Effective Revision

1. Introduction
Revising effectively means much more than simply trying to memorise information to regurgitate in the exam: it involves practise in recalling information in a flexible and ‘useable’ way; it involves practise in understanding and answering exam questions in an appropriate manner; it involves practise in assessing the quality of an answer. As such, revision needs to be an active and varied process that addresses the above three elements. Passively reading through lecture notes will not be enough.

Ideally, you should have been revising/reflecting on what you’ve learnt regularly throughout your course, rather than viewing revision and the exams as a separate activity which takes place at the end. Well-written, meaningful and frequently revisited notes make the revision process far easier than being faced with jumbled and half-forgotten piles of scribblings.

Formal revision should normally start at least six to eight weeks before your exams begin, but take your individual working patterns and how much you realistically have to do into account.

2. Researching your exams
As with any other aspect of academic study, effective revision depends on good research and thorough, careful, and critically-informed preparation.

Stage One in researching and preparing from your exams involves finding out what exactly it is you are going to be faced with:

- How many exams will you be taking?
- What are their dates, times and locations?
- What format will each exam be? - essay/long/short answers, MCQ, problem solving, gobbit?
- How long is each exam?
- What is the exam/coursework weighting for the module?
- What is your coursework performance so far?
**Stage two** involves deciding which topics/subject areas you should revise. A range of different sources of information are available to help you to identify the key topics within a module:

- Course outline/syllabus
- Past exam papers (available online/library catalogue)
- Reading lists
- Essay/assignment topics
- Topics emphasised by lecturers/tutors
- Module learning objectives

**Stage three** involves deciding how much to revise. There is no easy, magic answer to this question. Depending on the number of exams you have, it is unlikely to be a realistic proposition to attempt to revise an entire year’s worth of material for each module. Furthermore, the price for revising in great breadth may well be a lack of depth; you’ll be able to answer any question the examiners can set for you, but only at a superficial level. Instead, what you might think about is adopting a more strategic/tactical approach to revision – revising a smaller number of topics, but in greater depth. How you decide on which and how many topics to focus on, and which to treat more cursorily, depends on a number of different factors derived from the module, the exam, your personality and your circumstances. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

**Module format:** how many discrete/core topics have been covered during the course? Are some of these more fundamental than others? How do these topics relate to the subject area as a whole? Are certain topics naturally compatible/contrasting? What themes/ideas/concepts are associated with different topics within the module? What themes/ideas/concepts recur throughout the module?

**Exam format:** how have the above been reflected in previous exam papers? Which topics recur? Which alternate? How many topics are covered – i.e., what is the number of questions on the paper? Are topics combined within questions or dealt with individually? How many questions are you required to answer? What marks are given to each question? Is the paper is divided in sections? If so, on what basis? Are there any compulsory questions?

**Personality:** are you a risk-taker? Are you motivated by high stakes and danger – by the unorthodox and the challenging? Or are you risk-averse? Would you always rather take the sure and certain path? Do you value safety and familiarity over the unknown? Or do you fall somewhere in between? Do you believe that to perform at your best you will need to take a gamble, but at the same time you want to hedge your bets as best as you can?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High risk (minimum topics, great depth)</th>
<th>Moderate risk (enough topics, enough depth)</th>
<th>No risk (all topics, little depth)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Best case scenario vs. Worst case scenario</td>
<td>Excellent results vs. Failure</td>
<td>Average result vs. Average result</td>
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**Circumstances:** How much time do you have to revise for each subject? How easy/difficult do you find the subject matter? How much do you think you can meaningfully revise and recall? What quality of understanding are you working with? How well has your revision prepared you in previous rounds of exams? What have you learnt from taking previous exams? How have you conditioned yourself to believe you perform in exams?

*Stage four* involves reflecting on the different categories and formats of information you will need to be able to recall during the exam in order to answer the questions you are likely to be faced with. One of the key challenges of university exams is preparing for an unseen paper. Typically, this means revising in a way that will allow you to answer any one of a range of possible questions relating to a given topic. Your examiners will be looking at how well you’ve answered the question that has been set, not your ability to list everything you know about the topic as a whole. The implication of this is that you’ll need to be able to recall and organise all (and only) the information relevant to answering the question. As such, attempting to memorise model answers is unlikely to be an effective revision strategy, since the actual question will remain unknown prior to the exam itself. What is instead needed is an approach that allows you to construct an answer to the question out of building-blocks of information relevant to the topic. Depending on the subject, these might include the following:

- Facts (numbers, percentages, value, dates, names, places, events)
- Processes (stages/steps/order)
- Components (of a system - order/importance)
- Theories/concepts
- People/roles/ideas
- Legislation/rules/regulations/requirements/guidelines
- Lists
- Relationships
- Formulae/equations/rules
- Definitions/meanings
- Languages/codes

### 3. Revision techniques

There is no single ‘correct’ way to revise. Effective revision involves engaging with your work in an active, imaginative and varied way, since different types of information lend themselves to being memorised and recalled in different ways. And what works well for one person won’t necessarily work well for another; so, developing effective revision techniques of your own will involve a degree of experimentation. If it works, use it; if it doesn’t, try something else. But what is true, as a general rule, is that our brains work much more effectively when seeking answers to questions than from passive reading. Attempting to revise by simply reading and re-reading your notes is dull, tiring and ineffective.

