

CITY OF GLASGOW
COLLEGE

Revision & exam preparation

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Updated June 2016



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Introduction

Many college and university courses use exams as a major part of assessment. Whatever form the exam takes, the key to performing well is **good preparation**.

This guide describes several methods that can help you develop **note-taking, revision and exam preparation skills**. Try the methods described in the guide from the start of your studies. This guide covers the following areas:

Early preparation

Without good planning, it is all too easy to leave exam preparation until a few weeks before exams start. However, this is just not long enough to reinforce all that you learned through your studies. College blocks last about three months, so there is plenty of time to prepare properly. **Last minute exam preparation is risky and best avoided!** The key to good exam preparation is forming good study and revision habits early on, and ensuring study is ongoing.

Your learning style

We each have an individual learning style. There are several ways to learn and different people have different learning preferences. You may not even be aware of what your own learning style is. By discovering your learning style, you can tailor your note taking, revision and studying to maximise what you learn.

For example, some people learn best through **listening**. Such people can increase their learning through group discussion or recording their notes onto an audio file to play back when revising.

To find out more about your learning style, see the Library's *Learning styles* guide. Or why not take an **online learning style self-assessment test**? Complete a simple questionnaire





about your learning preferences. The answers will reveal which style you have, and point to which study methods and tips suit your style.

To take the Vark “How do I learn best?” test, go to:

<http://vark-learn.com/the-vark-questionnaire/>

(Accessed 4 July 2016)

Set targets

Draw up a “to-do list” or, if you are feeling particularly dynamic, an “action plan”! Keep your list handy – say at the front of notes or in your student diary – so that you can keep track of what you should be doing.

Note on your list the goals you wish to achieve in each of your subjects. The goals can be simple, such as “By next Tuesday I will revise and summarise the notes I made last week”. Review your “to-do list” regularly (at least once a week) to check you are achieving your goals. If you aren’t, what is stopping you?

Prioritise what you need to learn most. This avoids ignoring subjects you don’t enjoy or find difficult. If you are having problems with a subject, try tackling it in small chunks to make it more bearable.

2

Time management

Look at your College timetable – can you fit in some study time between classes and lectures? Try to use your “spare” time productively and get the best out of the College facilities, such as the two campus libraries and our online resources.

It’s also important to maintain a balance between College work and other commitments, such as family, jobs and the day-to-day stuff. Make time for leisure too – taking time out to relax has a positive effect on studying; getting yourself tired, stressed and run down by studying





constantly, doesn't.

Study environment

Choose a study environment that avoids distractions and is comfortable, and has easy access to any resources, such as computers, reference books etc.

How will you be assessed?

Be prepared: find out how many exams you will have, what they are and when they will take place. What form will the exams take, and are any mock exams provided?

Note-taking

The type of notes you take can have a major influence on how much you learn and remember when revising for exams. Some simple note-taking methods can make your revision easier and more productive.

Remember: what you learn near the beginning of a course can still feature in exams, so take good notes and revise from the first lesson.

Make notes that help you

Notes should be brief, clear and easy to read, besides containing the important information taken from lectures, classes, books, etc. Try some of the following techniques to improve your note-taking:

- Record where and when you take notes. If you're in class, jot down the date and the name of the lecturer. If you are unsure about something in your notes later, you can consult the lecturer.
- When you take notes from a book, jot down the book's bibliographic details (book title, author, pages referred to, year published, etc.), plus where you obtained the book. If



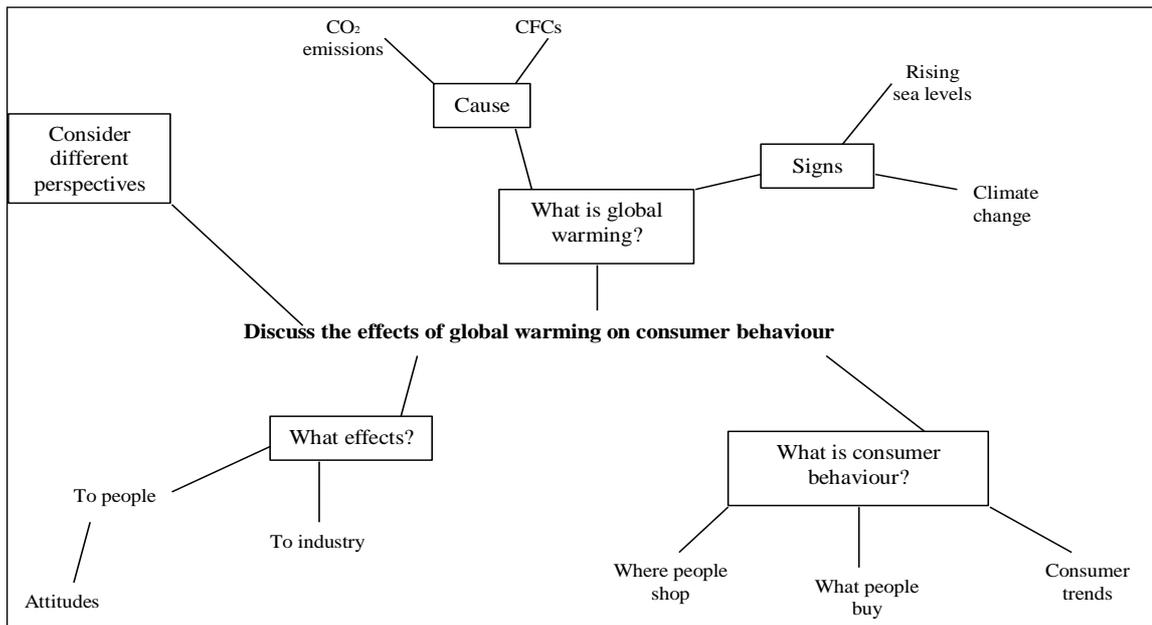
you need further information from the book, you will know where to find it again.

