

# DocsPlus

## Top tips for parents: Helping children prepare for exams

Taking exams can be very stressful for students – and for their parents! Dr Amanda Hipkiss is an expert in how students can prepare for examinations. She was a SENCO and teacher in a mainstream secondary school for many years, where she organised student skills support for students taking examinations as well as organising access arrangements for students with SEND.

These are Amanda's top tips for parents of students who are preparing for upcoming examinations.



# Does your child need help with revision?



Learning how to revise can be a challenge for students as they balance their workload for multiple subjects. You can help with organisation of study time, providing materials and being available to help. Remember, one size doesn't fit all! If your child is already well organised, let them get on with it, even if they don't work the way you would.

The key is to build up their examination stamina. You can't do a marathon without training, and you can't do six weeks of exams without building up to it.

Remind your child that revision is exercise for the brain. They need to keep training!

A revising student needs food, sleep, exercise and something to look forward to, so offer rewards for working hard and doing their best.

# Getting started with revision

## How should my child revise when s/he is attending school full time?

Teachers will do revision with students. Encourage your child to come home and look again at what was revised in class. It helps to fix it in the memory.

## How should my child revise in school holidays and if his/her school organises study leave?

Your child needs to build up their working stamina so that they can show what they have learned in each subject over a six-week period of time, and they need to build their concentration stamina so that they can focus for the whole exam. The

longest written exams are two hours, so they need to be able to work in concentrated bursts for the time it takes to answer each question with short 'take a breath' breaks before starting the next question.

First, agree what time your child will have away from revision and exams. This seems like it's the wrong way round but if they want to do sports training, a part time job, go to a party or attend a gig or show, they need to build that into their week and use the rest of the time for quality revision. They also need one full day off a week – but only one day! Call time off a 'reward session'.

See if the school offers revision sessions in the subjects s/he takes and encourage him/her to attend.

## How long should my child spend revising?

Get your child to divide their day into three sessions. One is a 'reward session' where they can do what they want to. In school holidays and during study leave, they need to revise for two sessions of three hours each work day. Each session should be divided into blocks of work, with a short break at the end of each block. Use an alarm at the end of each block of work.

Agree what subject(s) they will revise in each session. Make sure this fits with their exam timetable. For example, if English Literature is before half term and History is after half term, it makes sense to leave History revision until the half term holiday. Agree what they will do in each reward session.

### REVISION



## How can I help my child to revise?



- Show an interest but try not to nag! Their way of learning things may not be the same as yours, but it doesn't matter as long as they learn.
- Revision is best if it is active. Remind your child to do more than just read notes or watch revision videos. The evidence is that revision works best when students summon information from their memory.
- Offer to be a revision buddy and ask them questions. If they work with friends, ask how they are revising together to check it's active learning.
- Get them to teach you the topic – if you can learn, they really know it!
- The important thing in the exam is what they can show they know. Encourage them to write examination answers and get them to check their marks with the mark scheme.
- If your child is using a reader or a scribe, offer to read or scribe for them.

## How can I help once exams have started?

- Pick your battles! Encourage your child to eat well, sleep, take some exercise and revise. All other nagging can wait.
- Know the exam timetable and what time your child has to be in school. Make sure they are there on time and with the equipment they need.
- Encourage your child to keep to his/her school day routine. Evidence suggests students have a body clock which wants to wake up later and go to bed later than adults do, but s/he needs to be ready to work at exam start time.
- Revision has to work round the exams they are taking. Count each exam as a work session and encourage them to continue to work two out of three sessions a day. If they have two exams in one day and an exam the next day, encourage them to remind themselves of what is in the next day's exam in the evening.



## Revision techniques to try

Some of these seem odd to those who don't use them but each one works for some people. We all learn in different ways. It's a matter of experimenting to see what works for your child.



### Mnemonics

Mnemonics are useful for remembering lists or sequences, for instance 'Richard of York Gave Battle in Vain' for the colours of the rainbow.

Why this works:

The mnemonic is a memorable sentence or phrase and easier to remember than a list of words. Research shows they work best if students make up their own – and the sillier the better!

## Subject revision planner

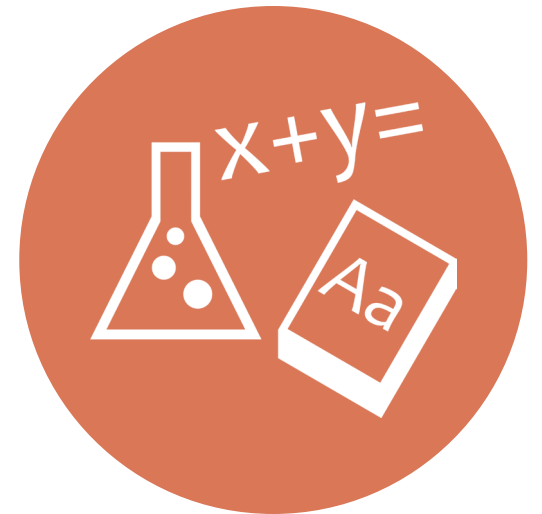
Divide a piece of A3 paper (or two A4 sheets stuck together) into three columns.

