



UNIVERSITY OF  
PORTSMOUTH  
ASK - ACADEMIC  
SKILLS UNIT

# Revision Techniques and Memory.

It is vital that you don't just know your subject: you need to understand it. Many people rely on simple repetition, which can be great for memorising knowledge such as factual information, models and formulae. However, it is not very useful where you need to either apply the information to new contexts or where you need to demonstrate understanding. If you understand something, you are far more likely to both remember it and be able to use it effectively in an exam (and in any assignment).

This handout includes information which is designed to help both with memory and with demonstrating understanding. This will help you to tackle questions which require, for example, interpretation, discussion, analysis and criticality.

There are many ways to revise for exams, but the three most important aspects are:

1. Start early. For a summer exam, you should be starting around the end of January.
2. Revise, revise, revise! Repetition is needed to for information to move from your short-term memory to your long-term memory. **It really is "use it or lose it"**.
3. You don't have to be chained to a desk for hours and days at a time. Get up, walk around, take a quick look at material on your way to put the kettle on, and think while it's boiling. Shorter bursts when you are more relaxed are often more effective than slogging away, becoming tired and getting stressed.

This handout provides a range of techniques to help with your revision. Use and adapt them to fit how you work and remember things. They won't all be suitable for all types of exam, so consider which is best for the type of exam you are taking and, especially, for the type of information you need to remember and understand.

**Please note that there are many methods, but they cannot all be included in this one handout.** This handout uses the Oscar model, which stands for organisation, selection, creativity, association and repetition, to help you structure your revision.

## The Oscar Model

### Organisation:

Sort and order your notes. Study past papers if available. Our brains thrive on being organised. Revising from disorganised notes is frustrating and ineffective.

Tips for organisation:

- Create folders for different themes. Sub-divide them into different topics. Use colour-coding. Quite often, you will have information which crosses over into a different them or topic.
- Identify information which could apply to more than one theme or topic.

- Use colour coding for themes and topics, and write down a reference to the other folder or sub-division.
- Put a flowchart, diagram, or mind map to put in the front of the folder.
- Put a list in the front of the folder which includes anything which also applies to another theme or topic.

## Selection:

Choosing which topics to revise can be stressful. Don't try to revise everything. It is wiser to be selective. Make informed selections rather than random choices.

Tips for selection:

- Listen carefully to what your lecturers say and what they emphasise.
- Revisit handbooks, notes, guidance, and other forms of information, to identify what *might* be included in a paper.
- If past papers are available, they can help you identify what might be included in the exam.
- If you are well-organised, you probably have identified information which applies to more than one theme or topic. You can use this as a springboard for revising multiple themes and topics.
- Thoroughly revise a few more topics than will be needed in a particular paper. You could follow the "five-for-three" rule, which means that if you need to answer questions on three topics, you should revise five. You cannot guarantee that you will pick all the specific topics which will be included, but you will have a better chance of doing so.

## Creativity:

The more creative you are, the more you are likely to understand and remember. This is because you are using more of your brain and each type of activity reinforces the others.

- The brain loves an image. It doesn't have to be realistic or "good" art. You just have to know what it means. It doesn't even have to be obvious. If your brain comes up with an "odd" image for a topic, don't push it aside: run with it!
- The brain also loves patterns. It likes to compartmentalise, but it also likes to see how, where and why things relate to each other. Use your visual memory. Create and use images, colour, lines and arrows.
- Use different text sizes and styles emphasis and to show significance.
- Create ways of linking, for example, theory to application.
- Use mind maps, spidergrams, pyramid diagrams, flow charts, or other methods of interlinking information which shows relationships between and within themes and topics. They are also very good for showing development, for example from theory to application; from starting point to end point, and cause-and-effect.
- Use mnemonics and acronyms. A mnemonic is a short phrase, often created using a phrase which begins with the same letter, for each letter of a word, or the first letter of each word in a phrase. For example, for the strings on a guitar, which are EADGBE, you might say "Everyone Admires Dave's Gentle Blue Eyes."

- An acronym is in the opposite direction. It reduces a phrase to a word. For example, NATO stands for “The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation”.
- Use rhythm and music. Putting even complex theories and ideas to a favourite or familiar tune can really help you remember it.
- Use space and movement. Walking around while reading and thinking can be surprisingly effective, as can doing even a little exercise to get your circulation going before and during revision.

## Association:

Association can be direct or indirect links between, for example, themes, topics, ideas, theories, models, the real world and textual examples. You can associate information with your own and observed experiences. It doesn't have to make sense to anyone else. If you associate knowledge and theory, for example, with the real world of your field, you stand a much better chance of both understanding and remembering it.

Association helps the brain create a “story”, where all the parts come together and support each other. The sections on organisation, selection and creativity above, all have techniques which involve association.

- Use your space or draw a space for a “memory palace.” This is a very popular method, used by many “stars” of the memory world. It involves associating a theme with a building, a topic with a room, and information about that topic with items in that room.
- For practical subjects, associate material with your “real world” experience. Integrate the literature, your knowledge and your understanding.
- For text-based subjects, you still are talking about the “real world” in one way or another.

## Repetition:

Review the material actively and repeatedly. One effective form of repetition is to, over time, gradually reduce the amount you are writing. You can reduce pages of notes down to key bullet points or, for example, a diagram, a flowchart, a spidergram, or a mindmap. Ensure that you include key authors, studies, articles, other material, and examples.

If you would like an ASK tutorial, please contact us.

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