

The Parents Guide to High School Exams (Part 2)

When it comes to pupils sitting down to revise, there are a number of practical steps they can employ to make their study time more effective. One useful step (as mentioned in Part 1) is to do a quiz to determine their learning styles – that is, how they best take in and process information. In my book, *Passing Exams for Dummies*, I offer a short questionnaire that helps students determine if they are a visual, auditory, kinaesthetic or an analytical learner.

There are a number of other styles that help determine other strengths such as whether your teen works best independently or with others. You can download a free questionnaire and chart your results from this website. Simply click on the learning styles link on the home-page. When their learning styles are known, students can then direct their revision techniques according to their strengths and work to build on their weaknesses.

Students then need to decide what to study and what to leave from a vast amount of information gathered during the year. Using past exam papers and asking their teachers for information are two helpful hints. Another is for you to ask them: 'if you were allowed to take your notes into the exam, which ones would you take?' With this question in their mind, they will be more selective as to what to revise.

When reading information, it is helpful to skim read in the first instance. Suggest to them that they look at headings, pictures, captions, bold or highlighted words and topic sentences. This primes the brain to get ready to receive more detailed information and helps comprehension later because the brain cannot understand something it does not recognise. Study reading can follow shortly after and will occur with a lot more ease.

The intention now is to begin to condense the material being revised into smaller chunks. This can be done by simply highlighting a key word in a paragraph or underlining a key phrase. The idea is that these key words can then be used in rewritten notes that are organised for memory retention. Class notes tend to be taken in a linear format, which is not ideal for retention so more visual representations of condensed class notes is necessary. Colour-coded mind mapping techniques and other types of concept maps are a great way to re-write class notes. They involve branching out key points around a page from a centre topic and using a lot of colour and pictures. There is some great software for this, such as *Mind Manager*, which can be purchased on line. For more sequential forms of note taking, such as the key points for an essay, route maps are needed and help organise information from introduction to conclusion. I have developed an interactive CD called *Essay Route Maps* that teaches this technique to help students plan, write and memorise key points for their assignment and exam essays. You can obtain an interactive CD about it from this website under the High school / resources tabs.

Once students have reviewed their class notes and rewritten them into condensed key words and phrases, the next step is to memorise them and practice their recall. Knowing how memory works is essential to maximise exam performance, and yet, I have found through my research that many students do not know how to best utilise

their memory. As a parent, if you have some knowledge on this subject, you may be able to help.

Memory works well through *visual association*. This means students need to use their imagination to make *pictures* of their condensed notes and place them into a particular location by linking them to pictures already stored in the memory.

For example, one powerful technique that you can suggest to your children is the *Location Method*. It has many applications for memorising different subject content. You can tell them that the idea is to first imagine five rooms in a familiar location (rooms in a house) and see themselves walking through the rooms a number of times in the same sequence and noticing pieces of furniture as they go. These items of furniture establish memory 'pegs' – pictures that form a place on which to store new information.

The next step is to take the key words from condensed class notes (concept maps, route maps etc), and create pictures of each of these. It is important that the pictures are illogical, exaggerated, strange, sexy, funny or rude, but above all highly active. Using imagination, they link the unusual keyword pictures in groups to each room. For example, if they had a list of twenty keywords for sentences in an essay, they could place four pictures on furniture in each of the five rooms. I teach this technique as part of a school seminar and many students are amazed that after five minutes of preparation they have 100% recall.

The time they spend revising now needs to focus on using memory techniques such as the Location Method and rehearsing the recall of class notes. Just writing them out and looking at them is not good enough. There are many simple memory techniques or mnemonics they can use. For example, making acronyms or acrostics involve taking the first letter of a list of keywords and making another word or funny rhyme. Spreadsheets list key words in sequences and in patterns to each other. Flash cards are good for testing definitions – the keyword on one side, the explanation on the other. Mind Mapping offers a good visual display of class notes while Essay Route Maps put sequences of keywords together to memorise essays.

The active rehearsal of memory techniques can then be implemented according to the pupil's general learning styles. If they are a highly visual learner, they need to write and rehearse their notes visually. If they are strongly auditory, recording onto tape and playing it back is helpful. Kinaesthetic learners benefit from moving their body (feeling / doing) as they rehearse their recall as if performing on stage. Analytical learners need to think it all through logically, perhaps try to teach it to someone else.

To maximise more whole brain learning, using as many of these techniques as possible is the best solution for rehearsing recall. Mix them up a bit. As students all learn differently, some techniques may work better than others. The main thing is to give them a go. As I mentioned, an exam performance can be likened to a sports, music or drama performance - how well they prepare will determine how well they perform on the day.

I wish your children well with their exams.