



Exam Success Secrets Guide

By Nasos and Guy

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Chapter One

My Story

- Nasos

I like to tell myself that exams never really fazed me. Looking back on my academic record at school and university, it looks like I had a pretty good time of it. I scored straight A*s in 12 subjects at GCSE and straight As in 4 subjects at A Level, which gained me a place to study Economics & Management at Oxford.

With hindsight, GCSEs, A Levels and University exams all feel so trivial – but if I go back in time and put myself in the shoes of my 16 and 18-year old self, the emotions all come flooding back. The growing tension as the school year wore on and the days started to vanish on the calendar. The bouts of stress and anxiety in the days leading up to the exam. And worst of all, that recurring fear of failure that always reappeared when I thought it was gone for good.

And that's not even considering the hundreds of questions bouncing around my head, which felt like an overactive pinball machine a lot of the time.

““ How early should I start revising?

How will I remember all the material?

What's the best way to take notes?

What should I do the week before the exam?

What about the day before?

Should I cram so I can remember more or get a good night's sleep?

What's the best pen that will help optimise the speed and style of my writing? ””

OK, maybe this last one's just me, and I'm a little on the obsessive side. Before my finals at university, I must have tried out about 10 different kinds of pen before settling on the one I ended up using.

The point is, exams are hard. Exams are stressful. And stress makes us behave irrationally and sabotage ourselves. It makes us worry about things that don't really matter instead of focusing on things that do – like thinking about what pen is the best to use instead of spending some more time studying or recharging. The thing is, whatever you do, the stress and fear of failure won't go away, at least not completely.

Imagine that you're about to embark on a journey through the woods to reach a shop on the other side. You haven't made this trip before, so naturally you're afraid and anxious. Who knows what dangers lurk in the depths of the forest and it's just you on your own, right?

But what if a friendly traveller appeared on the path with a

smile on his face. He pulled a shiny map from his rucksack and told you that he'd just made the exact journey you were about to begin and completed it safe and sound. He'd even worked as a guide for other travellers on the route. You'd start to feel a little more confident, wouldn't you? And you'd probably want to take a good look at that map. Well, I am that traveller, this guide is the map, and at the end of it, is exam success.

I've been through the process of exams over and over again and come out the other side with excellent grades to show for it. What's more, I've helped other students achieve success as an academic tutor for the last 2 years, allowing me to identify what works and what doesn't. I want to share the strategies and techniques that have helped me and my students to succeed so that you can too.

Chapter Two

My Story

- Guy

Working smart, rather than hard, is pretty much the theme of this guide and the theme of my life. Some of this advice is a bit controversial, so it makes sense to first explain a little how this has worked for us.

At school, I was always pretty average. I did quite well – but was never at the top. I was “quite bright”, but never the best. When I started AS levels, I fell badly ill with glandular fever and missed the entire first term of sixth form. My teachers made an effort to try to send home some material and tell me what was going on in class. I couldn’t do **anything** while I was ill, but when I got better, I decided to take an extra week off to try to catch up. At school, you’re taught to do whatever the teacher tells you. This is today’s homework, this is what you need to know for the test, this is how you should revise, and so on. But I’d been away from teachers for a while, and in this week, it was the first time I had to take “learning” into my own hands.

When I returned to school, I vividly remember our class being hit with an immediate chemistry test on everything

covered so far. My chemistry teacher reassured me that, although I had to sit the test, she wouldn't judge what I got because I had missed all her lessons and there was no way I'd do any good. When we got the results back, she was horrified. I was top of the class.

What I had learnt in one week of taking learning into my own hands, had completely outperformed my entire classes' 8 weeks of lessons. For the first time, I was that freakish genius top of the class. But I didn't feel like a genius. In fact, I'm not. It felt more like I had got away with cheating! But I realised, I'd done something better. I had stumbled upon how to learn effectively. And it left my peers, even the so-called "natural geniuses", in the dust.

And that's how it all began. I went on to achieve 3 A*s in Maths, Physics and Chemistry and earned a place doing Mechanical Engineering at Imperial College London. Whilst at university, on what is known to be one of the toughest university courses in the world, I decided to take things a few steps further... While studying, I continued to run my internet business that I started when I was 13. I grew this to

serve over 5000 customers and successfully sold it in July 2014. At the same time, I started an events company and sold-out some of the biggest venues in London, including Ministry of Sound. I even secured a prestigious internship with one the largest investment banks in the world, Credit Suisse. And to top it all off, I graduated with 1st Class honours – in the top 10% of my year.

How did I learn to run a business? How did I become an expert in finance and investment banking? And how did I ace the material for my university degree? Well, I religiously applied the habits, study techniques and mindsets we teach you in this guide.

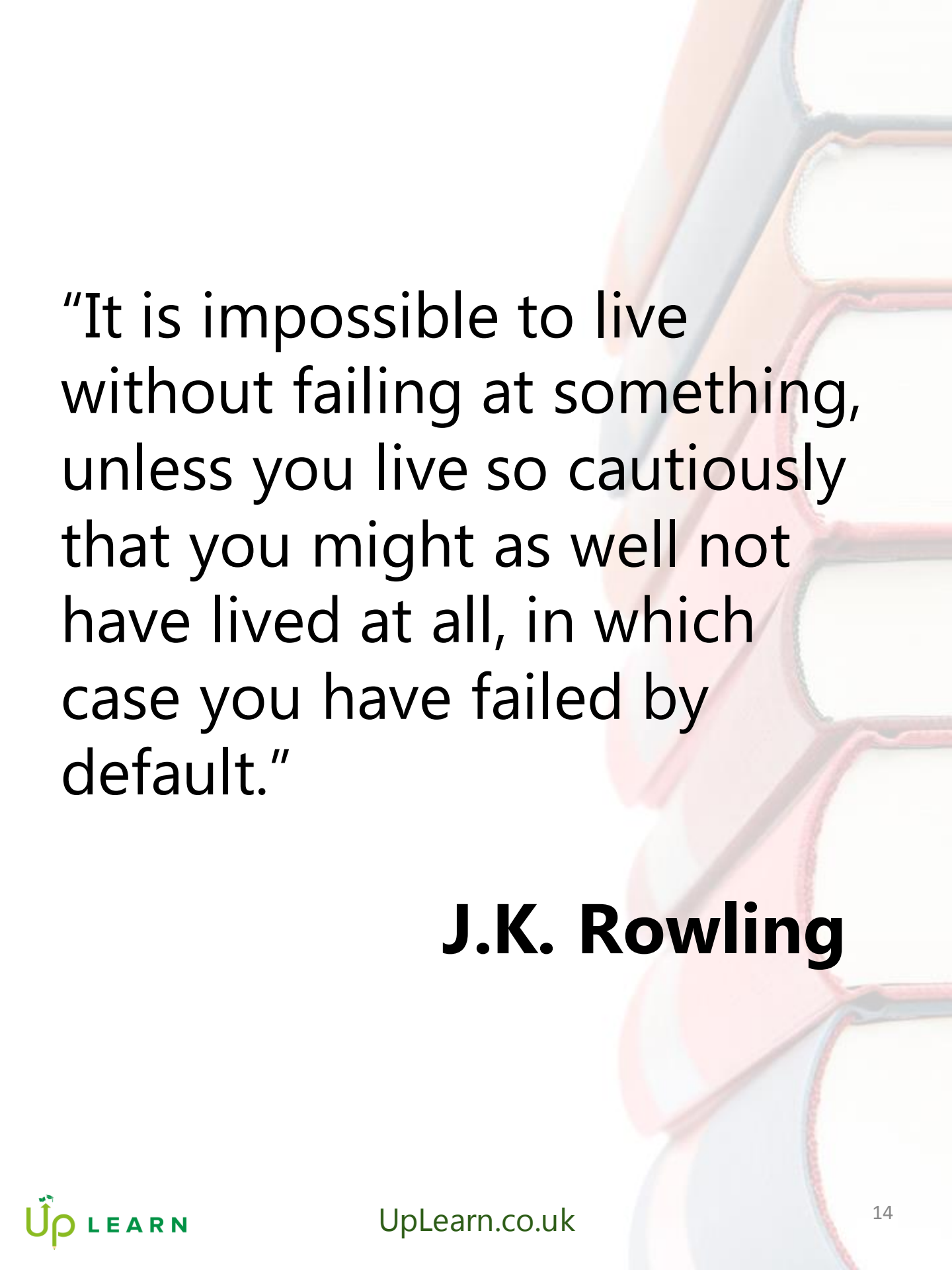
Whilst most my friends were cramming the night before exams, I was relaxing watching a movie with my girlfriend, because I already knew that I had mastered all of the material. With such effective learning techniques, I was able to spend time on whatever else I chose... Business, banking, partying...

