

Introduction: Handbook for 'Revision and Examination Advice'

This handbook on revision and exams is designed to help you develop your strategies for various types of exams. It is a short reference text that provides some guidance into a range of areas, such as planning your revision strategies and managing exam stress. Hopefully it will help you to get the most out of your experience of examinations and provide encouragement for managing this type of assessment. A list of useful resources referred to here is provided at the end of the handbook.

There are four key areas of knowledge you need for success in exams:

1. Know yourself

- think about how certain factors apply to you e.g.
 - o how do I work ?
 - o when do I work best (e.g. time of day, location)?
 - o what are my circumstances and my health?
- what about relaxation, exercise and diet?

2. Know how you learn

- Memory and concentration (a 'mind-map' of factors)
- How does memory work?
- Thinking about how you learn
- What strategies are available?
- How not to forget
 - o Know your preferred learning style
 - o Use your 5 senses
 - o Link your knowledge
- Revising for exams (two pages)
 - o Studying effectively website
 - o Understanding what is the purpose of revision
 - o How to select areas for revision
 - o Gathering materials together to create your 'revision pack'
 - o Draw up a realistic exam timetable
- Making revision work
- How does exam stress affect your revision?

Academic Support, Student Services

3. Know your examinations

- Using past and practice papers
- Practising for exam essays
- Strategy for exam day
- Planning ideas for exam essays
- What makes a good exam answer?
- What about different types of exams?
- Process words

4. Know your subject

- Overall points tutors will be looking for in your answers
 - o Key concepts / ideas / activities
 - o Examples to illustrate these
 - o Criticisms and debates – key sources
 - o Details
 - o Context

About this handbook

This handbook has been written and compiled for the students at the University of Nottingham by Dr. Lisa Rull with assistance from Dr. Ann Hurford and Dr. Barbara Taylor.

It has drawn on the teaching experience of the University of Nottingham Academic Support team and their associated hand-out material. The package on study skills for mature students produced initially by Dr. Mark Dale for the former School of Continuing Education (now Centre for Continuing Education, part of the School of Education) has proven helpful. As this handbook is only a starting point a list of 'Useful sources' is provided at the end of the document.

Summer 2009 - Updated October 2014

Know Yourself: Think about how these factors apply to you

What is your best time to work?

What is your worst time?

Where do you work best?

What is the maximum time you can keep your concentration?

How easy is it to motivate yourself to start and to keep going?

What about your anxiety levels?

What feelings generally does revision generate for you?

Do you give yourself a treat after revision?



Know Yourself: What about relaxation, exercise and diet?

Getting the right balance of relaxation, exercise and diet can often be a challenge when managing a busy life, especially when it includes studying. However, making time for each of these can have an impact on your energy levels and your physical and mental wellbeing.

Relaxation

If you are feeling tense or anxious it can be helpful to use some imagery and relaxation skills. A range of strategies and techniques are discussed in Palmer & Puri (2006) but here is one you can try out:

Close your eyes and think of a snowman – any snowman. This one perhaps:

Picture him very clearly in your mind's eye

Now count backwards slowly and steadily from 20.

At the same time, let your snowman melt gradually until all you are left with is a pool of water with his scarf and his hat floating in it.



Exercise

Exercise can help improve not only your physical well-being but also helps your mental health. Regular exercise can build stamina so you have more energy for your studies, and providing you exercise sensibly it can also reduce overall tiredness and improve your concentration.

The NHS website provides a range of advice on exercise and recommendations of types of activity to suit a range of lifestyles.

<http://www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/Fitness/Pages/Fitnesshome.aspx>



Diet

Getting a healthy, well-balanced diet is always important because it helps your body and mind in being effective.

The NHS has a range of advice on healthy eating and food groups

<http://www.nhs.uk/chq/Pages/1127.aspx?CategoryID=51&SubCategoryID=166>

The 'Feeding Minds' Web Guide indicates what foods may help you to manage your mental wellbeing and also includes a Nutrients Table with more detailed suggested food items.

