



Guide To Academic Study

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Introduction

These notes were written just before my GCSE examinations to try and help me revise effectively. They helped quite a lot and since then I've been asked for these notes a number of times for friends and friends' children. So I thought it was about time I converted it into an e-book to share with everyone. This was also the time I found out about concepts such as Mindmaps and Speed Reading. These basic notes were the seeds that grew into the research that grew into my lectures. So please enjoy this guide to academic study.

1 Using Reference Books

1. Make sure the book is not too difficult to understand. Is it easy to read?
2. When was it written? Check date of publication. If it was written some time ago, then the information is probably out of date.
3. Use the index or contents page
4. Are there useful diagrams or pictures
5. Look for summaries. These are often at the end of each chapter; or there may be a conclusion at the end of the book. If there is none then read the first and last paragraph of each chapter.

Do not spend hours reading the whole book. Pick out the relevant snippets.

2 Giving a Prepared Talk

Preparation

1. A talk must have a shape, structure and direction.
2. You must not write it out fully and just read it. You are not allowed to do this - It is a talk, not a reading.
3. Avoid learning it by heart and delivering is 'parrot style'
4. Prepare brief notes on a card. Refer to them but do not depend on them too much. Alternatively use acetates to place your main points.

A blue-tinted banner image showing a group of people in a classroom or office setting. The text 'James Abela ELT' is overlaid in large white font.

James Abela ELT

Planning

Always try to put yourself in the position of the listener.

A talk must have:

1. A beginning - The introduction
2. A middle - The main part, maybe divided into sections.
3. A conclusion - either, a brief summary or a number of recommendations.

Never just tail off. Always have a definite ending.

You should suit the content, tone and language to your audience.

Making Notes

Keep it brief, use phrases or key words and headings.

Delivery

Speech must be clear and audible. Vary pitch, tone and emphasis. *Avoid monotony*

Timing

To take too long is as bad as finishing too soon. Practise and time yourself.

Eye Contact

You have to look at the people you are talking to. You have to maintain eye contact with them no matter how painful it is. You should only have fleeting glances at any cards you have. (This is the reason I do not have cards, it is too easy to maintain eye contact at the cards and not at the people. James)

The Boredom factor

Unfortunately when giving a talk to your fellow pupils, they tend to get bored very quickly and although it should not make any difference, lecturers mark accordingly. Therefore when possible avoid going at the end of the day, when people pay little attention. Use flashy props, gadgets and jokes where appropriate.

3 Work Checklist

The Appearance of your work

- Is it neat? (If you did not type it or word process it, why not?)
- Did you put the title? (If necessary)
- If handwritten, did you underline the title and headings carefully? If using a computer, use the Embolden, Italic and size functions. Underlining is unprofessional. You should only use one family of fonts per document and normally no more than four different styles.
- Did you have proper margins?
- Did you use paragraphs? (Normally between 4 to 8 sentences per paragraph)
- Can you improve the neatness of your work? Was a computer allowed? (If so, don't hand write it, the quicker you learn to type the better. James)

General checks to make

1. Is your handwriting easy to read? (Assumes you were not allowed to type the work)
2. Did you check your spelling? No the computer spell checker is not sufficient. It only checks for real words, not for context.
3. Did you check your punctuation? Your computer will not help you here, Microsoft have not perfected their Grammar checkers yet.
4. Are the diagrams or drawings carefully done? Are they appropriate to the document? Garfield may look pretty, but unless the document is about cartoon characters, he is unlikely to be appropriate.

Can you honestly say that you did your very best?

What will improve your next piece of work?

Summary (C O P S)

C apital letters
O verall appearance
P unctuation
S pelling

4 Remembering by Association

Say what you want to remember as a list of words:

1. Matchbox
2. Watch
3. Pencil
4. Lamp
5. Key
6. Pen
7. Handkerchief
8. Book

It can be easier for some people to remember if one can form the list of items into a song or rhyme.

- One is a bun
- two is a shoe
- three is a tree
- four is a door
- five is a hive
- six is sticks
- seven is heaven
- eight is a gate

The other trick takes some practise, but unleashes your imagination. In fact there have been many books written on the subject. For example you need to remember five objects, because you are going shopping tonight:

1. Pair of Shoes
2. An evening dress
3. A packet of mints
4. Cat food
5. Petrol for the car.

To remember these items you will need to picture these items in a completely zany situation. Normally linking two items together. If you can come up with your own imaginative links that is very good, but for example:

Let us imagine that the pair of shoes and the dress are walking down the street without anybody inside them.

Then imagine that you are about to eat a packet of mints, but instead out comes an evening dress.

Next imagine that the cat is happily eating a huge can of mints

Finally imagine that you are filling your car with shovels and shovels of cat food.

5 Basic Rules for learning and Remembering

To answer most questions it is necessary to understand as well as well as to remember. It is not usually possible to score good marks by relying on memory alone. Things remembered without understanding will soon be forgotten.

Interest

1. Work to some purpose. Lack of motivation is the most common reason for failure. You will find it easier to learn if you really want to know and understand. You will find it easier to remember if you have a reason to remember.
2. Study the things that you find interesting and develop your interest. Have an enquiring mind. Ask questions: How? Why? What is the evidence? What Follows?

Attention

1. Survey the whole before studying the parts. Skim-read and plan.
2. Get things right first time. Listen *carefully*. Read *carefully*. Ask questions if you do not understand.
3. Concentrate on one task at a time in order of priority.

Association

1. Keep your notes on each subject separate, in an organised sequence and in good order. make summaries at the end of each piece of work.
2. Relate new information and ideas to things that you already know. Build on a firm foundation. Try to fit new material into a meaningful sequence or pattern.
3. Keep previous work fresh in your mind. Look at recent exam papers. Practise answering questions. This makes you think again and look at your notes and reference books. Thinking repeatedly helps to fix relevant information and ideas in your mind.

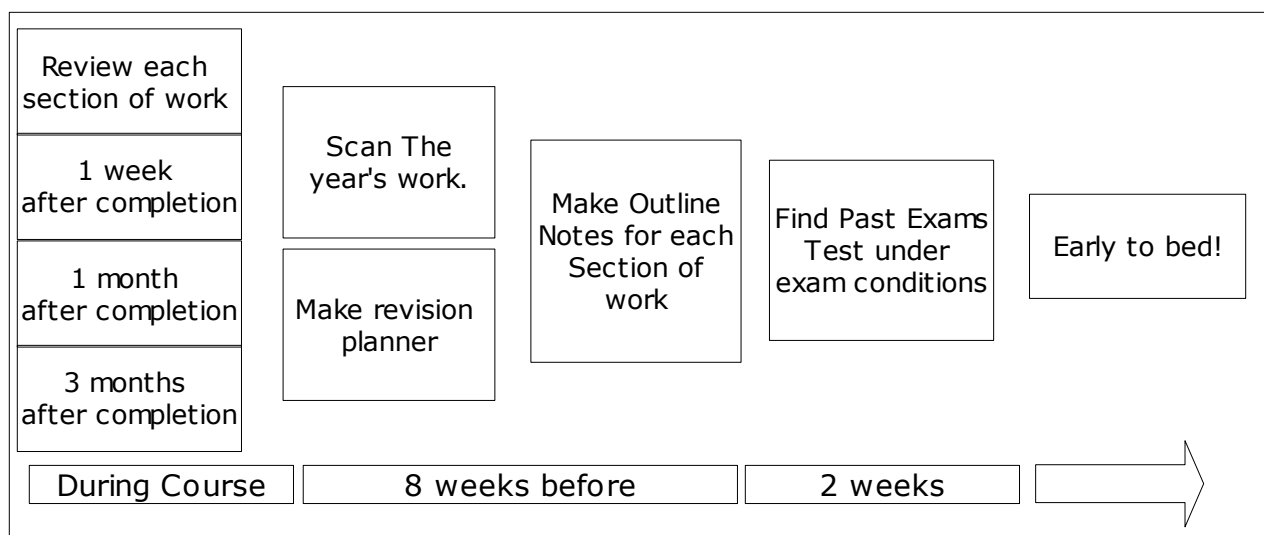
Selection

1. Make sure you understand and then prepare very short revision notes, diagrams etc. Select important points, convey knowledge and understanding in your own words. Use index cards or postcards. Read aloud or tape.
2. Use memory cues for learning by heart.

