Preparing for exams

Introduction

We hope you find this booklet helpful as you begin your preparations for the mock and summer examinations. We want all of our students to leave with the best possible results. Results that will not only enable you to take the next step in their chosen career pathway but that you will be proud to write whenever and wherever required for the rest of their lives.

All the strategies and advice in this booklet are based on current educational research and are proven to have the biggest impact when preparing for exams. Central to the success of all of these strategies is attendance. Attendance between now and the final exams is crucial to ensure that not only do you have as much teaching contact with your teachers as possible, but also to ensure you are privy to essential exam practice. There is a strong link correlation between attendance and success in final exams. It is clear that low attendance has a significant impact on your final grades as missed lessons creates knowledge gaps. These gaps in knowledge puts you under even more pressure to catch up. Attendance is key to your success!

If at any point between now and the examination period, you are concerned or worried then please talk to us.

How to get good results

Remember:

- You can't revise something you haven't learnt yet!
- Revision is recalling information you have learnt previously. The idea is that you know the information that will be tested and can remember it for the exam. Knowing depends on understanding.
- Every lesson counts and your attendance is vital. Make all lessons work for you – it is not whether you like the teacher or not, whether you find it difficult, whether you find it boring – it is what you are getting out of it that matters. This is YOUR result.
- Your attitude is all important – success is 80% attitude and 20% skill.
- Regardless of what's happened in the past you can always change your future.
- Start your revision early
- Keep to your revision timetable
- You only fail if you give up.

Revision techniques

All of these strategies have been proven by research to have an impact on your learning and revision. How many of them do you use?

- **Retrieval practice** (the testing effect) requires you to answer a question. It is proven to be the most effective revision strategy. Examples of strategies used in retrieval practice are:
  - Quizlet – use the flashcard and testing applications to practise recalling the information from topics.
  - Using your flashcards to quiz – try organising them into three piles. One pile for cards where you can't remember the information, one pile for where you remember some of the information, and the other pile where you remember all of the information. Use the first pile of flashcards the most.
  - Use your mind-maps, revision clocks, knowledge organiser gap fills, splurges or Cornell notes to quiz – read, cover, write. You are aiming to recall all of the information on the revision resource and should be able to reproduce it.
  - Answering short retrieval questions or multiple choice quizzes and set yourself a time limit so you get used to working under pressure and working to a set time limit.
  - Work in pairs to quiz each other.

- Trying to **master** a full understanding of tasks and material by:
    - Explaining each step in a process or commentating on what you are including in an answer.
    - Elaborating on your work by explaining why you are doing each step in a process or why you are including certain information in an answer.
- **Past papers** – use past papers towards the end of the revision process to improve your recall from a variety of questions. Use the mark schemes to self-assess and make you aware of what information needs to be included in your answers. Remember to **re-do** any questions that you got incorrect until you are getting them right.
- **Spacing** is another good revision technique that you must employ. This involves learning a little information regularly, rather than trying to learn a lot in a single day. Recent research has found that the use of spacing resulted in a 10% to 30% difference in final test results compared to students who did lots of cramming. Spacing out your revision gives you enough time to forget previously learnt information, meaning that when this information is re-visited and re-learnt it is more likely to be transferred to their long-term memory.
- **Interleaving** involves mixing up the topics you study within a given subject. Recent research has shown how effective this technique is: those students who used interleaving performed more than three times better if the test was more than a day later. Interleaving helps you make links between different topics as well as discriminate between different types of problems, allowing them to identify the most ideal thought process for each.

Get better grades

Eat breakfast – Often described as the most important meal of the day, eating breakfast has been shown to improve attention and memory

Believe You Can Learn The Material – Having a positive minds-set and resilience have been proven to impact on your achievement. The more effort you put into your revision the better the final grades.

