

Tips for examinations

A. Tips during the revision period

Developing your own tactics & choosing revision topics

Clearly getting ready for exams requires planning. You are probably well-versed in preparing revision timetables, because you have probably got to university by being good at exams. What is different, however, is that at university no-one is training you in how to pass exams in the same way that your school or college will have attempted to train you to get through A-levels (the phenomenon of 'teaching to the test'). So, you will need to be much more self-reliant at university.

Clearly, you must attend any revision classes – where hints are often given either deliberately or inadvertently. (Make sure that the person purporting to give hints was involved in setting the exam paper before believing them: I had an idiot (now a professor of law) purport to guide dozens of us in a specially-organised lecture session when he had not even seen the exam paper, and so he misled us all abominably.) most importantly, this sort of session will help you to look back over the course and to decide which parts of the course suited you best. And this is where 'tactics' come in.

Let us start with an obvious truism. You will have to decide which questions you are going to answer either at the start of your revision or when you turn over the exam paper in the exam room. My advice is that you make some key tactical decisions early on. Here is the information you will require to make those decisions:

- You will need previous years' papers
- Looking at those papers, is your course one in which topics are clearly segregated from one another, or are your topics mixed?
- Looking at those papers, is your course one based on essays or problems?
- Have you been given any indication that the exam is likely to change this academic year?
- Has the syllabus changed from previous years?
- Was there something in the course (e.g. an important new development) on which you dwelled for some time during the course?

Next, do the following:-

- Make a list of the topics covered on your course.
- Identify the topics about which you are (i) confident, (ii) which you understood, and (iii) about which you feel you have something to say (e.g. from journal reading).
- See if those topics have tended to come up on previous years' exam papers, and if they have been stressed this year.

I would suggest that these topics are your personal targets for revision. But you must be careful to think about whether or not *on your particular course* those topics are likely to come up alone, etc., or at all. Some exams are more capricious about what will come up than others – i.e. some courses are predictable and others not at all.

Next draw up a revision timetable which gives roughly proportionate amounts of time to:-

- Re-learning the law

- Practising answering previous years' exam questions and seminar questions.

The key point

The key point is that you get your 2:1 or First in the April revision period, not just in the exam room. This is because you plan exactly what you are going to do in the exam during the April revision period. In the exam room itself you do only two things: (1) execute the plan you formulated in April and (2) think carefully about the facts of the particular problems or the titles of the particular essay titles in front of you. It is all about planning your tactics, and then having the calmness to carry that plan into effect on the day.

What other forms of tactics could you have?

You must create the right tactics for yourself. Only you can know your own mind and your own capabilities. But here are some of the things to take into account.

- Make sure you can write all of the things you want to say in your essay / problem question in the time allotted by practising in advance: and then select the best points you want to make in the amount you can write.
- Ensure you do not run out of time: this is the principal reason for people doing less well than they ought to have done.
- Do you want to start with your strongest question to get off to a good start (a good tactic because it puts the examiner in mind that you are a likely candidate for a good mark from the start) or would you rather save a question on which you know you will perform well until the end (a good tactic if you know that you are the sort of person who tires towards the end of examinations)?
- Do you get panic attacks, or does the stress generally hurt your performance? In which case, you need to develop a system for calming yourself down. This might involve developing a mantra you will chant to yourself; or having a lucky mascot on the desk solely to remind you to stay calm; or writing something on the question paper to remind yourself to stay calm; or stopping yourself writing to take a drink of water so that you can think about what you are writing in more detail. You must work on this sort of thing during the revision period.
- The key tactic relates to your choice of revision topics: see above.

Take care of yourself

The analogy which I always use for preparing for examinations is that of an athlete preparing for a sporting event like the 400 metre hurdles. The thing about the 'high hurdles' is that it is not only about speed but it is also about technique: you must have exactly the right stride pattern to reach the hurdles at exactly the right speed and pattern to cross them without hitting them, while maintaining maximum speed. So, an athlete has to train constantly not just at being fast and at staying fit, but at the technique of crossing the hurdles in the best way. In the same way, a law student needs to practice answering questions: to eradicate waffle, to ensure that you can fit it all into the time allotted, to ensure that you stick to the ideal problem answering format (see elsewhere on this site), and so on.

Many sports people will explain their failures at major athletics championships as being due to seemingly minor things like not sleeping properly the night before, or allowing their nerves to prevent them from carrying out their tactics properly, or not eating properly due to nerves or whatever, and so on. The same is true for a law student. If your exams are at 9.30am, there is no point in working through the night because you will not be awake enough to perform at 9.30am. Do not get into a habit of being unable to sleep, because it will make you less effective. Eat properly for the same reason.

Be selfish

Now, I am confident that you are a warm and wonderful person. And that being selfish is not something which comes easily to you, but during revision time it is essential. Revision is a necessary period to fix the law in your head and, more significantly, to plan how you will execute the examination (which I will explain below). What you do not need are interruptions or unwelcome diversions. Here are some examples ...

(1) Watch your friends

During the revision period, your friends may not be the best people to be around. Some 'friends' deliberately or inadvertently like to pretend that they have done 'no work' (in which case they're liars or really stupid) or that they have already done all their revision and say things like 'oh my god, have you not finished yet?': these people are not actually your friends. The effect of being around them is that you become stressed and demoralised. So, don't stay around them if you are having these problems.

Similarly boyfriends and girlfriends: during revision time they are likely to be stressed and cranky themselves (if they are students too) or feeling left out (if they are not), and so they are likely to forget that you need to spend weeks doing nothing but work (even if they get off to a supportive start). The worst type will have a soap opera-style tantrum regularly during this period. There is only one answer: leave them, either temporarily (by moving elsewhere until the exams are over) or permanently (let's face it, if this is what they are like when you need support, then they are probably not someone you want to be with in the long term. Better to take up with someone less and let them break your heart or put you off romance for life, but at a time when you do not have exams just around the corner.) Alternatively, well-meaning partners can develop a new role: buying you cinema tickets on the nights when you want to relax, preparing your favourite meals when you want them at exactly the time you want them during the revision and exam period, and providing anything else you need pretty much to order as and when you need it. This strategy does, however, mean that you will have to do an enormous amount of payback after the exams are over: but it will be worth it.

(2) Educate your family

If you are going home for revision (or if you live at home anyway) then it is possible that your family will not understand what being at university involves, or that they went to university during less stressful times. So, you will need to educate them as to your needs during the exam periods. Well-meaning mothers who keep coming in with cups of tea need to understand you need peace; similarly other people need to know that you cannot pick relatives up from the airport; and fathers need to know that

having building work done during the April revision period will be deeply prejudicial to your ability to work. It may be that you need to move out during the revision period.

'What if I haven't done exams for many years? Maybe I am a mature student or from another jurisdiction or was simply never taught this sort of stuff at school.'

Exams are more like a driving test than a mystical ritual

B. Tips in the exam room

Don't panic

Stick to your tactics

Think

Put your pen down

Do not just scribble madly.

Answer the question

Do not run out of time