Repetition

1. Space your revision. It should be a part of your study from the start of the course. Make short summaries at the end of each study period. Look through the notes after 24 hours, 1 week, 1 month and then in the weeks before the exam.
2. Devote short periods to revision. Trying to concentrate for too long can be tedious, unrewarding and not very effective. (45 minute - 1 hour with ten minute breaks in between each revision period. James)
3. Repeat things you wish to remember.

6 Rules for Revising



Revise as a regular part of study

Be well organised. This will help you to avoid last-minute overwork or panic

Prepare a timetable for your final revision

For the eight weeks before the exams. Do not revise one subject at a time or you may run out of time and some subjects will get little or no revision. Set yourself targets and deadlines by which you will finish each part of your revision. If you have no classes in the weeks before the exams try to study for lengths of time that correspond to the length of your exam. so that you can get used to concentrating for 2 to 3 hours without a break. (Only applies when doing past papers or making notes.)

- Have eight hours sleep a night
- Regular breaks for recreation
- Occasional days off work (No more than two a week)
- Overwork results in tiredness and under achievement in exams.

Learn from last years exam papers (and any others you can get your hands on)

- Read the instructions and questions most carefully and plan your answers.
- Practise answering questions
- Planning, timing The examiner is looking for quality, not quantity.
- Some lazy examiners will only bother to mark the first and last paragraphs. So make sure that you start off well and round off well. (James)

Practise answering complete exam papers

A. Allocate your time sensibly

B. Do not write all you know about the subject, only answer the question you have been asked.

These are the two most common faults in exam technique.

Summary

Here are the three basic requirements for the learner: Attention, Interest and Repetition

7 The Examination - General Points

Your success depends on:

1. Effective study throughout the course
2. Well planned revision
3. Practice in planning and answering exam questions
4. Reading and obeying instructions at the beginning
5. Reading and interpreting the questions correctly
6. Using your exam time effectively
7. Choosing questions wisely
8. Answering the required number of questions
9. Writing legibly and organising your answer effectively.
10. Conveying your knowledge and understanding to the best of your ability.

Make sure you fill in the details on the front of the answer book correctly. Read all the instructions carefully.

Make sure you have been given the right paper. Make sure it is complete and printed properly (It would not be the first time I have been given the wrong paper or a page was missing. James)

Short answers

1. Start with question 1 and work your way through the paper. Read each question carefully and answer the ones you are sure of.
2. If you are not sure of any answers, leave a question mark in the margin and come back later.
3. Go onto the next question, do not spend time on questions you find difficult. If you do this then you could be missing easy point later in the exam paper.
4. After finishing the easy questions, go back to the harder ones. Remember most of the time it is better to take a guess, you have nothing to lose. (Unless they deduct marks for incorrect guesses)
5. Check all your answers

Long Answers

1. Read all the questions, very carefully before deciding which you want to answer. Select the ones you can provide the most complete answer to.
2. Allocate your time according to the marks for each question. If they carry equal marks then divide the time evenly. Remember to allow time for checking your answers.
3. First answer the question you think you can do best in. Do not spend too much time on it. Stick to the plan. Most people get 3/4 of the marks in the first quarter of their effort.
4. Read each question again before answering it. Make sure you understand it completely. Sometimes you can ask for clarification.
5. Write the question number clearly in the margin, do not waste time copying out the question.
6. If you are asked to 'include a labelled diagram' then you must do so, but if asked to 'answer by means of a labelled diagram' then that is all that is required. No explanation is required. *Answer the question, the whole question but no more!*
7. Think before you write. Planning is vital, because you have no time for re-writing or re-organising. *Keep to your plan.* This will help you to get to the point quickly, answer all parts of the question, arrange them in an effective order and to include all that is necessary.
8. Answer as many questions as is required. Don't answer more! If you are short of time and can not answer all the required questions. Answer the last question in note form, it may get you a few marks.
9. Check your work. When allocating your time remember to leave enough time for checking.
 - Cross out any rough work
 - Correct slips of the pen.
 - Add any relevant details
 - When crossing out, just use a single line of the pen. Do not bother with Tippex.

