

Revision advice – The University of Manchester

Revision Strategies

We all understand the importance of revision. Most work hard at it, but we don't always work well at it. As with any other aspect of your studies, you need to organise your time and plan your revision in advance.

The main purposes of revision are:

- to understand the topic for which you are sitting an exam
- to commit what you have learnt and understood to memory
- to practice planning and writing answers to questions

To enable you to do this, you will need to organise your notes, essays, handouts etc. into a convenient and coherent set of material. This section includes advice on:

- making a revision plan
- how to revise
- revising all year round

Making a Revision Plan

As always, planning is key. Here are some tips:

- **Create a Revision Timetable**
You should start revising at least five or six weeks before your exams are due to start. Do be realistic about the goals you set in the time you have available, and remember you need to allow breaks now and then.
- **Balance your subjects**
Allocate topics to days, and make sure you have enough time for everything you want to revise. Balance the time you have available between your various courses. Do not neglect courses you find particularly easy or difficult.
- **Identify key topics**
For each course, identify which topics to revise. At the very least, you should cover twice as many topics as the number of questions you need to answer (e.g. 6 topics for a 3-essay exam). Select topics based on:
 - The content of the course
 - Past examination papers
 - Your own interests and abilities
- **Arrange your revision material**
You will have lecture notes and seminar class notes, your own notes from books and journals, essays with your tutor's feedback, handouts and other photocopies and references. You will also need textbooks, past exam papers etc. Arrange to have everything you need well in advance.

How to Revise

There are three key revision methods:

1. note-taking/note-making
2. memorising
3. drafting model answers

We will look at each of these in turn:

1. Note-Taking/Note-Making

For detailed information on how to take good notes, see our [Note-taking](#) section.

Throughout the academic year you will have been *taking* lots of notes - from lectures, seminars, reading that you've done. Now that it's revision time, the main objective is to work on your notes in various ways to *make* them more memorable:

- Physically organise your notes so that they are clear, logically ordered and easy to find your way around
- Then read them through, underlining key words, highlighting different themes
- Devise your own colour coding system - it may seem childish, but associating different colours with different topics or themes will help you to memorise and compartmentalise things in your mind
- Write-out more and more concise versions of your notes, whittling down the content to manageable and digestible proportions - aim to reduce each topic to an index card. At this stage, your notes are an aide memoire, not a full repository of facts and arguments.
- You may find [Spider diagrams](#), [Mind maps](#) and [Concept maps](#) helpful ways of summarising a lot of information onto a single page. (They are also visually memorable, too.)

When it comes to note-making for revision purposes, less is more!

2. Memorising

There is no way around this task - to do well in exams, you have to remember your material. Ultimately, you have to work out the way of doing this that works best for you. Some of these approaches may help:

- Look at your notes for a topic on three or four occasions. This will fix them in your mind better than a once and for all approach.
- Predict a page of notes in your mind before you look at it. What you have forgotten will bring itself to your attention as you read.
- Using the [Cornell Note-Taking System](#) helps memorisation, as you can cover up half of the page where your detailed notes are made, and focus on recalling information triggered by the key words/questions.
- Mnemonics. Use the letters of a word, or the initial letters of a phrase, to trigger associations.
 - For example, the key elements in the topic 'Hitler's Rise to Power' could be remembered by the word 'VIEW', which stands for:
V = Versailles (the treaty signed at the end of World War I)
I = Individual personality of Hitler
E = Economic collapse
W = Weimar
- Think of a picture of the topic.
 - To continue our previous example, a mental picture of one of Hitler's rallies might suggest Crowds, Regimentation, Technology, Scapegoats, etc...
- [Diagrammatic notes](#) e.g. Spider diagrams, Mind maps and Concept maps are more visually stimulating and therefore more easily remembered than a list of points.
- Last-minute revision of notes, now reduced to minimal levels, is generally helpful. However, attempting to learn new material the day before the exam is harmful, as it can displace the material you have already learned and lead to a sense of confusion and panic.

2. Drafting Model Answers

Working out model answers to anticipated questions should be central to your revision process. This technique will work on you remembering your material, developing your critical skills and practising for the exam.

See [How to Use Past Papers](#)

You need to develop an abbreviated version of the essay writing process outlined in the [How to Write an Essay](#) section of this website. The following stages could all be practices:

- **Analyse the question**
Using past exam papers, think about the wording of questions (see the [Glossary of Exam Terms](#) page for help on this). What are the problem or key words? What approach is being asked for? You could practice rephrasing the question in your own words to highlight the exact meaning.
- **Generate ideas**
You are going to need at least five or six major points or arguments with which to answer most questions. Often these will be fairly obvious from your seminar/lecture notes, and from your reading. If not, try to generate ideas based on who, what, why, where and when.
- **Authors and controversies**
What are the main schools of thoughts on a given topic? Are there any major developments between them? If you can summarise these briefly it will improve your essay, especially if you can work out a position for yourself.
- **Other angles**
Some topics are dealt with from one particular perspective. You could improve your essay and catch the examiners eye by introducing an alternative perspective, where relevant.
- **Check**
Go over your outline answers looking for errors and irrelevant points and ways to improve the argument.
- **Write under exam conditions**
Practice writing at speed under exam conditions. It is useful to get someone else's opinion on these fully written answers afterwards. Your tutor may be prepared to do this, otherwise, ask a friend to look at them.

Revision all year round

Revision should not be a last-minute attempt to make up for poor study habits in the previous eight months. As one topic quickly succeeds another in each course, it's easy to forget previous work all too soon. There seems to be little time to revise. Nevertheless, throughout the academic year you should work with one eye on the revision process to come:

- Make sure your notes are easy to follow and well organised. Keep things neatly filed together with clear labeling. Keep your lists of readings and references. Collect lists of past questions and past papers.
- Note down what you have not yet had time to do, and the key issues you have not yet investigated.
- Don't let work pile up. Even if you make the time to catch up, it may be impossible to get hold of readings for topics a few weeks before the exam.
- Try to read through your notes periodically. Use them to form an overview of the course so far. Make connections between what you have studied and what is to come.
- If you are particularly confused with one aspect of your course, set aside time to look at your notes, key texts and past exams. Try to make sense of your course as a whole. Introductory lectures and seminars may help, as will talking to your tutor. Don't leave it too late.
- Final lectures in courses may give useful summaries and tips.