<http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/mental-health-a-z/D/nutrients-table>

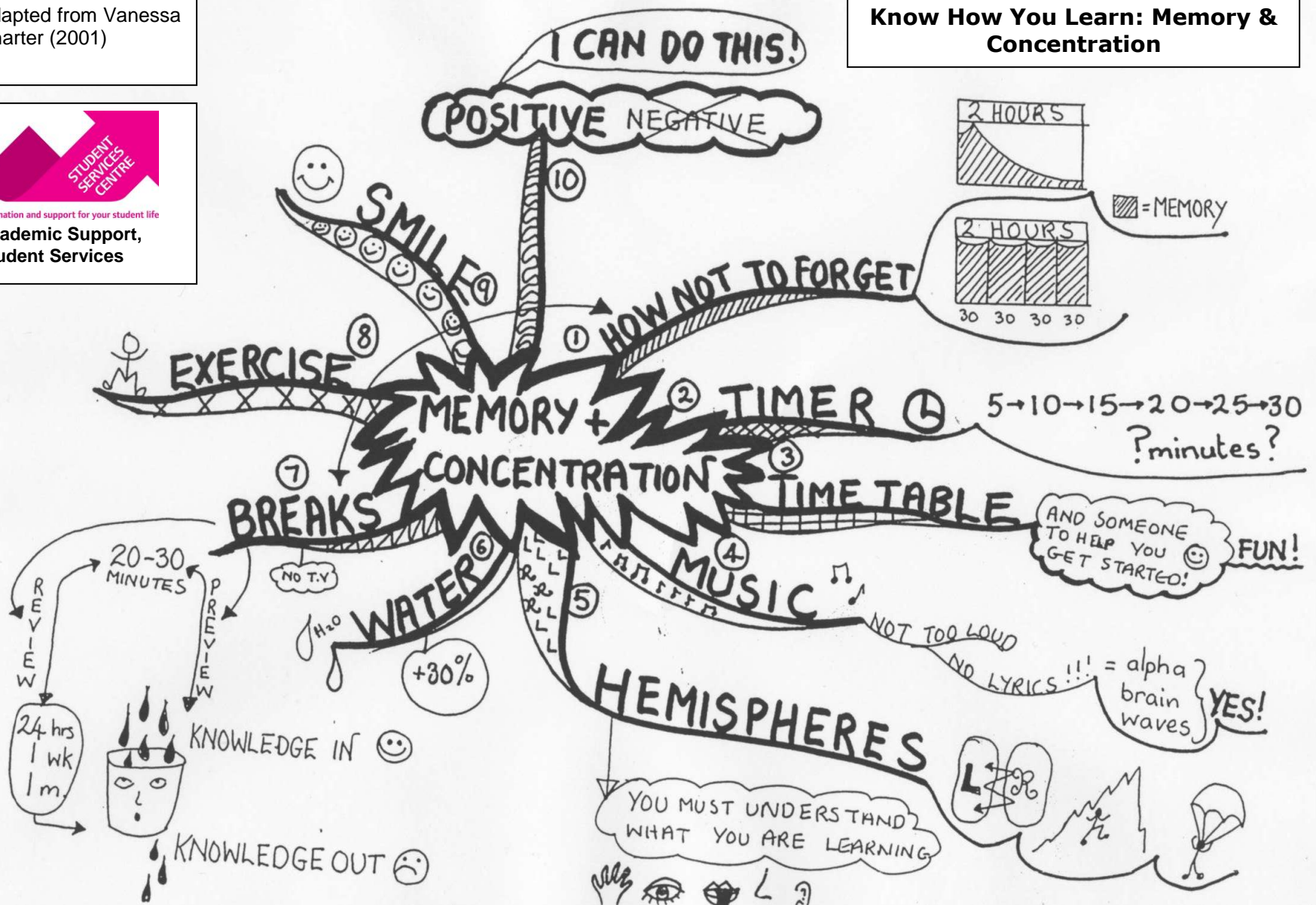


Adapted from Vanessa
Charter (2001)



Information and support for your student life
**Academic Support,
Student Services**

Know How You Learn: Memory & Concentration



Know How You Learn: How does memory work?