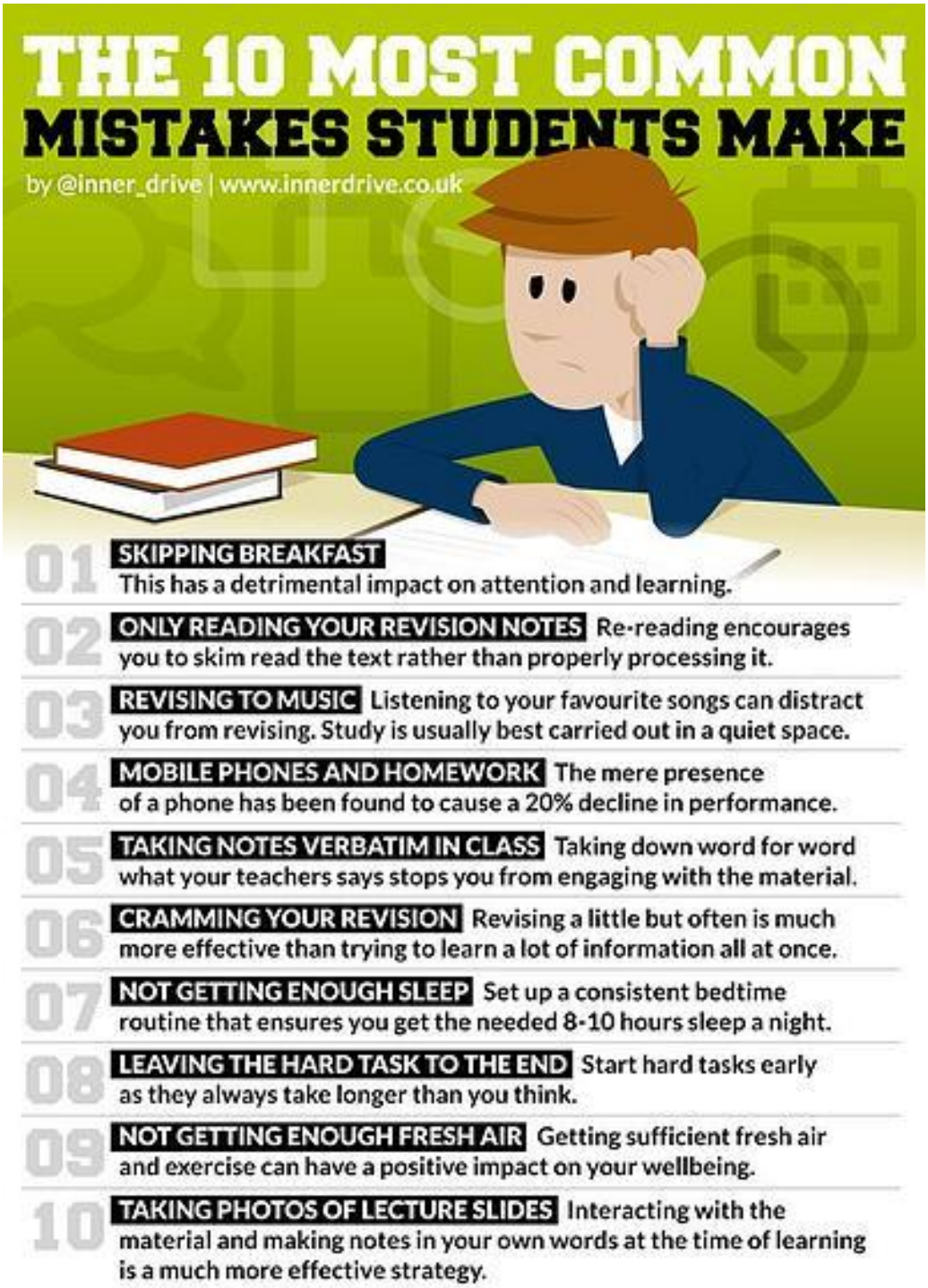
Have a Sense of Purpose – Keep reminding yourself that you are doing this to achieve your future goals. Having a good set of GCSE results helps you get into sixth form, college, university and your chosen career.

