



The Open University



# Revising for Examinations

This booklet accompanies the Skills for OU Study website: [www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy](http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy)

Skills for OU Study

Revising for Examinations

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# Skills for OU Study

## Revising for Examinations

Knowing how to prepare for an exam increases your chances of success. This booklet accompanies the *Skills for OU Study* website <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy> which contains advice, quizzes and exercises to help you prepare for your exam.



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# 1 Overview

Exams provide an opportunity for you to demonstrate some of what you have learnt on the course – arguments, concepts, skills, processes, debates or theories, as well as your knowledge of the subject. Examiners are interested in what you know, not what you don't know. They try to write exam questions that give you a good chance of passing and they do not want to catch you out or trick you in any way.

Exams at the OU are mostly written, but can be oral for some subjects. Some courses have an end-of-course assessment (ECA) instead of an exam. ECAs are described in the booklet *Preparing Assignments* and you can find further information, including links to information about all aspects of the assessment process, through the *Skills for OU Study* website <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy>.



Learn what to expect in the exam and how to revise for it.

This booklet provides ideas and suggestions that can help you:

- appreciate that the exam is more about understanding than memory
- realise that you aren't expected to know everything
- recognise that you have prepared in the right way and practised your skills and techniques
- know what to expect in the exam
- feel confident in tackling the exam.

Your tutor or study adviser can help you get ready for your exam, so do ask for help and advice.

## Do you need alternative support for your exam?

If you have a disability or temporary medical condition, or have difficulties in attending an examination centre, the OU can usually adjust arrangements to suit your individual needs, as long as you complete a request form at least two months before the examination. You will need to provide evidence to support your request.

Options include

- question papers in alternative formats
- extra time in the exam
- rest breaks in the exam
- changing the venue
- home-based exams
- an amanuensis to take your dictation and write out your answers.

If your exam is due in less than two months, contact your regional centre immediately.

## 1.1 Revision

Essentially you need to prepare and practise for your exam - see Figure 1.

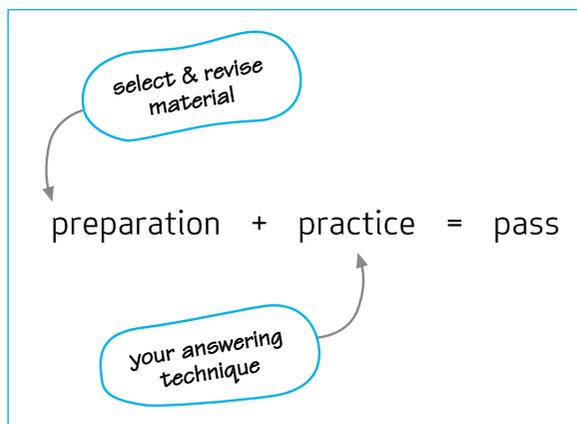


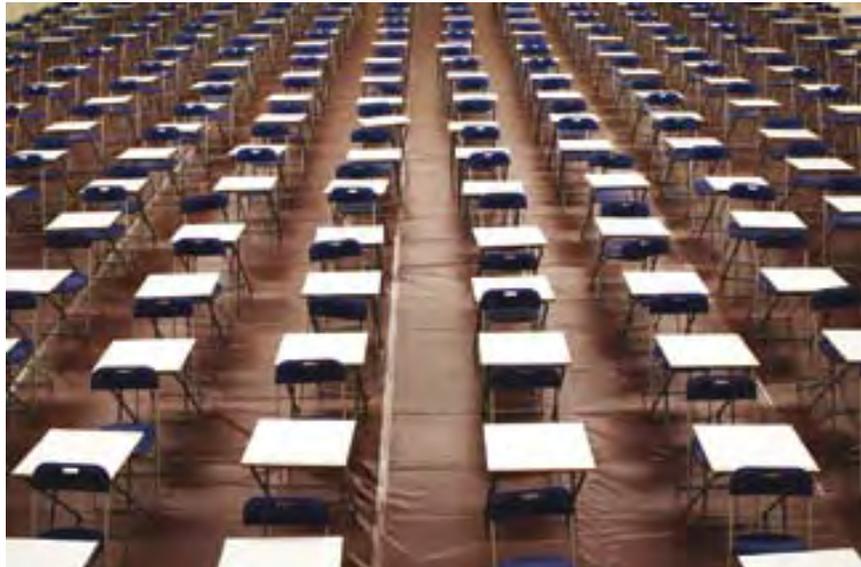
Figure 1 How to pass the exam

Follow these key rules to get good marks for your work.

## 1.2 Exams

In order to get good marks for your work you should

- take care to follow the instructions on the exam paper and be sure to answer the right number of questions
- answer the questions as written
- make sure your answers are organised and legible
- make use of course materials in your answers, including key concepts, examples and diagrams.



## 2 Managing exam stress

Some people get very nervous before or during exams, which can limit how well they do. If exam stress affects you, then try to find ways to maintain a positive attitude and approach during your revision. You could:

- keep fit by taking some exercise you enjoy
- relax, perhaps by sitting quietly or meditating
- eat well, but healthily
- get sufficient sleep
- take some planned time away from study, rather than feel you're avoiding revision
- be pleased with your achievements as you revise
- reward yourself with an occasional treat.

Don't compare yourself with other students. This is your exam, so concentrate on your needs and what makes you most comfortable.

*Discover ways to cope and sources of help if you are worried about the exam.*

Focus on the one topic you're revising now, not on what else you still have to cover. If you get stuck on a topic, leave it and come back to it when you're fresh. Ask for help from students or your tutor or study adviser if you need it.

