

# EXAMS: PREPARATION AND REVISING

## By Dr. Kevin Bucknall

### 1. GENERAL PREPARATION AND STUDY METHODS

- Take note of the time of day when you naturally feel low and try not to use it for study purposes. I personally have found that around 4 p.m. to 5.30 p.m. are not good times for me. My energy level is low and I cannot tackle anything new with enthusiasm. If you have a similar down-time, schedule that for rest and relaxation rather than study. Best not to persuade yourself that 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. is your problem time!
- It is worth learning a relaxation technique and practicing it, perhaps twice a day, in order to keep your stress levels down and improve your ability to study. You can do this between your study sessions if you find it helps.
- Find a study-buddy if possible—it helps you to learn. You can bounce ideas off, explain things to them and listen to their views. You can revise as a couple, playing valuable learning games.
- If your study-buddy is someone you fancy, make sure you really are studying and not socializing in some way! Save your smooching or whatever for non-study periods.
- It does not have to be one study-buddy, you could work with two or three of you together. Is merely easier to organise a couple of people and just maybe there will be less distraction.

Here is a list of useful things to do with your buddy that can improve your learning and exam marks.

- Choose your general subject then each of you takes the same topic and reads silently through their individual lecture notes for, say, 10 minutes (or 20 minutes, whatever you find useful). Then close your notes and one explains what they know to the other. You can either have number two interrupt and question number one; or number two can save questions to the end; or of course each can explain individually to the other without any questions. You can then discuss what you have learned about the topic, and argue if you disagree. After the explanation/discussion period, you can both check for individual weak spots by opening your notes to see how well you did.
- Choose your general subject, then you can each read up a *different* topic within the subject beforehand. Both know what topic the other will cover. Then each person explains as much as s/he can remember to the other but without reference to notes. Then the explainer opens his or her notes and goes through, seeing what was missed and explaining that part too. This is a particularly valuable exercise for both parties.
- If you are good at, say, history and your buddy is good at geography you can each take one topic from your favorite discipline and explain it to the other. It is a good idea to set a time limit for each person, maybe ten minutes or whatever works best for you up to perhaps half an hour. Then take a break, switch roles, and move to the other discipline. If after the first presentation you feel like discussing more, do it!
- Take an old exam question paper and you both mug up the same question beforehand, each independently preparing a skeleton outline answer. Then you meet up and compare outlines. Discuss any differences in approach and content. See if you can merge them into an even better answer than either individual one. Do this with as many questions as you can cope with in one study session. When you have worked your way through the whole exam paper, you can always start again with a different one. Keep all these skeleton outlines, filed by topic, for they make excellent revision material.

- Take the same exam paper, but instead of you both mugging up the same question, you tackle different ones, again preparing a skeleton outline answer. First you could try to explain your answer *without* looking at the skeleton, then do it again but this time with the skeleton in front of you. The listener may ask questions, criticize where possible, and make you defend your position. Then you switch roles and the previous listener now presents his or her answer in similar fashion.
- You both take the same exam paper and go through in advance, making skeleton outline answers to *every* question. Then you meet up and compare answers, looking at both the approach to the question and the content. You might discuss which seems the better approach, how best to organize the points in logical fashion, which points should be in and why. In the end, try to combine your views into one brilliant skeleton outline answer for each question. And pray that similar questions, come up for you! You are both gradually covering the course/exam material *and* getting practice at preparing good answers. If that doesn't improve your marks, then I don't know what will!
- Having agreed on the subject in advance, you meet up and one asks questions of the other. The question-asker can have lecture notes, or other notes or textbook, open in order to ask a sensible question; the responder works from memory and intelligence. Then you switch roles when one gets fed up! Perhaps taking one topic within the overall subject would be useful for one questioner, then you might role switch to a different topic but within the same general subject.
- If the topic is large and your session starts to get lengthy, it helps to take a break. You might do this after each person has finished their individual part or maybe after you have both presented on one topic. Tired is good—it means you are studying and learning. Exhausted is not good, so be sensible about this.

