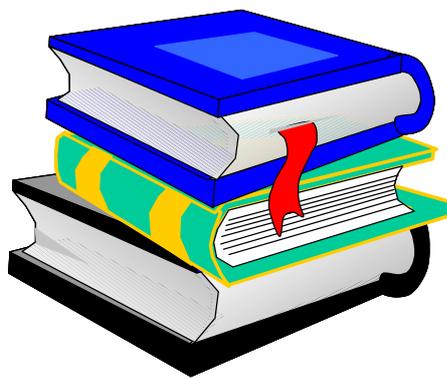


Above Average Exam Excellence



Ian M. Wiley

*Night Owl Publications
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Foreword

Whatever you want in life you'll almost certainly need to take exams at some time. Getting good grades can open doors, for you to follow the path you want. Whether you're at school, college or university, doing evening classes, studying for a vocational qualification or learning to drive, exams seem to find their way into so much of our lives. And yet sadly, despite the importance of exams in today's society, most people will prepare for their exams without being aware of basic information about study and exam technique.

To do anything well you have to know how. Over the years I've marked thousands of exam papers. I've seen students making the same mistakes I did as a student, and inventing others that hadn't occurred to me! Under examination stress students often make easily avoidable mistakes – and they **lose marks** as a consequence. **It's such a pity!** I've produced this study guide in the hope that I can help you avoid such mistakes, whatever subjects you're studying, at whatever level and for whatever purpose.

Ian M. Wiley
March 2004.

Introduction

This guide is to help you with the task of preparing for, and coping with, formal examinations. It gives advice to help you prepare yourself, from knowing what's expected, to revising, to organising yourself prior to your exams. Consideration's also given to the things to do and think about when you sit down to exams, during your exams and afterwards. As well as providing information generally relevant to all exams, specific categories of examination, such as oral exams, and particular question types, are discussed individually. A summary of the most important points is provided as an aide memoir.

When it comes down to it you're the one who'll be sitting exams. No-one else can revise for you, and there's no-one else to help you in an exam. Although the techniques of revision and answering exam questions can be learned you must invest time for practice and revision. The more you do this the better you'll become, and the more you'll be able to cope with your exams and succeed in them.

It's a useful to think about any previous exams you've taken before reading this guide. Make a list of problems you've encountered and things you want to improve for the future. Then when you read this guide you can look for advice that's specific to

your needs. Don't, however, let your list limit you: I hope you'll find other information to help you improve your exam technique.

To study well you need to be relaxed and happy. If you're struggling with it's better to go and see your tutor straight away. If you wait you may get further behind. You'll also worry, which could adversely affect your other studies. Never be afraid to ask your tutors about things you're finding difficult – that's what they're there for!

Finally a word about worry! Although a little worry will probably drive you to prepare yourself, over-worrying is counter productive. Don't try to live up to unnecessarily high expectations, especially if they're other people's. Don't let others upset you and don't worry about whether your friends will do better than you. Remember that there's life after exams, so don't get things out of perspective! Remember too that if you prepare adequately you're unlikely to fail.

Knowing what's expected

It seems obvious that you should know something of what will be expected of you in your exams. It's therefore remarkable how many students face exams without knowing some basic facts. Some

don't even realise what it is they ought to know.

(1) Exam format

Know what the format of your exams will be. Only this week I discovered some first year degree students who, with less than a month to go, still didn't know whether their exams would be multiple-choice, short-answer questions, essays or a mix of these. Until I asked them about this it hadn't occurred to them that they ought to know! Another postgraduate student was worrying because she didn't know what format her impending statistics exam would take. Yet other students were expressing surprise, and some distress, about the content of a practical exam they'd recently taken. According to these last students most of the class had been surprised about the kind of tasks they'd been asked to complete. I strongly urged all of these students to find out about the format of all their future exams, and to get some past exam papers to look at. You should do the same, preferably as near to the beginning of your course as possible.

For the students mentioned the information they needed was freely available on the internet. You too may be able to get past or specimen exam papers from the internet, otherwise ask your teachers for them – and check that your exams will follow the

same format shown on these papers. If you're provided with only practice questions ask about the format of your exams, including the instructions written on the top of each exam paper (rubric). Being well prepared is one of the best ways of reducing exam anxiety. You can't be well prepared if you don't know what'll be expected of you.

You'll need to ask yourself whether you can answer the following questions – if you can't then ask someone who can.

1. **What sort of questions** will you have to answer? Will they all be of one sort, such as multiple-choice or essays, or will there be a mixture of types? For practical exams find out the type of tasks that you'll have to complete. Will you need to do experimental work, recall and report on experiments done previously or analyse data?

2. **How many questions** will you be expected to answer, and **in how much time**?

3. **Will your exam paper be split into sections?** If so how many questions will you be expected to answer per section, and will each section consist of the same or different types of questions or tasks? Will all the questions carry the same weight (and therefore equal marks), or will some be worth more marks than others?

4. **How much choice will you have?** Will some or all of the questions and/or sections be compulsory? Will you be expected to answer a given number of questions from a selection, and if so how many must you answer out of how many? Will some questions be either/or type questions?

5. **How much time** are you expected to spend **on each question?** See if you can work out how much time you have for each question. This may be easy, for example if you have a 3 hour exam in which to write 4 essays of about equal length you might expect to spend about 40 or so minutes per essay. The rest of the time would be for reading the exam paper through, thinking about which questions to answer and checking your answers.

For short answer and multiple-choice type questions work out a time for a block of questions. In a 3 hour exam with 30 similar style questions, for example, you'd expect to spend about 6 minutes per question, including reading time. However it's easier to attempt to complete 5 questions every 30 minutes.

If your exams include a variety of question types find out how much time you're expected to spend on each type. Similarly if you're having a practical exam find out as much as you can about the types of tasks you will be expected to complete, and the time allowed for each type.

If you're unsure about how much time you'll be expected to spend per question ask your teacher. Don't forget that some time may be allocated for reading, planning and checking.

6. Will you be allowed any reference or other materials in the exam?

Some exams are "open book", which means that either you can take material in with you, or the teacher will provide selected texts. In the latter case find out as soon as possible whether you'll be allowed to have prior access to the chosen texts. If you're allowed to take in your own books and/or notes spend some time considering exactly which material will be most helpful and how it could be best arranged. Become as familiar as possible with any material that you'll be referring to in your exams. Make sure you understand any material you'll be allowed to use, including your own notes, which should be concise without being ambiguous. Make sure your notes are legible!

In some exams you may be provided with tables, formulae or perhaps a dictionary. Find this out in advance, so that you avoid wasting time on revising unnecessary information. Learning how to use such resources should become part of revision: become completely comfortable about using them.

(2) Can you, should you...?

Apart from determining the format of your exams there are other things you should know as early as possible before your exams. Some common questions students either ask, or ought to know the answers to, are now considered:

1. **Are past papers typical of what you can expect in your exam?** Your teachers may not teach exactly the same thing every year. Courses may be updated, or the teacher may vary the course content for their own interest! Also, from time to time, courses change more radically, especially with the retirement or other departure of teachers and the arrival of their replacements. If this has happened to your course ask for sample papers and practice questions (rather than past ones).