Your memory...

- Retains beginnings and endings best, therefore
- ... prefers short sessions with breaks
- Needs to make links
- Remembers bizarre or outstanding features
- Needs structured reviews:

Learning session



Review 10-15 minutes later



24 hours later (test for 5 minutes)



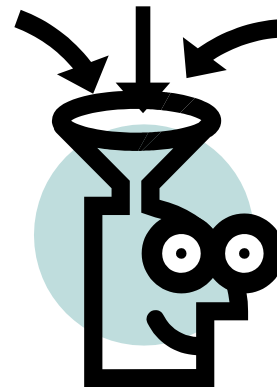
1 week later (test for 3 minutes)



1 month later (test for 3 minutes)

Your memory works best when you:

- are ready to learn – so have regular breaks
- have the right location – avoid distractions
- are focused – avoid 'just' reading for things to 'sink in'
- have an overview of the bigger picture
- break material in small chunks and group related pieces of information
- can visualise associations between pieces of information
- use multi-sensory techniques – make use of a range of strategies to reinforce learning
- regularly review what you are learning



Be active with your material, and be aware of your own preferred learning style for getting the information into your head.

Know How You Learn: Thinking about how you learn

Thinking about how you learn can help you identify effective strategies for revision. Although we often use a variety of strategies, understanding your 'learning style' may alert you to your preferences and habits.

For example:

Do you learn visually?

- Do you remember faces rather than names?
- Do you prefer film to radio and enjoy descriptive scenes in books?
- Do you use words like 'see' ("I see what you mean") and 'picture' ("I can picture that")?



You may be a visual learner

Do you learn by listening?

- Do you prefer the telephone for important conversations?
- Do you find verbal instructions helpful?
- Do you use words like 'say', and 'hear' ("I hear what you're saying" to mean 'I understand')? Or use phrases like "that sounds right"?



You may be an auditory learner

Do you learn by doing things?

- Do you prefer to jump in and try it when faced with a new task?
- Do you watch for body language?
- Do you use words like 'touch' and 'hold'? Or phrases like "that feels right"?
-



You may be a physical learner (kinaesthetic)

There is further information on strategies associated with particular learning styles in the section 'How not to forget'.

Do remember that when thinking about how you learn, ask yourself:

- have you used certain strategies in the past?
- have they worked?
- what effect did they have? (how well did they work?)
- do they still work? (sometimes a different strategy may be most effective when dealing with a certain type, level or quantity of information to be learnt)

Know How You Learn: What strategies are available?

There are lots of different ways to learn and understand and memorise information. Your learning style may mean you have certain preferences – as discussed above. However, do remember that multi-sensory learning can help reinforce what you are learning. Here is some further information on a selection of strategies. More strategies are given in the next section 'How not to forget'.

Mnemonics: these rely on using easy-to-recall phrases that match the initial letters to the information you want to remember.

You have probably heard of some common ones – this one helps list the colours of the rainbow

Richard Of York Gained Battles In Vain
Red Orange Yellow Green Blue Indigo Violet

Rhymes and songs: setting information in poetic or song-form can also help – especially if you can 'sing' it to yourself.

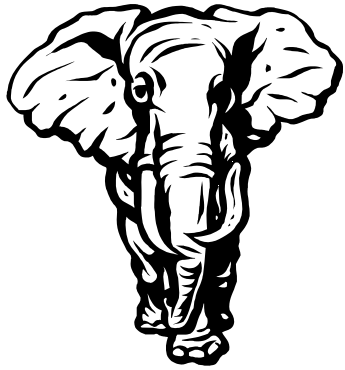
30 days hath September,
April, June and November
All the rest have 31
Excepting February clear
Which has only 28
But 29 in each Leap Year.

'Songs' can also help keep a sequence of information in order as you may find it easy to remember the progression of a simple tune (and then associate this to certain information).

Posters / Diagrams / Colour: why not try creating images, visualising sequences of actions or processes, and even adding **colour** to information. You may want to select a **colour** to be associated with a particular topic so keywords connected to that topic are always visualised in that **colour** in your revision materials.