Have a clear idea of how you are going to spend the time immediately before the exam, and include activities that help you to keep things in perspective. It may be worth thinking about something you achieved that meant a lot to you. It will help you acknowledge that the exam is not the only important thing – and is well within your capacities.

*“ I realised that talking to other students before the exam wound me up, so now I just listen to music while waiting for the exam hall to open. ”*



You can download audio files on managing exam stress from the *Skills for OU Study* website <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy>. A positive attitude and self talk can make a real difference.

*“ If you begin to panic during the exam, say to yourself STOP and take several deep breaths, or STOP and move to another question. ”*

If you feel that your stress is getting out of control, it may be best to leave the exam room temporarily. You would have to be supervised by an invigilator if you wanted to return and you would not be given any extra time. However, taking time out like this might help you to get a better mark than simply sitting and panicking at your exam desk.

“ There’s an awful lot of support out there, but it’s like all other things... you have got to go and get it for yourself. If you are sitting in your room expecting somebody to come and help you that’s not the way it’s going to work I’m afraid. You have actually got to get out there and sort it out for yourself. ”



# 3 How to revise

There's no single best way to revise, so make sure to develop a system that works for you. You can think of revision as a set of stages - see Figure 2.

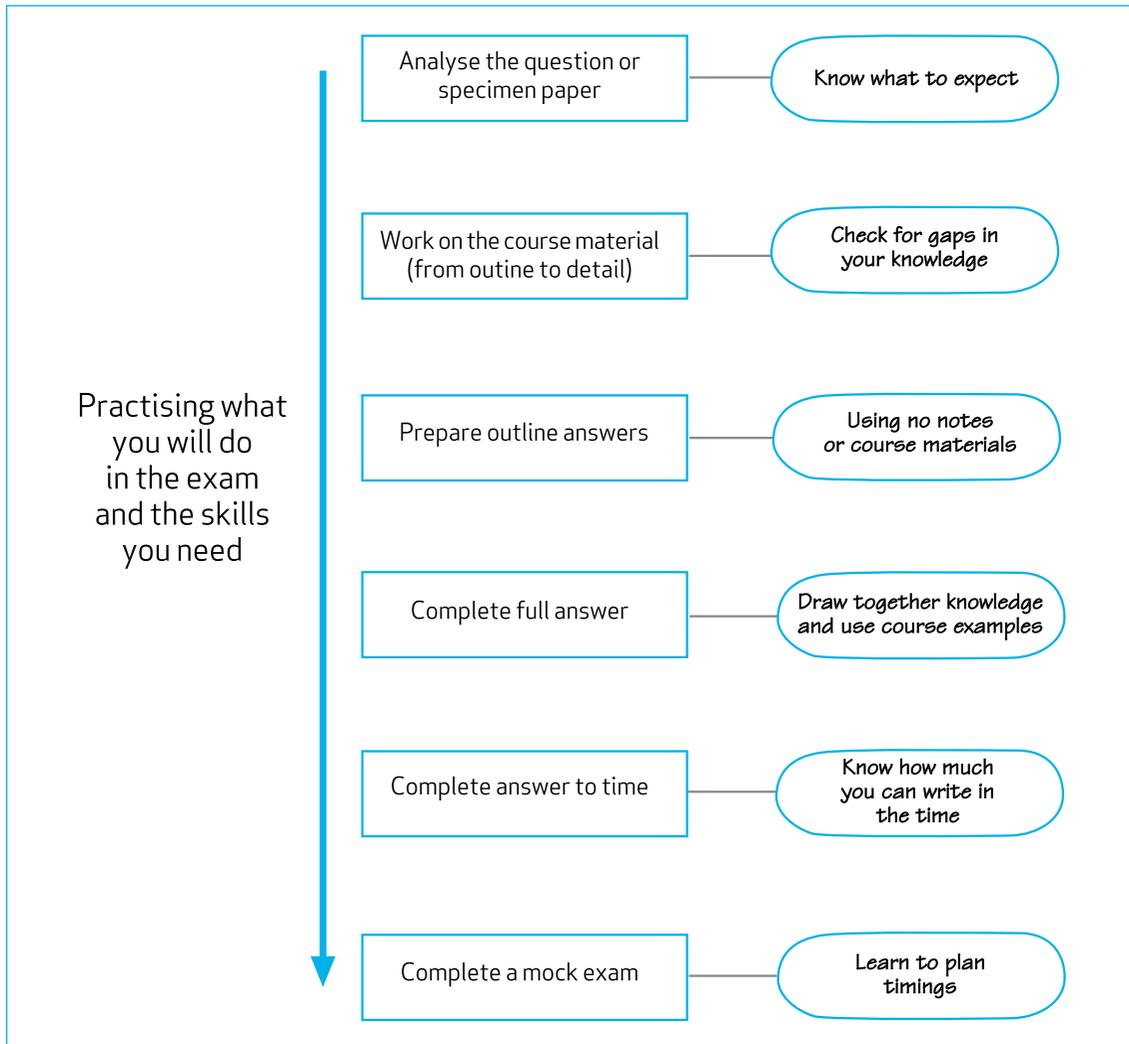


Figure 2 Stages of revision

You should use the time you have for revision to do what you will do in the exam.

- Remember course material
- Plan your answer
- Write or speak your answer
- Check your answer.

Take time to stand back from the course and develop an overview of it, linking topics and themes together. Work out which areas you need to improve so you can answer questions on them.