2. **Will you be expected, or encouraged, to use diagrams?** Can you use colours to enhance your answers? As strange as it seems a student once asked me (after her exam!) if she could've used coloured pens.

3. **Will you need to use a calculator?** If so then make sure you're completely familiar with it before the exam. This is especially important for students studying non-mathematical subjects with just a few mathematical elements, e.g. biology or chemistry.

You might only use your calculator infrequently during your course, but you must know how to use all the functions you might need in an exam. Practice is the best policy! Before your exam make sure your calculator's batteries are charged.

4. Are there **things you must take to your exams** – such as a student registration card?

5. Are there **things you must not take to your exams**? Mobile phones and personal organizers are usually banned from exam rooms. If you take them you'll be required to leave them in a certain place, such as in a cloak-room or at the front of the examination room with the invigilators (they **must** be switched off). Bags will also have to be left outside the exam room (and possibly coats, so wear enough clothes to be warm).

6. **Are you allowed to take a drink** (or a snack) into the exam? This is sometimes allowed, especially in long exams, but check beforehand.

Listen out for hints from your teachers about what subjects or questions might be in your exams. In my experience **teachers do genuinely want their students to succeed**. As an incentive to revision they often do drop hints about the exam, which may be more or less subtle! I know of one teacher who,

as an experiment and presumably in the hope of improving everyone's chances, told his class exactly what was going to be on the exam paper. Surprisingly the distribution of marks that year didn't change much from that observed in previous years, suggesting that the students probably hadn't taken him seriously. A former student told me that one of her teachers also told the class exactly what would be on the exam paper – but many of the students just didn't believe he was being serious! It really is a good idea to take careful note of hints. Teachers mayn't tell you exactly what questions are going to be in the exam, but they won't pretend things are going to be in the exam if they're not.

(3) Special needs

If you have special needs take advice from your tutor about making arrangements for them. Don't be shy about this. Most teachers are aware that some students have special needs, and will be sympathetic and helpful.

It's common for students with dyslexia, for example, to be given extra time in exams, typically between 10 to 20 minutes extra per hour of exam. Sometimes students are allowed time to walk about during the exam, e.g. if they are recovering from some injury. In other situations students are allowed

to dictate or word-process their exam answers.

Students with impaired eyesight can request large print copies of course handouts and exam papers.

Revision

Everyone knows that to do well in exams you have to revise. It's clear to me, however, that many students don't seem to have been given any idea about **how to revise**. They are expected to somehow know how to revise, as if they will learn this by osmosis! As a consequence of using poor or inappropriate revision techniques many students don't do as well in exams as they might.

(1) When to start revising

Exams always come around sooner than you expect! **If you put off revising for your exams it'll make your task more difficult later.** It's also likely to increase your anxiety, which could itself inhibit you from reaching your potential. The very best thing to do is to start revising shortly after starting your course. In the first instance read through your notes, making sure they are ordered and in a form that you can understand later (including being legible!).

Read around the subjects you're studying, using recommended or other publications. In some exams you'll only get a high mark if you show evidence of having done extra reading, i.e. on top of having read your class notes. This is true at degree level, hence the old fashioned phrase of "reading for a degree". If you're unsure if this applies to you ask your teacher when you start your course of study.

Reading helps you to increase your knowledge base. Even in mathematical subjects it'll help you understand what you're learning. The more you read the more you're likely to remember later. By reading various accounts of the same subject you'll expose yourself to different styles of explanation, different examples and even different details of the same examples. You probably won't remember it all, but you're more likely to remember at least some of it. This is especially important if you're not being regularly assessed by your teacher. Having to continually complete coursework forces students to have to read and think about their subjects, which in turn helps them to understand and remember it.

Your more formal revision should start at least weeks, but preferably 4 months or more in advance of your exams. The more time you devote to revision the more successful you're likely to be. Little and often is a much better strategy than trying to "cram" everything in the week before the exam.

On no account leave your revision until a day or two before the exam, let alone the evening before. The odd person might occasionally “do OK” using this method, perhaps because they were “lucky” in revising something “that came up”. But for most people, most of the time, this method just doesn’t do justice to their potential ability, and could easily result in disaster. Furthermore you’ll probably feel more stressed in the immediate run up to your exams. If you start revision before your exams are imminent you’ll be under less stress and therefore more likely to remember what you learn. You wouldn’t run a marathon if you hadn’t trained for it, so don’t sit your exams without being prepared!

(2) Getting down to it

To do well in your exams you’ll have to be disciplined about your revision. If you have trouble getting down to it then you should set aside specific times for revision and stick to them. You presumably have some kind of study timetable already, to tell you when your lessons will be, so have one for your revision as well.

Plan your revision timetable carefully. Be aware that some things will require more revision than others. In particular ***make sure you revise subjects you’re less keen on at least as much as those***

you like. The fact that you don't like a subject probably means you're not so good at it - and need more practice with it. Reading around such subjects can help to increase both your understanding and your interest level.

Making a plan will help you get an overview of the amount of work needed to prepare for your exams. By breaking the big task of revision into smaller, more manageable pieces, you can ensure that everything gets revised in plenty of time. The plan will also help you stay focused, especially if you have the habit of putting off until tomorrow what should be done today! Beware though of making a timetable (or “prettying” up your notes) as a displacement activity. Don't spend hours making an elaborate timetable when you should be revising!

Sticking to your study timetable will require you to be motivated. There may be times when you're tired or fed-up, and wonder if it's all worth the effort. Always ***keep in mind why you're doing the exams***, and what you hope they'll lead to. If you can have some positive vision of life after exam success all the better! Remember too that ***your study time won't last forever***: it won't be too long before your exams will be over and you can breathe a sigh of relief. Your future might well look all the rosier if you put in some effort now!

Where you revise is important and you should ***aim to do your revision in an atmosphere conducive to study.*** Problems with memory are often really problems due to poor concentration. Revise somewhere quiet, comfortable and warm. If you live in communal accommodation perhaps you could revise in the library, or at least ask not to be disturbed during your revision times. If the weather's good you might revise outside, finding yourself a quiet spot somewhere pleasant.

Some people believe they revise best if they listen to music, and there was a time I liked to think so. While I'm not aware of any research on this, I doubt it's really so. If you're properly concentrating on what you're doing your mind probably filters out background music, allowing you to ignore it. Louder music isn't so easy to block out and interferes with concentration. I've nothing against music, in fact I love it. Use it for unwinding after your revision, but I don't think it's compatible with revision itself (unless, of course, you'll be doing music exams). I may be wrong on this, and if anyone knows of any research on the subject I'd be happy to hear from them.

It can be useful to make use of odd bits of time. If you regularly travel by train or bus revise when waiting or travelling (if it doesn't make you travel sick, of course). If you've half an hour or so before an event you're looking forward to, say just before

your favourite telly programme or before you go out for the evening, do a quick bit of revision. You can get down to it knowing that you'll soon be enjoying yourself. You'll also feel as though you've "earned" your treat, and can enjoy yourself without feeling guilty about the work that's waiting for you!

