

Special report Exam season

A handy guide to surviving exams

Despite new technologies available to students, says author, ABCs of preparing properly still golden advice

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'Read the question" has been joined by "turn the laptop off well before bed" as indispensable advice to survive the stresses of exam season.

Switching the Wi-fi off and visualising the perfect exam performance are other tips that will be alien to past generations – but many of the fundamentals remain the same.

"All of those traditional words of advice are still equally important," said Patrick Sherratt, author of *Passing Exams for Dummies*, who nominates chestnuts such as never leaving an exam early and double-checking an exam's location.

Sherratt's quirky study tips include mixing up study locations (the brain responds to novelty, he says), listening to music that accesses the brainwave frequencies in the Alpha range, and visualising the ideal exam performance (as top sports people do before an event).

Having performed badly in his own high school exams, the Havelock North-based author entered university as a mature student and became interested in the psychology of learning.

Sherratt, 43, now has a masters degree in education and believes motivation problems often stem from students not knowing how to study properly.

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Patrick Sherratt

Right now those students who have not done so should be focused on condensing notes from class into study notes that use pictures, patterns, key words and colour, Sherratt said.

Reading notes repeatedly – a common study habit – was time-consuming and generally ineffective in terms of memory retention.

"Study efforts can then be focused on rehearsing the understanding and memory retention of key words. Look at past exam papers – do practice questions.

"Test yourself on understanding and content retention. Use flash cards, make silly rhymes, discuss aloud, use acronyms and visual association techniques."

A good approach was to map out a two-week planner that allows the repetition of the same content at least three times before an exam. Sherratt said the first two repetitions should be done within 24 hours, then the third the following week.

Exams are a highly stressful time for many, with pressure coming from all directions. It was therefore important to try to keep a life balance – shutting yourself away all day and night could backfire.

Sherratt said the brain would naturally seek more pleasurable activities than studying, which explains why staring out the window becomes strangely desirable.

But distractions – eating or listening to music, for example – can be used as minor rewards after a set period of study.

Technology needed to be carefully managed. It was a good idea to switch off phones and Wi-fi during study, and to reduce close-to-face screen time at night in order to get a good night's sleep.



Ruth Lever has learned to manage her schedule carefully.

Picture / Greg Bowker

Dedicated student makes her study time count

Mt Albert Grammar School student Ruth Lever's philosophy when it comes to preparing for exams is quality over quantity.

"I find it much more useful to spend a solid half an hour going through practice questions or writing notes, rather than stewing over something for two hours."

It's an approach that is perhaps forged from necessity.

Competing nationally in lacrosse and rhythmic gymnastics, coaching a Special Olympics group, and contributing to the Eden Arts Young Artists Awards are among

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Ruth Lever

other activities vying for her time.

The year 13 student gained NCEA Level 2 with Excellence last year and is preparing for Level 3 examinations in a couple of weeks, as well as a scholarship exam.

When school finishes she will study for three or four hours a day, and a plan is essential. Some study notes are already in place from earlier mock and mid-year exams.

"When it comes down to this time [of year] I can mostly just do practice questions. . . I find if I study in short blocks it helps me memorise more, and having lots of short breaks in between.

"If I find I'm not focusing, it's better to take a walk or go and watch a TV show to get your focus back. . . rather than just sitting at a desk staring for two hours."

10 tips to survive exam season

Preparation

1 Make big study tasks into small ones – if tasks seem too large it can be hard to get started. Chunk tasks into short periods and start with just five minutes.

2 Set up a fortnight planner that allows the repetition of the same content at least three times before the actual exam. For the first two times, do the same content within 24 hours then again the following week.

3 Reduce close-to-face screen time at night. Bright lights from phones, tablets and laptop screens used prior to sleep may disrupt it, and a good night's rest is crucial.

4 Turn-off the phone and Wi-fi. Research shows technology is affecting people's brains in a way that could be addictive and unhelpful for the concentration needed to study.

5 But don't totally ignore technology – advances in technology can make a positive difference, from software to help make notes, to apps that can help with remembering content.

6 Use typical distractions as rewards. Set a goal to do 30-50 minutes of study, then use those distracting things you like to do (eat/listen to music) as a reward.

Exam day

7 Keep to yourself – discussing your readiness in the hall before an exam can be a major setback if it causes a loss of confidence. Same goes for after the exam – don't let comparisons derail confidence for your next exam.

8 Recall study notes first – jotting down key details at the start of an exam allows you to release any anxiety about your ability to recall information and focus entirely on answering the question.

9 Read the question carefully and read each question twice. It's an obvious but common reason students lose points in exams.

10 Don't leave early – make use of extra time to review answers, tidy up spelling errors or messy writing, and see if anything extra can be added to more difficult answers.

Source: *Passing Exams For Dummies*

