## Contents

*Acknowledgements* vi

1 Introduction 1
2 Where do I start? 17
3 Getting in ‘the zone’ (i): Planning for peak performance 29
4 Getting in ‘the zone’ (ii): Frames of mind for peak performance 45
5 Exam myths and realities 63
6 What are examiners looking for? 77
7 Revision strategies 95
8 Memory: Remembering what we want, when we need it 115
9 Structured revision sessions 141
10 Stress, health and performance 163
11 Getting in ‘the zone’ (iii): Seeing success 177
12 The exam 195

Appendix 1 Alternative exam arrangements for students with disabilities and/or dyslexia 213
Appendix 2 Might I be dyslexic? 215
Appendix 3 Sources of help 218
Appendix 4 5-point plan for peak performance 220
Appendix 5 Planning checklists 225
Appendix 6 Tracking developments in an area of research 231

*References* 232
*Index* 233
Finding the reward

Exams can bring a sense of satisfaction and reward. They provide a reason for putting time aside to really come to terms with a subject, which we might not do if the pressure of the exam were not there. In other words, exams can drive us to perform better, to become experts in a subject.

Naturally, most people would rather spend their time doing almost anything else than sit an exam, or even prepare for it. However, if we appreciate that exams can confer advantages, and remind ourselves of this from time to time, it can help to maintain the motivation we need in order to achieve success.

Achieving personal best

If you adopt even basic, common-sense strategies for exam preparation, the chances of passing your exams are very high. This book provides guidance on how to maximise such chances of success.

However, athletes are rarely content simply to complete a race; they seek continually to improve on their personal best, taking a broad approach to all aspects of their training. Similarly, this book encourages you to take holistic, systematic and strategic approaches to exam preparation, which can help you achieve the best possible results, or your ‘peak performance’.

Taking charge of the process

This book emphasises that there are things we can do to increase the likelihood of a better exam experience for ourselves. This means not just better marks in exams, but greater clarity and control over the exam process:

- more understanding of what exams are for,
- more understanding of our own performance,
- awareness of better coping strategies,
Aims of the book

This book aims to assist you to:

- feel positive about taking exams,
- reflect upon what exam success means to you personally,
- build your confidence in taking exams,
- plan more effectively for your exams,
- develop useful revision and exam strategies and techniques,
- take a broad-based approach to exam preparation,
- cope with emergencies,
- achieve your personal best.

Confused about exams?
Clarify your thinking with Chapters 5 and 6 on exam myths and what examiners are looking for.

Anxious and stressed about exams?
To identify suitable ways of managing your anxiety, see Chapter 10.

Wasting time in revision sessions?
Make better use of revision time by using the structured revision sessions in Chapter 9.

Worried about memory?
Train your memory through techniques outlined in Chapter 8, but see Chapter 10 on the impact of stress management, mental calm, relaxation and nourishment. Structured revision (Chapter 9) is also relevant.

Want to achieve peak performance in exams?
Even if you are already good at exams, you may wish to do better. See Chapters 3, 4 and 11, on getting into the ‘exam zone’.

Lots of time before the exam?
Look at sections on building knowledge architectures (Chapter 8), and on paced revision through structured sessions (Chapter 9).

Different starting places
The book is designed so you can start at different places depending on:

- what you need,
- how much time you have to revise,
- how good at exams you are already,
- what you want to achieve, at what cost.

New to exams?
You don’t have to start at the beginning of the book or work through it chapter by chapter. However, if you are very anxious about exams, or have not been successful in them recently, then this Introduction and Chapter 2, ‘Where do I start?’ will orientate your thinking about exams. Chapters 7 and 9 outline basic revision strategies.
The approach of this book

This book makes certain assumptions. These are that:

- you can influence the outcome of exams,
- mental attitude is a key factor in success,
- you need to recognise and value your resources,
- there will be an individualised approach to exams that will work for you.

You can influence the outcome of exams

This book starts from the premise that you can influence how well you do at exams. Much of exam success is the result of adopting the right state of mind, combined with good preparation, recent practice and the application of realistic strategies. This is good news as, generally, these are matters over which we can take control.

Mental attitude

Although many people view exams with apprehension, this does not have to be the case. It is not unreasonable to question the validity of exams as a way of measuring understanding or as an indicator of intelligence. However, focusing on the drawbacks of exams, dwelling on past disappointments or worrying about what might happen, will not help us to feel any better about exams. We are more likely to do well if we engineer a positive mind-set with regard to revision and exams.

Recognise and value your resources

Thinking and talking about negative aspects of exams simply swallows up resources such as time, mental effort and physical energy that we could deploy more productively. It can also drive away social resources such as other students to study with, or friends and family, as people find it easier to be around people with a positive approach rather than those who complain.

This does not mean that we have to pretend we love exams if we don’t. It does mean thinking through ways of diverting our attention, time, energy and even our social interactions towards achieving a better exam outcome.

The approach that works for you

Individual students will respond to very specific strategies in preparing for exams. This book places an emphasis on thinking through different ways of approaching exams in order to find the right combination of strategies and techniques for your own situation. It provides quick and easy activities to structure your reflection about revision and exams to help you to identify the right ways for you to achieve exam success.
Does exam advice work?

Most of us have been given advice about what to do or not to do in order to be better students and pass our exams:

Many students ignore the advice they are given and still do very well at exams. Others follow it dutifully and find it doesn’t work for them. It is rarely as straightforward as following a simple set of ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’. It is to be expected that the same advice won’t suit all students: individuals perform well under different conditions. If you haven’t taken exams recently, or haven’t been very successful at them, then it is worth testing out advice in similar conditions to those of real exams, and seeing what works for you.

Reflection

What was the best exam advice you have been given? Why did this work?

Have you been given, or read, any exam advice that doesn’t seem to work for you? Is this poor advice, or are there particular reasons why it doesn’t seem to work for you?
Does exam advice work? (continued)

Underlying assumptions

Much easily available advice about exams is based on assumptions such as that:

- understanding the subject is more important than passing exams;
- learning over time is better than learning at the last minute;
- it is unhelpful to spend time revising the night before exams;
- only poor students use strategies such as ‘learning off by heart’;
- it isn’t a good idea to look at new material just before an exam.

Test these assumptions for yourself

Advice based on the assumptions listed above can be very useful and is worth taking into consideration. However, these underlying assumptions are not true for all students. They may, or may not, be right for you.

Our individuality in aspects such as our attitude towards study, our stamina, how well we have trained our memories, our hunger for success, and our willingness to find enjoyment in difficult tasks, will have an effect on how far we can ignore advice and still do well. We are also very different in the way we think about time, the way we use time, our need to work with other people, and our need for rest or distractions.

It is important that we practise and experiment with different strategies so that we know from experience what is really effective for us in particular circumstances and for different kinds of learning. We can then feel confident in accepting or declining advice.
I do work hard all through the year, but I do my most effective revision the week or so before the exam – that’s when all the connections start to fall into place.

My housemates revise through the night sometimes, and they seem to do OK. I don’t know how they do that – it doesn’t work for me, I need my sleep so for me it is essential to start preparing well in advance of the exam.

I know everyone says don’t stay up revising the night before an exam, but that’s the best way for me to remember dates and names.

I read somewhere that memorising material was a superficial approach to study and that students who do this are not very successful. I find this hard to believe because I have always memorised things like lists of information and I have always had very good exam results.

Once I am in the exam, I won’t remember things if I haven’t been over it and over it. This means I can’t just start revising the week before the exam. I have to build up my sense of the subject by looking at it from different angles over many weeks.

It really depends for me what kind of thing I am trying to remember. I need to keep at the work on a regular basis to get to grips with it. That way, I know I know ‘the big stuff’, like the people and what their contributions were. Even if I do that, I still end up working like mad for the last few days, going over the fine details.

I learnt some of my best little gems by reading my notes in the corridor on the way down to the exam room, and outside the exam room door. I know this goes against all advice in the books, but details that seemed trivial when I was trying to revise concepts suddenly struck me as useful examples when I was about to go into the exam.
What affects exam success?

Exam performance is the result of a combination of many factors, not a single cause. Even though we may realise this, when we excel or do badly we tend to revert to simplistic reasons, such as whether we ‘got the right questions’ or ‘not being very good at exams’. If exam success has seemed elusive or inexplicable, then it is worth considering the following contributory factors, and reflecting on how far these are significant to your own situation.

Factors that affect exam performance

1. Subject knowledge
2. Your exam history
3. Exam preparation
4. Exam practice
5. Experience of the subject
6. Writing skills
7. Use of time
8. Attitude and approach

These aspects are covered briefly in the following pages, and most are covered in detail throughout the book.

Reflection

Before you go further, take a moment to consider the 8 factors listed above. Which of these factors do you think have been amongst your strengths in previous exams?

Which factors are likely to be areas that let you down?

What, in general, do you think made your exam marks lower than they needed to be?
1 Subject knowledge

Knowing your subject well

The better you know your subject, the easier it is to:

• recognise what is significant – and to understand what must be included and what you can leave out when revising and when writing exam answers;
• identify links and connections between different aspects of the subject;
• recognise which schools of thought are relevant to which exam questions.