Put Your Phone Away - Being on your phone divides your focus, making concentration and learning more difficult. In a study that wins an award for 'stating-the-obvious', researchers found that students who spend more time on their phones checking emails, Facebook and texting, get lower grades

Write About Your Nerves – When done in a group with a teacher this can be a cathartic activity, where you realise that your worries are illogical. It can help address you fears and help you prioritise your revision.

Use Out of School Time Productively - recent study by researchers from Cambridge University found what many teachers/parents have been saying for years. Students who spend more time playing video games and less time doing their homework/reading do worse in their exams. The report states that those who spent an extra two hours in front of a screen scored 18 fewer points in their GCSEs, whereas pupils who spent an extra hour doing their homework or reading each day got on average 23.1 more GCSE points.

Get a Good Night's Sleep - Sleepy students tend do worse at school because not getting enough sleep can affect your memory, concentration, mood, creativity, health and concentration. This has been found to have a negative effect on grades in both maths and languages.



1. **Only re-reading their notes for revision**

Despite being proven to be one of the most ineffective revision techniques, the popularity of re-reading remains worryingly high because it's easy and you feel purposeful. Remember if you choose to revise in this way you are choosing an ineffective method.

2. **Skipping breakfast**

Not eating breakfast has been demonstrated to have a detrimental impact on attention and memory. In one particular study, students who skipped breakfast or only had an energy drink performed significantly worse in attention and memory tasks when compared to those who ate breakfast.

3. **Revising to Music**

Recent research found that students who revised in a quiet environment performed over 50% better in an exam than those who revised listening to music with lyrics.

4. **Trying to complete homework in sight of their phone**
Multi-tasking is impossible and causes students to make errors, as well as reducing their productivity: it simply wastes their time and energy switching from one task to another.

5. **Taking notes in class verbatim**
When you select the notes to write down you spend more time processing the information and embedding it in your brain.

6. **Cramming their revision**
This is an ineffective method: when it comes to revision, a little but often is much better than a lot all at once for long term memory (**spacing**). Recent research proved that those who spaced out their revision scored on average 74%. In comparison, those who crammed only scored an average of 49% if the test was at least a week away**.**

7. **Not getting enough sleep**
Research has shown that sleep plays a key role in enhancing memory, as the brain uses sleep to form new connections and prioritise the most important information. Setting up a consistent bedtime routine is therefore of paramount importance to students, and it has even been shown that focusing on getting at least 8 hours of sleep a night during exams leads to better grades than revising late into the night.

8. **Leaving the hard task until the end**
The harder the task, the more energy and focus we need to complete it. Therefore, it makes sense for most students to work on their hardest tasks around 10am when their daily biological clocks make them most alert. Attempting to do these tasks later makes them more difficult and increases the likelihood that they will be left until the next day – by the time they get to these tasks, students are usually too tired to complete them well.

9. **Not getting enough fresh air**
In a world dominated by technology, many students are locking themselves indoors and spending hours on their phone or playing video games. However, getting enough fresh air is very important because of the profound impact it can have on well-being. A recent study found that going for a short walk, even for just 12 minutes, can improve happiness, attentiveness and confidence.

Get ready for that exam

Before the Exam:

- Know your timetable – highlight yours in colour and add them first to your revision planner.
- Know where and when you need to be and give yourself plenty of time to get there.
- Allow time for your brain to get into action – have a shower, eat breakfast, go to the pre-exam revision session.
- Check the structure of the exam – are you going to answer the correct questions?
- Make sure you have everything you need the night before
- Have a good night's sleep – you are able to concentrate far better when you are well rested.
- Take water into the exam – your ability to remember and your concentration improves by 70% if you are hydrated
- Don't worry if you think you've forgotten everything! If you've revised it will all be there and will come back.

Beating exam stress

Self-talk: Recent research demonstrated a link between high levels of cognitive distortion and high test anxiety, which together led to lower exam results. Cognitive distortions include catastrophising (belief in the worst possible outcome e.g. “I will fail all my exams”), personalising (excessive attribution of failure to self, for instance “I will not pass this exam because I am a failure”) and concentrating too much on negative elements (for example, “I will fail my exam because I could not answer some questions”).