- To keep your notes brief and clear but still record enough information, try bullet points; for brevity and emphasis include diagrams or information tables, using a range of colours to add interest and visual cues.

Mind maps

Mind maps are very useful for revision. They allow you to record, review and analyse information in the same way we process it in our heads. This can aid recall, as well as increase the amount we take in.

For further information on mind maps, see the Library's *Mind maps* guide.



The above example shows how a central theme is broken down into topics and sub-topics, and the different themes explored.



Methods of revision

Revision should be a regular, ongoing process... As exams approach, step up the amount of revision you are doing. Try the following revision methods:

- Create summaries of your notes. Read through and process your notes, picking out essential information. Rewording your notes will aid recall.
- When summarising your notes, consider changing the format they are in. E.g. - convert written notes into mind maps, diagrams or tables - they may be easier to remember than a solid paragraph of written text.
- Transfer essential information from your written notes to typed-up summary sheets. This lets you to process important points, leaving you with tidy notes for later revision. Leave spaces in the summaries for adding more information later. Use tools such as **bold**, underline and bullet points for key points.
- You remember more if you read the same notes for a short while on consecutive days, rather than reading the same notes over and over on one occasion. When planning revision, set aside a regular time for rereading important notes. This keeps important information fresh in your head, as **regular repetition is better than solid cramming**.
- Create question cards of the type which will appear in the exam. Questions should cover essential information, but don't make the questions too easy! Write the questions on cards with the answers on the back. Mix your own questions with some from your tutor or previous exams. Shuffle the cards and answer the questions as they come up (no peeking at the answers...). Works even better if you can get class mates to join in and swap cards.
- Form a revision group with others from your course. Simply discussing key areas of your studies will help you to learn more. It also gives you the chance to straighten out any topics of which you are unsure.





Exam build-up

By the time the exams approach, you should have formed good study and revision habits. Ideally, you should be able to increase your combined studying and revision each week in the month before exams begin (if not earlier).

When stepping up your revision:

- Think about what you still need to do for each exam and draw up a timetable for when you will do it.
- Study for any topics you find difficult when your mind is most fresh and alert - you are more likely to take it the information in. Don't put it off!
- Make sure you know the timing of each of your exams, so that you can prioritise.
- Keep revision varied by spending time on different types of study: e.g. read for a while, summarise notes and then answer some exam type questions. Take regular breaks to avoid burn out.
- Don't rely on predicting exam content: it is unreliable and risky! Revise subjects comprehensively so that you will not be caught out on the day of the exam. There are no guarantees of which questions will come up, so be sure to study broadly.
- Once classes and lectures are finished, create study sheets for each of your subjects. Review and summarise all the essential information from notes and class handouts gathered from the start of your course. Take the chance to process and re-cap, making the summaries neat and easy to read. Reading the summaries several times daily in the run up to the exam should help you remember the material (via repetition and reinforcement).
- Be familiar with the types of questions you can expect in your exams, as there may be different kinds you could be set (whether multiple choice, essays...) Check with your lecturers whether past papers are available to help you prepare.





Multiple choice exams

The principle behind multiple choice questions is simple – identify the correct answer to a set question by choosing from the selection of answers offered.

Multiple choices test whether you know specific details, facts etc – and whether you know the differences between options offered. Thoroughly revising your subjects is the best strategy for approaching multiple choice questions – guess work should be a last option. In some multiple choice exams, you can be penalised for selecting the wrong answer – again, knowing your subject is the only way to avoid this.

If your exam is a mix of multiple choice and written questions and essays, it is usually better to tackle the multiple choice section first. You should schedule time for it just as you would for any short answer or essay questions.

