The '3-5 approach: breaking down tasks into 3-5 stages

Without realising it, you may already have had used the 3-5 approach to help with breaking tasks down into manageable chunks.

**Types of activity**

**Revising for exams:** revise 3-5 topics from the 10-12 covered in lectures

**Lab reports**
- Introduction
- Materials and methods
- Observations and results
- Analysis
- Conclusions

**Essays**
- Introduction
- 1st theme/aspect of the topic
- 2nd theme/aspect of the topic
- 3rd theme/aspect of the topic
- Conclusion

For longer assessments, break it into 'essay-sized' chunks:

**Dissertation/project:**
- Introduction
- Chapter / Section 1 – then break these down again as per essays
- Chapter / Section 2 – then break these down again as per essays
- Chapter / Section 3 – then break these down again as per essays
- Conclusion

For tips about breaking down essays, you may want look at our resource [Planning your writing to manage your reading](#) from our Hunter-gatherer pack of resources in the Reading Strategies and Support section of [Study Resources](#).

**Examples of using the 3-5 approach**

**Reading and notetaking: from overview to detail**
- Identify 3-5 core sources potentially useful for your assessment – check reading lists and class notes for ideas of possible resources
- Think where and how your reading/notes will potentially help you for your assessment. Think about SQ3R as a strategy: Survey, Question, Read, Recall, Review (see how the 3-5 rule works there? Five stages for reading).
- Identify 3-5 key aspects of your text to get an overview of its content
  - Summarise the core points of a text in 3-5 bullet points
  - Do you need more detail? Why? Where would you use/refer to the detail?

For more advice see our [Study resources](#)
Revision tips: Build up your knowledge of the module in layers

- Look at the lecture topics – are they all very distinct areas or do some lecture topics overlap/interact? (Look to see if you can group these into 3-5 categories)

- Look at the learning objectives/outcomes for the module: there are likely to be 3-5 core objectives (or 3-5 groups of objectives)

- Start by identifying key pieces of information – for example
  - 3-5 concepts
  - 3-5 theories
  - 3-5 names – e.g. authors, theorists, historians, artists
  - 3-5 types of text / document / research study
  - 3-5 periods of time or dates
  - 3-5 formulae / processes
  - 3-5 systems / models

- Look at any past exam papers of sample questions – how would this initial layer of information help you to put together an answer?
  - You may then need 3-5 reasons or 3-5 more specific examples to illustrate the points you want to include in your answers
  - Think about how facts and ideas relate to each other
    - Similar (and – more of the same or alike)
    - Different (but – contrasting examples)
    - Consequence (so – this happens because)
    - Sequence (time or next in the process)

Presentations: 3 points is probably enough

If you are using PowerPoint, allow approximately/at least 2 minutes per slide

- 10 minute presentation – 5 slides max e.g.
  1. Introduction / overview
  2. Point 1 – with 3 bullet points to expand the idea
  3. Point 2 – with 3 bullet points to expand the idea
  4. Point 3 – with 3 bullet points to expand the idea
  5. Conclusion / summary

- 15 minute presentation – between 7 and 10 slides max e.g.
  1. Introduction
  2. Point 1 – with 3 bullet points to expand the idea
  3. Point 2 – with 3 bullet points to expand the idea
  4. Point 3 – with 3 bullet points to expand the idea
  5. Point 4 – with 3 bullet points to expand the idea
  6. Point 5 – with 3 bullet points to expand the idea
  7. Conclusion / summary

Break it down! Tasks broken into 3-5 steps can be more manageable

For more advice see our Study resources
Mind-map for planning the main sections of an essay proportionately: Using the 3-5 rule

Figure 1 Mind map for breaking down a 3000 word assignment

For more advice see our Study resources