Audio materials: listening back to information whilst doing other things may also help you learn, perhaps whilst doing household chores. Examples of audio resources may include:

- Audiobook versions of key texts
- Performances
- Listening to radio programmes on the topic
- Podcasts may be available from Moodle (from lectures), the iTunes U account for University of Nottingham, or by typing in 'podcasts' into the University search engine



How not to forget

Know your preferred learning style

Use your 5 senses

Link your knowledge



VISUAL (spatial)	AURAL (auditory-musical)	VERBAL (linguistic)	PHYSICAL (kinaesthetic)	LOGICAL (mathematical)	SOCIAL (interpersonal)	SOLITARY (intra-personal)
posters pictures	audio tapes talk to yourself	summary cards key words	hands-on role-play (group)	mnemonics patterns	tell or teach others question others	self-reflection set goals aligned with your beliefs
mind maps	question yourself	active reading	flash cards (include visuals)	go beyond planning - "do it now"	discuss	project journal
videos / tv	talk to others	SQ3R*	posters	diagrams	argue	role-play (individual)
diagrams		practice exam questions				
colour						

* Survey – Question – Read – Recall – Review (see our advice on Reading Strategies on the Academic Support website)

Know how you learn: Revising for exams (two pages)

Studying effectively

Guidance on 'Dealing with Exams' is included within the 'Preparing for assessment' section of 'Studying effectively' at the University of Nottingham <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/studyingeffectively/preparing/index.aspx> .

Understanding what is the purpose of revision

- To acquire a sense of over-arching issues and 'the whole picture'
- To be able to communicate coherently on a given subject by combining what you have learned in general with its application to a specific question

How to select areas for revision

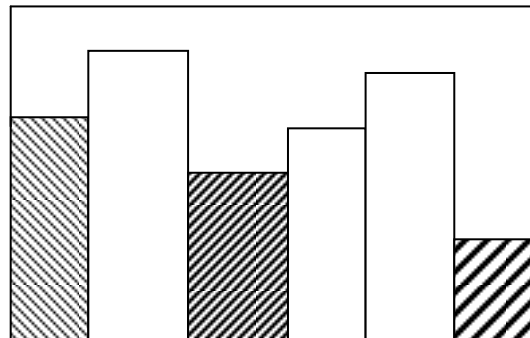
Remember that revision should be about building on the knowledge you gain through the whole module, so 'revision' could be built up gradually. Your work throughout the module – reading for seminars, carrying out experiments/lab work – could be helpful towards your final 'revision weeks'.

Things to consider

- Are there restrictions on you answering questions on topics/texts already covered in your coursework?
- Are there particular (small) areas of the course you feel more confident about writing on?
- Are there types of question you feel more confident about than others (e.g. number/data analysis)?
- Are there certain significant topics on which there will always be at least one question?
 - o Beware in the exam itself that you do not miss the specific requirement of the question actually set (e.g. it may be on the topic, but not the text/aspect you anticipated).
- How many topics as a minimum would you need to revise?
 - o You will probably NOT need to revise 'everything' to the same depth of detail (though this may depend on your course and the type of exam assessment you will have).

How to select areas for revision (continued)

Imagine your knowledge of the module as resembling a skyline. Some areas you will know a bit more about than others. You probably won't gain a lot by adding to your knowledge in your areas of greatest strength; but building up your weaker areas (shaded) – especially where they have connections to one or more of your stronger/main topics – could be helpful.



Gathering materials together to create your 'revision pack'

Look for:

- Relevant essays or assignments, especially for noting which sources you used in your reference list(s) / bibliography
- Lecture, seminar and laboratory notes
- Notes from reading
- Set books
- Revision notes

Draw up a realistic exam timetable

- Use our 'Tools for Managing your time' from our 'Time management' section <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/StudentServices/StudyResources>
- Assess the amount of time you will have for revising
- Produce a diary sheet and allocate a series of revision slots
- Divide your time fairly between topics
- Write down what you intend to revise and how long you will spend doing it
- Start the revision time with some more familiar material
- Then go on to unfamiliar and more difficult areas
- Try not to tackle any new material right before the exam
- On the night before do what suits you – either 'cram', do 'light' reading or time off

Know how you learn: Making revision work

Build 'critical thinking' into how you record information or revise material

- make connections between topics and examples
- similar: add in examples or information (how are they similar?)
- different: note down opposites, alternatives (how are they different?)
- is the relationship one to do with 'time' (this happened first, then that happened next)?
- Is 'x' the first stage in a process (what comes next?)