Prepare for multiple choice questions by revising definitions, processes, calculations and facts as thoroughly as possible. This is part of the “reinforcement principle” – this means finding examples on which to peg your understanding of arguments and topics, then practising recalling the examples and details.

7

This can be done by reading carefully through one small section of what you are revising once – be it a set of figures, a sequence, names or dates. Set the information aside and then write out, as accurately as you can, what you read from memory. Check how you did against the original, adding or correcting if needed. To help reinforce recall, try the same thing again a few days later – but without looking at the original text first.

Practice writing out sequences and lists etc. which you find hard to remember. Try using **mnemonics** like this one, for the order of planets from the Sun:

Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto
= **My Very Easy Method: Just Set Up Nine Planets.**





Multiple answers can be very similar, and could confuse you if you don't have a firm understanding of the subject. **Thorough revision** is the best guard against this.

It is very important that you understand what you are studying, and not just recalling it because of repetition. **Flash cards or index cards** can help you break down large chunks of information into easier to understand segments – they are also handy for revising on trains and buses.

Exam time tips

The day before an exam

Study as normal. If you have revised and practised exam questions for the previous few weeks, you won't need to "cram" lots of information at the last minute. Cramming is not a good way to take in information and may confuse, rather than help.

Don't stay up late studying – do your best to relax with an early night, to ensure you are fresh the following day.

8

Exam day

Get to the exam location with plenty of **time to spare**. If you have far to travel, or use public transport, set out early, in case of delays.

Eat well before your exam – you will need energy to focus for an extended period of time. If allowed, take some fruit or sweets into the exam to boost energy levels half way through. Avoid too much coffee, as it can make you anxious!

Make sure you have **plenty of pens** for the exam. Check beforehand if you need a calculator or ruler, and always take a few spare pens.

If you feel anxious, remember that all the hard work and revision you have done have prepared you well! **Relax** and take some deep breaths.





In the exam

- At the start of the exam, make sure you put your name and any other details on the paper. This seems obvious but it's very easy to forget!
- Be clear about how long the exam lasts and how much time you can spend on each question. There should be a clock you can check regularly (you will probably not be allowed to have your phone)
- At the start of the exam, read through any instructions on the exam paper. If you have a choice of questions, be sure you pick the correct amount. Next, read through all the questions and make sure you understand them. Before making any choices, read them all again.
- Give more time to the questions worth more marks. If a question is worth 25 marks, and another 5 marks, spend longer on the 25 mark question.
- Answering easier questions first can be a good way to get started, and can help build up your confidence as you progress.
- You need to get as many marks as possible in the exam, so use your time wisely and answer as many questions as you can. If you are struggling with a question, go to the next. Return to the problem question when you have tackled the others.
- Leave enough time at the end to double check your answers – look for any errors or anything you have missed out. Use all the time available to you!
- After the exam, don't dwell on it, especially if you have more exams coming up. Try and learn by any mistakes you made.

Multiple choice exam questions

Try the following for tackling multiple choice questions:

- Correct identification: read the questions through quickly, and answer those where you know the correct answer.
- Elimination: for those questions you haven't answered, cross off answers you know aren't correct.





- Through this, you may be left with the correct answer, which may shine out once the competition is removed.
- If you are still in doubt about a question, leave it to return to later – going back to it with a fresh mind may help you recall the right answer. Exam stress or nerves can leave you doubting your judgement.
- Double-check you have actually understood the question – it may have been phrased in a way meant to catch you out.
- When you simply don't know the right answer (rather than just can't recall it) you may have to make an educated guess. Cross off any answers which you know to be wrong, then weigh up the remaining answers. The only way to avoid this is to revise as widely and thoroughly as possible before your exams.

Tip: if you find multiple choice answers confuse you, try covering up the options while thinking about the answer. Use what you think is the correct answer to select from the options. Trust your powers of recall, rather than the power of suggestion.

GOOD LUCK!

Further information

For more information about mind maps, see the following resources:

Mind maps - a powerful approach to note taking, from the Mind Tools website at:

http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newlSS_01.htm

(Accessed 21 June 2016)





For **general study advice**, try some of these books, available to borrow from the College libraries:

City Campus Library

Burns, T. (2016). Essential study skills: the complete guide to success at university.

Thousand Oaks: Sage. **Location: 378.170 BUR (level 4)**

Connelly, J. and Forsyth, P. (2010). The study skills guide: essential strategies for smart students. London: Kogan Page.

Location: 378.170 FOR (level 4)

Cottrell, S. (2008). The study skills handbook. 3rd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Location: 371.302 COT (level 4)

Riverside Campus Library

Cottrell, S. (2003). The study skills handbook. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Location: 371.30281 COT

