

Exam preparation

A guide to preparing
yourself for exams



Define tomorrow.

UNISA | 
university
of south africa



1 Motivation

Why are you studying? (What do you need most or want that you do not have?)
What does “success” mean to you? How much do you believe in yourself?

Some tips to keep you motivated

1. Make sure you have clear goals - try to keep it specific when setting goals (for example, I need to study tonight versus I need to study Chapter 6 of Psychology 101 textbook tonight)
2. Have clear short-term goals - you can achieve a lot by concentrating on what needs to be done now (the more you do, the more you are capable of doing)
3. Set a time frame - list the tasks that you need to get done and tick off the items that you get done. Once you see that today wasn't wasted, you can start having more confidence in your ability to get things done
4. Reward yourself! For each goal your complete, reward yourself with a positive result (for example, watch a movie or having coffee with a friend).
5. Break tasks into smaller tasks - Reinforce the idea that every bit helps. A little writing often can be very productive!
6. Focus on what you have achieved and not on what you have not done - acknowledge that you are managing some tasks and others not.
7. Don't make excuses, make progress - everyone has interruptions and crises that prevent them from completing something. If your plans for studying were sabotaged, devise a new plan to start studying again.
8. Get a different perspective - when you get stuck or bored or you cannot see the relevance of your studies, consider your long-term goals. Why did you first register for this qualification? Are those reasons still valid? If not, contact a counsellor to discuss your career plans.
9. Join a study group/ find a study buddy - other students may also struggle with the same subject that you are struggling with. Talking to others about your studies helps you to gain perspective.



1 Motivation

10. Don't fight it - all modules in a degree/ diploma might not be equally interesting or exciting, but they are necessary. Try to change a hated subject into something fun for yourself, or reward yourself more often for completing work in this subject.
11. Know where you stand - if your results for an assignment or exam were not what you expected, do self-assessment (Did I spend enough time on this module? How can I approach this subject differently? Did I follow the instructions?). You can also contact your lecturer to request feedback (on written examinations).
12. Try something different - mix your activities to spend not more than 30 minutes on one task (for example, work on a module you struggle with for 30 minutes and then on a module you enjoy for 30 minutes, and so on).
13. Talk to someone you trust about your difficulties with your studies; do some exercise; reconnect with friends or try focus and meditation activities..
14. Can you add more ways to stay motivated?

Source: University of Melbourne Learning Skills Unit. Motivation.

2 What do you still need to do?

Which of the following do you still need to pay attention to?

- Set up a timetable and make a commitment to stick to it.
- Exercise, eat enough and get sufficient rest.
- A positive attitude will help you to cope with exam anxiety.
- Stick to your timetable and also have time for other commitments.
- Arrange for study leave.
- Contact your lecturers if you are unsure about aspects of the work.
- What else is important?

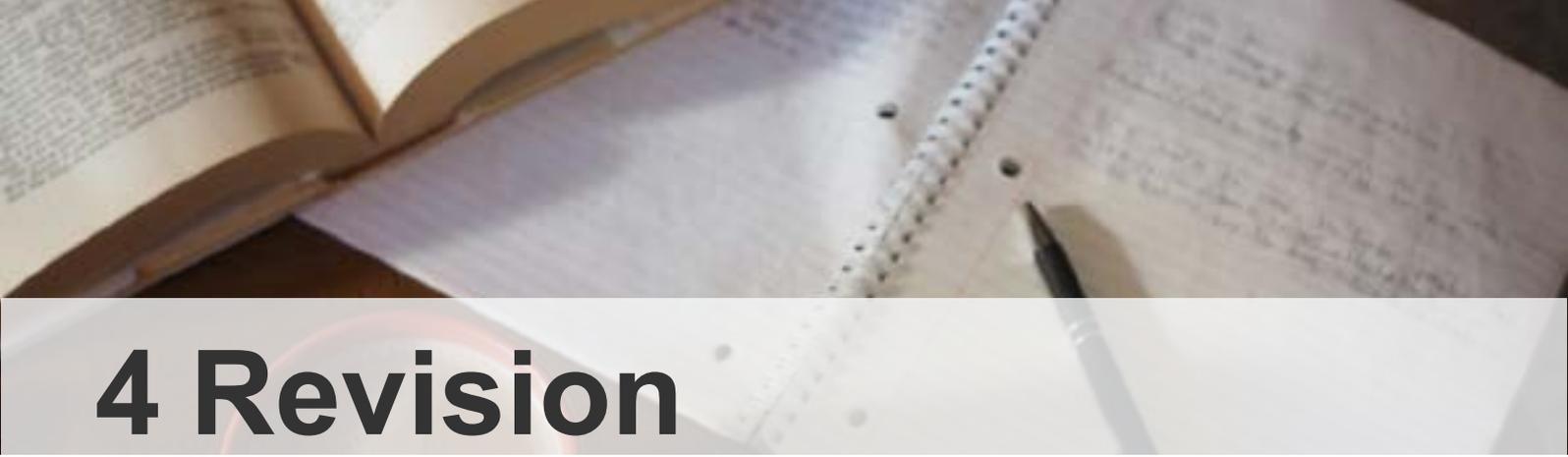
3 Your demotivators

Which of the following are applicable to you:

- Your family/ work environment is not very supportive
- You feel overwhelmed by the amount of work.
- You take ages to complete irrelevant tasks.
- You rather do household chores than studying.
- You will not produce a good enough result.
- Daydreaming.
- You become anxious because your studies are too difficult/ tedious.

Which other demotivators bother you?

Write a plan of action to address the demotivators:



4 Revision

Timetable

- Count all the pages in your study guide and textbook and divide them into the days left before you write your paper.
- See how much you will need to study each day in order to be ready for the examinations.
- Do not cram the night before.

Problem-solving

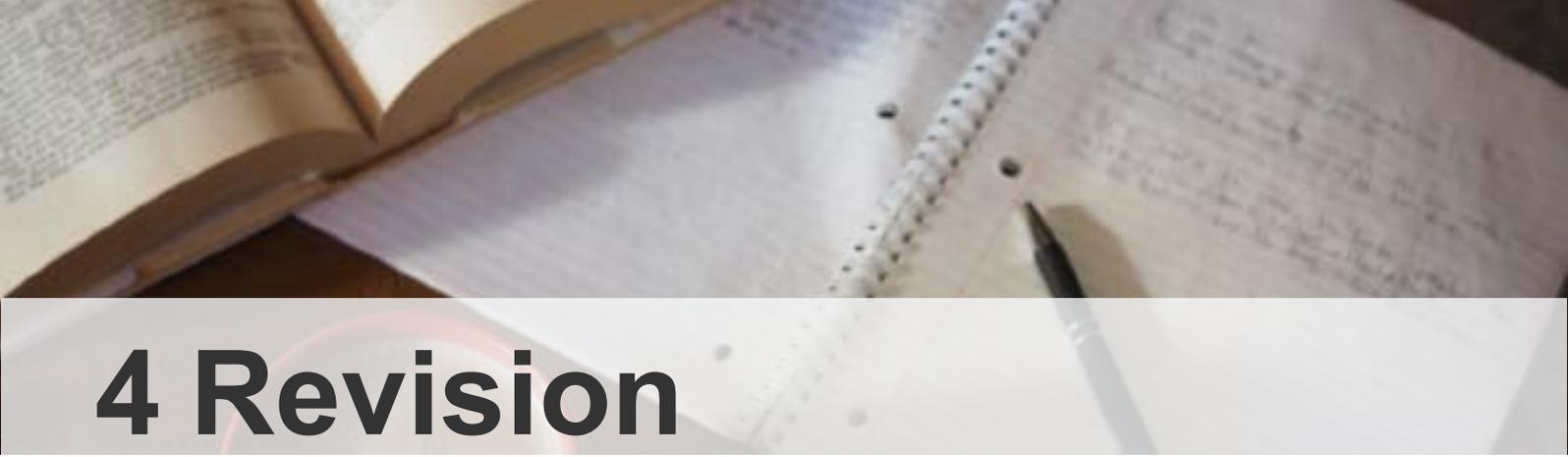
- Subjects such as Accounting, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Computer Science involve a lot of problem solving exercises.
- Solve at least one of each of the types of problems found in every section, especially the ones you find difficult.

Mock exams

- Set time limits when practising to answer questions.
- Make sure that you know which format(s) of questions you need to deal with, for example multiple-choice, essay type or short questions.

Check

- Make sure that you have all your tutorial letters and check through them for guidance.
- Check Tutorial letter 101 again to make sure about the exam format.



4 Revision

Assignments and notes

- Revise your assignment answers and pay special attention to comments from lecturers.
- Use keywords to make a concept list which covers all the major concepts (and where applicable, formulas) that you have covered.
- Integrate all the information so that you get an overall view of the work.
- Use [notemaking techniques](#) such as mindmapping, textmapping and the question and answer system. The question and answer system is particularly useful when you have turned learning outcomes/ study objectives into questions.

Look after yourself

- Make sure you get enough sleep.
- On a physiological level, drink enough water; stand up and stretch; run on the spot before you sit down and continue with your studies.

