

## Coping with revision and exams

Very few people enjoy exams and most students experience some anxiety from time to time whilst revising and during the exams themselves. This anxiety can be helpful in motivating us to study and in improving performance, but very occasionally, it can lead to students feeling paralysed and unable to perform to the best of their ability. Below are some suggestions which may help you cope with revision and exams and with the anxiety they may cause. Many of them may seem obvious but when we are anxious we sometimes forget simple ways to lessen our fears.

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### Revision

The best way to increase confidence and reduce anxiety is to be well prepared, so start your revision in good time. Many tutors in Oxford will build it into your course but you will need to make your own plans as well to make sure you have covered all the topics you think you need to know.

Begin by spending a little time organising your work space and your material. It can help to separate out the areas where you work and those where you relax. Think about using libraries to do most of your work. Move things that distract you into the area where you relax. Similarly organise your notes and files so that you can find things easily. This will also give you some idea of your strengths and weaknesses.

See past papers. Make sure you know the format of the exam. You might like to look at some **past papers** for the last two years. See also Examiners' Reports.

Select topics you intend to answer questions on – usually this will depend on what you are interested in and feel you understood best and also on what you feel is likely to come up in the exam (use past papers as a guide). As a rule of thumb revise the number of questions that you are required to answer plus two but this is not appropriate for some subjects – consult your tutor if in doubt. How much you decide to revise may also depend on the time you have available. Make sure the topics you have chosen come up fairly regularly.

Make a revision plan. Allocate more time to subjects you are unsure about or did a long time ago. More recent work will be fresher in your mind and will probably not need as much time spending on it. Your

**Source: University of Oxford (Student Gateway)**

plan needs to be flexible to allow for some things taking longer than you expect. Be realistic about how much time you can work each day and how much you can get through in the time.

Revise subjects that make you feel anxious fairly early on so that you reduce the anxiety and feel you have the time to deal with them. It may be best not to do them first however but to begin with something you know well to boost your confidence. Never leave subjects that cause you anxiety till the last minute.

Read new material and expand your notes early on.

Active revision is better than passive revision. Take notes. Make summaries of notes. Review what you have learned regularly. Recite aloud, test yourself, make cards or tapes to use outside the study situation.

Use the material you have learned to write essay plans, write answers to single questions from past papers, do full collections if these have been avoided. Practice gobbets or short answers, if these are part of your exams. Get feedback from tutors if possible.

Mathematicians and some scientists seem to revise best by working through past papers.

Look after yourself. Revision is hard work so make sure you eat and sleep well and take time off to relax, see friends and exercise. This will make you more productive.

Avoid excessive use of caffeine and alcohol.

On the day of the exams:

- Prepare your clothes and equipment the day before.
- Don't stay up all night revising. You will perform much better after a good night's sleep.
- Don't try to learn anything new – perhaps look over a few key points.
- Arrive on time but not too early.
- Avoid anyone or anything that will make you anxious.
- Use any time before you are allowed to look at the paper to take a few deep breaths and relax as much as possible.
- Take your time to read through the paper and select the questions you will answer.
- Some people like to plan all their answers before beginning to write but others plan and write each answer in turn.
- Make sure you answer the question you are asked, not the one you would prefer.
- Keep a firm eye on the time and answer the required number of questions. Two brilliant answers will not get you as many marks as three average ones.

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- Write legibly.

There is very little point in conducting a detailed post-mortem. Once the exam is over there is nothing you can do to change what you have written and it may only make you more anxious in the next exams if you focus on faults and omissions. A period of rest or relaxation or even exercise should help you to unwind before you begin preparing for the next exam.

### Coping with anxiety

Anxiety is normal and, for most of us, inevitable at exam time. Generally people perform well despite quite high levels of anxiety. If you become very anxious, try one of the following:

- Relaxation – this means anything that helps you to relax, for example, a hot bath, chatting to friends, listening to music, yoga, meditation or a relaxation tape. You may have other ideas of your own too.
- Distraction – this means anything that you can get involved in and that takes your mind off your anxieties, for example, TV, cinema, a good novel, sport or exercise. Exercise is particularly good as a way of forgetting anxieties.
- Think positively. When we are anxious, we tend to focus on our negative thoughts and this can increase our anxiety. Instead of concentrating on how little you know, how you will fail, etc., concentrate on how much you have learned so far and how you have always done well in exams.

### Panic

Whilst revising or in exams students sometimes become very anxious and feel they are having a panic attack. Usually this means that you will be breathing very fast and may feel dizzy, nauseous, sweating, shaky or faint. These feelings can be very unpleasant but they are not dangerous. Try to control them by pausing and slowing down your breathing. Breathe in slowly and smoothly and breathe out slowly too. You should aim for smooth, slow, regular but fairly shallow breathing. Let your body relax and reassure yourself that you are not going to lose control or collapse. As you begin to feel better, try to focus on one question on the exam paper that you feel able to answer and begin to plan and write the answer to this question. Your anxiety should continue to decrease as you write. However bad you feel, do not leave the exam as your anxiety level will fall in a short time and you will begin to feel better.