You can build this into revision using diagrams, visuals, mnemonics etc [see 'Know How You Learn: What strategies are available?']

- practice developing arguments
- Practice exam questions where you can (even if you just practice planning out a possible answer – see 'Know Your Examinations: Using Past Papers')
- Imagine you are trying to convince a jury (your readership) of a particular explanation or argument: you want to
 - Structure your points to guide readers through your argument
 - Provide evidence from witnesses (sources, examples) to support your argument
 - (if appropriate) - Acknowledge and deal with alternative evidence
 - Explain the significance / meaning of the evidence you provide



Know How You Learn: How does stress affect your revision?

Remembering the advice in the section on relaxation, exercise and diet, make sure that you:

- take regular breaks
 - try not to revise constantly: allow yourself time to rest and do other activities
 - for longer breaks, such for meals, rest in locations away from where you revise. Physically move away from your desk even if you cannot easily go to another room or building.
- go for quality food and drinks: water, fresh fruit juice
- exercise
 - fresh air and activity can help you unwind
 - walking is good: you do not have to join a gym or play team sports
- relax
 - meditation and activities such as yoga or tai chi can help relax both body and mind
- sleep
 - make sure you wind down after your revision session before you try to go to sleep

Peter Levin has written a range of 'study-friendly guides' which you may also find helpful. These include titles called Conquer Study Stress and Sail Through Exams!: preparing for traditional exams for Undergraduates and Taught Postgraduates (see our 'List of Useful Sources' at the end of this document for details).

The University of Nottingham Counselling Service also offer support for students concerned about exam stress and anxiety

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/counselling/index.aspx>



Know Your Examinations: Using past and practice papers

- Is the format the same? (e.g. 3 hours – answer 3 questions chosen from the 6 questions available).
- Are there any compulsory questions (e.g. you must answer Question 1)?
- Are there restrictions on how many (minimum / maximum) questions you must answer from each section?
- Are there papers to practice? Very often there are papers available via your Moodle page for your modules or they will be available on the Library tab of the Portal
<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/academicservices/currentstudents/examinations/pastpapers.aspx>.

Remember that multiple choice examination papers are less likely to be available for practice

- Can you only practice the paper in timed conditions (or can you take it/them home)?
 - Can you practice a paper more than once if it is only available on campus?
 - Are several different practice/past papers available (or just one)?
 - Are answer sheets available?
 - Is feedback available on practice papers?
 - Are there opportunities to practice questions that are not identified as 'past papers' (e.g. problem sheets in mathematics)?
- Check out the advice on MCQs available from your School as well as the handouts specifically on this form of exams on our 'Revision and Exams' section <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/StudentServices/StudyResources>
 - Look at how questions are phrased – what sort of instructions are given? (e.g. discuss, evaluate, define, compare/contrast...)
 - Look at the content of questions – some may relate to specific texts or lecture topics, others may allow you to use material from several teaching sessions.
 - Either practice doing outline plans or practice answering questions – this may depend on the type of exam and your subject discipline

Know Your Examinations: Practising for exam essays

- Try out doing a rough outline plan (perhaps a mind-map) about how you may answer a question: what ideas may you need to write about? What sort of examples could you use?
- Practice doing plans – you could check your notes for ideas at this stage or see how detailed a plan you could do without checking
- Be realistic about how much you can write or how much detail you need to go into: write clearly, concisely and remain focused to the question
- Remember that exam essays are different to coursework so expectations about using quotations may also differ (though this can depend on the subject)



Know your examinations: Strategy for exam day

Be prepared in advance

- check exam location, travelling time, parking
- get equipment together the night before; have spare pens but stick with familiar types
- try to avoid pre-exam talk