Did you know that it is an extremely bad idea to study through the night without sleeping since your brain does not have time to link concepts that foster understanding. Watch this video to learn more:

https://www.ted.com/talks/russell_foster_why_do_we_sleep



5 Exam questions

Essay-type questions

- There are different criteria for assignment essays and exam essays - exam essays are usually less polished than assignment essays.
- Well-planned and presented essays earn higher marks.
- Do a mindmap before you start. Tree diagrams and tables are also useful.
- You may not have time to edit your work thoroughly.
- Stress may mean that you may miss errors or forget to correct them, even if you reread.
- Identify the key words in the essay question, because it helps you to focus on the answer immediately and to avoid misunderstanding.
- As part of your preparation, you need to have made a detailed, focused study on selected topics.

Multiple-choice examination

- It requires a review of nearly everything covered.
- It still means purposeful notes, well-reviewed texts and daily active learning.
- Use the many cues provided, such as questions that contain those choices that use absolute words such as always, never and only
- Read carefully for terms like not, except and but which may come before the choices.
- First answer all the obvious questions and mark the “puzzlers”.
- Know the scoring system (for example, how many marks will be deducted for each wrong answer?).



5 Exam anxiety

Every person experiences some degree of anxiety. Controlled anxiety is normal and necessary in order to be sufficiently motivated.

Signs of anxiety before the examination:

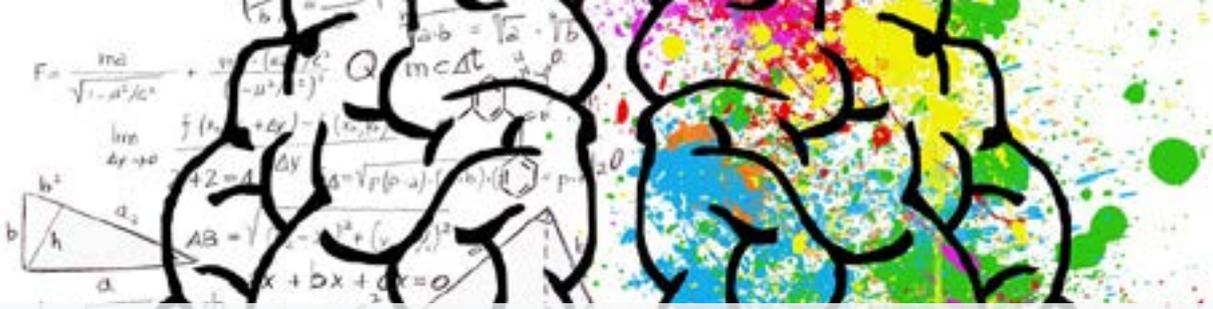
- insomnia (sleeplessness)
- decreased/ increased appetite
- inability to concentrate
- lack of interest
- boredom

Signs during an exam:

- confusion
- panic
- guilt
- anger
- mental blocks
- depression

What is “normal” anxiety for you?

How are you going to handle exam anxiety, when it is out of the “normal” range?



6 Memory tips

Focus your attention on the materials you are studying

In order to information to move from short-term to long-term memory, you need to actively attend to this information. It helps to study in a place free from distractions (people, TV, radio, music and other diversions).

Establish regular study sessions to avoid cramming.

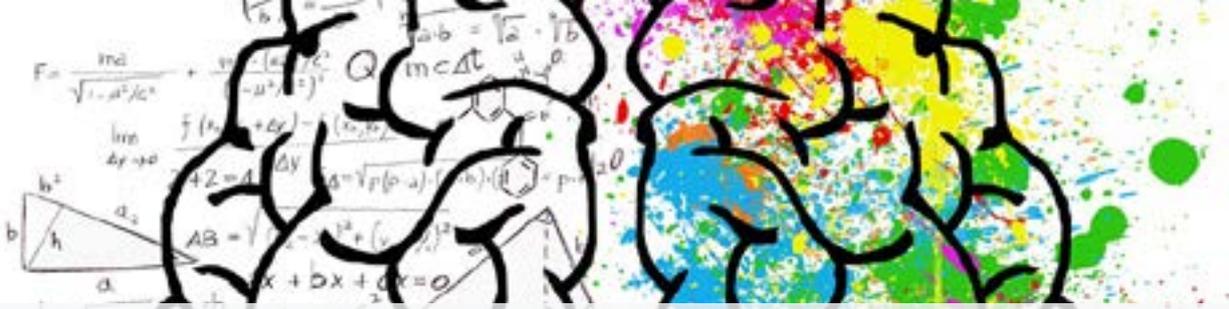
Repetition is an important part of memorising information. Studying materials over a number of session gives you more time to process the information. Regular studying produce better results than marathon sessions. Study in a number of shorter study sessions rather than one long session. The reasons for this are: (1) it is difficult to maintain close attention to material throughout a long study session; (2) studying after a break gives you better feedback about what you know; and (3) studying the same material in a number of settings can make retrieval less dependent on conditions during the test.