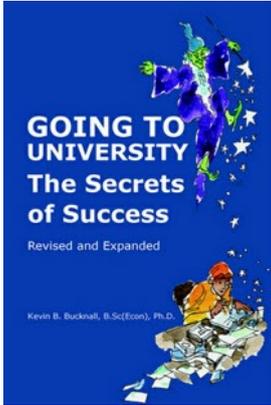
On the whole, any game of this kind is an excellent way of learning and revising, and can be a lot more fun than sitting trying to read notes on one's own and feeling bored and fed up with the whole process. You can remember much more by explaining something to someone else rather than just reading it over, particularly if your attention is apt to wander a bit.

## 2. REVISING STEADILY

- It's best to revise a little each day, working steadily throughout the term or semester. If you go over the notes you took during the day, for instance your class and lecture notes, or other notes you might have taken for yourself when reading new materials, it helps to embed the information by the immediate reinforcement. This should make it easier for you to recall the information later.
- Then look back over the notes you take earlier in the term or in the year and read them. Choose a topic and go over it a few times. This helps to stop you forgetting things that you should know—and the teachers will assume you do know because they are certain that you have covered it.
- For most people it's a good idea to file all the information you have by topic. When it comes to you later intensive revision before the exams you can knock the topic over more easily and also see the boundaries of your knowledge. If your lecture notes, homework notes, of the notes you took yourself from books or the internet and so on are all separate it will probably be harder for you later on. Remember! Exams are not set about the sequence of your lectures but about the topics and questions you have covered. Organisation by topic seems to work best.

### 3. THE PERIOD IMMEDIATELY BEFORE THE EXAM

- If you have not worked steadily as suggested earlier, then start by reading your old notes *now*. Starting is the hard part; putting this off is easy and the mind can always think of things that seem more attractive than work. Fight it! Do it!! Begin now!!!
- Unless you have no notes at all, this is not the time to be making new notes, other than for any ongoing lecture or class room work you are still doing. It is usually better to revise steadily all the work you have already done, rather than go off to libraries reading new material. The payoff from revision is usually greater in terms of gaining better exam marks.
- About four weeks before the exams begin you could usefully make a revision timetable and start to follow it.
- In your revision timetable, make sure that each subject in which you will be examined gets roughly (but definitely not exactly) the same amount of time.
- However you should allocate a bit more time to the subjects you are weaker in, to bring them up to strength. It is tempting, but not as useful, to revise heavily in the subjects you like the best.
- Make sure that you get some time off for exercise and enjoyment, away from studying, but keep this time to a reasonable amount only. Saturday or Sunday off, as well as two evenings a week not studying, might be ample relaxation time for you when this close to the exams. In the end it is your choice on how well you want to do.
- Do not try to study for hours on end without a break. Sheer input of time is not the aim: maximum your understanding and ability to remember is your goal. Most people seem to do best with concentrated revision periods of about 45 minutes, with a maximum of perhaps an hour and a quarter. Then a short break, then back to the grindstone.
- Your rest periods between study sessions should be at least ten minutes but not more than half an hour. Longer than that you are really goofing off, not maximizing your learning capability.
- In the rest periods between studying, try to do something different; make a cup of coffee and listen to music; vacuum clean your room and make the bed (ouch!); do some work in the garden; wash up; take the dog for a short walk..... whatever fits your needs best. If you can get some physical effort into this “rest” period, it often seems to help your studying.
- For some people it is better not to revise one subject for a whole evening, but take perhaps two subjects, with a rest in between. If however you find it irritating to stop and are so interested in what you are doing that you wish to go on with the first subject, then for you one subject per evening is right. Individuals just differ on this so do your own thing.
- It is usually a bad idea to work through the night however desperate you might feel; and to try to mug up a semester’s work by staying awake for 36 hours is plain stupid. This is particularly bad to do the evening before an exam. It will exhaust you and leave you in poor shape to sit the exam where you really want to give of your best.



The author's latest book is *Going to University: the Secrets of Success*, 2nd Revised and Expanded Edition, Kewei Press, UK, 2009. The recommended retail price is £9.95. An excerpt can be downloaded from [www.keweipress.com](http://www.keweipress.com). A Kindle version is now available, priced about £3.09 (inc. VAT), or in United States dollars around \$4.79. Details and links on the site below.

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