Left column - not known.  
Middle column - learning.  
Right column - known.

Write topic headings on post-it notes and put them in the appropriate column. As they learn each topic, they move it to the right until all the topics are in the 'known' column.

Why this works:

- It tells the student what to revise (not known first, then learning) and how they are progressing.
- It shows what they already know.







## Cue cards

Postcard size cards. Question on one side, answer on the other. Good for content-based subjects like science.

Why this works:

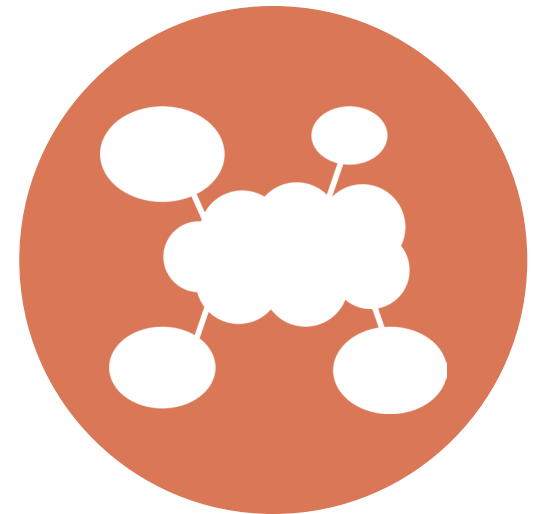
- Making them is a reminder of what to learn. Writing questions also helps learning.
- They are portable. You can revise on the bus, in the car, in the park, on the beach etc.
- A partner can hold up the card with the question facing the student and read the answer on the back.
- The student can read the question and turn the card over to check the answer.
- The student can mark the card with a tick every time s/he gets the answer right. Five ticks and it is learned.
- Cards can be sorted into 'learning' and 'known' piles. The 'learning' pile can be gone through every day. The 'known' pile can be gone through once a week.

## Mind mapping

Mind maps are good for people who remember visual images well. The topic is the central idea - add branches to show the different sections of the main topic, then use colour and images to make it more memorable.

Why this works:

Students who remember visual images well will remember the colours / shapes / pictures in the mind map they have drawn and can redraw all or part of it in the exam to help with planning answers.





## Mind palace / memory palace

This is a different version of a mnemonic. The student imagines walking through a familiar building or outdoor space. S/he then imagines that a particular piece of information is stored in a specific spot. To find the information again, s/he imagines going to that place.

Why this works:

Students are able to link the place with the information.

## Music / smell / taste

Some evidence suggests that students who play music when revising do less well than those who revise in silence. Other research suggests that if the student plays different music while revising each subject, s/he can think about the same music and the revised information is easier to recall.

Some research also suggests that wearing a particular aftershave or perfume when revising a specific subject, then wearing the same one in the exam, can help with recall of information. Eating the same mints or sweets when revising or in the exam could also help.

Why this works:

Revision usually uses sight, hearing, speech and movement (writing). Engaging hearing music and smell activates more parts of the brain and helps to jog the memory for information.





## Teaching someone else

Evidence shows revision works best when students finish by having to recall information from their memory in a different way to answering exam questions. A good tactic for this is for a student to teach it to someone else.

Why this works:

If you can teach it, you have to know the topic very well. You not only have to recall information, you also have to work out how to tell someone else about it in a way which helps the other person learn.

## Answering examination questions

Find past papers and answer the questions in the time allowed. Exam boards have copies of past papers online with the mark schemes.

Why this works:

- Research shows producing information from memory is the best revision.
- Some subjects, like English Language, are about producing responses like a letter or an essay and not about learning facts. This is what has to be done in the exam. It's the only way to let the examiner know what the student knows.



## Useful links

BBC Bitesize has useful advice about revision techniques and revision materials for many GCSE subjects:

[www.bbc.com/bitesize/levels/z98jmp3](http://www.bbc.com/bitesize/levels/z98jmp3)

Another good thing about online revision materials are that there are plenty of videos for those who prefer to listen and watch:

[www.bbc.com/bitesize/support](http://www.bbc.com/bitesize/support)

Bitesize has advice for parents too:

[www.bbc.com/bitesize/articles/zckydxs](http://www.bbc.com/bitesize/articles/zckydxs)

The Times Educational Supplement has a section called GCSE revision tips. These are produced by teachers for their classes. There are also links to subject specific revision materials:

[www.tes.com/teaching-resources/gcse-exam-revision/revision-tips-and-techniques](http://www.tes.com/teaching-resources/gcse-exam-revision/revision-tips-and-techniques)

The Times Higher Education Supplement has an article about different revision techniques:

[www.timeshighereducation.com/student/advice/5-revision-tips-help-you-ace-exam-season-plus-7-more-unusual-approaches](http://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/advice/5-revision-tips-help-you-ace-exam-season-plus-7-more-unusual-approaches)

This guide was produced by Dr Amanda Hipkiss in collaboration with Crick Software, creators of the award-winning secondary school writing tool DocsPlus. If you have struggling writers or students who qualify for scribes or readers in exams, visit [www.cricksoft.com/DocsPlus](http://www.cricksoft.com/DocsPlus) to find out how DocsPlus will help!

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