Organise the information you are studying

Information in you memory is organised in clusters. Take advantage of this and structure and organise the materials that you are studying. Use mind maps to group similar concepts and terms.

Associate

Associate what you are learning with what you already know. Techniques based on association (for example, creating images that link two things) often prove useful for learning individual words or definitions. For example, for your module End-user computing, you need to remember that a printer is an output device, whereas a mouse is an input device. You can imagine a printer flying OUT of a window and a mouse crawling IN to its hole in the wall.



6 Memory tips

Elaborate

Reading your study material is just the first step in remembering. Elaboration (thinking about what you are reading and how it relates to other things you know) helps you to transfer the learning material into your long-term memory. One of the most effective ways of elaboration is to make up questions about your study material and then answer them. All study guides have learning objectives/ study outcomes at the start of each unit. These already provide you with the basis of your questions you could ask about your study material.

Match learning and testing conditions

It is not (always) practical to study where you are going to write examinations, so to solve this problem, you can study in a number of different locations. Research has shown that people remembered better if they have learned it in a number of locations, compared to only one location. The reason for this is that certain locations are then associated with certain learning material which makes it easier to retrieve the information.

Teach new concepts to another person

Repeating information out loud and especially teaching others that information enhances understanding and recall.

Source: Goldstein, B.E. 2005. Cognitive Psychology: Connecting mind, research and everyday experience. Wadsworth: California



7 Before, during, after

Before the exam

- Check on which day and at what time you write each paper.
- Know where your exam centre is.
- Make sure that you have your student card and ID, as well as your examination timetable.
- Make sure that you have all the stationary you need, as well as a pocket calculator if needed.
- Do not study new material before you enter the hall.
- Pay attention to the exam rules and instructions.
- Be positive.

During the exam

- Read the exam paper instructions carefully.
- Quickly check the exam paper to assess questions in terms of their level of difficulty and point value (especially paragraph and essay-type questions exams).
- Read all the questions.
- Plan the amount of time to spend on each question. Leave time at the end to check your work.
- Start with the question you know best, but make sure that you spend enough time on the questions that count the most.

After the exams

- Complete an “Exam self-assessment” sheet for each exam that you wrote.
- Make sure that you know when the closing date for the next semester/ year is and plan your studies.
- Relax!



8 Some final thoughts...

Remember that positive thinking needs practice. It involves:

- recognising when you are thinking negatively
- identifying what the negative thoughts are
- creating positive thoughts to replace them
- focusing on what you can do and are doing well

Also keep in mind ...

- worrying about what you haven't done is wasted energy.
- worrying about what might happen if you don't do well is wasted energy.
- worrying unnecessarily adds to your stress level and that is not useful.
- the exam is only an exam - it is not a reflection of your self worth nor does it predict your future success. If the worst happened and you failed an exam you are still a worthwhile person who will live to enjoy another day.
- you have had previous successes in exams - you have survived exams and received good results for them - otherwise you would not have gained entry to University.

Source: Lintern, S. (2001). My thoughts about exams. Downloaded from <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/control/examanxiety/>



9 What else?

Find these podcasts and other resources related to exams on our website at <http://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/About/Service-departments/Counselling-and-Career-Development/Manage-your-studies/Exams>.

Podcasts

- Exam preparation
- Exam revision
- Exam self-reflection
- Exam anxiety
- Exam stress
- Dealing with a traumatic experience before the exam

Workshop handouts

- Exam preparation
- Exam focus
- Exam anxiety
- So you failed an exam - what now?

Counselling and Career Development

We provide career, academic and personal guidance and counselling to prospective and registered students by e-mail, in person or by telephone.

Have a question about your career, improving your learning or managing challenges that impact on your studies? Send an e-mail to counselling@unisa.ac.za.

Our website

The counselling and career development website contain a number of e-resources to support your career decision-making, how you learn and dealing with personal challenges. Some examples of what is available on our website:

Career resources	Solving career problems, making career decisions, changing career direction, research career options, develop employability and graduateness skills and learn how to use LinkedIn.
Learning resources	Getting started with studies, planning studies and time, learn more effectively, get support, deal with study challenges and exam preparation
Personal challenges resources	Improve wellness, finding a counsellor and what counselling is about.

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