Once you've started revising you should **revise regularly and test yourself regularly**. The quality of your revision sessions is important. Research shows that most people are only capable of efficiently absorbing information for about 25-50 minutes at a time. They also take in and remember more information at the beginning and end of study sessions. So lots of short sessions are better than a few marathons. By using short sessions you can vary the subjects you revise, to help you keep up your interest level, and to ensure that everything gets revised. **Don't revise until you're exhausted**. If your concentration starts to drift, take a break and, if necessary, schedule an alternative study period.

(3) Making and revising from notes

Try to compile revision **summaries** throughout the course, not just at the end of it. **Don't confuse making a neat copy of your notes with revision**. Such an exercise is likely to take lots of time and you may well still have little idea of what's in your

notes when you've completed it! You should, however, make sure you have all the necessary information for revision, and that you understand it. You'll remember things better if you understand them. If you get stuck with anything note down the problem so you can either look it up or ask about it later (your teacher, or a friend who "got that bit").

To make revision summaries divide each subject into topics and list the headings under each topic. In this way you'll be creating an index of what needs revising as well as dividing your revision into easy to manage sections. Make revision notes of the **key points** for each heading. Use lesson summaries to guide you, if these were provided. Condense your notes by creating a list of headings with keywords for each point, selecting the most important points. You might want to make your revision notes as a series of summary cards. Some people remember better if they visualize what they are memorizing. If that's you then make visually memorable notes: use colour, diagrams and mind maps, for example. You might even consider putting up posters of key information around your home.

Note down each topic on your revision plan, to ensure that everything's allotted revision time. Try to answer practice questions using only your revision notes. If you can't then modify your notes. When you're happy that you can answer questions from

your notes revise from these.

Eventually you should try and answer questions without the aid of your notes. At least once you should simulate an exam situation with 'a set and timed examination paper'. The paper should be as near to the true exam format as possible. The easiest way to ensure this is so is to use a past exam or sample paper. This "mock" exam will not only test how much you know but also get you more used to the "exam atmosphere", helping to reduce your anxiety about the "real thing".

Evaluate answers by checking them against your notes. Examine them to see how they could be improved. Highlight anything you missed, along with anything that's incorrect. Re-revise this information.

(4) Sustaining your interest

Few of us are fortunate enough to enjoy everything we have to learn and there may be times when it's not easy to sustain your interest. At these times it can be useful to keep interest in your subject matter by becoming an **active learner**. Taking an 'active' approach to revision is much more effective, and more interesting, than simply reading through your notes. **Ask yourself questions** about your subject and then search for and **write down the answers**.

By doing this you'll be forcing yourself to get your brain actively thinking about your subject, as well as getting some practice in writing answers.

Analyse and **evaluate** what you've learned. Ask yourself what evidence there is to support what you've learnt and think about whether the evidence could've any other interpretations. Discuss aspects of the course with your friends. Explaining concepts to each other will help you check that you understand them, as well as helping you remember them. Taking an enquiring attitude will help to build your interest. It will also help you to internalise your subject so that you remember it better.

Think about the sort of questions that the examiners might ask you. Use previous and/or sample exam papers and questions and try to invent similar questions. Get your friends to invent questions too and compare them. ***Often you'll find that there's only a limited range of questions that can be asked!*** The same topics may well come up year after year. They may be approached from slightly different angles, with questions phrased in slightly different ways, but essentially they involve the same information. As your revision progresses you should try ***answering full exam questions***, both real ones from old and/or sample papers, and ones that you or your friends have made up. ***Practice answering questions to time:*** give yourself the actual amount

of time that you'd have in the exam, so that you get used to writing for the appropriate length of time.

Some people find that using **memory tricks** not only help them to revise but can be fun. Try creating mental pictures and 'stories' to peg your revision information to. Use rhyme, song, word associations, mnemonics or acronyms to aid your memory. Try using the first letters from key words in your revision notes and rearrange them to make memorable "words" or "phrases", which will trigger your memory in exams. Everyone remembers that “every good boy deserves favours” represents the notes on a stave of music, even if they can't site read music!

One of my students once told me that she remembers the stages of cellular division using the phrase “in Peterborough men are terrible”! (Although as someone originating from this area I can't of course agree with her.) Each first letter reminds her of the next stage of cell division. This must be memorable since she told me several years ago – and I didn't forget. I myself wasn't so imaginative and remembered “ipmat”. Since it sounds as though it could be a word I've remembered it, and the stages of cell division, for over 20 years. You must use whatever “tricks” work for you, whether they're very cheeky or really quite mundane - no-one else has to know!

Taping your revision notes can be a useful technique. You can then listen to them at times when you might not otherwise be able to revise, e.g. whilst cooking, doing housework, getting ready to go out, driving, or exercising. Although listening to yourself might at first seem strange it can be less boring than trying to read notes all the time. Also it may help you to consolidate information in your memory by involving another sense, and another part of your brain. Some people remember what they've heard better than what they've seen.

It can be a good idea to keep a record of all the revision you do, even the short sessions. If you feel fed up you can cheer yourself up, and be encouraged by the revision you've already done.

Written examinations

It's very important that you find out exactly what kind of tasks you'll be expected to complete during your exams, and then revise by practising.

Check in advance whether you'll be expected to revise diagrams. If you've been given them during classes you most probably will be. You may find it easier to memorize diagrams than notes, but practicing drawing them is still important. It's easy to

make a mistake, or to take too long over diagrams you're not familiar with reproducing.

If your hand-writing is poor make an effort to improve it (after all you wouldn't expect to be presented with unreadable study materials). Examiners who decide to persevere with scripts that look as though a spider has walked ink all over the page will nevertheless not be put in the best of moods. They may be less inclined to give the student "the benefit of the doubt" and might even ignore the very worst writing. In some cases examiners may refuse to read very bad scripts, or request that it be typed up at the students expense.

Each year, for one reason or another, a few students don't answer the questions set. Sometimes they don't answer the right number of questions, a poor exam techniques that's discussed later. Sometimes though students seem to make a mistake in either reading or interpreting the questions set. The importance of reading the exam paper thoroughly can't be over-emphasized. A colleague once told me to tell students this: "Script that doesn't address the question set, even if it's informative on another topic, can't be awarded marks." He was right! When we read answers that are about something other than what they should be we can't award them marks, even if the information is not wrong *per se*. All we can do is cry a bit and

pass on to the next script! A good habit that'll help you to understand the question set is to underline the key words in the question or title.

There are some points you'll need to keep in mind that are specific to each type of exam task, and these are now explored.

(1) Seen and open book examinations

Although these types of examination focus less on remembering you may still be required to know, and be able to reproduce, information that's not provided during the exam. It's therefore still important to revise. During the exam you'll be allowed to use particular texts, which you may or may not have seen before. You'll then be expected to perform a specific task, such as an analysis of the information provided. You may be required to draw on your knowledge to support your analysis. Assessors may well expect a higher standard of response than they would've expected if no information had been provided. As with other exams it's essential for you to find out the format of your exam and to know what sort of task you'll be expected to perform. If you'll be allowed to see texts in advance obtain copies to study as soon as possible.