Take your time

- read all the questions carefully before you choose – mark the questions you will definitely do and those you might do
- check instructions have not changed
- read the question carefully – make sure you answer the question set, not the question you wish had been set
- distinguish between content words (related to your subject) and process words (actions you should carry out)
- ignore other people

Plan

- allocate time both between questions and within questions
- take time to gather ideas, to think, to remember – brainstorm and jot down points you can recall or formulae likely to be used
- select what is relevant to the questions you will answer
- organise your ideas into a coherent answer
- formulate sentences to express that answer

Process

- try to write legibly – the more slowly an examiner is forced to read, the less chance there is that s/he can work out what the answer is saying
- remember that the first 50% of marks are fairly easy to get, the next 25% are more difficult, and the last 25% next to impossible. So instead of elaborating on already good or adequate answers, improve the poorer ones
- read through the answers – check for mistakes and omissions – add bits at the end using * in the text
- avoid post-mortems after the exam (discussing with others what you did/didn't do in the exam)

Know your examinations: Planning ideas for exam essays

- gather and group together jotted down thoughts that are similar (themes)
 - o these could form your paragraphs in the main body of your exam essay
- decide on an order for the paragraphs
- add some examples to illustrate/explain your points in each paragraph
- when writing, leave space to come back and add more in if you need to
- Remember 'Know How You Learn: Making Revision Work' and 'Know Your Examinations: practising for exam essays'



Know your examinations: What makes a good exam answer?

The 'Studying effectively' site includes some useful tips about 'What are examiners looking for?': see the section 'Dealing with Exams'

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/studyingeffectively/preparing/exams/examiners.aspx>

- make sure you allow time to answer the right number of questions
 - don't spend too long on one question and not enough on the others
 - check you match the weighting or marks allocated to each question with the time should allow to write an answer
- answers that respond to the set questions
 - check you have accurately understood the process word / instruction(s) e.g. analyse
 - check you have accurately identified the topic of the question
 - check you have accurately understood any specialist terminology in the question
 - check you have addressed all aspects of the question
- clear writing that explains and accurately uses terminology and concepts where appropriate
- coherent structure clearly presented
 - clearly laid out answers
 - for essay answers, a brief introduction/conclusion indicating how the main body of the answer will be structured (a rough order of sections or aspects)
 - use paragraphs to group together material on a particular aspect of the question
 - use signposting words appropriately (e.g. 'however' before explaining a point of contrast)

Know your examinations: What about different types of exams?

Here is a selection of some of the common types of written exams you may encounter. You may also have practical exams involving hands-on activities.

- Multiple Choice Questions (MCQ)
 - You will usually have a small number of alternatives from which to select the correct answer(s)
 - In factual questions, the options may be alternatives to the correct answer
 - Sometimes, especially when testing knowledge of technical terminology or concepts, the options available will include similar-sounding or related terminology
 - Problem-solving can be required to distinguish between potential answers so you may need to practice certain calculations
- Short answer questions
 - Whilst writing in clear short sentences can help, some subjects may prefer you to bullet-point your answers so check what is expected
 - Be clear about the marking criteria for diagrams – drawing skills may be less important than proportions and accurate labelling
- Problem questions (common in maths, science, engineering etc)
 - Your workings out – the processes you use to reach 'the answer' are likely to be as important as the answer so make sure your reader can follow your processes clearly
 - Depending on your subject you may be able to use limited facilities on your calculator – check this in advance of the examination
- Essay questions
 - is there a structure (and is it appropriate?)
 - beginning – a brief introduction on what the question means, how you will go about answering it (the type of evidence or examples you will use), and the structure/order of points in your main body.
 - middle - with supporting evidence and examples plus criticism
 - end – have you come to any conclusions? Is 'X' a more important factor than 'Y'? What are the implications?