*Be realistic: in the exam you'll need examples from the course but you won't be expected to remember every detail.*

Be realistic about what you can cover in the exam and the details you can put in an answer, given that you have limited time, and keep this level of detail in mind as you work through your revision.

It's also generally best to do a little revision, often – regularly checking back that you know and understand the material. Do take breaks, and don't expect to study solidly for too long at a time as you won't really be taking in what you're working on. Keep your breaks short, but build in a system of rewards to keep up your motivation.

Revision should always be an active process. Read more about revision techniques in section 3.5.

## 3.1 When to revise

### Finding out about the exam paper

One helpful thing you can do at an early stage of the course is to check details of the exam paper, as this could affect the types of notes you take. There will be information in your course guide or assessment guide and one of your course mailings will include a specimen exam paper, which will be very similar in structure to the actual exam paper. Some specimen papers also include answers to give you an idea of the type of content expected, although you should accept that your answers may be less polished than the example answers you're given.

Looking at the specimen paper (and past exam papers if you have them) can help you decide what is important to revise. However, remember that each year the exam questions and topics change, so you won't be able to predict just what you'll find.

- Look at the instructions. How long is the whole exam? Is there more than one section? Do you have to choose a certain number of questions per section? Do any questions need to be answered before others?
- Look at the weighting for different questions and sections. Are there compulsory questions? Do some questions involve short answers and few marks?
- What kinds of answer are expected: essays, reports, short paragraphs, diagrams, outlines? Will you need to answer particular questions in separate exam booklets?

*Get to know the exam paper so that you can plan what to revise.*

- Once you understand the structure of the exam, plan how you will spend the exam time to answer the required number of questions, allocating time according to the marks each is worth. Allow time to read the paper thoroughly through at the beginning, and to check what you've written at the end.
- Which sections do you think you'd be happiest tackling first?
- How much reading might the exam paper itself take? For example, are there likely to be extensive case studies that you must be ready to read calmly and carefully? Are any questions 'seen' questions – available before the exam?
- What topics or course subjects are examined, and how?
- Look at the way the questions are written: the specimen paper answers will help you see how those questions should be answered, but if you have trouble identifying what's wanted in past papers, discuss this with your tutor or study adviser, or with other students.

## Revising during the course

Start revising as early in the course as you can, because rolling revision, which you do as you study, is a useful way to ensure that you understand the material. It also makes it easier to learn subsequent topics. Towards the end of a course you'll find that reviewing the material begins to bring the course together.

Some students collect material for their assignments while they study, which can be an effective time management strategy. However, waiting for a while and then re-reading your course material to complete your assignment is very effective revision.

## Revising near the exam

You won't have time to revise the whole course between the end of your course and the exam date. If you have revised as you study, and you've done all the assignments, you will be in a good position to review the course now and concentrate your revision on selected areas.

As you review the course you'll be able to identify your weaknesses and the gaps in your knowledge. If it is a central part of the course, don't ignore what you don't understand: ask your tutor or study adviser for help.

You will need to plan ahead in order to find time around work or your domestic life. Perhaps you can have a day or two of leave,

or make arrangements for someone to take on some of your other commitments or deal with housework. Let your family, friends and work colleagues know how they can support you best.

Regular reviews help you to retain information.

Before you take a break from a revision session, review the key points of what you've been studying, then review them again perhaps one hour, one day and two days later. See the difference this will make in Figure 3.

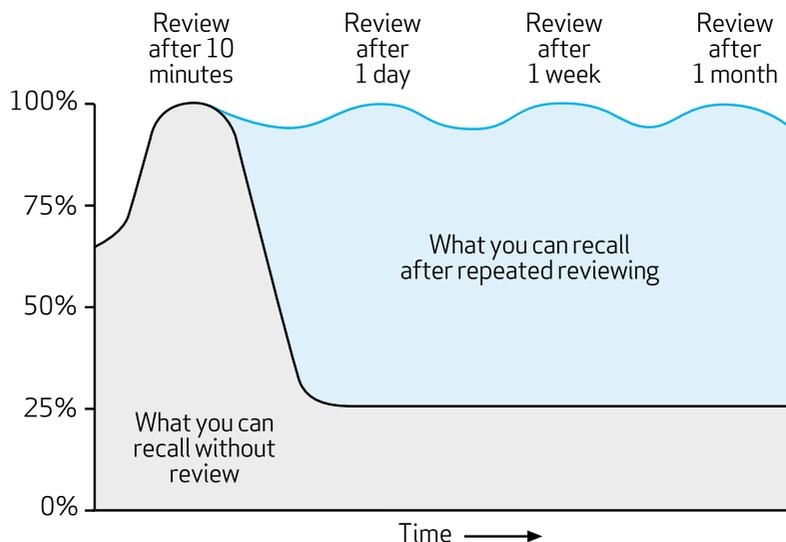


Figure 3 The benefits of regular review

It's a good idea to use time at the end of each session to plan your next one - you'll know what you've covered and what you still need to do. You'll also know what materials you'll need with you so that you can have them ready if you're studying away from home.

## 3.2 What to revise

Here are some materials that you should review when you're preparing for your exam.

- Exam notes and guidance from the course team
- The specimen exam paper supplied by the course team, and past exam papers if available.

These will help you to decide what course materials to go back over – usually the following are helpful.

- Summaries and introductions in the course texts and the course guide
- Course learning objectives, conclusions, glossaries

- DVD, audio and multimedia materials and their notes
- Revision or review units
- Assignment questions, including ones you didn't do, and their accompanying notes
- Your assignments and your tutor or study adviser's comments: you'll find that you recall the material because you spent time working on it
- Tutorial notes, exercises and handouts
- Your own notes you've taken during the course.