In some cases you may be given a specific essay

title or question in advance and be expected to research this before writing up your response under examination conditions. Usually you'll be allowed to take notes in with you, although there are likely to be specific limitations on this. Keep your notes as neat as possible, making sure you can later understand any shorthand you've used in preparation. Research your essay carefully and think about how you'll structure it. Practice writing it before the exam, until you can do it using only the notes you'll be allowed to take with you. The more you practice the easier it will be during the exam, and the better your eventual result will be.

(2) Multiple-choice questions

Many assessments involve answering "multiple-choice" type questions. This gives an opportunity to test students over the whole subject area (in comparison to essays, for example, which test a few areas in depth). Many students panic about multiple-choice exams: they worry about getting confused between the possible alternative answers and may even end up guessing answers. However, there's a technique for answering multiple-choice questions, and some information you should keep in mind when sitting multiple-choice exams.

Be aware that the topics studied on your course

may be shuffled around on the exam paper and not presented in a predictable order (this isn't always so, check past papers to see if this is likely to happen). Also the ideas and concepts you learned during your course will be reworded in different ways. You'll have to understand your course material in order to work out the answers, you won't be able to rely solely on recall.

Treat "multiple choice" as ordinary short questions - read the questions carefully and see if you can work out answers ***before you look at the possibilities given***. This is important as you may become doubtful of things you actually know if you look at all the possible answers immediately. Consider using a "cover-up" strategy. Cover the possible answers and try to answer the question. This will help you choose the correct answer and stop you getting distracted by other plausible options.

If you're sure you don't know an answer then eliminate those answers which are clearly non-sense before considering the remaining possibilities. This will increase your odds even if you don't know the answer. Remember that all but one answer has been made up. Making up lots of wrong answers isn't always easy, and some teachers often put the odd (or more) really daft answers in. Don't grumble about your teachers bad sense of humour – or imagine he or she is trying to insult you by including

a stupid answer. These are not “trick” answers and the teacher hopes students will spot them easily, thus perhaps increasing your chances a little. Maybe you’ll even enjoy the joke at the same time!

If you’ve really no idea about the answer to a question don’t waste time agonising over it. Consider whether the possible answers are in the same topic area as the question, ruling out those answers which aren’t. There may be clues to answers in other questions. Quickly see if you can spot any, or look for them as you proceed through the exam. If necessary come back to the question at the end, if you have time. ***Don’t be tempted to look for patterns in the answers.*** The order will have been chosen at random. Any patterns that are there will be entirely accidental!

Some institutions use a system of “negative marking” for multiple-choice exams, e.g. you might get 5 marks for a correct answer but minus a mark for an incorrect answer (sometimes called penalty marking). This is supposedly to account for the marks you would otherwise gain by correctly guessing at some answers, although not everyone agrees that the system is always as fair as it’s made out to be. However ***if there’s negative marking check how much will be subtracted per wrong answer.*** If, for example, one mark is given for a right answer and one deducted for a wrong answer,

don't guess at answers. If on the other hand more marks are given for a correct answer than are deducted for a wrong answer you might want to take some calculated risks, e.g. if you are sure that one of two answers is right out of 5 possibilities.

You'll improve your ability to cope with multiple-choice questions if you practice. At first use your revision notes to help you. Later practice answering without notes, and then within the appropriate time limit. There are often a lot of questions to answer in the given time. Work out how much time you have for blocks of say 5 or 10 questions and practice answering at this rate (see section on exam format).

(3) Short answer questions and tasks

Answers to short answer questions should be **brief and succinct**. However unless you are told otherwise you should still write your answers in complete and well-structured sentences. The examiner may not be able to understand everyone's shorthand, and it's best not to risk it!

For paragraph length answers your opening sentence should make the most important and relevant point. The rest of the paragraph should show that you understand this point, make related points and/or give appropriate examples. Remember you've not been asked to tell everything

you know about a subject. You need to illustrate your grasp of a very specific piece of knowledge.

Alternative short answer type questions might include making lists or drawing schemes or diagrams. Make sure you do what's asked. If the question asks for a list then a paragraph about each point in your list isn't required. If you're asked for a diagram then reams of text are just not required, however appropriate it seems. The examiner, who is probably looking at hundreds of other exam scripts, might completely ignore even the most interesting of such surplus information!

(4) Multi-part questions and tasks

The main things about multi-part exam tasks is to be sure about how much you've to do and how the marks are distributed between parts. Other than that treat each part separately.

Be careful about whether you're supposed to complete all the separate parts or whether you have a choice. Sometimes questions are complex, for example you may have to answer both parts of a two part question although one part may be an either/or type question itself. Some parts may be shorter and/or potentially carry fewer marks than others. Keep this in mind when deciding how much information to give in your answers.

(5) Essay length questions and tasks

If you're expected to write exam essays take some time to become familiar with the skill of essay writing (there's an Above Average guide on this topic). Essays should be **a continuous piece of prose with no subtitles**, consisting of an introduction, main body and conclusion. Some essay length questions, especially multi-part ones, may not have to be written in essay style. They may require you to use sub-titles and/or diagrams (e.g. for explaining chemical processes or computer programs).

The **introduction** is a paragraph in which **the reader is told what the essay is about**, and what kind of information it will contain. Attention grabbers" can be included as long as they indicate what the essay is about. Especially in exams introductions should be short and to the point. A few sentences are usually enough.

The **main body** should be written using paragraphs, each conveying **one main idea**, and perhaps gives examples. Each subject area or argument should be discussed in one or a few paragraphs, depending on the length and complexity of the essay. You should try to keep your sentences concise, with each conveying just a single idea. A mixture of short and long sentences can be used, but using too many long sentences is not a good idea (especially

for the novice). Long sentences are more difficult to punctuate correctly. Furthermore it's often easier to make a point clear by using shorter sentences.

The **conclusion** should summarise the main points. ***No new material should be included and examples should not be given.*** An overall **concluding opinion** can be included, particularly if the essay is a discursive piece or involves critical evaluation. If you include an opinion make sure it's one you've already thought carefully about, and that it doesn't contradict anything you've already written. The conclusion isn't the place to reargue your opinion: it should already be clear why and how you came to your point of view in the main body of text.

The style of your writing you adopt should be tailored to the type of essay you're writing, but unless you are doing a "journalistic piece" you're likely to be expected to write formally (ask if you're not sure). For formal writing you should use impersonal language and not use slang or colloquial (conversational) expressions.

The best way to revise for exam essays is to practice. It's not enough to read through or replicate your notes. Use past exam papers or sample questions given to you for that purpose. You can also invent your own questions, as already discussed. To revise first of all practice writing

essays (or essay length questions) ***with your revision notes***. If you can't do this then modify your notes until you can. When you're happy doing this try writing the ***same essays without your notes***. Finally practice writing to time: if you're expected to spend 40 minutes writing each essay when you're in the exam hall practice writing essays in that time during your revision. If you typically finish before the 40 minutes is up then you need to find some more information relating to the topics of your essays.

If you find it difficult completing your essays in time it may be that you need a few practices at it. Most people are faster after practising. Alternatively you may be repeating yourself, or writing in a long-winded style, when you should think about improving your essay writing technique (read **Above Average Essay Writing** for help with essay technique). Another possibility is that you're not answering the questions set. Check to make sure you understand exactly what's expected of you – and ask someone if you don't. If you still have problems you may be using too much information, although this is only likely if your extra information is from your own reading, rather than your class notes. See if you can write anything more concisely before you cutting out the least relevant information, or perhaps removing an extra example that you added.