Know your Exams: Process words

Account for	Explain why something happens, clarify, give reasons for
Analyse	Identify the main points and significant features. Examine critically and/or in great detail.
Assess	Identify the value of, weigh up (See also Evaluate)
Comment on	Identify the main issues, providing reactions and evidence (examples, sources, authors) to support your points. Avoid personal opinions lacking supporting evidence.
Compare	Show similarities between two (or more) things. Indicate relevance, importance and consequence of these similarities.
Contrast	Show differences between two (or more) things. Indicate relevance, importance and consequence of these differences. If appropriate, justify why one item/argument may be more convincing or preferred.
Compare and contrast	Show the similarities and differences between two (or more) things.
Criticise	Make a judgement – based on and using examples, evidence and reasoning – about the merit of two or more related things: for example, theories, opinions, models, items.
Critically evaluate	Weigh arguments for and against something, indicating and then assessing the strength of the evidence on both sides. Be clear about your criteria for how you judge which side is preferable/more convincing.
Define	Provide the exact meaning of a word, concept or phrase. Where appropriate you may need to identify other alternative definitions and/or disagreements about the definition.
Describe	Give the main characteristics or features of something, or give a detailed account of it.
Discuss	Explain and give arguments for and against an issue; consider the implications of. Provide evidence to support your points. Often used in connection with a quotation or statement that can be disputed.
Distinguish or differentiate between	Look for differences between...
Evaluate	Assess the worth, importance, validity, effectiveness of something using evidence. There will probably be a case both for and against (see Assess)
Examine	Look in detail – this may also involve 'critical evaluation' as well
Explain	Clearly identify why something happens or why it is the way that it is.
How far...	Usually involves looking at evidence/arguments for and against and weighing them up. (see also To what extent...)
Illustrate	Make clear and explicit, usually requiring carefully chosen examples
Interpret	Give the meaning and relevance of data or other material

Know your Exams: Process words (continued)

Justify	Provide evidence supporting an argument/point of view/idea. Show why a decision or conclusions are made, considering and exploring objections.
Narrate	Focus on what happened as a series of events
Outline	Give only the main features or points on a topic, omitting minor details and emphasising the main structure (see Summarise)
Relate	Show similarities and connections between two or more things
State	Give the main features in brief and clear form
Summarise	Draw out the main points only (see Outline)
To what extent	Consider how far something is true and how convincing the evidence is, including any ways in which the proposition remains unproven (see also How far...)
Trace	Follow the order of different stages in an event or process

If you want to test yourself on 'process words', try the activity on the Open University website <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/process-word-activity.php>

Information adapted from Cottrell (2003) *The Study Skills Handbook*. Second Edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan p.155

When reading essay or exam questions, remember to use the process word to help you break down the question and identify:

- Process word – WHAT you need to do (your action)

...which will be used to write about the:

- Topic – the broad subject (there may be more than one)
- Focus – the specific aspect of the topic (again: there may be more than one)

You may need to decide, depending on what the module was about, which aspect(s) – the topic or the focus – has greatest importance

Sometimes questions may begin with other types of words such as 'is' 'was' 'why' 'what is' or 'how important' – it can often help to write in the implied 'process words' or action

e.g.	(To what extent) is...	(Discuss / Identify) what is...
	(To what extent) was...	(Discuss) how important...
	(Discuss) why...	

Here is an example showing how a question can be broken down:

What is the	contribution of behaviouralism	to political science?
Process words	Focus (an aspect covered in the module)	Topic (based on what the module is about)

Know Your Subject: Overall points tutors will be looking for in your answers

- a sense you have studied this specific course – what were the module aims/objectives?
- evidence that you understand the main themes and key issues covered: use of appropriate examples
- does your answer have the right content?
- are you using terminology and concepts accurately?
- Have you addressed subject-specific requirements? (e.g. best practice, health and safety issues, professional expectations)

The following list indicates the sort of information that will be useful to demonstrate in your exam answers

- Awareness of key concepts / ideas / activities
 - Examples to illustrate these
- Criticisms and debates – key sources and authors
- Some details
- Context for topic

Academic Support, Student Services

Useful sources

Charter, A. (2001) Memory and Concentration. Workshop handout.

Cottrell, S. (2013) The Study Skills Handbook. 4th ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

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