Peaked your interest yet?

Read on.

Chapter Three

Mindset



“It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all, in which case you have failed by default.”

J.K. Rowling

What if I Fail? Miss my Grades?

“Your exams are one of the most important events of your life so far. They represent the culmination of the first chapter of your education and your performance in them will determine what and where you go on to study at university. What you study at university will then determine the career you pursue, which in turn will determine the quality of your life.”

Yes, this is what we’re told in school assemblies at the start of our exam years. It’s the “time to get serious” talk that all schools use to strike fear into the hearts of students and make them all run home that evening and start planning their revision schedules.

The “time to get serious” talk proves that fear can be a useful and highly effective tool. What happens when we know we’ve got a test in 4 weeks? Well, we’ll probably do

nothing for the first 3, and all too often, we wait until the last minute before springing into action to study intensively just before the deadline. Why do we do this? If we analyse this behaviour, the main driver is our fear of failing and looking stupid in front of our teachers, classmates and parents as well as our own sense of personal pride.

But if it's not managed properly, fear can actually have the opposite effect – it can paralyse us rather than inspiring action. It can make us freeze at the very moment we need to get moving. And when it comes to exams, our fear tends to revolve around the dreaded question:

“What happens if I fail?”

Well not that much actually. You mess up, you miss your grades and you don't get into your first choice university.

So what does that really mean?

You'll be a failure in life?

No, there are countless examples of people who weren't successful academically and succeeded in later life - Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison and Henry Ford are all among them. Richard Branson, Alan Sugar and Simon Cowell have amassed fortunes and built business empires, all without a single A Level qualification between them.

Branson quit school at 15 after struggling with severe dyslexia. He then set up the Virgin empire which today has over 400 operations including Virgin Atlantic, Virgin Money, Virgin Media and Virgin Trains. Branson has been knighted for advances in business and is worth approximately £3.6bn.

Lord Alan Sugar's one GCSE hasn't stopped him amassing a £900m personal fortune - he built up electronics giant Amstrad into a multi-million pound business starting at the

age of 21. Music mogul Simon Cowell only achieved three O levels (GCSEs) and is worth £300m, producing global TV franchises such as Pop Idol and the X Factor that are watched by hundreds of millions of people.

I hope you're starting to get the picture – I could go on and on listing examples of people who have achieved big things without any qualifications, let alone getting a B instead of an A in one of their A Levels.

You'll never get a good job?

Getting subpar results in your exams is definitely not a good thing, but the idea that this will prevent you from getting a good job or building a successful career for yourself is ridiculous. The structure of our economy is changing rapidly and the way people work is following suit. Most modern jobs now depend on specific skillsets. Employers care about whether you have the necessary attributes to do well in a certain role, not how many As you got at A Level.

This trend is illustrated by one of the Big 4 Accounting Firms, Ernst & Young's recent announcement that they will stop requiring degrees for job applications, taking on talented individuals regardless of their social or academic background. While they've admitted that they will still take academic performance into account, this type of a move by such a big firm shows the way the labour market is going, and it's only a matter of time before many others follow suit.

Alternatively, you could follow the examples of Branson, Sugar and Cowell and start your own business. In fact, the progress of technology and the growth of the internet means that it's now easier than ever to set up your own business using a range of mostly free tools. You only have to look to the huge growth in London's Tech City to see how many people are choosing to build their own startup rather than working as an employee. This is an option that few would have considered ten years ago but it's becoming more and more common for recent graduates. Both of us (Nasos and Guy) are prime examples of graduates that have started their own business rather than joining a grad

scheme and there's no reason that you can't do the same if you want to.

Your parents will disown you?

No, your parents won't send you away from home and pretend they never knew you for failing an exam. However, there is often a lot of tension between parents and children around academic performance and it's important to clarify some of the problems that can crop up here.

In almost all cases, your parents just want the best for you. They believe that achieving good grades at school and doing well in your exams will allow you to go to a good university and get a good job. As a result, they do their best to encourage you to study hard and do well in school. Sometimes, this can go too far and result in excessive pressure being placed on the students. I've tutored students before whose parents would hang on every school report and homework grade and start to panic if they ever saw anything less than an A.

If you miss your grades, your parents may be disappointed but this is largely outside of your control as it depends on their own expectations. Even if they expected more, your results don't stop you from being their son or daughter and they won't want to make you suffer for it.

The key thing to remember is that, as much as they want you to succeed, and as much as you may want to make them proud, you're not doing these exams for your parents. You're not doing them for your teachers and you're not doing them for your classmates either. You're doing them for yourself.

Detach from the Outcome

"He who would be serene needs but one thing.

Detachment."

Meister Eckhart

What I'm about to suggest won't sound right the first time you read it, so feel free to go over it again if necessary.

The way to achieve exam success is to not care about your exams. Or at least, not to care too much.

Before you dismiss this advice as idiotic, I'm not suggesting you abandon your studies and just expect things to magically fall into place. What I am suggesting is that you don't attach your entire identity to getting straight A*s or getting into University X, because by doing that you're heaping a huge amount of extra pressure on yourself in an already stressful situation.

Clearly exams are important and they have an impact on what and where you'll continue your studies but as I suggested above, most of our fears about the impact of failing or missing our grades are totally irrational and far from irreversible.

Activity

I want you to try an experiment. Grab a pen and a piece of paper and imagine the absolute worst-case scenario that could happen. This could be you failing all your exams and not getting into any university, or getting 2A*s and an A and missing out on an offer from Oxbridge.

Whatever it is, write down what the scenario looks like in painstaking detail and imagine what would happen – have some fun with it. Write at least half a page. Once you've outlined the exam apocalypse ask yourself these questions:

- 1) What is the permanent impact of this on my life?**
- 2) How likely is this to actually happen?**
- 3) What steps could I take to repair the damage and get things under control?**

Activity Continued

Now ask yourself:

- 1) What are some more likely scenarios?**
- 2) How likely is it that I could produce at least an average set of results?**
- 3) Have equally or even less intelligent people taken exams before and done well?**

Write out brief responses to each of these questions.

Take a moment to review what you've written before continuing with this book.

The answer to the last question above is a resounding yes, by the way. Plenty of people who you and I would classify as far from intelligent have managed to successfully navigate exams, so there's no reason you can't do the same.

By doing this exercise I hope you've realised one thing: no matter what happens in your exams, you will survive. And the chances are that your nightmare won't materialise and things will work out just fine.

Yes, taking exams is an important step for you, but by exploring the possibility of failure and realising that it won't be the end of the world, you're already putting yourself in a better frame of mind for the journey ahead.

Excuses

Excuses. We all love a good excuse but the problem is they're like leaks in a boat. Whenever you cover one, another pops up and it's even bigger. It's very hard to keep the boat repaired and make it safely to shore if you have an excuse mindset.

An excuse is anything you tell yourself that stops you from taking action. They can be short-lived and subtle, but have a profound impact on your life. You have to continuously make a conscious effort to recognise your excuses, see how they're holding you back and eliminate them.

If you're someone who makes excuses to yourself as to why you can't study, you might find yourself thinking the following after a bad exam:

- 1) The exam paper that came up was unreasonably difficult.
- 2) Your teacher didn't prepare you well enough in that subject.
- 3) You're just not good at subject X and never have been.

I don't want you to be this person so let's try another experiment.

Activity

Grab that piece of paper and pen you just used again. Now imagine your worst-case nightmare scenario again and this time I want you to try and explain **why** it happened – make every excuse you can possibly think of including some or all of the above.

Now, once you've written them all down, go through each one and rationally explain to yourself why this is nothing more than an excuse and that it can't have an impact on you, unless you let it. Once that's done, calmly take the piece of paper, fold it in half and tear it into pieces.

Those are your excuses. Gone.

Activity Continued

Whenever one of those excuses comes up again, realise that it's no longer yours to claim. Say,

"Sorry excuse, I've sent you away and I can't let you back in now."

Note that this is a practice – your excuses may go away and never come back. But the chances are they sneak back in again later on. That's OK. Just keep recognising them for what they are and refuse to let them stop you from doing what you need to do.



“Action is the foundational key to all success.”

Pablo Picasso

Defining Success

OK, so now you've taken the pressure off by exploring the possibility of failure and taken your limiting beliefs apart. Let's look at the other side of the coin. What does success look like for you? And why do you want it so badly? The reason this is so important is because when you know what your destination looks like, you're much more likely to get there – you'll be able to remember where you're heading when the going gets tough and keep moving forward. The challenges that come your way will just be minor obstacles rather than stopping you completely.

Top performers in every single field know the importance of thinking about what success looks like to them. Take athletes for example. In the days leading up to an important race, Usain Bolt will wake up each morning and play the entire race through in his head. He'll taste the crispness of the cold air as he positions himself at the starting line. As he waits for the starting gun, he'll sense the entire crowd holding its breath, sitting on the edge of their seats in anticipation in the moments before it goes off.



He'll feel the whole world slow down and seem to stop entirely. BANG. His muscles come to life as a wave of electricity floods through him. He charges forward like a gazelle, his legs springing him closer to the finish line with each step. He feels the sole of his foot connecting with the racetrack beneath him as he reaches top speed. With one final stride, he crosses the finish line. He looks up. First place. World record. Olympic champion. And the fastest human being on earth.

Now it's your turn. Take a few moments to picture the ideal scenario and why it would be so great. You'd be going to university X, which would put you on the right path to career Y. You'd have a whole summer to bask in the knowledge that you'd done everything you could and that success was more a formality than a question, with no anxious waiting for results in August.



Now take a moment to consider what's motivating you to achieve success and why you even picked up this guide in the first place.

Some of your motivations might be external like making Mum and Dad proud and looking good in front of your friends. As we discussed in the section before, there's nothing wrong with making your parents proud and having some friendly competition with your friends. Where this can go wrong is when these external factors become the main motivation for your pursuit of top grades in your exams.

Extrinsic motivators can be powerful tools, but the strongest and most durable motivations are intrinsic. Exams are not just important because of the consequences – they are a test and life is nothing but a series of different challenges. I'm not saying that you should resign yourself to a life of grinding and hard work. I'm saying that challenges are not only fun but rewarding. Without them, we would become very bored indeed. The challenge you have in front of you right now is your exams and by successfully navigating your exams, you're preparing yourself for the challenges that life has to bring. You're practising the process of planning a project in advance and

peaking at the right time. You're practising your ability to shut out distractions and focus on what's important. You're practising the ability to succeed in the face of adversity. All of these are crucial life skills, which are applicable to countless different areas.

What's more, there's nothing like the pleasure you get from meeting a tough challenge and coming out on top so don't forget to keep reminding yourself of this during the process, especially if things get tough. It'll feel great when it's over.


Summary

- Only use fear as a motivator, don't let it paralyse you.
- Exams are not the be all and end all.
- You are working for yourself; not for your parents, teachers or friends.
- Eliminate excuses.
- Envision success, not failure.

Chapter Four

Habit

Creation

A hand with pink nail polish is writing on a piece of paper. The paper has the words "My Plan:" written on it. The background is a wooden surface.

My Plan:

"We become what we repeatedly do."

Sean Covey

Using Habits to Your Advantage

What was your last New Year's resolution? Research suggests that only 8% of resolutions are achieved so the statistics suggest you probably weren't successful. Planning to run a marathon or to become a vegetarian isn't that different from planning exam success – it's a process of setting goals and taking action to achieve them.

The main reasons for failure to achieve are usually linked to negative framing and limiting beliefs, excuses and an unclear definition of the desired outcome. We've dealt with each of these in the previous sections and now it's time to focus on one of the other key drivers of success and failure – our behaviour and habits.

Some people cover all their other bases but stop short of behaviour change. They set ambitious goals and get clear about their motivations. They may even get as far as writing

out a schedule and planning what they're going to do in detail. But they never take the action needed to achieve their targets. Please don't let yourself be this person.

The main reason this happens is that people become over reliant on motivation. They think that they'll always be as inspired as the day that they began. This doesn't just apply to preparing for exams and it's the same for people looking to start exercising regularly or eating healthily.

The thing about motivation is that it's temporary - there one minute and gone the next. It may last for a few minutes, hours, days, weeks or even months at a time, but at some point it will disappear, no matter how committed you believe you are. And when your motivation goes, what are you going to do if there's no safety net to stop you from falling into inactivity?

This is why habits are so important. It takes a lot of willpower and energy for our brains to force us to do things, but habits are automatic behaviours that work like

shortcuts to make the brain more efficient. Establishing good habits means that you don't need to be motivated to study – you just do it because that's what you're used to doing. To establish a habit, all you need is a minimal amount of willpower to start the activity and then you're off. Eventually, you won't even need willpower – it will just become an automatic behaviour like getting dressed or brushing your teeth.

Think about those processes a little more. When you wake up in the morning, you probably go through a similar routine each day before school including getting up, getting dressed, eating breakfast and brushing your teeth. Your routine is a sequence of habits stacked together. You don't need to be told to put some clothes on before you go out or inspired to brush your teeth. It's just what you do – you're used to doing it.

When it comes to scheduling your study/revision sessions, an understanding of how habits work can be the difference between sticking to the plan or flaking out. By exploring how habits work and building your own, you'll be able to

make study habits as second nature as getting dressed or brushing your teeth in the morning.



Habits can be broken down into a simple 3-stage process: first, there's a cue, a trigger that tells your brain to go into autopilot. Then there's the routine, a behaviour that can be physical, mental or emotional. Finally, there's a reward, which helps your brain figure out if the loop is worth remembering in the future.

An example of creating a habit for a study session would be: cue – reminder/alarm on phone goes off at 2pm on Saturday; routine - go to bedroom and study; reward - spend the evening relaxing with friends.

After you do this a couple of times your brain will start to associate the reward of hanging out with your friends on a Saturday, with the act of studying beforehand. The behaviour will just become automatic. And if you don't do it, then it just won't feel right and you won't even be able to fool yourself.

A hiker with a backpack and arms raised in triumph stands on the peak of a rocky mountain. The background shows a vast valley with green fields, a winding river, and a town, all under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds.

"Success is nothing more than a few simple disciplines, practised every day."

Jim Rohn

Fighting Procrastination

There will be times when the alarm goes off and you just don't want to study. You'll do everything you can to delay the inevitable start. Make a cup of tea, walk the dog, call a friend and have a chat to Mum or Dad about nothing in particular. Then once you get to your desk you'll quickly check email, have a look at what's going on Facebook and before you know it, the two-hour study block you set aside has now turned into a rushed 30 minutes.

The simplest way to combat this type of procrastination is to focus on the process rather than the product. Instead of thinking about how you have to slave away over your textbook for 2 hours, just focus on starting. Set yourself the target of quizzing yourself on the first chapter of the textbook for 15 minutes and see where it takes you.

You'll be surprised at how often the resistance is just the result of fixating on the outcome you want to achieve, like putting in two hours of solid study time. If you just sit down

and start, you'll often get into the flow of whatever you're doing and the two hours will be over before you know it. The most difficult part is starting.

The Importance of Taking Breaks

Contrary to what you might imagine, studying for hours on end is extremely unproductive. It's actually much more effective to concentrate for short sharp bursts and take breaks in between. As we take a break, our unconscious mind is consolidating the material we've just covered and is making new connections to what we already know.

The key is keeping these breaks short and not allowing them to turn into excuses to avoid getting back to work. A 5-minute break can easily turn into 30 minutes of browsing your Facebook newsfeed or responding to texts and messages on your phone.

One way of formalising this process is to use a technique called the Pomodoro. A 'Pomodoro' simply involves focusing (with no distractions) for 25 minutes before taking a 5-minute break, meaning you study in blocks of 30 minutes at a time. I've found this particularly effective as a

study tool both for my own learning and when working with my students, as it gives the mind some time to rest and digest what's just been covered.

Feel free to play around with the time you spend – if you feel you're getting into flow you can extend the focus period a little longer or if you're feeling particularly tired, you can make the break 10 minutes instead of 5. I've found that for essay subjects I tend to use focus periods of around 45 minutes whereas for problem solving subjects like maths I'll keep the focus periods slightly shorter. The key, as always, is to experiment and do what works for you.

The important thing is to structure your study as a mixture of focused work with recovery breaks. During the focused time, you need to switch off any distractions (that means closing your door, turning off your phone and shutting down Facebook). In the recovery breaks, you can do anything, just make sure you don't get carried away and over-run them. The result is a neat 'unit' of study. You can finish your day, satisfied that you completed 5 productive

Pomodoros. It can help to record these in a notebook or spreadsheet and at the end of the week you can judge your performance and see how successful you were in executing your plan. If you've met your objective, give yourself a pat on the back. If not, think about what you can do to fit in more blocks next week.

Summary

- Motivation comes and goes but habits are there to stay; make studying a habit.
- Overcome the resistance and get started, the rest will follow.
- Dedicate periods of time to focused study without distractions and allow yourself to take short breaks.

Chapter Five

Health & Lifestyle

The importance of what you're doing when you're not studying is so often overlooked. The truth is that you can have the perfect study plan with all the right systems in place, but if your lifestyle isn't aligned with what you're trying to do, you won't succeed in achieving it. Eating healthily, getting plenty of sleep and enjoying your free time are all crucial to staying on the right track.



Nutrition

When you apply all of your willpower towards studying, things like nutrition can start to slip. It leads to a vicious downwards spiral, where eating bad foods leads to less productive study time and even lower willpower. When we're stressed, it's easy to get carried away and deal with our emotions through eating. Eating a whole packet of cereal or an entire box of biscuits isn't going to make you feel less stressed, it will just make you feel sick, and that's not going to help with your studying. While I'm not here to advise you on your eating habits, I will warn you that consuming certain foods is very counterproductive to studying.

For instance, you might think that you need extra sugar to give you the energy to study, but the initial rush you get from consuming chocolate bars, sweets or fizzy drinks will end quickly and you'll soon start to feel sluggish and lethargic. This will greatly reduce the productivity of your study session – we've all experienced that slump that comes after an initial sugar rush and it's definitely not

conducive to studying. As a result, I'd really recommend staying away from sugar either before or during your sessions. Of course there's nothing wrong with rewarding yourself after a session if you really want to, but the trick, as with so many things, is to do it in moderation.

Recommendations

- 1) Avoid processed foods and refined sugars, especially before and during studying
- 2) Rewarding yourself every once in a while is OK, just don't overdo it

Caffeine & Stimulants

You may already be a coffee drinker and there's nothing wrong with this – I love a good cup of coffee as much as the next person – but the key here is not to become dependent on caffeine and other stimulants for study sessions.



This is why energy drinks are so addictive. They contain far more caffeine than a standard cup of coffee and are packed full of other stimulants, which leads to a temporary high followed by a big crash. My advice would be to avoid these as much as possible.

The more caffeine you consume, the more desensitized you become to its effects, so the more and more you need to keep consuming to get the same effect. You might enjoy an initial high, but the effects of caffeine can also leave you feeling jittery and put you in the type of state that makes it difficult to think clearly on the task at hand. Try and replace coffee with herbal teas or even organic herbal coffee substitutes, such as Teeccino, which smell and taste just like the real thing but are caffeine free.

Although caffeine affects people differently, just keep in mind that too much of anything is usually a bad thing so just as suggested with sugar, moderation is definitely the best policy.

Recommendations

- 1) Control consumption of caffeine
- 2) Replace coffee and energy drinks with decaffeinated tea where possible

Sleep

Studies have shown that people who have had less than 6 hours of sleep perform as badly as drunk people on cognitive tests. So unless you want to be learning at the same rate as someone who's just left the pub, I'd recommend you make this a priority, especially in the run up to exams.

To ensure you get good quality sleep, there are a few simple things you can do before hitting the hay that make a massive difference. The first is turning off all screens at least 30 minutes before bed – TV, computer and phone. Yes, even your phone. Being stimulated by the white/blue light on our various electronic devices before bed has been proven to not only delay the onset of sleep but to reduce its quality as well. Before going to bed, also make sure that all your curtains are closed and that the room is as dark as possible. Temperature wise, try not to have the heating up too high and keep a window open for fresh air.

It's useful to note that we sleep in 90-minute cycles, and we wake up feeling most refreshed at the end of one of these cycles. That's why it's possible for us to wake up feeling groggy and grumpy even if we've got plenty of sleep – waking up in the middle of a cycle, when you're in a deeper stage of sleep is often the cause of this.

Try timing your bedtime so you wake up at the end of a sleep cycle instead of in the middle. Sleep apps like Sleepyti.me are based on the 90-minute sleep cycle and are designed to help you wake up naturally and energised.

Recommendations

- 1) Avoid screens for at least 30 minutes before bed – turn off your computer, TV and phone
- 2) Make sure your room is completely dark
- 3) Use the 90-minute rule to time your sleep

Free Time & Socialising

As I've mentioned already, balance is key to creating a sustainable lifestyle that you can maintain in the run up to your exams. Too much of anything is usually a bad thing and there comes a point where you'll start to see diminishing returns to studying as well.