For essay questions it's a good idea to do a short

plan of the key points to be covered and the order in which they'll occur relative to one another. Both during your revision and in your exams plans will help you to logically assimilate your knowledge into coherent and readable answers. Making essay plans as part of your revision will also help you to identify and learn relevant information.

Following a plan can help you keep track of how much you're covering over time, helping you to keep to time. Make sure though that your plans are just enough to jog your memory and get your facts in order. I've marked exam scripts where the plans take up more space than the answers! Clearly this wastes valuable time.

Particularly in long answers be careful not to contradict yourself. If you're going to guess do it one way or the other. You'll at least have a chance of being right. I once read an exam essay that started off well, but when half-way through the student started to contradict herself it became clear that she didn't know what she was confused. It was most disappointing for both of us. With a little thought you can make sure you don't make this mistake!

(6) Problems and calculations

Problem-solving questions usually involve making calculations. Typically the examiner's most

concerned with establishing that you understand the method. Look out for words and phrases that indicate a requirement for **showing** your working out, these include “show”, “demonstrate”, “prove” and “explain how”. By showing that you know how to work something out you’re demonstrating an understanding of the method and logic to solving that kind of problem.

If you must demonstrate your understanding of the **method** of arriving at an answer, then marks will be awarded for your working out as well as for your answer. Quite possibly there’ll be more marks awarded for the working out than for the eventual correct answer. This means that even if you eventually make a mistake and get the wrong answer overall you’ll probably get several marks if most of your working out is correct. However if you just give an answer with no working out you’ll probably get few marks ***even if the answer is the correct one***. You should therefore set out your working out, step by step.

When solving a problem with a numerical answer first estimate the expected order of magnitude of the answer. If possible do your calculation mentally (or on scrap paper) after rounding the numbers up or down to simple figures. For example, if you are dividing 620 by 52, then round the numbers to 600 and 50, you can then quickly estimate that the

answer will be in the region of 12 (the real answer is 11.92). Similarly if you're multiplying or dividing a fractional number by non fractional number try moving the decimal place an appropriate number of places right or left to get an idea of the magnitude of the expected result. For example to multiply 0.02 by 1000 move the decimal point of 0.02 three places to the right to get 20. If you were to multiply by 1324 you would know to expect a number of similar magnitude to 20. You might also notice that it would be about one third bigger than 20, since 1324 is about a third bigger than 1000. You might further realise that this is just less than 27 ($3 \times 7 = 21$). When your calculator tells you the actual answer is 26.48 you can be confident of not having made a mistake!

If your mental arithmetic's rusty practice is the best remedy. There are also books, and perhaps even local evening classes, that'll teach you various quick and easy ways of making particular kinds of calculations, e.g. for calculating VAT at 17.5% work out 10% and add to it half of that amount (i.e. 5%), and then half of that (i.e. 2.5%) – much easier than multiplying by 0.175.

Many problems will involve you working with quantities with various possible units. In this case work out what units your answers should be expressed in. If you're working out speed, for example, ask yourself whether it should be in

kilometres per hour, metres per second, or something else. The exact unit will depend on the context of your question, including the overall distances and times you're dealing with, which for example may be microscopic distances over seconds, macroscopic distances over hours, or even interplanetary distances over years.

When deciding what units a quantity should be in treat the unit symbols as if they were numbers: for example if speed = distance/time then the units will be those of distance per unit time, e.g. Km/h or ms^{-1} (the "/" and " $^{-1}$ " being different ways of indicating the "per" implied by division). If we rearrange the equation so that distance = speed x time then the units of distance might be $\text{ms}^{-1} \times \text{s} = \text{m}$ ($\text{s}^{-1} \times \text{s} = 1$, and so cancel each other out). While this is an obvious example the same principle can be used for more complex examples when you mayn't be so sure of what the units ought to be.

Practical examinations

The nature of practical examinations varies widely. Depending on the subject you may be asked to play a musical instrument, paint a picture, present a banquet, make a web-site or carry out a scientific experiment. There are countless possibilities that

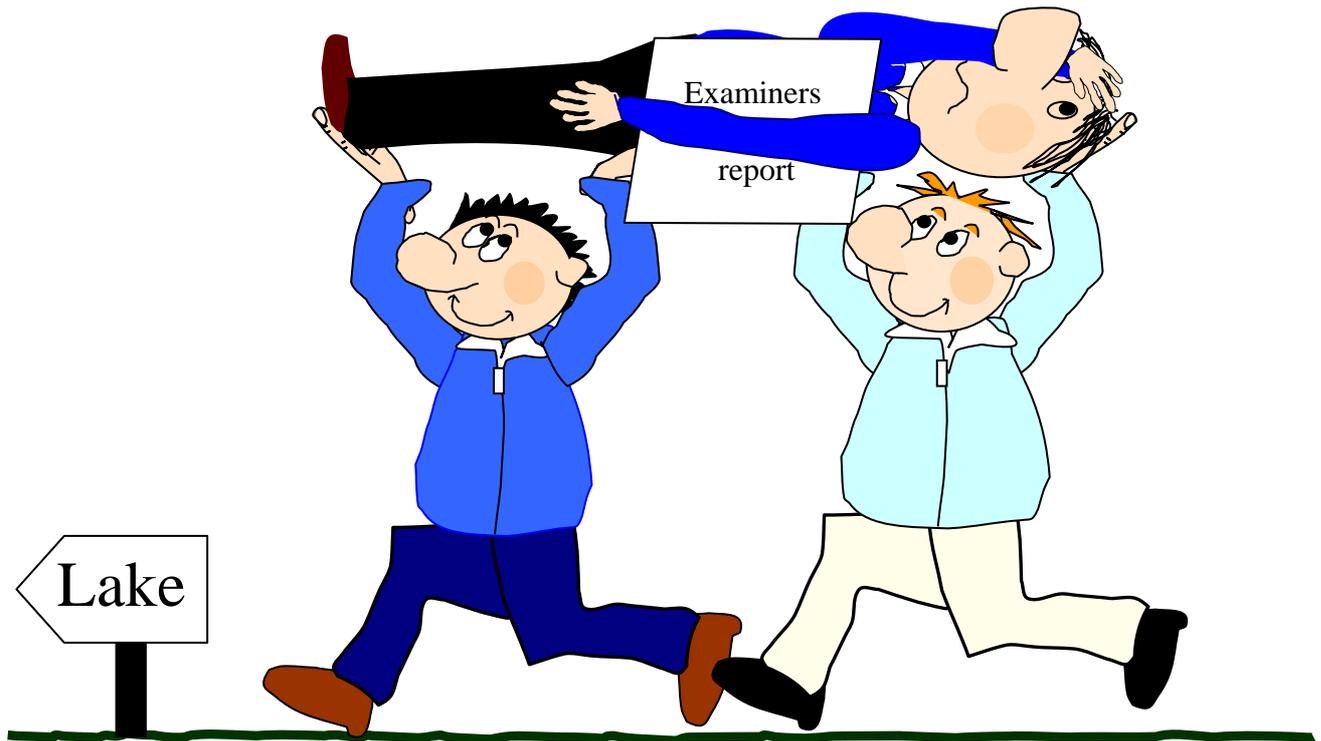
could be listed. The idea behind a practical exam is that students are given the opportunity to demonstrate how good they are at particular tasks, by bringing together the knowledge and skills learned during their studying. ***You need to find out, as early as possible, exactly what's going to be assessed in your practical exams, and how.***

Consider the following questions before preparing yourself for a practical examination:

1. Will you be assessed on an individual basis or as part of a group? If you'll be working in a group find out how the examiners will distinguish between the effort and skill shown by each person (or indeed whether they intend to do so). If you're working in a group the examiners will look to see how far the candidates co-operate with and give support to each other. Work as a team, pulling together and helping each other to cover up any hitches. A favourable overall performance may result in an upgrading of marks for everyone.