Background reading

You are expected to read a wide range of books and articles to deepen your understanding of the subject. Your reading will be evident in aspects such as the examples and details that you refer to in your exam answers, the way you link material, the judgements you make, and the quality of your analysis.

Subject knowledge is often regarded as the most important aspect of exam success but it is unlikely to be the sole factor. Even if you know a great deal, other factors apart from subject knowledge can be more critical in the exam.
The number of exams you sit builds your familiarity with working under exam conditions. Combined with a taste of success, this can help you to approach exams without excessive stress.

A history of exam failure can undermine exam confidence, but does not mean that you can’t be good at exams in the future. You can improve exam technique.

On the other hand, students who are usually good at exams can become complacent or even bored, which can lose them the competitive edge unless they adopt new approaches.

**Reflection**  My exam history

Consider whether your exam history has left you feeling:

- [ ] Confident about exams?
- [ ] With a taste of success?
- [ ] With a good understanding of how to improve?
- [ ] With sufficient experience that you can enter exams without excessive nerves?
- [ ] Ready and keen to find ways of improving your marks?
3 Exam preparation

The amount of exam preparation

If you want to be really sure of doing well in exams, then it is essential to prepare well for them. It is extremely unlikely that you can go into an exam and do well without such preparation, even if you work hard throughout the course. This is because the exam isn’t simply about studying or even understanding the material, but is about presenting:

- **specific aspects of what you know**, that is, only what the questions ask for;
- **in particular ways**, such as short answers or essays or demonstrations;
- **at speed** – there is little time to think, plan, and select during an exam;
- **from memory**: there isn’t usually the time or the opportunity to look up anything you can’t remember.

In preparing for an exam, there isn’t a set amount that you must do. It is more a question of putting aside time, on a regular basis, to focus on the subject in an active and strategic way. As the exam approaches, you need to spend much more time in exam preparation.

The type of preparation

Preparation is about more than learning the material. It includes such factors as:

- creating the right state of mind;
- knowing your weak points and working on them;
- finding support;
- taking care of yourself so that you are physically able to perform;
- organising your life so that you can cope with the lead-up to the exam.

Reflection Exam preparation

Consider whether your preparation is:

- Too rushed? Do you need to start earlier?
- Too brief? Do you need to do more?
- Boring? Do you need to make it more varied and interesting?
- Lonely or isolating? Would you work better with others?
4 Exam practice

One of the best ways of preparing for any event is to practise in conditions as near to the real event as possible. Although it is hard to simulate exam conditions exactly, it is still valuable to go through the process. If you are not used to exams, or suffer from exam nerves, then it is all the more important to work under simulated exam conditions before your exams.

Through exam practice, you:

- gain a sense of how much you can write in a short time; this will help you revise more efficiently, recognising the importance of selecting the most essential material;
- learn to work quickly in planning, writing and checking answers;
- improve at becoming focused quickly;
- discover what you really know and what you only half-remember;
- can check your answers after the event – and see the quality of your answers.

**Take and make opportunities**

If you are lucky, your programme may set mock exams. If you get the chance of these, do take it. It may not be an enjoyable experience, but you will find out valuable lessons about your own performance before you sit the exam for real. Otherwise, consider setting up your own mock conditions, either alone or with others (see Chapter 9).

---


---

**Reflection Exam practice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What would you gain from exam practice?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What stops you from doing exam practice? How can you overcome this?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do you need to know about your own exam answers that you could find out from practice exams?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Could you set up mock exams with others? What do you need to do to set this up?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5 Experience of the subject

Students who are familiar with their current subject area benefit from:

- an existing good knowledge base in the subject, on which to build;
- awareness of specialist terminology in the subject.

If you are new to the subject, or recently returned to study, it can sometimes take longer to build an underlying sense of the subject. This may mean that you need to read course material slowly while you build your subject comprehension. This may feel frustrating or demotivating, as it can be a slow process looking up words you don’t know, and making sense of material with unfamiliar language and concepts. However, be reassured, over time, the initial disadvantage will reduce or disappear.

If you are new to a subject, you will benefit from actively building your knowledge architecture of the subject, so that you can see how new material fits together (see p. 136, Chapter 8). This will help you use time effectively in preparing for exams, as you will have a better sense of what to learn and what to leave out.
6 Writing skills

For all written exams, exam success is affected by:

- **Style**: using a clear, easy to read, writing style
- **Vocabulary**: having the vocabulary to express yourself quickly, succinctly and accurately
- **Composition**: using well-structured, reasoned argument
- **Technical writing skills**: using grammar, punctuation and spelling accurately in order to express your case more clearly, and to ensure the examiner remains focused on the quality of your argument, and not on writing errors.

Students who write well do have an advantage. They can use their language skills to demonstrate their knowledge well, and can sometimes even disguise what they don’t know. It is worth developing your writing skills.

**Poor writing skills?**

If your writing skills are not strong, there are things you can do.

- Look for courses where you can develop academic skills, such as critical thinking, writing clearly and structuring an argument. These skills are essential for most university programmes and improve the quality of your writing.
- If you have poor grammar, spelling or punctuation, check whether your university or a local college offers sessions to improve these.
- Take extra care in checking through your exam answers.

If you have always had poor technical writing skills despite working on these, it may be worth checking whether you are dyslexic (see p. 215).

---

7 Use of time

Amount of time

Exam performance is affected by the amount of time you spend on:

- reading around the subject to build up your subject expertise;
- thinking about the subject;
- getting to grips with difficult material;
- how many topics you cover in depth for the exams;
- exam preparation;
- developing techniques to aid recall;
- practising exam questions.

It can be a great advantage simply to have more time available for study and revision. This enables you to do justice to the subject, as well as spending time on relaxation, managing stress, physical exercise, and nutrition, all of which also contribute to your ability to do well in exams. It is rare for any student to feel they have enough time to give their subject the time it deserves.

Time well spent

The way you manage the time available to you can be more important than the overall amount of time. If there are many demands on your time, then the strategies outlined in this book should help you make more effective use of the time available.

Reflection

How could you create more time for study and revision?

How could you spend more time on your health, nutrition, stress management, and fitness, all of which affect exam performance?

Consider how you can use the time you spend on revision and exam preparation more effectively.
8 Attitude and approach

Our mental preparation for exams is perhaps the most important aspect of all. Our cognitive activity, such as our ability to think clearly and logically, is affected by factors such as:

- how calm we are feeling;
- whether we have a sufficient level of interest and excitement;
- the chemicals in the bloodstream released by how calm, excited or stressed we are feeling;
- the chemicals we have in the bloodstream because of what we consume as food, drink, medication or drugs, or take in from our surroundings;
- how distracted we are by emotions and feelings, rather than focusing on the task in hand.

Our performance is further affected by our attitude in areas such as:

- our motivation and endurance: how well we can keep going when there are other things we would rather do instead;
- our self-understanding: knowing what is likely to be a barrier to good preparation and the steps we need to take to overcome these.

These aspects are addressed in more detail in subsequent chapters.

Reflection

Does your attitude or level of commitment help or hinder your revision and exam performance?

In which areas of life could you take better care of yourself, so as to improve your exam performance?

What barriers stand in the way of you developing your performance? How can you address these?
This book assumes that people can do well at exams if they understand their subject, practise and prepare well. However, it is important to recognise that the path to exam success isn’t the same for everyone. This means that it isn’t simply a question of imitating the actions of people who have been good at exams, or following advice that seems to work for some people under certain circumstances.

Part of your exam preparation is testing out what works for you. You need to know whether printed advice or received wisdom works for you. You can develop this knowledge through a number of means, including:

- reflecting on what has happened to you in the past: did it work?
- considering doing things differently if you are not happy with your previous marks
- testing out a variety of techniques
- practise, using past exam papers and mock exams.

This introduction has also alluded to the broader context in which we take exams. Good exam preparation isn’t simply about spending lots of time going over the material we have covered in class, or even how we spend our study time, important though these might be. Other factors are also significant, such as our mental and physical well-being, and our overall ability to cope with revision and exams.

The following chapters provide suggestions on methods, strategies, techniques and reflections that you can try out for yourself. The eight factors that affect performance that are identified in this Introduction are referred to, where relevant in those chapters, linked to the themes or activities being covered. You can also find out more about sources of particular help, if you feel you need it, through Appendix 3 (p. 218).
Index

Advice – does it work? 4–5
Aims of the book 2
Answering exam questions
  good exam answers 80, 81
  set questions 78
  short answer-questions 82–3
  technical answers 85–6
  see Questions
Anxiety about exams 2
  managing anxiety 171–6
  about memory 119
  and stress 163
Athletes approach to success 1, 29
  and 'the zone' 32, 35, 36, 178
Attitude 3, 15, 45–63, 177, 178–81,
  183–4, 220–4
  to exams 19
  and peak performance 45–62
  positive attitude 49, 54–5
  taking charge of 46, 50, 52–3
  triggers to negative attitudes 51
Benefits of exams 21
Boredom 100, 137
Brain
  and food 117
  and rest 118
  training the brain 125–131
  and the unconscious 118
  see Memory
Calming exercises 172–5, 179
Challenges, setting 110
Checklists 225–30
Critical analysis 89, 91, 92, 93
Critical moments 35, 39
Deferred gratification 55
Disability and exams 213–9
Dyslexia 213, 215–7, 218
Enjoyment and peak performance 40
  finding enjoyment and interest 108–10, 137, 185, 186, 198
Environment
  deciding the best 25–6, 10–14
  changing 110
Essays in exams 81, 89–93
Exam Boards 77
Examiners 77–94
  impressing examiners 87–8
  how they mark 79–80
  myths about 78
  what looking for 77–81, 88
  wording of questions 89–93
Exam papers
  completing 190–93
  understanding exam papers 89–92, 143
Exams
  after the exams 210, 211
  how they affect me 47–8
  costs and benefits 21–2
  keeping in perspective 56–7,
  71
  objective measure 19
  positive aspects 20
Experience
  building on your own 182, 211
  of exams 9
  students' experiences 6, 27, 34,
  66, 102–3, 170
  of your subject 12
Flow experience 32
Focus 38–9, 101, 105, 135
Food and exams 117, 200
Frequently asked questions 208–10
Ideal performance state 58
Imaging techniques 180–2
Individual approaches 3, 5, 16, 22,
  78
Intelligence 67, 72
Isoflavins 117
Knowledge 222
  Knowledge architectures 12,
  135, 136–40
  of exams 9
  of your subject 8, 12
  versus memory 134
Last-minute revision 99, 195, 196
  emergence measures 197
  fine-tuning 198
  on the way to the exam 187–9
Marking criteria 79
Marking, how exams are marked
  79–80, 81

© Stella Cottrell (2006), The Exam Skills Handbook,
Palgrave Macmillan Ltd
Meditation 174–5
Memory
exam memory 123
and failure 75, 115–140
and food 117
and knowledge 135–9
and rest 118
and strategies 120, 121, 126–31
understanding your memory 115–16
Mnemonics 126–31, 132–3, 198
Mock exams 155–7
Motivation 21, 22, 61
Myths about exams 63–5, 67–76
Note-making for revision
organising your notes 146–8
reducing notes down 147–8, 198
unhelpful approaches 100
using index cards 149–50, 152
Omega oils 117
Organising yourself 201, 202
see checklists, planning, time management
Past exam papers 104
Peak performance
Factors that affect 7–16, 30–1, 36–43, 177
see 'the zone'
Personal best 1, 30, 31
Plan: 5-Point plan 41–3, 220–4
Planning
Exams answers 150–1, 203
Revision 99, 107, 113, 141–56
Positive thinking 49
Practice in taking exams 11, 37, 155–161
Preparation for exams
How much to prepare 10, 74, 101
see Practice in taking exams,
Questions
Presentations 84
Programme expectations 23
Purpose of exams 19, 20
Questions
answering 78, 91–3, 149–56, 191–2, 203, 205–7, 208, 209
familiarising yourself with exam questions 145, 149–56
how many to answer 75, 79
interpreting exam 91–2, 93
invent your own 109, 138
selecting in the exam 191, 204
words used in exam questions 89–90
Reading
importance of to exam preparation 8, 137–8
as useful revision 101, 109
Resources, social 3
Revision
common mistakes 98–101
getting started 104
imaging the process 186
long-term revision 97
make it interesting 108–10
myths 73
revising sufficiently 105–6
revising too little 101, 106
revising too much 101, 145
for short-answer questions 82
strategies 95–114
structured revision sessions 143–61
for technical questions 85
timetable 107
what is revision? 97
with other people 100, 108, 111
Reward 1, 55
Self-awareness 35–6
Selection
of key information 105, 135, 138–9, 151–4, 197
see Planning, Questions
Self-talk 181, 183–4
Short-answer questions 82–3
Sleep, rest and the brain 118, 199
Starting places for exam preparation 2, 17–28
Stress, coping with 163–176
checklist 166–7
benefits of 164
managing in the exam 209
Success
what affects it? 7–16, 177–80
what does it mean to you? 22
Support from others 3
Technical questions 85
Time
management 99, 104, 108, 197
managing time in the exam 114–5, 193, 203, 208–9
time-tabling revision 107, 141–2
use of time 14
see Checklists, Planning, Organisation
Tools for exam preparation 24
Unconscious memory working 118
Water, value to brain 117
Working with others 100
benefits of 111
setting up study groups 111–12
and stress 171, 172, 176
Writing skills 13
Writing speed 75, 144–5
'the zone' 29, 32–6
at critical moments 35
the exam zone 33
seeing success 177–94