Of course it's important to enjoy your free time by socialising and doing other things you enjoy rather than dedicating every waking hour to studying. Here at Up Learn we're all about working smart, rather than working for the sake of it, and when you're maintaining balance, you're much more likely to stick with your schedule.

If you want to score top grades, you probably shouldn't go out every weekend with your friends in the final weeks before your exams but that doesn't mean you have to lock yourself in your room and study non-stop. Equally there's nothing wrong with you enjoying a couple of guilt free hours playing Call of Duty or FIFA if you've done your work

for the day and are hitting your targets. If you end up ploughing through a marathon eight-hour gaming session without opening a book on the other hand, you're probably taking things too far.

As with all aspects of this lifestyle section, I'd stress balance over excess and the application of your own good sense. If you want to score the top grades, you will have to make some sacrifices, like spending less time on your computer or games console or not going to a party one weekend, so that you can get up early the next day. None of these things are really major sacrifices in the grand scheme of things – you shouldn't be getting withdrawal symptoms from a few less hours on your PlayStation or Xbox or from watching fewer YouTube videos. The key is that you're aware of why you're making these choices, which all comes down to the motivation and vision that you clarified earlier.

A group of runners participating in a marathon on a city street. The runners are wearing various athletic gear, including tank tops, shorts, and running shoes. Some are wearing bibs with numbers. The background shows trees and a clear sky. A pink sign with the word 'HAVE' is visible on the right side.

"A goal without a plan is just a wish."

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Managing Your Time

Good time management isn't complicated but it's one of the most underrated study and life secrets out there. The positive impact that managing your time has on the quality of your life and the progress you make on your goals is remarkable, given how little time it takes to do it effectively.

In the build up to your exams, it is crucial that you manage your time as intelligently as possible. Inevitably you'll have different extracurricular activities going on at school and will still want to enjoy your free time and maintain your social life, so it's imperative that you use a system that will keep you well organised. "OK" you're probably thinking, "but how many hours do I have to spend planning and organising every week?" My answer is between 5 and 10 minutes a day. No more than that.

To make this system work you need two things:

1) A Calendar

This can be physical or digital – a cheap day planner or GCal or iCal on your computer. It just has to be something that you can look at every morning and that has enough space for around 10-15 items a day.

2) A List

A piece of paper that you can update throughout the day. You should carry this around with you, so keep it simple and use A4 folded into quarters or a page torn out of a notebook. Draw a line down the middle to divide the list into two columns – the first will be your schedule for the day and the second will be things that come up that you need to remember to do later.

The System

First, record all your to-dos and deadlines on your **calendar**, including those from school homework assignments and those associated with your revision plan. So for instance, one to-do item might be “finish first revision of Economics module 3” or “write quiz questions for Physics module 1”.

	TUESDAY
	8
10	Email teacher
	Write Economic revision questions on Supply & Demand
11	Complete maths homework
	Do 1 physics practice exam
12	Iterate through Physics Unit 1 flash cards
	Lunch with Annie
13	Jogging

The calendar serves as your base-schedule and you only need to use it once every twenty-four hours, so disable automatic reminders. Each morning, you look at the calendar and figure out what you need to get done that day. Now turn to your list. Roughly plan out your time in the first column of your list, allocating the different tasks to relevant time slots. Then when you encounter new items throughout the day note them down on the second column of your list and add them to the calendar the following morning. It really is as simple as that. The whole system involves three simple steps:

- 1) Add new tasks and assignments to the second column of your list during the day**
- 2) Transfer the new items from your list onto your calendar the following morning**
- 3) Take 5 minutes to plan your day and start work**

You will have a plan that resembles this:

Tues	
8	
9	Wake up & get ready
10	Physics
11	Practice
12	Paper
1	Lunch with Amie
2	Physics Flashcards
3	Email teacher
3	Maths Homework
4	Econ Revision Questions
5	Jog
6	

→ Wait until Friday

→ Finish homework

Inevitably, things will change during the day and you'll end up getting some things done without completing your schedule perfectly as planned. The next morning simply move the unfinished items to new days on your calendar and repeat the process.

This may sound surprisingly simple given the range of time management tools and software that exists – there are whole books that have been written on this topic alone. The beauty of this system, which has been discussed at length by productivity expert Professor Cal Newport, is its simplicity. It requires very little time to execute and maintain, yet the results it produces are immense. Try it and you'll quickly see the rewards in terms of productivity and enjoyment of your day.

A day in the life of an A Level Student

Let's consider a sample Saturday of two students, Mark and Sam, at the same school, studying the same set of A Levels – Economics, Physics and Maths.

Mark's Day

Mark wakes up at around 11am, feeling slightly groggy after a night out with friends. He's already behind on his revision schedule for the day but decides to quickly check his email and social media before grabbing some breakfast. By the time he finishes it's 12am and he's really not in the mood to get started – he opens his textbook, but gets a call from his girlfriend after reading a page. He takes the call and chats to her for about 30 minutes before getting down to work again. He then reads his textbook, struggling to retain his attention and having to re-read whole paragraphs, while intermittently receiving text messages

from a friend about the party he'll be attending that evening. Suddenly he looks up at the clock on his wall and it's 2pm – time for lunch. After finding something to eat he flicks on the TV to digest his food for half an hour or so. That half an hour turns into an hour and he heads back up to his room at 4pm. Feeling increasingly guilty about his lack of progress he considers writing-off the rest of the day and refocusing tomorrow. Too tired to complete a physics past paper he looks over some of his more recent homework problems and calls it a day at 6pm to grab dinner and get ready for the party at his friend Jack's house later that night.

Sam's Day

Sam wakes up at 9am after a good night's sleep. He grabs some breakfast quickly and by 9:30am he's at his desk with his books open. After 2 hours of writing out quiz questions with a 15-minute break to grab a cup of tea in between, Sam walks round to his friend's house and the two grab a light lunch together on the high street and discuss the

topics they've just been studying. At 1pm Sam is back at his desk and gets to work on a Physics past paper under timed conditions. He makes sure that he completes the paper as though it were a real exam and after he's done, he goes for a quick walk around the block to clear his head. On returning home he prints out the mark scheme for his paper and corrects it accurately, noting any mistakes. He seems to have a problem with questions on refraction, so he makes a note on his list to look through this in more detail tomorrow. After finishing the marking (he scores a high A), Sam checks the football scores and quizzes himself on his economics flashcards for 45 minutes, before writing out 2 essay plans for the 25 mark questions on a recent past paper. By 6pm, he's done for the day and heads off to his girlfriend's house to have dinner before going to Jack's party later that evening, feeling pretty pleased with himself and on-track.

It's not hard to see how Sam will score a top grade, while Mark will struggle. Sam's focus for the day is his work and when he's on, he's on. He starts the day early to build momentum and still has time to get lunch with a friend, meet his girlfriend for dinner and go to the party in the evening, in the knowledge that he has his revision covered. His study time is actually spent studying, so he can enjoy other activities guilt free.

Mark on the other hand started the day off on the wrong foot by going out the night before and getting to bed late. He then delayed starting work until midday at which point he already felt behind and started to feel that the day was lost. Further distractions from his phone meant that he failed to get any real work done before lunch, at which point the day was basically a write off. His study time was unfocused and disjointed, which meant that he probably didn't even enjoy the other activities that much because of the feelings of guilt from not executing his plan.



The key message here is to use your study time effectively – when you're planning to study make sure you're in the right state to do so and focus. Remove unnecessary distractions and get through your work in short sharp bursts, whilst still taking breaks and time to relax. Be more like Sam and less like Mark.