What you should instead do is process your lecture/seminar/reading notes: for example, by converting them into short, punchy, and portable revision notes that give pointers to possible answers for exam questions. These revision
notes should consist of concise summaries or outlines of topics covered, lists of essential information, etc. Some students aim to end up with flashcards showing the minimum amount of information necessary to trigger recall of what they have learned. Other students will create mind-maps or spider-grams that show how different ideas and information fit together within a topic. The use of colour, images and shapes provides additional meaning, while the visual imagery serves as a powerful tool for recalling and making sense of information during the exam. And the time spent in producing such revision aids is an extremely effective investment of your time as it requires you to engage actively with the subject matter.

The process of memorising information should be balanced with time spent monitoring your progress. Test yourself on what you have read, maybe by devising a question and seeing if you can answer it, using brief notes, diagrams or orally (use your phone or mp3 player to record your answers). Check out your answer in the text, looking for any omissions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ten Tips for Maintaining Concentration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Prepare a revision timetable, and start each revision session on time.</td>
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<td>2. Study in an area free from distractions and interruptions.</td>
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<td>3. Work in a comfortable area – good light, fresh air, seating, etc.</td>
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<td>4. Undertake demanding tasks when at your best; do more straightforward tasks at other times.</td>
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<td>5. Actively engage with your revision rather than just reading passively.</td>
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<td>6. Complete each task within the time allocated.</td>
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<td>7. Review each task for a few minutes before moving on to the next.</td>
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<td>8. Don’t work for too long on any one task.</td>
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<td>9. Mix up different kinds of activity.</td>
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<td>10. Take frequent breaks. As a minimum, take a few deep breaths, stand up, flex your arms, walk about.</td>
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Alternatively, test yourself by answering questions from past exam papers. A brief outline answer, as a list of points that could be covered or a spider diagram, is enough. Answer one or two questions from each paper in full. This will help you to check out your timing and style. Look again at these answers after a couple of days from an examiner’s point of view. Try to be as honest with yourself as you can: how many good points have you made? How many have you omitted? Have you answered the question fully? Is your style OK? Is your handwriting legible, etc? Working on past papers also means that the format will also become familiar to you, and so less intimidating.

Maintain your engagement in the revision process by varying activities. For example:

- Create written lists; structure your notes with headings, sub-headings, titles, categories, chronologies, etc...
- Arrange information diagrammatically – into flow diagrams, hierarchies, groupings and relationships...
- Personalise your information, using metaphor, synthesis, images, shapes, colours, patterns, tune, rhythm, intuition, emotion – in other words, engage your imagination...
- Create your own mnemonics (e.g., Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain = colours of the rainbow)...

www.kent.ac.uk/learning
- Talk to yourself / Sing information...
- Record yourself reciting key facts etc; then listen to yourself...
- Work in pairs testing each other...
- Put Post-it notes / posters in your room...
- Move about, study in different locations...

Form a revision group...

**Revision groups**

Group revision can work well with people you trust and feel are competent. Divide individual course topics up amongst the group, one person becoming a resource for the group on that topic. He or she could make revision notes, write an overview, answer questions, make photocopies, etc.

The group could brainstorm answers together, with someone taking notes, or play a kind of Consequences, where an exam question is written at the top of a long piece of paper, and each member writes an outline answer and then passes it on. All the answers are pooled at the end.

Alternatively, the group could think of the Worst Possible Question and discuss possible answers to it.

4. **Revision and Lifestyle**

Use student/athlete analogy: aim to peak at the right time.

- Get into a revision routine, work in short, manageable periods.
- Avoid getting over-tired.
- Turn off frequently, do something quite different.

**Exercise**

Aim for 150 mins of moderate-intensity (or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity) aerobic-type exercise per week. (See WHO (2010) ‘Global recommendations on physical activity for health’). Brief exercise before revision periods and exams improves concentration and intellectual performance.

**Sleep**

Try to get regular periods of sleep at regular times, but don’t fret if you’re not sleeping as well as you usually do. Take naps. Get lots of daylight.

**Diet**

Keep your intake of alcohol and sugar down. Too much sugar lowers your blood sugar level, makes you sleepy, and makes you need more. ‘Energy’ drinks are especially bad for this. Cut down on caffeine – in short term caffeine makes you feel more alert, but large doses lead to insomnia and increased tension/anxiety. But don’t give up caffeine right now - withdrawal symptoms (headaches, etc.) can be severe.

Starving yourself does not enhance intellectual performance. Try to maintain a healthy balanced diet.
6. **Conclusion**

Developing an effective approach to revision requires research, reflection, planning and perseverance. There is no single magic technique, but rather a range of techniques to experiment with in order to identify a mixed approach that works for you. Effective revision depends on recognising what works, what doesn't work, and what works with certain types of information, and refining how you revise accordingly. Effective revision depends on you clearly understanding exactly what it is you are revising for. Above all, effective revision requires you to engage actively with the subject matter about which you will be examined.