2. What's going to be assessed? Is it the process of you performing something or the outcome of your performance, or both? If it's the former then you'll be observed during the exam, either directly or using video. If, for example, you're taking an equine studies course you may have a riding exam, when you'll be watched by examiners,

who'll study your technique. If only the outcome of the performance is important you'll have to produce something, such as a computer programme or a painting, or for some scientific subjects a written report or labelled diagram.



If you have to work in a group show the examiner you can work together...

3. What criteria will you be judged against? How will the examiner decide if your performance is satisfactory? Find out how important precision and accuracy are, and whether you'll be expected to complete a task in a pre-determined way, or show originality and innovation.

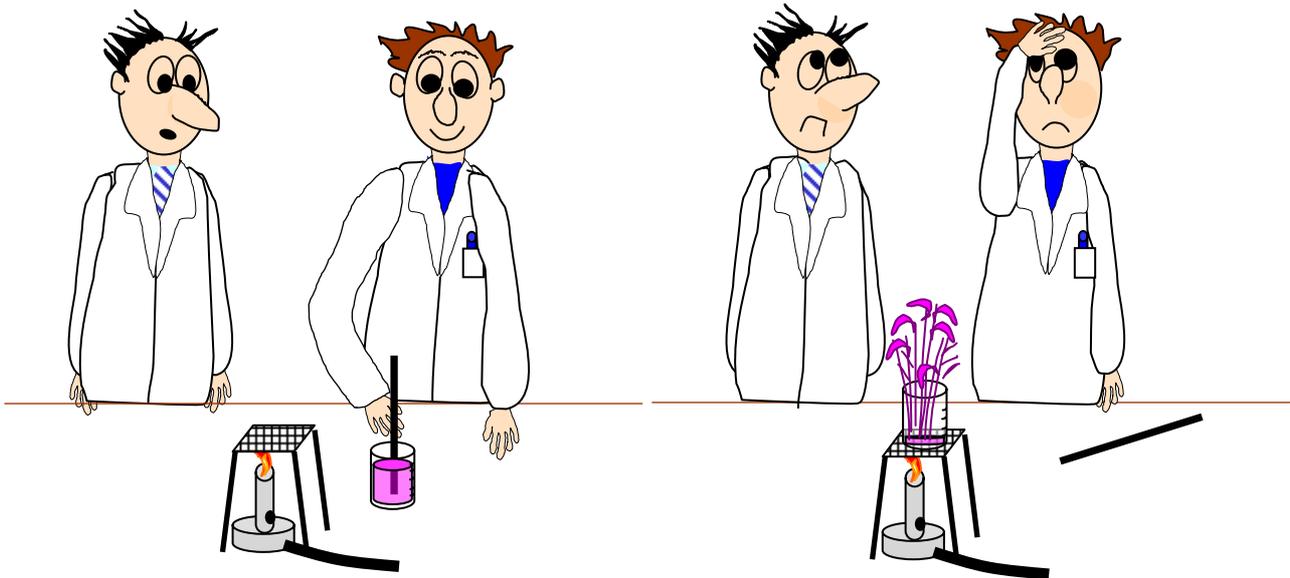
4. How important is it that you complete the tasks set within a given time? In certain circumstances you may be expected to complete a task “in your own time”, e.g. a swimming test in a scuba-diving exam.

5. What equipment will you be expected to use? Will it be provided or will you be expected to take your own equipment? If the latter then are there limitations on what equipment you can have, for example should you have tools of a particular brand or to certain technical specifications? You’ll want to get as good tools as possible, that will aid you at the crucial time, rather than let you down.

Approach practical exams with as much rigour and planning as you would other exams. Find out exactly what tasks you’ll have to complete and work out in advance how you’ll go about them. Set yourself goals of what’s to be accomplished, in what sequence, and in how much time. You’ll only be able to do this effectively if you practice beforehand.

Practice all the skills you’ll use, aiming to make your actions as proficient as possible. Sometimes practice completing the whole task or tasks, as you’ll have to in the exam. Wherever possible practice with others watching you, particularly people who’re already skilled at whatever it is your learning to do. They can help by commenting on

and discussing the expertise of your performance. You'll also become less self conscious about being observed whilst performing your skills.



You need to revise for practical exams...

Make sure you understand how to use all the necessary tools and equipment. Even if you've used them before get your teacher to give advise, and to watch you using them. There may be specific techniques that will make their operation easier or more accurate. Also take any opportunities you can to watch and talk to experts. Try to analyse what they do. Ask them about things you find difficult or puzzling, and ask if they can give you any tips.

If equipment is to be provided during your exam

make sure you can practice with that particular equipment, or at least equipment like it. Not all makes of any particular tool will necessarily work in exactly the same way, so be aware of any differences that you may encounter.

When you take your practical exam ensure you have all the items necessary before you start. If you are short of anything you need then tell an invigilator about this immediately.

Oral examinations

There are basically two types of oral exam. There's the sort where you're asked questions, and perhaps to discuss certain topics. This might be an assessment of a project you've done (sometimes called a *viva voce*, or just a *viva*) or for a language exam. This type of exam is to verify your understanding of course materials, and/or personal research. Examiners check whether you're able to effectively discuss a specific subject or area of expertise. Alternatively you may be expected to give a formal presentation, often followed by questions from the audience or assessors.

If you have a question and discussion type of oral don't expect to be able to muddle by, or that you'll

be inspired when the occasion calls! You'll be expected to know your facts and background knowledge, just as if you were in any other exam. It's particularly important to revise actively, thinking of and answering questions, preferably with a friend, so that you get used to oral presentation.

During the exam maintain eye contact with your examiners. If you don't hear a question clearly ask for it to be repeated. If you don't understand a question ask for it to be rephrased, don't try and bluff through an answer. After you've been asked a question you don't have to lunge straight in. Take a few moments to think carefully about your answer and how you'll phrase it. Then answer, speaking as clearly and fluently as possible.

When responding to a question consider the examiners' views carefully. If you challenge an examiners' perspective or interpretations do so politely and non-aggressively. Don't get annoyed if you disagree with the examiner (or at least don't show it!). Instead back up your challenges with argument and evidence. Equally there's no need to be afraid of your examiners – they're just people with their own strengths and weaknesses!