Understanding the Rules of the Game

There is a big difference between learning effectively and sitting exams effectively. This may seem a little confusing at first, given that we normally associate the two together in school, since exams are the main measure of our learning. However, being able to learn effectively doesn't necessarily mean you'll ace your exams. Similarly, being able to pass exams doesn't necessarily mean you've fully learnt and understood the material! The distinction here is that the main objective of learning is understanding and application, whereas the main objective of exams is to hit benchmarks, which are set by the exam boards.

For better or worse, this means that getting the top grade in your exams is not really about demonstrating a full and detailed grasp of your subject – it's about producing work that hits the mark scheme criteria for the top grade set by the exam boards. Even if you have a deep interest in your subjects, you would be missing a trick not to take advantage of this.

Know the System Inside Out

You wouldn't go and play tennis, expecting to perform well without first understanding the rules, so why would you go into an exam without knowing everything about how they work? You should do everything you can to find out. Take the time to get answers to the following:

- 1) Who writes the papers?**
- 2) What are their views on teaching?**
- 3) Are there any trends in the past papers as to what questions come up?**
- 4) Is there anything the examiners seem to like or dislike in the examiner reports?**
- 5) Can you get copies of marked example papers with examiner comments to see the patterns there?**

As far as structure and marking is concerned, exams are repetitive and the examiners rarely make major changes from year to year. The same is actually true of content – the

same things tend to come up again and again – although they may be presented in a slightly different way.

Do everything you can to find out as much about the exam as possible – there is no real secret to this other than doing your research properly. It shouldn't take more than 2-3 hours in total and the benefit you'll gain from doing it is tremendous.

Learning Hacks & Techniques

When it comes to studying it's often useful to know what doesn't work so we've compiled a "Not To Do" list based on our own experience and the experiences of our students. Returning to the map analogy, there are some places you definitely shouldn't visit on your journey and following this list will help you steer clear of these no-go zones.

We've made some recommendations to resolve these problems and help you optimise your studying and revision, which are backed up by research from cognitive psychology and neuroscience. These methods and more are all implemented in the Up Learn system, but even if you choose not to try one of our courses, you should keep them in mind and try to build them into your studying as much as possible. While some of the methods may seem counterintuitive and may even feel awkward initially, this is usually a sign that they're working, as we'll explain shortly.

The 'Not To Do' List

1 Don't re-read the textbook

So many students think they're doing everything right and then wonder why they've failed to do as well as they expected. They take notes during all lessons at school, read all the textbook chapters and highlight the key passages. But when they get their results back from a test, they're often disappointed. How could this happen?

We've all been in this situation at one point or another and inevitably we start to question ourselves – maybe we didn't work hard enough or we're just not good at this subject. But these explanations are rarely the right ones.

The real problem comes from our tendency to fool ourselves. Strategies like re-reading and highlighting create fluency, the belief and feeling that facts and formulas that seem familiar now will be easy to remember tomorrow or

next week. Apparent fluency makes us feel like we've mastered the material when we haven't – all we've done is move it into our short-term memory. Without consolidating it properly, we end up forgetting most of it. When we re-read something, we instantly feel like we're learning because what we're reading seems more familiar. But that's all it is. More familiar. And being familiar with something is not the same as learning, retaining and being able to apply it.

Imagine that you walk past a person you've met before. Being familiar is like vaguely recognising their face but being unable to remember their name or anything else about them, which won't be of much use. Learning and remembering the material is the equivalent of remembering who that person is, where you met them, what their interests are and what you spoke about.

In order to avoid fooling yourself it's important to test yourself as often as possible and see what you really know – see item 2 on the To Do list for more on this.

2 Minimise rote learning and repetition

Rote learning is the process of going over something again and again, often in the same format. For instance, if you're studying economics definitions, rote learning might involve you reading them out to yourself again and again or writing them down repeatedly.

It's not that this process doesn't work. People have had OK levels of success with these types of study strategies. But there are much better, faster, more efficient ways of doing things. Here at Up Learn, we want you to get as much from every single hour spend studying as possible and rote learning and repetition are not the most effective ways to master material. It's possible to cut your study time in half and remember key concepts and definitions clearly through processes called visceralisation and elaboration, which are covered in step 3 of the To Do list.

3 Don't overuse blocked practice

Blocked practice is when you focus on one problem type or topic, repeating the practice over and over before moving onto the next type. Most students use blocked practice to master a topic completely before moving on to the next one. What this would look like in practice if I'm studying for my Economic A Level would be doing ten multiple choice questions on scarcity followed by ten multiple choice questions on Production Possibility Frontiers (PPFs) as opposed to mixing the examples up randomly.

Blocked practice naturally seems like the right thing to do. This is because it's how we're taught at school and the way textbooks are structured. But the problem is, we get comfortable with one problem type and don't repeat it again until revision comes around, by which point we've more or less forgotten how to solve it.

Research shows that mixing things up, working on different problem types on a regular basis, leads to categorically better long-term learning even though it feels more awkward than blocked practice. This process is covered in more detail in step 4 of the To Do List.

The 'To Do' List

Growth Mindset, Practice and Training Your Brain

“When it is obvious that the goals cannot be reached, don't adjust the goals, adjust the action steps.”

Confucius

Activity

Rate each of the statements below on a scale from 0 to 5, with 0 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree:

- 1) You have a certain amount of intelligence, and you can't really do much to change it.
- 2) Your intelligence is something about you that you can't change very much.
- 3) No matter who you are, you can significantly change your intelligence level.
- 4) To be honest, you can't really change how intelligent you are.
- 5) You can always substantially change how much talent you have.
- 6) You can learn new things, but you can't really change your basic level of talent.

Activity Continued

- 7) No matter how much talent you have, you can always change it quite a bit.
- 8) You can change even your basic intelligence level considerably.

Finished scoring them? Add up the total for your scores of questions 1, 2, 4 and 6. Then create a separate total for your scores of questions 3, 5, 7 and 8.

Which set of questions did you score the highest? If you scored highest for questions 1, 2, 4 and 6, that means you currently have a fixed mindset. If you scored highest for 3, 5, 7 and 8, you currently have a growth mindset.

Read on to learn the difference between these and how to apply this insight effectively.

Before we go into the recommended study techniques that will lead you to exam success, it's important to clarify a few things.

Learning is not easy. In fact, effective learning can be hard. It is normal for it to feel uncomfortable. The key is to realise that this difficulty and discomfort is desirable, not something to run away from, because it means you're stretching yourself, which is an essential part of learning anything.

The brain is like a muscle – the more you strain it, the more it grows and the more information you're able to convert into retrievable knowledge for your exams. Eventually, you want to get to a point where you understand the fundamentals so well, that you can explain a concept in terms even an 8-year-old would understand. But it's not easy to get there.

In order to deal with this difficulty, you must approach learning with the right mindset and attitude. When we

discussed excuses earlier on, we touched on one of the most common beliefs among students:

“I’m just not good at subject X and never have been”

This excuse is the result of a fixed mindset – an attitude based on the belief that your intelligence, talents and abilities have been somewhat fixed from birth and there’s nothing you can do about it. Maybe you’re good with numbers but bad at languages; or you’re an ace at history and geography but weak at science.

So let’s break through one of the biggest myths in our society today: no one is ever innately better at maths or innately better at writing than someone else – they’ve just practiced more.

We all have stronger and weaker areas at this current instance, but the idea that you can’t improve your weaknesses is simply false. An essential component of any

successful student is to realise this truth and adopt a growth mindset. This involves accepting that your abilities can be altered through consistent practice.