Therefore, to overcome test anxiety, these cognitive distortions need to be overridden with positive and helpful self-talk where students focus on previous exam successes.

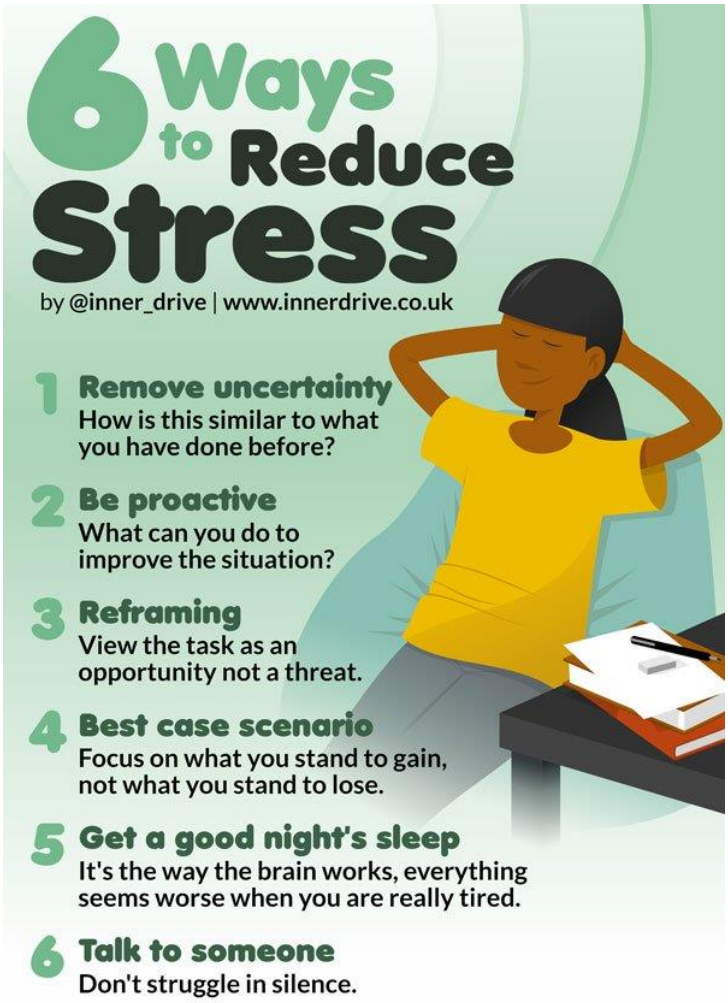
Reframing: Exam anxiety boosts performance. It triggers the release of hormones that boost energy supplies and enhances the brain’s effectivity. Researchers have found that students who accept exam anxiety showed lower levels of test anxiety and performed better in their exam. More importantly, the positive effects of the reframing email were long lasting, as test anxiety was lower and exam performance higher in subsequent exams taken later that year.

Prepare well: In one particularly study, researchers found that when students felt underprepared they experienced higher levels of test anxiety and lower levels of performance. Good preparation involves engaging with revision, eating well and getting a good night's sleep. It also includes avoiding interacting with others who are also anxious, and instead engage in conversation with calmer students.

Take Deep Breaths: Research has shown that by slowing your breathing, you can reduce your heart rate, moving the body closer to a state of physiological rest, allowing you to regain more control over your emotions.

Holiday expectations

Once the exams are over you will have a VERY long summer holiday. If you are going to achieve the best exam result possible, you will need to work during the Christmas, February and Easter holidays. Before each holiday, teachers will set you at least 10 hours of homework per subject per holiday week. All homework tasks will be planned with exam success in mind. Completing all your homework to a good standard will go a long way towards preparing you for your exams. During the run up to the exams, it is important you prioritise your revision over part-time jobs, hobbies, time on the X-box or going out.

Useful links:

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