If you have to give an oral presentation you should prepare yourself well in advance: the structure and content of your talk should be carefully

thought out and you should've practised your talk and be aware of how long it'll take you.

If possible find out how marks for your talk will be allocated. Examiners often have a scheme, with a certain number of marks allocated for each of various components. Whatever the case you should pay attention to the following points when preparing your talk, the examiners will certainly be considering them when they are marking it!

1. Structure Divide your talk into a few sections and make it clear when each section starts and ends. Make use of visual aids with bullet points and key-words to structure your talk.

At the beginning state the title of your talk and who you are – even if the examiner already knows this. Preferably have a visual aid that says only this.

Examiners will specifically look for a clear introduction where you state what your talk will be about. In some cases, for example if you're describing a project, you should have a clear statement of the aims of the project. One common error is for students to give background information for their introduction, e.g. a student that's done a project on the conservation of some animal might start by telling the audience some general information about that animal, such as where it

lives. This is not usually considered to be an adequate or proper introduction.

At the end of your talk have a clear summary and conclusion: marks may well be specifically allocated for these. Don't just trail off after the last point. It's a good idea to use a visual aid with a summary of your **main points**. This should not be too wordy.

2. Content You should research your talk as you would for other assignments.

Make sure the content is to the point, and at an appropriate level. You'll probably not have time for lots of discussion and examples so pick your content carefully and be choosy about what you include. Make sure you've read around the subject so that you can answer questions after your talk.

Think carefully about how you'll explain difficult concepts. Just because you understand something don't automatically expect that you can explain it to others. You'll need to have thought about what words you'll use, and if you can use images to get the meaning across more easily.

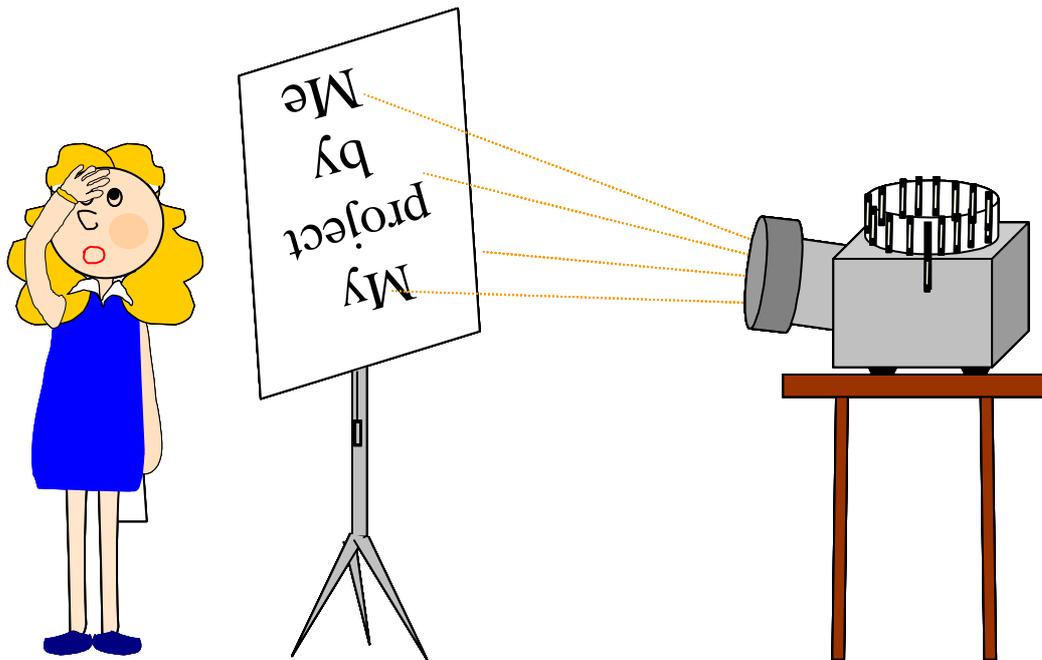
3. Visual-aids should be clear, tidy and **not too wordy**. Take care that you spell things correctly, including subject specific words. Use bullet points and/or numbered lists of keywords and key-points.

Use pictures and diagrams wherever they make your presentation clearer and more interesting, but make sure they are entirely relevant to what you're saying. Also be sure that your diagrams are not too complicated. Don't put up visual aids unless you'll be directly referring to what's on them.

If you present data be sure it's clear and easy to grasp quickly – simple graphical representations are usually best. Don't use large tables of data which can't be seen clearly or digested quickly.

One of the mistakes most frequently made by students giving presentations is making their visual aids too wordy. Try to avoid using whole sentences or paragraphs unless you quote someone. Then your quote should be as short as possible and to the point. Quotes from totally obscure people should be avoided unless they're exceptionally inspiring! Too many quotes of this sort give the impression that you can't phrase things for yourself.

When presenting visual aids make sure they are visible, in focus, straight and the right way up. For slides it's best to test this beforehand if you can. If someone else will be loading the carousel mark one corner of the slides to indicate how they should be loaded. Make sure you know and understand the instructions for marking slides. If possible do the marking while trying out your slides with a projector.



Check your slides are the right way up...

Be aware of your own position in relation to both your visual aids and the audience. As far as possible perform to the audience. Be careful not to obscure your visual aids by standing in front of them. Try not to face in towards your visual aids if you can help it. The examiners will be watching your body position as well as listening to your talk.

4. Time-keeping is important. You may be stopped mid flow if you go over the time allowed, if you're not you'll almost certainly lose marks for. The best way to talk to time is to practice. You'll usually speed up after you've practised a few times. A good method of keeping to time is to have a number of optional points or examples which can be added or left out without changing the overall quality or sense of your talk. Then if you're going faster

than you expected you can incorporate the extra information without anyone knowing. Similarly if you are running out of time you can leave bits out. This does need to be thought out in advance so that it's only obvious to you that you've adjusted your talk. If your talk is short you might keep any "optional extras" to be near the end of your talk. If your talk is long then you may want to know approximately where you expect to be at various times, so you can judge how fast you are progressing. "Optional extras" can then be added (or withheld) at various points during your talk. Be alert to the possibility of bringing out unused information at question time, but only if the opportunity presents itself naturally.

5. Your performance Practice speaking at an even and unhurried pace, audibly, fluently and without over-using your notes. Don't rush, gabble, or try to get your talk over with as quickly as possible. Speak loudly enough to be heard, without having to strain. Use a microphone if one is available, and you can do so without problem. Try to show a range of tone, pace and volume of speech, to prevent your voice from becoming monotonous. Relax yourself as much as possible, breath properly and pause where necessary. If you feel nervous take long deep breaths down to your stomach and breath out slowly. If you speak with a strong accent you don't need to drop it, but be careful to make sure the examiner can understand what you're saying.

Engage the whole audience by looking (but not staring) at them, but make sure you don't seem to be just addressing only one part of the audience. Don't look at your hands, the floor, or only at your visual aids. Try not to fidget, or to "um" and "ah". Practice with a friend who will tell you how you look and sound when you perform.

6. Answering questions You may be assessed on how well the examiners think you **understand of the content** of your talk. This will probably be partly judged by your answers to questions. Listen to the questions and comments carefully and ask them to be rephrased if you don't understand them. Answer all questions politely and honestly. The best way to ensure you're prepared for questions is to have researched around the area of your talk, and know more than just the information included in it.