Above all be selective and focus on key course resources. You can't re-read everything. Most exams give you some choice of questions to answer or choice in how you tackle them: there will be things you feel confident about and you might be able to leave some topics out. There may even be materials that the course team tells you are not assessed in an exam.

If you are unsure about the areas you need to revise, ask your tutor or study adviser.

“ I decide what topics are essential to revise, then go back through my margin notes and key course texts to create mind maps around those topics. Then I practise exam questions a lot! I even make some up if there aren't many old papers.”

### 3.3 Writing a revision plan

Work out a revision timetable, outlining the areas of the course you will cover and when you will do it. Make more detailed session plans as you get through the material.

What you include in your revision plan will depend on the time you have available and your own style and study habits.

Make a note of:

- the submission date of your final assignment or project
- the date of your exam
- work, family and personal demands on your time
- the number of weeks, days or hours you have available
- the number of blocks, units, books or other materials you need to revise over that period.

Plan what you will revise and when you will fit it in.

A simple grid like the one below might be helpful. Decide how many hours you have for revision and allocate them accordingly. Try to spread the workload and identify what and when you should be revising.

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
work	work	work	work am	work am	housework	revise 2 hrs
work	work	work	revise 1hr	shopping	revise 3 hrs	family
revise 1hr	sport	revise 1hr	choir	evening out	-	family

Avoid being over-ambitious, as not being able to keep up with the plan can be disheartening. Be aware of your own needs and ensure you allow time for rest and relaxation.

☺ I put my plan on the fridge – that way everyone knows what I'll be doing.☺

Allow a day or so immediately before the exam to review everything rather than continuing to try to cover new ground.

### 3.4 Where to revise

You can obviously revise in your usual study place, but don't miss opportunities to revise elsewhere.

*Have some revision materials that you can carry with you and look at when you have some time to spare.*

Think of some times and places where you have a short gap that you could use for revision. Ten minutes of revision each day is much better than none! Use cards, small notebooks, audio or other material that you can take with you for your revision.

Check whether the reference area of your library is a quiet place when you want to do some work under exam conditions.

It's really helpful to put up revision material (such as summary cards, posters or pictures) around your home or at your workplace, so that you can see them often and you are constantly taking in key points and details of your course.

### 3.5 Revision techniques

Here are some different techniques to try in your revision – have a go at some new ones to see which suit you. It's worth trying a variety of techniques, to keep up your interest and let your brain learn in

different ways, but it's probably better to avoid new techniques too close to the exam.

Look through the section *What to revise* in section 3.2 – you'll find some techniques suit certain materials better than others but don't get stuck in a rut.

Your aim is to get to grips with important aspects of your subject. Divide the material into topics, themes or ideas that you can learn separately before linking them together, and look out for particular techniques or processes that you need to know.

☞ I rarely write things by hand, so I always handwrite my revision notes to get my hands used to writing for long periods of time. ☞

## Check what you know

How?

- Answer exam questions – it gives you the chance to become comfortable with the types of question you'll find, the themes and focus of the exam, and how the paper is organised.
- Try to recall, don't just re-read. Have a go at answering a question, then review some relevant course material to fill in any gaps, then try a question again.
- Write notes or summary cards, keeping them brief as reminders of themes, processes or names. Then test yourself on them.
- Test with others in a group – write questions for each other and share them.

## Index cards

*Index cards are a great way to keep short notes.*

Use an index card to note – in a few words – your summary of a topic. It's important to put things into your own words because then you process the information, which improves your understanding. Keep the notes brief so that they act as prompts.

Try to organise your notes in new ways on the cards (see Figure 4) – perhaps providing an overview of a topic on one, and then notes around sub-topics on others. Some people like to use colour as an aid to memory. The idea is to have something that is easy to carry around and useful for revising in odd moments or for testing yourself. Some people prefer to use small notebooks.

You can use index cards for a set of questions, perhaps from past exams or questions you've developed yourself or with other students. Develop some quick questions to help you get to know small bits of material, especially if you will have some short answer questions in the exam – answer them regularly until they are secure in your memory.

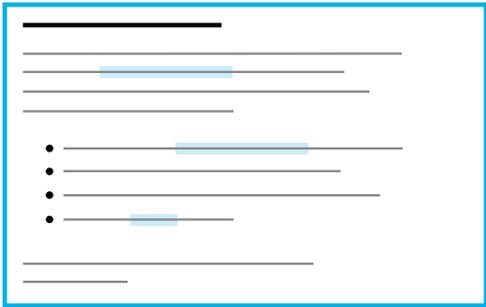
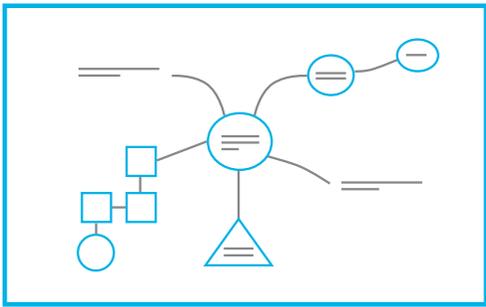
- (a)  linear notes with bullet points and highlighting
- (b)  mind maps with pictures and colour
- (c)  summary tables

Figure 4 Some ways to use index cards

### Key words and phrases

Make the most of key words and phrases in your revision so they can become prompts to your memory in the exam: ensure that you really understand what they mean and can associate some course examples with them. Also use elements of the course, such

as introductions, summaries and key questions. Note if there are alternative ways of looking at a concept that are covered in your course.

## Definitions

Make sure you know the meaning of important words or specialised terminology. Write two or three sentences to define a process, argument or theory, and then add a course example and a diagram if relevant. If your course has a glossary of terms then include that in your revision.

## Mnemonics

Mnemonics can help you remember factual material, as you'll see from these examples. Develop them for your own subject.

- Acronyms for lists, for example, classification in biology (Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species)  
Kids Prefer Cheese Over Fried Green Spinach.
- Spelling acronyms RHYTHM: Rhythm Helps Your Two Hips Move.

## Audio techniques

Try recording audio notes of key points, perhaps short quotes or unit summaries, so you can play them when you have a chance.

## Visual techniques, mind maps, posters

*Visual material can help your recall and also be a quick way to show lots of information.*

Developing visual material can help you remember and can be a good way to gather information without writing lots of words. Practise drawing diagrams if this suits your course, and make sure you provide clear labels as these can earn you marks in the exam.

Use a mind map to get an overview (see Figure 5). Put the block, unit or topic name in the middle of a blank sheet of paper. From memory, add the main themes, concepts, key words and processes, key theories, authors, and arguments, using lines radiating from the centre. Use pictures or symbols to represent ideas. Link and connect these as far as you can, then work with the course material to complete any blanks, using a different colour pen to identify what you omitted. Next day, recall the whole diagram again from your memory, making sure you recall the points you previously missed. Recall the diagram at intervals to bring your knowledge to the surface, consolidate what you know and organise your memory.

You can also use mind maps to generate ideas and make associations, and they can be a powerful memory aid when it comes to the exam.

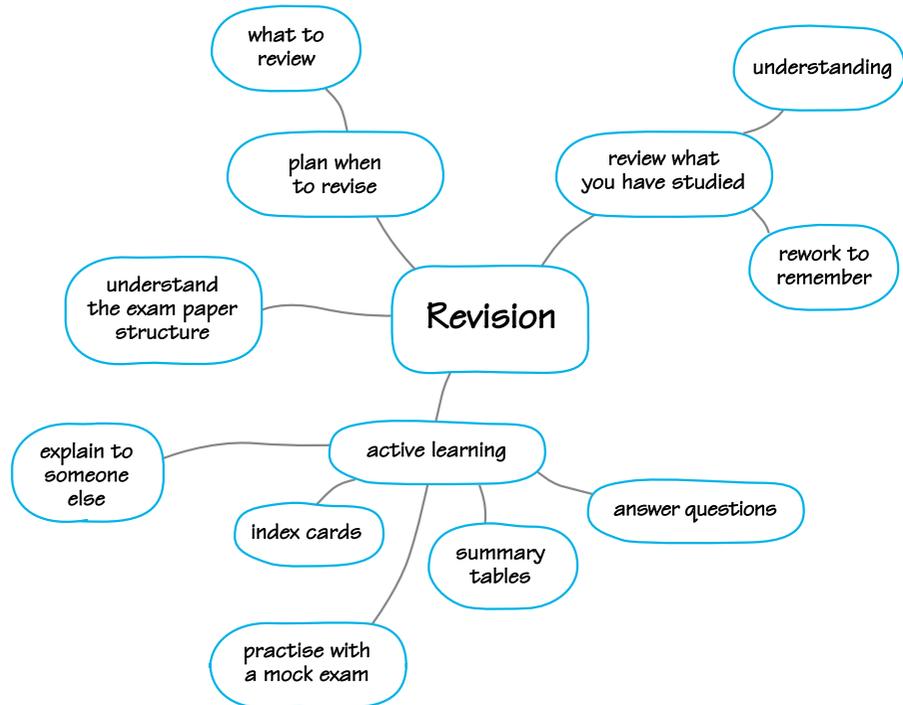


Figure 5 Mind maps - a powerful revision technique

Learning posters can also be used to detail key points on a particular topic. Use flip-chart paper or stick several pieces of A4 together. Use pattern, colour, diagrams and drawings in your posters and display them in your home where you'll gaze at them for a few minutes now and then and absorb the information.

## Summaries

Use tabulated summaries to collect information from within or across course books or units – they're a great way to compare or evaluate competing theories, grammatical rules or examples of themes in different parts of the course. You can use a table like the one shown below. Change the number of columns or rows for your own work, but keep them fairly simple so they'll help you in the exam.

	Block 1	Block 2
Theme 1		
Theme 2		

## Quick reviews

First spend time recalling what you can from a section of the course, perhaps using a mind map to note it down, then:

- flick through the relevant pages, reading the introduction, the learning outcomes, and any additional notes
- on the contents page, look through the main headings
- read the summary of each section and check you understand it
- if you don't understand the summary, read the section through.

Then put key points on a card or tape, or make a list of questions for you to try answering later.

## Teach someone

*To be able to teach someone else about a process or topic you first need to understand it well, so this is an effective way of checking what you know.*

One of the most successful ways to learn something is to teach it. Select a topic that you need to revise and try teaching it to a friend or fellow student, or even to an imaginary person. The thinking you need to do to work out how you would explain a topic to someone else is very effective revision. You will quickly identify where gaps lie in your knowledge and understanding, and find the topics that you need to focus on for your revision.

Even if you can't meet other students, you can still get help from people who don't know anything about the subject, if they're willing.

- Explaining something to them helps you get it clear in your own mind.
- You can tell them 'What I've learned today'.
- They can ask you short questions from exam papers or questions that you've developed.

## Revise with others

It can be helpful to work with other students, either in a group or with just one other, face to face, on the phone or online. Course forums are good places to pick up tips and ideas from other students and tutors, and many courses have tutorials or day schools before the exam where you can make contact.

Working with other students can help you keep the revision process in perspective. You can share marked assignments, revision material and plans. You can learn in different ways than when you are on your own because everyone brings their own ideas and tips.

Use your time with other students to check that you understand aspects of the course materials.

- Other people look at the course differently and focus on other issues and areas, and that can expand your own study.
- Get everyone to prepare for a topic then encourage discussion – it's a great way to make you think.
- You can develop your own questions about the course, share them in the group, and ask each other as practice.
- Swap review notes on the course – but check that they are right and that there are no gaps. The group could collaborate to develop notes on difficult topics.

It's worth setting up a plan in advance for a group revision session so you don't waste time together deciding what to cover. Here is a form you could fill in and circulate.

<b>Study group planner</b>	
Date and time of meeting	
Place of meeting Directions	
Contact number(s)	
Topics to cover	Individual preparation

## Games and quizzes

These work well in group work, or even when you're on your own.

Try 'Just a minute!'. Talk on a topic as best you can for one minute (without repeating or hesitating or getting off the point).

## Write parts of a question

You don't have to give full answers to every question when you're revising. It's also useful to:

- write introductions and conclusions
- do outline planning for the whole answer
- list key points to mention, including those for short answer questions.

*By completing a mock exam you'll have a really good idea of what it will be like on the day and how much material you can expect to include.*

## Mock exam

Develop your skills by using past exam questions and writing out some complete answers within the set time. You'll get a good idea of how much you can expect to write in an exam.

Do this under exam conditions – somewhere quiet, where you'll be undisturbed, away from any course materials or notes, in the time allowed. If you can't do this at home, use the quiet area of a library.

Tackle your mock exam in the same way you plan to tackle the real one, which is to:

- read everything through carefully before you start
- choose, plan and write your answers, re-reading the question from time to time as you go
- check that you've followed the instructions
- check your work before the end.

You may be able to find someone to read your answers through who will check that your writing is legible and your work makes good sense, but don't ask for criticism of the content from anyone who has not taught or studied the course.

A mock exam is one good way to get in some handwriting practice before the day – you'll need to write quickly while keeping your work legible. Don't use small writing, especially as it may be a bit messy: larger writing should be easier for the examiner to read. Do some handwriting regularly as you come up to the exam, to build up the muscles in your hand and wrist.



# 4 How to take written exams

The important thing to remember is that in an exam no-one expects you to provide the same type of answer that you would for an assignment. Instead you have to work quickly to provide the key issues in an answer, usually adding supporting material and examples from the course. You don't have the time to polish an answer, and you are not expected to provide full or detailed references for things like sources of evidence or theories.

## 4.1 What examiners look for

Help yourself get marks. Examiners look out for particular points you have made so they can give you marks, but they'd rather not search through a disorganised or illegible mass of writing to do so. They won't give you extra marks just for writing a lot either, so answer the question and move on. Present your work legibly and in an organised way, with clearly labelled question numbers and diagrams if appropriate.

Examiners find these common faults, but you can avoid making them.

Common faults that lose marks	What you should do
not following the instructions on the paper about how many questions should be answered from each section	read the instructions carefully, and check them again as you complete your questions
not answering the question set	read the question several times to make sure you know what is being asked
writing without reference to the course material	plan your answer to include course themes, topics and examples
not allocating time appropriately between questions	plan how much time you'll spend on questions, depending on how many points they are worth

## 4.2 What to expect in the paper

You'll receive a specimen exam paper, which will be very similar in structure to the actual exam paper. It's important that you get to know the paper so that you can be prepared for what you will find in the exam and how to tackle it. Finding out about the exam paper is discussed in section 3.1.

Remember: it is very important to answer the right number of questions. You will lose marks if you answer too few and waste time if you answer too many.

### Where to get previous exam papers

Unless the question papers are restricted or this is the first year of a course, you can order previous exam papers. Go to the *Skills for OU Study* website <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy> for contact details or contact your local regional centre.

## 4.3 Practical preparations

*Find out what you need to take to the exam, then get yourself organised.*

The revision work that you do, during the course and in the run up to the exam date, is a form of preparation for the exam. You've seen that practising the techniques that you will need on the day is a great way to make sure that you are ready.

This section tells you about the information we send you, and what you are expected to do at different times before the exam.

You will be notified of your exam date and time. If necessary and if you act quickly, you can request to take your examination at another exam centre. Contact your regional centre as soon as possible.

“Once I got to an exam a bit late because I'd misjudged how long it would take me to get there, and that really unsettled me so that I found it hard to concentrate on the questions. Now I make sure I get there in good time, and I sometimes try to get a lift so I don't have to worry about parking.”

We'll send you the Examinations Timetable booklet, Examination Allocation letter and Examination Arrangements booklet: they will tell you where your exam is, what you can and can't take in with you and any other rules that apply to the exam. You'll need to take your Examination Allocation letter with you to the exam, together with identification.

Every year there are students who miss the examination unnecessarily, perhaps turning up on the wrong day, to the wrong place, or because they were not able to park.

- Check the date and time of your examination.
- Check a map so you know exactly where your examination centre is. Make sure you know where you can park if you are driving, and consider whether traffic congestion will be a problem. Perhaps someone can give you a lift? Leave plenty of time to get there whether you are travelling by car or public transport.
- Check what you can take into the exam and make sure you gather everything you need and put them somewhere obvious.
  - Your proof of identity with recent photograph and signature: examples are a passport or driving licence
  - Your Examination Allocation letter.
  - The items listed in Appendix 1 of the Examination Arrangements booklet. Each course has its own regulations about what is allowed – make sure that what you take conforms to the rules.
  - Make sure you have a couple of good pens that are easy to write with. Check beforehand what equipment is necessary for your paper, for example a ruler, pencils or coloured pencils. If you are permitted to use a calculator, make sure that the batteries are fully working.
  - Food and drink (if allowed): small amounts - but avoid cans and fizzy drinks and sweets with wrappers on.

## 4.4 On the day of the exam

Have something to eat, even if you don't want much. Dress in layers so that you can be comfortable to suit the temperature in the room. Bring the things you've collected together for the exam.

*Get to the exam centre with time to spare so that you can stay calm.*

Make sure you get to the exam centre in good time to find the room and your allocated place and get settled. Try to remain calm and focused, and don't exchange worries with other students. Instead, listen to music or imagine your perfect holiday.

There's a plan outside the exam room showing where the desks are for your course, then student names for each course in alphabetical

order. You might see a student from your course, but your tutor won't be there.

You'll find your name on a desk record card on the desk – check that the name and personal identification number on it are correct, sign in the box and leave it with your Examination Allocation letter and your identification that includes your photograph and signature.

The exam invigilators check those papers, give general instructions and ensure that the exam goes smoothly.

You may find it helpful to take some deep, slow breaths as you prepare to concentrate.

## The question paper and answer books

Although you can't turn over the paper until the invigilator tells you to start, do make sure that the exam paper on your desk is the correct paper for your course and that the instructions all make sense to you. If any instructions are unclear, raise your hand to check with the invigilator before the exam time starts. You can also get more answer booklets from the invigilator. Some courses ask you to use more than one answer booklet because parts of the exam are marked separately, so follow the instructions in the question paper.

## Other students

On the day of the exam there are students from other courses in the same room. Some may be taking exams of different lengths, so will leave at a different time. A number of exams allow certain course materials to be used, so there may be students with books on their desk.

### What if something goes wrong?

If you arrive late or are taken ill during the exam, speak to the invigilator, who will tell you what to do. You might also want to contact your regional centre for advice on what options are available to you. Details of how to report special circumstances to the Examination and Assessment Board are given in your Examination Arrangements booklet.

## What to do in the first 10 minutes

Spend at least 5–10 minutes reading through the paper, taking time to identify the key terms and then, if you have a choice, decide which questions can best show your knowledge. Mark the ones you know you won't attempt, and then go through the questions again and decide which to answer.

*Choose which questions you will answer and in what order.*

Choosing your questions at the beginning of the exam is often helpful as it allows them to settle in the back of your thoughts so when you start them you may find you move on much more quickly. A lot of students also find it helpful to write a few notes on the questions they are going to attempt before getting down to the first answer, so they have something to come back to.

### Why read the question several times?

At the start of the exam, read all the questions a couple of times, making sure that you understand them so you choose the ones that you can answer best.

Before you start your planning, read the question again and you'll start off on the right track.

As you answer the question, refer back to the wording: notice the key words and phrases in the question and make sure you use them in your answer.

It can be tempting to put down information that you know very well and have put a lot of effort into learning. However, you won't get any marks for it if it isn't relevant.

Once you have decided on your questions, check again against the instructions. Are any questions compulsory? Should you write some in separate booklets, or just start a new page?

Decide which questions you will answer first. You don't have to do them in order as long as you do the right number. You may want to do an easy question first to get warmed up.

Don't worry about what other people do. Some of them will start writing immediately, but don't concern yourself with them. Take the approach that works best for you.

## Answering the questions



Make sure you have identified and marked the key words and process words that are at the heart of the question, so you are sure what it means and what you have been asked to do. Find out more about process words at the *Skills for OU Study* website at <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy>.

Plan your answer to the question, writing down some key points, examples and references. Put in everything that seems relevant to start with. Number parts of your plan to provide an organised answer, omitting anything that doesn't belong, then start writing. Some students prefer not to write detailed plans, but you should make sure you have between six and twelve key words or phrases.

‘ I use mind maps for revision and for summarising units or topics, but they're also great for planning an answer in the exam. In fact I choose all the questions I'm going to answer, then do the bulk of the planning for them all at once. I find that while I'm writing the first answer, my brain starts coming up with other ideas and details for the other questions I've chosen. In effect I'm giving myself more time to remember. It does mean that I don't start writing my answers until quite a while has passed, but I've got used to that and it works for me. ’

Plan how you will answer the questions, making sure you include course material.

- Tick off your plan notes as you use the material.
- If you find you've missed out something, put it in later and make sure the examiner knows where to look: for example, 'see further section at A'.
- Provide supporting material from the course by adding examples, names and evidence.
- Show your calculations for number work – some marks will be awarded for the process, even if the answer is wrong. Make sure you use the skills you've learnt in the course, for example working to the appropriate number of significant figures in calculations, and including units.
- Is there a place for a diagram such as a sketch, graph or chart? If so, use one and label it clearly.
- In short answer or multiple choice questions, if you can't answer a question right away, leave it and come back to it if you can. If you still don't know the answer, make a guess rather than leave it out.

- If you have a mental block about an aspect of an essay question, develop your plan and the name or detail may come back to you.
  - *Problem question? I leave a bit of space after each question, in case I want to add something relevant during my check-through before the exam finishes.*

## Keeping to time

*You can come back to an unfinished question later if you have time.*

If you know you won't have time to finish an essay question, put in the introduction and conclusion and as many notes as you can to show what you would have covered. You'll get some marks for your efforts.

Answer the required number of questions. It's the best way to get the most marks for your effort. Here are two explanations.

### Explanation 1

When you begin an answer, it's relatively easy to get the bulk of the marks. It's much harder to get all the marks, because you'll need to get details absolutely right.

Don't get bogged down trying to polish an answer for those last few points. Instead, make the most of your time by starting the next answer and getting the bulk of marks for that - two part-answers will be worth more than one complete answer.

### Explanation 2

Imagine that you have five equally weighted questions to answer. Each question is worth a maximum of 20%.

If you spend too much time and only answer three, you can't get more than 60% even with perfect answers.

If you attempt five questions you'll get marks for each (even if you don't write as much), and you're likely to reach 60% or more.

$$3 \times 20\% = 60\%$$

$$5 \times 13\% = 65\%$$

Work this out for your own paper – your questions will be worth different amounts, but you'll soon see that attempting all the questions is really important if you want to get sufficient marks to pass.

## Checking your answers

Allow a few minutes to check through and correct small mistakes. This work at the end of an exam can gain you several points, so make time for it.

*You may get some extra points for the few minutes of work you do tidying up and correcting any errors.*

Add anything you've remembered, such as names, dates or details.

Tidy up your work: is it legible? Have you labelled diagrams correctly and pointed the examiner to any extra material that is separate from the rest of a question?

## At the end of the exam

You'll give in all the paper you've used. Anything that doesn't have a line through it will be marked.

Write the numbers of the questions you have attempted in the grid on the first answer book, and write the number of answer books in the box on the desk record card. Attach the desk record and question paper to your answer books, and make sure they are collected by the invigilator so they can be marked.

An identification number, rather than your name, is used to identify your exam work so script markers do not know whose work they have.

It is tempting to spend time with fellow students after the exam, but avoid having post mortems as these can lead to needless worry. It's probably better to go home and have a well-deserved rest and perhaps a treat. Congratulate yourself on getting to the end of the course.

If you are going on to further study, it is probably a good idea to make some notes on how the exam went and how you may change your approach to revision next time.

You'll get your course results about nine weeks after the examination. The result is displayed on your online student record along with some information about your performance. If you move house during this time do remember to change your address, either by contacting your regional centre or by changing it yourself online.

Once your results are available you may have questions about them, particularly if your marks are lower than you had hoped. You can link to information on how results are determined through the *Skills for OU Study* website on <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy>.



# 5 How to prepare for oral exams

Most OU exams are written exams, as described in this booklet. However, foreign language courses have oral exams at Level 2 and Level 3. Check your course materials for the specific instructions you need.

## Tips for preparing at home

*It's really important to practise your skills for an oral exam.*

- Read through your question and specimen paper carefully and prepare all given materials thoroughly.
- Check all the instructions, including timings and allocation of marks.
- Use the language to talk to yourself as often as you can about the topics or topic required.
- For Level 2 or Level 3 exams, study each document carefully and plan a short presentation for each document provided, within the time limit of two to three minutes. Use bullet points for content and structure. If you don't rely too heavily on a written text your presentation will sound more natural and spontaneous.
- Learn ready-made expressions that will help you to interact spontaneously and contribute in a focused way, such as phrases that help you to agree or disagree, intervene politely or invite others to speak. Your course should provide plenty of suitable examples throughout the year. You could also prepare some 'holding expressions', such as 'in my opinion' or 'let me see', to allow you to take the time to plan a little more in your head.
- Make and listen to a recording of yourself practising with others or speaking aloud.
- Have at least one or two practice runs of the presentation and discussion with fellow students or others, in the target language. It will give you a feel for the interaction – how to question something another student has said, or how to 'take' or 'give' the floor – and help you to practise useful phrases.
- Ask your tutor to do at least one practice session during a tutorial close to the date.

## Strategies for the day of the exam

- Read the question paper and pay particular attention to the document you have been given.
- It doesn't matter if you don't identify with the role or material you are given on the day. You will be assessed on your ability to present and argue a case.
- Use your preparation time to write down your prepared notes, especially your useful structures. You will only have the time to use a dictionary if absolutely necessary and only during the preparation phase.
- Keep an eye on the clock so that you don't run out of time for preparation.
- You won't be allowed to run over and you'll only achieve your potential by speaking for the whole of the time allowed and covering the necessary content.
- Listen carefully to others speaking. You won't have the other roles in front of you during the actual oral.
- If you are taking part in a group oral, take notes during other students' turns. For example, you could sketch a table to show where each student sits, and note alongside the facts or points of arguments each makes.
- Make your points clearly in the discussion, remembering to include everyone in the group.
- You don't need to reach a consensus in the discussion. Marks are awarded for content, quality of language, pronunciation, intonation and quality of discussion.

*You'll be awarded marks for content, quality of language, pronunciation, intonation and quality of discussion.*

# 6 In conclusion

To pass an exam you need to have a good grasp of the course material and turn up for the exam itself.

You can do a lot to improve your exam results, from taking care of your health and learning how to deal with stress, through planning how your revision will cover what you need to review, to improving the techniques you use in your revision and in writing the exam.



We hope that you will find help in this booklet and on the accompanying *Skills for OU Study* website <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy>.

We wish you every success in your exam!





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