Historical greats like Einstein, Michelangelo and Mozart started somewhere and got to where they ended up through hours of sustained effort. Each of them acknowledged that hard work, practice and perseverance were the most important factors that led to their success.

The point is, some of the techniques we suggest you use below may feel awkward at first – they're supposed to, because that's what good learning should feel like. At times you will want to give up and go back to the methods that feel easier, the ones we've discussed above. But if you equip yourself with a growth mindset and an understanding of the importance of practice, we at Up Learn commit to guiding you to success in your exams.

1 Make a Strategic Plan

Having a high level strategic plan is the first step towards exam success. If you don't have a plan, you have no real way to objectively measure your performance and will end up feeling disorganised, which is likely to lead to disorganised thinking and studying.

Set out a block of time to plan ahead – look at the dates of your exams if you have them already and work backwards. Objectively analyse your strengths and weaknesses – do you need to spend more time on some subjects than others? Make sure you build a margin of safety into your plan – things always take longer than we expect, so give yourself a buffer for the achievement of certain goals. An example of accounting for this in your physics revision would be:

Goal: I aim to have revised the entire Physics syllabus for the first time by April 15th with a 1-week buffer period taking me to April 21st.

I know planning may seem like a chore but it really is essential. You might find that your plan changes over time and that you need to update it at certain intervals – maybe you're progressing faster on a certain subject than you expected or some new weaknesses have come to light that you need to deal with. Whatever happens along the way it's so important to have something directing your actions - a bad plan is better than no plan.

2 Test yourself at spaced intervals

In order to avoid those counterintuitive feelings of fluency we discussed earlier, it's absolutely essential that you test yourself, so that you have a realistic picture of the level you're at.

Testing yourself is the best shortcut to improving your learning efficiency. If you were to wait until an official school test, you might get a nasty surprise with the result

and not really know what went wrong. Whereas if you have tested yourself as you go along, you know exactly what areas you've mastered and which you need to spend more time on. Secondly, the process of testing itself reinforces the knowledge in your brain. By making an effort to solve problems and recall concepts, you push the knowledge to your long-term memory and remember it for longer. And finally, it's been proven that testing increases your understanding and ability to apply a concept. As a result of this, if you want to get the concepts from your notes into your head, it's more effective to test yourself on the content than to read it or highlight it.

How does this work in practice? After reading through an example in your maths or physics textbook, try to solve a problem or two on your own. Reading through and feeling that you understand one example is not the same thing as being able to solve a problem, which is what you'll need to do in your exam.

For essay based subjects, like Economics, History or English, the same principles should be applied. After reading an article or text, pause and ask: what are the key ideas here? What message is the author is trying to communicate? What examples do they use to do this? Then try and write down as much as you can remember, without looking, and you'll always find you remember less than you thought you did initially. Make a note of what you didn't remember and re-visit those areas.

It's not only important that test yourself, it's also important when you test yourself. Spaced retrieval involves studying information more than once and leaving gaps between sessions. The effort required to recall knowledge that's been partially forgotten makes it stand out more and reconnects it to other knowledge in your brain. This strengthens it in your memory and makes you more likely to be able to apply it in an exam.

Spaced retrieval is built into Up Learn modules. So depending on the time left until your exam, we make sure that your knowledge is crystal clear by the time you need it.

3 Use Elaboration and Visceralisation to make concepts stick

When studying a new concept, it helps to create as many connections to it as possible. If you can visualise something related to that concept, think about how it might feel or smell or taste, and what emotional reactions you might have, the information is far more likely to be stored effectively and retained. The process of extending how you think about a concept is known as elaboration, and the process of connecting it to other senses is called visceralisation. These techniques have been proven to be highly effective study and memorisation tools both by scientific research and in our own experience with students.

One form of elaboration is to use analogies to relate a concept to something you're familiar with. For example, when thinking about the structure of an atom, compare it to the structure of the solar system – just as the sun is at

the centre of our solar system with planets orbiting it, so the nucleus is at the centre of the atom with electrons orbiting it. To add elements of visceralisation, imagine placing yourself in the centre of the atom, standing on the nucleus as electrons whizz past above your head. What colours are they? What would it sound like? How would you feel?

Again, this is something that we've built into our Up Learn modules by creating regular memorisation exercises. In these exercises you're encouraged to come up with your own unique ways of elaborating and visceralising concepts as opposed to the traditional approach of rote learning.

This may sound a little unusual, but once you try it, you'll find how powerful the results are.

4 Use mixed practice

Mixed practice is the process of mixing up problem types together rather than blocking them all into categories. We touched on this in the 'Not To Do' list, explaining how you should do mixed practice rather than blocked practice. So if you're studying for Maths you should mix questions on algebra, geometry and calculus together rather than doing a block of algebra followed by a block of geometry and a block of calculus questions.

One of the reasons this is so effective is because it helps you to distinguish between the different problem types. When you're solving the same problem type over and over again, you miss out on the benefits of this variation. What's more, it doesn't take a genius to realise that mixed practice essentially simulates the real exam situation, so it's a form of practicing in context. This is something we value so much at Up Learn, that we've built it into our system, providing short, sharp, mixed practice questions at the end of every section to keep material that you've studied earlier

fresh in your memory. We also use spaced repetition, which makes it doubly effective.

Once again, mixed practice does feel a little harder and you may not be able to perfectly answer some of the questions on older material, but the idea that effort and difficulty is desirable in learning holds true. By experiencing a little more strain now in retrieving the memory, you'll actually strengthen your ability to retain and apply it when you need it on exam day. By contrast if you cover chapter 1 in week 1 and then don't return to it until 10 weeks later, you're not likely to remember very much!

As discussed before, most textbooks are structured into chapters covering specific topics, with related review questions at the end of the chapter. Instead of following the textbook structure, add different types of questions from other chapters into your review sessions. If you're studying maths, throw in some calculus problems while you're studying geometry. If you're studying economics, try planning one macro and micro essay instead of just two from one area.

5 Utilising examiner reports

Examiner reports are a fantastic resource but they're rarely taken advantage of by students. These reports contain a discussion of what the examiners are looking for and sometimes even have model answers attached.

The way to make the most of them is to take a few of the examiners reports from the most recent exam years and scan through them for patterns. Are examiners making the same comments every year? Are people making the same mistakes time and time again? What do the model answers share that you could build into your own work?

You don't have to spend ages going through these but you'll be amazed at what you can learn by allocating some time to go through them. Once you've identified the best practices, start applying them in your work.

Effectively using mark schemes to learn (without fooling yourself)

When the time comes to start working on practice papers, you'll need to be able to use mark schemes effectively to mark your own work.

Having the mark schemes available for past papers can be a blessing or a curse depending on how you use them. If you have a mark scheme close at hand when you're trying to work out a problem, it can be so easy just to flick through it to find the answer. The answer always seems to make sense in hindsight. You trick yourself into thinking that you came up with the answer, but all you did was recognise what was in the mark scheme.

It's important to avoid this at all costs. Really struggle with

the problem before looking for the answer because research has shown that this type of effort always leads to more durable learning.

The best solution to this is to do each and every past paper under real exam conditions. It's easy to come up with an excuse as to why you should just practise some of the questions and save doing it under exam conditions until nearer the exam, but you're only robbing yourself of valuable realistic practice.

Returning to the idea of habit creation, the more you get used to sitting papers under exam conditions, the easier it will be in the real thing. If you do the paper under exam conditions, you save using the mark scheme until you've attempted every question as best as you possibly can. It's impossible to cheat. And, you have the added benefit of accurately gauging how much time you'll have in the real exam as well.