The day before the exam

Prepare the things you'll need for the exam the day before. Always have at least one spare pen and pencil. Ensure you have any specialist equipment you need, as well as your student registration card or other necessary documents. If you require a calculator check the batteries (or better still take

some spares). The exam room may be cool, even if it's hot outside, so take something warm to wear.



Make sure you know exactly when your exam starts and where it will be. If you'll be driving to your exam venue make sure you know where you'll be able to park. Check too that your alarm clock works, and is set correctly. Occasionally students turn up late for exams because "their alarm clock didn't go off"! Every year some students turn up on the wrong day, or at the wrong time! Don't let that be you.

Get a good nights sleep before the exam. Don't stay up late revising, you'll not sleep as well and you'll probably worry. Equally don't go to bed early just because of exams. Your mind may be too active and you'll probably toss about and not sleep. Do

something relaxing and distracting just before going to bed. You might watch TV, listen to music or read a novel, but don't go out and get drunk!

If you're ill during your exam let someone in authority know as soon as you can. Take advice about what to do. You may well need to get a doctor's note if you wish your illness to be taken into consideration by the examiners, or if you need to have your exam rescheduled.

The hour before the exam

Don't arrive at the exam venue too early. You'll probably sit and worry. In addition there'll most likely be other students there doing the same thing, and you may wind each other up unnecessarily. Try to relax. If you're nervous breathe deeply and think positive thoughts for a few moments. Be reassured by all the work you've done!

During the exam

When you enter the examination hall you may be allowed to choose your own seat. If so then think about where to sit. Some students prefer to choose a site at the front of the room, to minimize

distractions from other students. Also a place near a window can benefit from extra natural light. However a window seat may be cooler in cold weather, or in too much sun in hot weather.

The exam room will be staffed by invigilators, who won't necessarily be your teachers. They are there to see that the exam is run in a fair and correct way. They will start the exam off, giving you any last minute information you need, and ensure that the exam ends at the required time. The invigilators will also bring extra paper round for any students that need it. Put up your hand to ask for paper before you need it, to make sure you don't waste time waiting for them after you've already run out of space. If you have any problem during the exam tell an invigilator. This includes if you feel unwell, need to go to the toilet or your pens run out of ink.

When you sit down check that you have the right exam paper. Make sure your watch shows the same time as the clock in the exam hall, and you know when the exam ends. Read the paper through **CAREFULLY**, including the instructions on the exam paper. If a question is in two parts **CHECK** whether you are expected to do **JUST ONE OR BOTH** parts!

Read **all** the questions, and think carefully about what's being asked. Mark possible questions and start with the one that you find the easiest. Doing

this will boost your confidence and may help to get your thoughts flowing. Often longer questions are easier - because they give you more clues and information, helping to trigger your memory. If you're stuck it may be easier to get some marks for multi-part questions, where you know at least some answers. Don't worry about answering questions in numerical order unless specifically instructed to do so. You must, however, write the correct question number by each of your answers.

One of the biggest causes of exam failure is not completing exactly the task set. Many students assume they know this before they've read the questions carefully, and consequently some will answer what they think or wish had been set. Always check the back of the paper. I once had an otherwise intelligent student tell me that after an exam he had turned the paper over – only to discover there were questions on the back! It's easier to do daft things when you're under pressure.

Ideally you should've worked out the time available per question before the exam and now you should try and stick to it. Don't ponder if you're stuck. Move on and return to unfinished questions at the end, if you've time, when you've completed the questions you can do. If you start to run out of time then list the points you would've made.

If your inspiration suddenly dries up **DON'T PANIC!** Relax by slowly taking several deep breaths. Focus for a moment on your good points. Remind yourself of all the revision you've been doing in preparation for this moment, before returning to your question. Check your instructions and try again. If your mind is still blank, try jotting down words and ideas connected with your question on a sheet of scrap paper. Try to visualise your notes. If your mind still refuses to co-operate do another question. Often you'll recall the information you need later, after you've been concentrating on something else.

Answer the right number of questions

One of the commonest exam mistakes is doing the wrong number of questions (students often do too few, and occasionally too many!). Always attempt the correct number of questions. If, for example, you're supposed to do 4 questions don't try answering 2, even if you think you can do them really well. Your marks will start out of 50%, and you'll have to get an average of 80% for the 2 you do - just to average 40% overall! If you answer 3 questions your marks will start out of 75%. Then you'll have to get an average of 67% for the 3 you do just to get 50% overall. It is better to do the right number of questions reasonably well than to do some questions well and some very poorly.

After the exam

It's probably best not to immediately check answers for exams you've just done. If you find your answers aren't correct you'll feel discouraged. Waiting for your results will then be more painful, and you may put a shadow over any other exams you have to take afterwards. Although analysing your exam performance can help you to improve yourself in the future it's better to wait until after you've come terms with whatever grades you get this time round.

If you're pleased with your results then **congratulations!** If you've tried your best and not got what you'd hoped for don't despair. Talk to your friends, family and teachers: find someone who'll help you cheer up and get things in perspective. Think carefully about how important it is to resit any failed exams. If it is important to do this then try to work out how you can improve your performance next time. Ask yourself what problems you encountered and work out how you'll address them, so that they aren't problems the next time. Reread this guide for ideas on improving your performance. If you make yourself a plan and do your best to stick to it things will hopefully be better next time round.

Summary

- If you're struggling with your study tell your teacher without delay.
- Know what the format of your exams will be.
- Obtain copies of past and/or sample exam papers as early as possible.
- Check what tools you'll use in your exam and learn to use them.
- If you have any special needs take advice about making arrangements for these.
- Start your revision as soon as possible. Read around your subject. Revise regularly and test yourself regularly. Use a revision timetable.
- Revise subjects you're less keen on at least as much as those you like.
- Revise in an atmosphere conducive to study.
- Remember why you're doing your exams and that your study won't last forever.
- Compile revision summaries and use them to help you answer exam questions.
- Practice answering questions with and then without your notes, then to time.
- Take an active approach to learning. Use whatever memory tricks work for you.
- Keep a record of the revision you do, for when you need cheering up.

- If you're allowed texts become familiar with them before the exam.
- Use a "cover-up" strategy when answering multiple-choice questions.
- Answers to short answer questions should be brief and succinct.
- Essays should be a continuous piece of prose, with an introduction, main body and conclusion.
- Show your reasoning and workings when doing problems and calculations.
- If you're taking a practical exam find out exactly what's going to be assessed and how. Practice your skills, aiming to become as proficient as possible.
- Prepare the structure and content of oral presentations carefully. Practise talks and be aware of how long they'll take you.
- Prepare what you need for your exam in advance. Know exactly when and where your exams will be. Get a good nights sleep before your exam.
- Read the exam paper carefully and answer the questions set. Answer the right number of questions.
- If you're pleased with your results – congratulations! If not then try to work out how you can improve next time.

About the Author

Ian M. Wiley is an experienced lecturer who's regularly involved in assessing and examining students at graduate and post-graduate level. He has written numerous other works of non-fiction.