8 Why Make Notes?

Making notes is a short way of writing something you have seen, heard or read about.

1. Writing notes makes you concentrate on what you are learning.
2. Making your own notes helps you to understand better, because you are putting ideas and materials into your own words and diagrams. Make sure you understand before you start making notes.
3. Notes link new knowledge to what you already know
4. On paper it is easier to see which are the most important points. Notes should be short and contain only the important keywords and sentences.
5. Notes are excellent for revision.

Your Notes should be:-

- Easy to Read
- Brief
- Clear
- Easy to Understand
- Well Organised
- Necessary to what you need

Your Notes should *not* be:-

- Difficult to read
- Long
- Unclear
- Difficult to understand
- Unnecessary for what you need

Helpful Hints for making Notes

1. Space the work out well.

You may want add things later

2. Use Headings

3. **Use CAPITAL LETTERS**, Underline Words, use coloured pens, highlighter pens, put words in colour

4. Number your lists

5. **Use Diagrams**, but make sure they are clear and large enough.

6. **Take care with your writing**. (You can always type your notes...) You need to be able to read it six months, or even several years later.

Suggestions for keeping and using your notes as a back-up memory system and revision aid.

You will already be keeping notes from your lessons and assignments. If you are in a lecture take rough notes and then write them out properly that evening.

Keep a loose-leaf file

- Put in it: Extra notes
- Relevant extracts from books
- newspaper articles
- specimen answers etc.

Number each one as you put it in and date it. Always put in the author, date published, publisher and page numbers if not visible in books.

9 Organise Yourself and Your Time

Take a positive attitude

If you believe you dislike a subject, you will always find reasons to confirm this and you will end up doing badly at it. The opposite is also true. If you like a subject, you will usually do well at it. If you think you are capable of doing something then you will often find you can.

Examine your reasons for disliking a subject

1. It is difficult and you don't understand it.

- Ask your teacher to recommend a good easy-to-read book on the subject which you can use to look up new or difficult ideas.
- Ask your teacher to explain or discuss the problem, but make sure you choose a convenient time. Make an appointment if necessary.
- Discuss with others in your class
- Sometimes even parents might be able to help (Ask your mum about higher mathematics, I am sure she knows the answers. I had the shock of my life when I asked my mum, she has a degree in the stuff.... James)

2. You missed some work and do not seem able to catch up

Same as above

3. You think the teacher dislikes you or you dislike the teacher.

- Try to forget about the teacher as a person and just concentrate on the subject
- Do not waste time and energy getting upset if a teacher bores or annoys you. Concentrate on what is being said, not how it is being said. At degree level you can simply not turn up to lectures and read the book instead. (I have still passed exams and I have only turned up to the first lecture)

Worry and anxiety

A small amount of is natural and is a good thing. Too much causes panic and poor performance.

Take some positive action:

1. Do not put off until tomorrow what can be done today. This applies to work and personal problems.
2. Write down the main points of the problem. Try to see both sides.
3. Do not keep your worries to yourself. Talk them over with your teacher, friend or relation. (You can always write to me. You would not be the only one...)
4. Take some time off. Walk, exercise and relaxation. (I am not sure walking is such a bright idea in KL, but I can not think of a more Malaysian alternative. The English quaintly enough like to walk.... Still where I live, there is no pollution, lots of footpaths, fields and most of the year it is very pleasant to walk about.)
5. Do one thing at a time - Make a list of things to do and go through the list doing them one by one. Breaking them down and achieving objectives will relieve tension.
6. Get enough sleep and rest.
7. Eat well but sensibly and take some exercise.

Organise your place of study

1. Use a desk or good sized flat surface.
2. Clear it of everything, except what you are working on now.
3. Put everything else away. (The floor is always a convenient place. James)
4. Get out pens, pencils, paper and books before you start.
5. Have a firm but comfortable seat
6. Have good lighting with no shadows on your work.

Noise

Any noise, even soft music, takes your concentration away from your studies. Studying is hard enough. Try to get rid of all distractions. (Studying can be enhanced if you are playing music of your choice, but it must be under your control so that when you need total concentration you can momentarily turn it down.)

Keep Working

Learning is not a passive process. Just like an athlete, you have to practice to improve.