When marking a full paper of your own, it's really important to be as objective as possible – if you mark yourself too generously, you'll only be fooling yourself which has the potential to harm your progress for the real thing. If you can learn to do this well, marking your own work can be one of the most powerful exam preparation strategies available, because you're actively reflecting on what you did well and what you could improve on for next time, whilst also learning what the marker is looking for.

Summary

- Plan your study time effectively.
- Adopt a growth mindset; the techniques discussed and used rely on you practicing and persevering.
- Don't go too easy on yourself – work through and test yourself on topics you find hard, sit exam papers under exam conditions and only use the mark scheme as a last resort.

Chapter Six

The Final Week

Getting in the zone

The final week is about bringing everything together. Depending on what your schedule's been like up until this point, the amount of studying you'll need to do will vary.

If you've been following the Up Learn system for some time, it's just a matter of reviewing the key concepts and doing some practice. You should be feeling confident as you continue to score highly on the mock papers and everything starts to fall into place. You can rest easy in the knowledge that you've studied smart and have done everything you can to prepare optimally.

If your revision hasn't gone perfectly to plan for whatever reason, the key is not to panic and to realise that you still have plenty of time to get yourself prepared. Panicking is by far and away the worst thing you can do before, during or after an exam so it's essential to accept your reality and create a solid plan of action to move forward.

The dangers of cramming

Cramming or covering all the material on your course in a short space of time is not a bad thing, provided that it's not grounded in last minute panic.

If you know the concepts already and are just going through them one last time, then briefly revising the key ideas is something I'd definitely recommend. Just don't expect to learn anything new at the last minute. You won't be able to retain 'crammed' knowledge much beyond a day or two.

Sleep is so important to your ability to think. It is crucial that you do not compromise on it the night before an exam in order to cram. As I explain later, there's nothing wrong with covering all the material on your course before the exam but sacrificing sleep to do this is just counterproductive. Cramming may feel like it's helping but your ability to respond on demand in your exams will be massively diminished. Studies have discovered that the

process of sleeping clears our brain of waste toxins built up during the day and reinforces the concepts we've learnt. If you sit an exam with these toxins still sitting in your brain, you put yourself at a massive disadvantage.



Remember that having less than 6 hours of sleep leads to the same level of cognitive functioning as someone who's drunk and over the limit for driving. So unless you want to perform like a drunk in your exams, I seriously recommend you don't allow your cramming to extend into the early hours.

Chapter Seven

The Exam

Pre-exam strategies

1) Prepare

The night before, gather everything you need for the exam and put it in your bag. Make sure you have spare pens, pencils, and any other equipment necessary (calculator, protractor, etc.). You don't want to be running around looking for things at the last minute.

2) Routine

Develop a routine that you implement when sitting your mocks or practice papers – it could be as simple as going for a walk, or listening to a specific song, but this will allow you to get comfortable with the process of sitting exams and get you feeling more relaxed.

3) Mindset

Remind yourself that you've done the best you can do and now it's just a matter of sitting the exam and seeing what happens. If you go in feeling confident that you couldn't have really done any more, you're pretty much there.

In-exam strategies

1 Explore the Paper and Plan it Out

The last thing you want to be doing in the exam is worry about time. You need a plan of attack. Having done past papers, you should be familiar with the structure of the exam, how marks are allocated to different sections and how long it typically takes you to complete a section. Turn this into a concrete system, so that when you go into the exam you know exactly how much time to spend on each question and section.

When you start the exam, map out the paper according to your plan. For example, 45 minutes on section A, 90 minutes on section B, 15 minutes to go over both. Set your watch and know when you need to move on. With your trusted system in place, you can focus on answering the question at hand and relax in knowing that you're always on track to finish on time.

2 Work, Move On, Loop Back and Check

As you move through the paper answer what you can. If you're stuck on a question, skip it and move on to the next one – very often when you come back to it you'll find that the solution presents itself quickly. That's because your unconscious has been working on that same problem while you've moved on to another one.

When it comes to checking your answers, always try to leave some time at the end to go through the paper again. It's amazing how many students just go through paper once, "check" their answers by glancing over them and hand in a paper filled with silly mistakes. If you're aiming for a top grade you can't afford to lose marks unnecessarily so make sure you check your work properly at the end.

Top Tip: When checking your answers, don't go back to the start and work through forwards. You're actually more likely to spot your mistakes if you start from the last question and work your way backwards.

3 Don't Forget to Do the Basics

This may sound ridiculous, but it can happen to the best of us. Make sure you dot all the I's and cross all the T's when filling out the front of the paper and when handing it in – so many students have suffered unnecessary complications because of an error in the completing their candidate or centre number (especially on an additional answer sheet) or a mistake in handing in their work.

Make sure that in all cases you are answering the question you are being asked and not the one you would like to be asked. The way to do this is to read each and every question carefully and methodically, underlining key ideas and concepts as you go. Every year examiners complain that countless students have failed to answer questions

properly by simply brain dumping anything they can remember related to the topic in question. This is obviously not the way to score a top grade, yet every year many students fail to follow the simple rule of **“Read the Question. Answer the Question.”**

4 Don't Try and Write a Game Changing Essay

For essay based subjects, remember that the exams are still standardised. All examiners are using the same mark scheme so there are rarely prizes for innovation and originality. Whatever your opinion is about this, don't waste your effort to try and write a game-changing essay that breaks the rules. Instead focus on producing a consistent predictable high quality piece of work, which is exactly what the examiners are looking for.

5 Focus on what Scores Points

As far as possible make sure that your handwriting is legible – illegible handwriting has probably lost students more marks than any other mistake in the history of public exams. Just imagine the frustration the examiner will encounter when he is trying to mark the paper as fast as possible and has to spend twice the amount of time to decipher what you're saying.

At the same time don't worry too much about cosmetic details – the examiner doesn't care if your diagrams have 5 different colours in them and that all the axes form perfect right angles. As long as they're clear and demonstrate what you're trying to show, you'll be fine.

For essay subjects separate ideas into clear, neatly spaced paragraphs. It's a good idea to write on every other line, so the examiner can mark your writing easily and you can add things in later without it getting messy. For maths and the

sciences, make sure that you write down the formulae you're using and show the steps in you working.

The same applies to the style and quality of language you're using – unless you're writing an exam where quality of writing matters don't worry too much about style. Beautiful sentences and flowery language won't score you points but clear facts, arguments and explanations will.

Post-exam strategies

You'll almost always have another exam coming up on the horizon after you finish one, so it's important to have a schedule in place that allows you to spend your time effectively.

If you have another exam coming up tomorrow, you'll probably only be able to take a few hours off before going back to revising, but if you have a few days' gap, then you should feel comfortable taking the rest of the day off, depending where you are with your revision.

Conclusion

This guide is everything we wish we had when we were doing exams a few years ago. It contains best practices that we've distilled by reflecting on our own experiences as students and optimised by working with students as private tutors in a range of subjects.

If you've successfully read through this guide, we can guess a couple of things about you. First, you're ambitious and hungry to succeed, or you wouldn't have started. Second you're committed to improving yourself and are willing to spend the time needed to do so, or you wouldn't have finished. These qualities are not only essential in achieving exam success but in achieving success in life.

What we've done here at Up Learn is find the best way of getting you to the top grades, using techniques from scientific research and practical experience. We've used these methods successfully with many students and are proud to put our name behind them. From the mindset, to

the strategies and techniques to your specific course content, we've got you covered. So all that's left for you is to go and crush your exams.

Enjoy the journey,

Nasos & Guy