weeks for each exam paper - not subject - that you are taking. Add 1 extra week to the final number of weeks. This is the starting date for your revision (yes, much earlier than you had thought!). Make a chart beginning on the date you have arrived at as the start date for your revision period. Put the date on the left, and four columns labelled 'morning', 'afternoon', 'evening' and 'support available/TV etc.'. (This is for your parents or school staff to show when they will be available to help you, or for any relevant TV programmes e.g. BBC 'Bitesize' to watch or record.)

Mark any planned days when you know you won't be able to revise at home. Colour code your chart if possible, e.g. school times in orange, working commitments in green, and days off and planned weekends away in blue. Make sure you have some time off each week.

The remaining squares are your revision times (in sessions of morning, afternoon and evening). It is suggested that morning and afternoon revision periods last approximately 3 hours each, while evening ones last 2 hours.

Work out approximately how much time you will have to revise in this period by adding together the hours in each session.

Divide the number of exams you will be taking (not number of subjects) with the number of hours available.

Decide how you will spend the time you have for revision using the plan you made in STEP 1 as a guide - some subjects will need more time than others.

Write in the subject and sub-topic (as identified in Step1) you will aim to cover in each revision session so that it looks like the timetable in Fig 3. Now you will have clear sections and goals to work from for each session.

Remember to build in time to revisit each subject briefly after 1 day, 1 week, 1 month and just before the exam.

Remember, this is only a plan. Be prepared to revise it when subjects turn out to take longer (or less time) than you had anticipated.

Step 3: Planning Revision Period 2

This period of revision starts a week or so before your first exam and allows you time to try out more old exam questions or papers.

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Start by making a similar calendar to Revision Period 1 for the week before the exam period begins.

Ensure that you have at least one old exam paper that you haven't completed before in each subject (school will provide these, or you can download them from the SQA website. Often the marking schemes are available too, so that if your teachers cannot mark your papers (see below) you can do it yourself from the 'model answers' provided on the websites.

Plan to complete one paper a day, three at the weekend. Make sure your teachers know that you are going to be doing these and are happy to mark them during your exam period (or download the mark-schemes with the paper).

Give your completed practice exam papers (and mark-schemes) to your teachers if they have agreed to mark them. Make CLEAR and definite arrangements to get feedback in time to go over any weak areas before your exam in that subject. Use the 'support' column on your timetable to mark meetings you arrange with your teachers.

FINALLY - plan a celebration for the end of the exams, you will deserve it!

Many of the ideas in this paper are developed further in the book "GCSEs What can a parent do? 101 tips to ensure success" by Julie Casey.

Education Scotland have a very good interactive section on study skills on their website, see the link below:

<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/studyskills/>

List of useful revision resources:

www.vark-learn.co.uk

www.SCHOLAR.hw.ac.uk

www.revisionworld.co.uk

www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize

<http://www.s-cool.co.uk/>

<http://www.mathsrevision.com/>

<http://www.hsn.uk.net/>

<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/glowblogs/NPF/nationals-in-a-nutshell/>

<http://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa>

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Example Study plan

	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject
Mon	Admin	Modern Studies			
	Time: 5-6pm	Time: 6:30 - 8:30	Time:	Time:	Time:
Tue	English	History	Maths		
	Time: 3:45 - 5pm	Time: 6 - 7pm	Time: 7:15 - 8:15pm	Time:	Time:
Wed	Maths (study support)	Admin	Modern studies		
	Time:3:30 - 4:30pm	Time: 5:30 - 6:30	Time: 7 - 8pm	Time:	Time:
	Admin	History	English	Modern studies	
Thur	Admin	History	English	Modern studies	
	Time: 5 - 6pm	Time:6:30 - 7:30pm	Time: 7:30 - 8pm	Time: 8 - 8:45pm	Time:
Fri	Maths	Biology			
	Time: 2 - 3pm	Time: 3:3-4:30pm	Time:	Time:	Time:
Sat	English	Modern Studies	History		
	Time: 10 - 11:30am	Time: 12 - 1pm	Time: 3 - 4pm	Time:	Time:
Sun	Maths	English	Biology		
	Time: 12 - 1pm	Time: 1:30 - 2:30pm	Time: 3:3-4:30pm	Time:	Time:

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Week 1

Mon	Subject					
	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Tue	Subject					
	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Wed	Subject					
	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Thur	Subject					
	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Fri	Subject					
	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Sat	Subject					
	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Sun	Subject					
	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:

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Week 2

Mon	Subject		Subject		Subject		Subject	
	Time:		Time:		Time:		Time:	
Tue	Subject		Subject		Subject		Subject	
	Time:		Time:		Time:		Time:	
Wed	Subject		Subject		Subject		Subject	
	Time:		Time:		Time:		Time:	
Thur	Subject		Subject		Subject		Subject	
	Time:		Time:		Time:		Time:	
Fri	Subject		Subject		Subject		Subject	
	Time:		Time:		Time:		Time:	
Sat	Subject		Subject		Subject		Subject	
	Time:		Time:		Time:		Time:	
Sun	Subject		Subject		Subject		Subject	
	Time:		Time:		Time:		Time:	

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Week 3

Mon	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject
	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Tue	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject
	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Wed	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject
	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Thur	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject
	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Fri	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject
	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Sat	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject
	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Sun	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject
	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:

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Week 4

	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject
Mon	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Tue	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Wed	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Thur	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Fri	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Sat	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Sun	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:

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Week 5

	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject	Subject
Mon	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Tue	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Wed	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Thur	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Fri	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Sat	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:
Sun	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time:	Time: