



Centre of Further Education

## TIPS FOR TOP GRADES

### **Practice is key**

Getting your hands on past paper questions and answers is very important. You're able to make connections between different areas of the syllabus. This is very important when it comes to A/A\* questions.

### **Get the examiners' reports**

I studied three essay subjects. All required some form of factual memory, but I essentially focused on revising exam technique rather than the actual knowledge. If you are studying sciences, maths, anything that you can't make up during the exam, then the following may well be useless to you.

But my big, big number-one gold-star neon-sign advice that I would give to everyone (and I genuinely believe is the *only* reason I got my A\* in English Language) is *read the examiners' reports*. **Then read them again.**

### **Try to relate your subjects to everyday life.**

This may sound crazy, but it works. My best friend and I were both studying *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in English lit and had to learn as many quotes as possible from the book for the exam. To revise-without-revising, we would teach each other relating our conversation to the book.

### **Start well in advance**

It might sound clichéd (I'm sure all teachers say it) but there's nothing worse than the feeling of panic and stress created by trying to cram revision. If you start weeks in advance you'll get a good pace and it means you can go to teachers for help on topics you don't quite get. I started very gentle revision (making notes) around late March/early April time for my June exams.

### **Practice papers**

It's a good idea to do practice questions on topics as you go along with your revision, rather than do a bunch of them at the end of revision. You might have interpreted something wrong when revising, or not quite nailed exam technique, so save half of the papers for "going along" with revision and half to test your knowledge by the end, so you know where to go back and what to revise more.

### **Break down your subject into ordered sections.**

Breaking down the exam into lots of little sections makes revision less daunting, and you'll know exactly where you stand in terms of how much you've done. For my exams I broke down a module into 20 sections or topics and so it didn't seem like much of a chore to start the next one, as they didn't last long. Then, before I knew it, I'd whizzed through the module without it being much work.

### **Track your revision**

I'm not one for making and sticking to timetables, but I found this actually really worked. I drew up a table in Excel and had columns for Subject, Date, Topic, Number of Hours Studied, Cumulative Number of Hours Studied for that Subject, Next Topic to Revise. I even colour-coded each subject so I could see how much I had done for each, at a glance. The benefit of doing this was that I could directly compare the number of hours I'd spent revising one subject to another, and which one I should spend longer on. Of course, some subjects may require more hours of revision than others, but I found this to be a good guide.

### **Revise continually**

Don't leave it a few weeks before an exam. Revise the stuff you're learning as you learn it. Go home from school and make flash cards and posters and so on. That way, when you come to the exam period, you already know most of it and it's just brushing up on final details. Don't frantically cram for an exam. There's no point - it won't go in.

### **Flash cards are life savers.**

Get a question wrong? Flash card it, and then test yourself later on. This is useful for when you're constantly forgetting definitions and stuff like that. This was my preferred choice at A-level.

### **Key events**

When I was revising for my A-levels, I went to the cinema, played sport and did lots of other things to benefit revision. Why? Because when something funny or enjoyable happens, you tend to remember the stuff that happens around it. I remember how an MRI machine works because my cat fell down the stairs while I was learning it! Use colours, use music - experiment with it.

### **Learn in layers**

Learn the principle behind something, and not just the facts. Get a general understanding of the topic first without trying to get all the details first time round. Plan to cover all the material three times, with each time adding slightly more detail, and you'll pick it up in no time.

### **Use past papers as much as possible**

It's no good memorising a ton of facts if you're not going to be able to answer the question correctly. Exam boards use similar styles of questions every year and therefore past papers will get you best prepared.

### **Repetition**

If you spend an evening learning something don't leave it and come back to it in several weeks. Look over it again briefly the next day, then again in three days, then again in a week, two weeks and so on.

### **Use colour**

Lots of colour helps liven up notes and makes them look more interesting.

### **Practise!**

With essay subjects, the key to revision is practise, practise and practise. Continually go over past exam questions.

### **Get some sleep!**

Don't fret over the exam, make sure you get a normal amount of sleep - and eat healthily, too.

### **Keep at it**

I did science A-levels and for me the key thing was just to do as many past papers as I could get my hands on. If I'd done them all and still couldn't answer every question, then I'd go and do them all again.

### **Revise everywhere**

I'm quite lazy and don't like writing revision notes. But for formulae I had to learn I'd write them on bits of paper and stick them on the bathroom mirror, or indeed any bit of wall that I'd be likely to be standing in front of.

### **Motivate yourself**

I stuck a picture of Trinity Hall (from where I'd got an offer) in front of my desk to motivate me to actually do some work.

### **Stay focused**

If I got fed up with one subject, I'd procrastinate by studying something else, instead of doing nothing at all.

### **Know your marker**

The strategy that helped me most was to completely familiarise myself with mark schemes. That way, you become familiar with terms that examiners look for and can instantly remember key words when you come across a related question.

### **Create a timetable**

The best thing my mum ever did for me was make me set up a revision timetable. I wrote out every topic within every subject I needed to revise then guesstimated how many sessions of 50 minutes I would need to revise that topic. I then put this into a timetable so when it came down to revising I would not spend ages just flicking through any book finding something to revise but would know exactly what area I was to cover in that time period.

### **Eat!**

Get someone to bring you snacks so you don't have the distraction of continually taking breaks in search of food.

### **Take breaks**

Don't confine yourself to study all day. Take a break of around 10-15 minutes every hour, where you go chat to family or watch TV so when you sit down for the next session your head is clear of what you previously studied and you are ready to move on.

### **Make it second nature**

For maths: practise, practise, practise and practise until you can factorise, integrate, differentiate in your sleep, until you become unconsciously competent... Do not be afraid to try out STEP, AEA or British Olympiad level questions (of course, not IMO level as that's way beyond most A-level student's level. Good starters are the Euclid Maths Competition and Australian Maths Competition). These competition questions may seem beyond the scope of A-levels but they train you to think out of the box.

### **Learn model answers**

For Biology, practise past years after you have a good grasp of the course content. Learn from the model answers to see what examiners want. If you're lucky, you might get a repeat.

### **Master answering techniques**

For Physics, practise past years as well. Learn the answering techniques from past years. The calculations required for physics are simple, just be careful. I cannot over-emphasise the importance of past years, as styles might be similar. Case in point: there was a question in Edexcel June 2012 Unit 4 that was VERY similar to one in Jan 2012 Unit 4. If I had not gone through the January paper beforehand, I would have stumbled on that question in June.

### **Practice makes perfect**

At A-level you gain the A\* grade not necessarily on your knowledge but on your ability to answer the exam questions perfectly. Do all the past papers and exam style questions from previous years that you can find: twice or thrice each.

### **Check the syllabus**

If you're unsure what will come up in an exam, get a copy of the syllabus off the internet and literally tick off every single thing on the list.

### **Distillation**

I got A\*s in two essay subjects, so for me it was lots of writing. I wrote very detailed plans, and every time I rewrote them I reduced the amount of detail. Eventually it was just basic prompts. I'd then try to write the essays from memory and check it against the essay plans.

### **Mind maps**

I personally found it helpful to create a large number of massive posters/family trees of historical figures, colourful mind maps, and so on, and plaster them all over my family dining room (where I study) so I was surrounded by my work.

### **Bite-sized chunks**

I also found it useful to stick small pieces of information (law cases) all over my room so that, as I was going about daily tasks, I would read small snippets of information.

### **Change your focus**

I tried to break up my work by listening to podcasts from Radio 4 and elsewhere. I personally found the 'In Our Time' program useful for my classics paper on Augustus.

### **Revise smart**

There's no point reading a textbook for eight hours a day if you don't take anything in. Use revision guides, close the book and recall the information, write down notes, use memory techniques and - most importantly - do past papers.

### **Learn by topic**

I don't recommend timing yourself, you'll typically not concentrate as much. You'll be under a false impression at the end of the allocated time that you actually did something. Instead I recommend setting yourself a specific topic or subject to learn, and to finish once you've done it.

Timetables work for some people, but I personally hate them.

### **Take your time**

Set yourself plenty of time to revise. Stress causes some people to work harder (I tend to) but for others it causes them to work less, get stressed out and distract themselves through seeing friends, watching TV or writing pointless revision timetables.

### **Do cram, it works**

This doesn't mean you shouldn't revise properly, but when it gets near the exam, cram as much as you can, write down the information without looking at a book. It has been proven to work for passing exams.

### **When you revise make sure you're actually revising**

There's no point staring at a book doing nothing; if you find you've stopped concentrating, get up, have a drink and a bite to eat, do some exercise (I had a skipping rope) and then get back to revision.

### **Wake up early and get your revision done for the day**

This way you'll still have lots of the day to look forward to! You are also able to learn and concentrate for longer periods in the morning, so make sure you use it!

### **Find a quiet place to study**

It could be your room, your garden, the library, wherever. Make sure you have a peaceful setting (I like to revise in my garden).

### **Don't revise with music**

Classical music is fine, but if you listen to music you're familiar with you might as well not revise. It may help you stay concentrated, but you will not learn as much. It's better to ball yourself through revision than spend double the time doing the same thing while listening to music.

### **Get a good night's sleep!**

You will not be able to revise as effectively without this.

### **Predict the questions!**

Don't limit yourself to revising for those questions, but it is likely at least one of them will come up. For one of my exams ALL of my predictions came up.

### **Become a memory champ**

Use the method of loci! Especially in exams where you're meant to remember many names/research. In a Psychology/Law exam I can remember hundreds of names with some effort the week beforehand. It takes time to get used to the technique but it's well worth it in the end.

This is the technique memory champions use in competitions.

### **Take it in**

Read a paragraph and write it out from memory after. I NEVER moved on until I memorised everything from that paragraph.

### **Relax**

A chilled-out revision atmosphere helped me. I started revising a month before the exam, doing a small amount each day. During the last week, I simply did a 30-minute session then listened to some music or watched TV for about 15 minutes. Then I went back to revision.

### **Find what helps you**

I wrote up all my notes on the computer as I can't revise from my own handwriting. It doesn't seem real and I can't remember the information.



### **Use graphs**

Sometimes diagrams help you remember more as you can visualize it in the exam.

### **Don't panic!**

I just said to myself if i don't get all As and don't get into Birmingham, I will simply go to my second choice and still enjoy myself because I will still be going to study the subject I want. Don't let any university status put you down - everywhere's good. You just need to put in the effort to succeed.

### **Picture your goal**

Think of the freedom that one has if you work hard and get the grades to go to your firm university.

### **Remain motivated**

Think of short term losses in terms of getting up and working for eight hours a day, then the long term gains associated with getting A\*s. Employers will probably take notice of them at some point, especially for meritocracies such as law.

### **Read and re-read your notes to remember everything**

Even if you think you know it, re-read it again.

### **Practise specifics**

For Spanish I did LOTS and LOTS of grammar practice online and in grammar books I'd bought. I learned vocab and I also made notes of what I would say if certain questions came up in the speaking exam to do with my culture topics and practised them.

### **Reread**

For English I wrote down quotes on note cards and tried to learn as many as possible: there are some that can be applied for many different themes. I read through lots of my previous essays and other essays. I read up on general themes and practised essays. I also reread all my texts which I think was very useful.

### **Take note(s)**

For Geography I just made notes and learnt them as much as possible. I don't think there's much of a system with Geography revision. It's pretty much take notes and learn them. I found a lot of the stuff I learned in Geography interesting though so I could remember a lot of the things I'd written in pieces of homework almost a year before.

### **Take an interest**

My best advice to anyone is to take subjects you are genuinely interested in. What helped me get A\*s in Maths, Physics and Biology was the fact that the topics we discussed were genuinely fascinating. That made me pay attention in class and remember the material.

### **Understand**

The key to learning is understanding, not cramming. I didn't do loads of intense revision, but I would often find myself making links in my head to help me solve problems in the future.