

TIPS ON EXAM REVISION, FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

1. These notes are written principally for undergraduates at Caius beginning to make plans for their second year of the English course, though they may also have a use for undergraduates in their third year, as a reminder. Since the earliest formal examination within the sequence of the course is not sat until the final term of the second year, it may seem premature to be considering the matter of exam revision well before that time; but there is good reason to do so. In recognition that individuals differ in how they will come to organise their work habits, this advice is expressed in rather general, even abstract, terms; each undergraduate should be able to apply it fittingly and devise a use for it suited to temperament and preference. Read these notes in conjunction also with 'Tips on Exams, for Students of English'.

2. Many will already be familiar with the black arts of revision technique, impressed upon you in the classroom by teachers anxious to improve your chances of good grades in public examinations: preparing a staged timetable, reviewing notes and condensing them into headings, scanning previous exam papers, memorising quotable passages, writing specimen answers in timed conditions--the full repertoire of smart devices. Some of these skills will continue to be of value, especially the discipline of focussed preparation and the uses of controlled anxiety.

3. But University examinations are much less like their school counterparts than they might seem. They are not so much tests of information and learned proficiency as they are challenges to intelligent thought and argument under pressure: the pressure of time and separation from books and notes, but also the pressure of questions designed to prompt the finding of new uses for material and approaches previously encountered; they are tests of intellectual and imaginative improvisation, under control of critical intelligence and well-ordered information, so that revising for them is in many ways less specific and less a straightforwardly learnable skill.

4. One consequence of the above is the importance, from the outset, of progressive revision and consolidation of the stages of earlier reading and study. It is often a self-frustrating project to leave the control and balance of previous study until last-minute revision. You will need to develop a set of habits, matching your personal way of working, which enable you to maintain a regular and continuing overview of your own study, so that material which you have covered is fully integrated into your mental scheme and not just set aside, to be re-activated later on. Rightly practised, this approach should make each aspect of the learning and study process also a stage in concurrently laying the foundations for revision.

5. At the most local level, you may need to review your habits of organising your mental storage arrangements. As you encounter information or structures of argument or complex bodies of literary text, you may find that you have already acquired unawares a tendency to postpone fully 'taking stock' until some later round of work practice. Take steps to overcome this tendency. Mobilise your memory function, by deliberately taxing your skills at

grasping and holding both the materials of study and your thoughts about it. If you have previously tended to skim over new and complex subjects, in the hope of getting a good introductory overview, leaving the detail and its specific functions until a later stage, examine this practice; initially you may be able to go back to the detail earlier than you thought possible, and eventually you should be able to assimilate a full range of all the supporting aspects in the very acts of your initial contact.

6. The efforts involved will be harder, at first. But with practice you will become more confidently skilled, and these skills will diminish to much more manageable proportions the crisis of revision in the approach to exams. To assist early efforts, consider setting aside regular periods of study review; the regularity will help you to develop and sustain good work habits. Perhaps at the end of each week during term you might review all of your current projects and assess how far they make sense and extend your understanding; you might identify the places where new material is beginning to come clearer, and others which remain puzzling and opaque. Don't just let the opaque patches accumulate; plan some reading to address them, consult your supervisor for advice, mobilise your powers of dissatisfaction.

7. It is a common experience for students in many fields of study that material can be more fully assimilated and retained if it is firmly related to some frame of understanding, some scheme which localises the parts in relation to a wider view. A well-constructed historical or linguistic framework, a set of interlocking perspectives and judgements, could assist you in this regard, or some continuing argument with your own critical preferences. There is no need to wrench undecided questions into some reductive schedule, since you will need to live creatively with some major uncertainties and floating problems, where even defining what the problem is may require extended thought, perhaps over a considerable time. But where you can, order your thoughts, and employ even provisional ordering as a support to keeping these thoughts active and actively connected to their contexts.

8. University terms are very concentrated and often exhausting, which makes the vacations a crucially valuable resource. As well as reading forward and planning for the following term's work, you should consciously and deliberately set yourself tasks of review and consolidation of what has been done or only part-done over the previous term. These are projects of interim revision, establishing a confirmed hold on material while it is still fresh, and while your own time is relatively free of revision anxiety. If you find that certain kinds of insight seem to be constantly not quite within reach, floating just beyond your powers of formulation, it is often good to re-read the text where you felt this most directly, to ponder and enlarge your receptiveness as well as to experiment with description and diagnosis. Likewise, if your supervisor has more than once commented on stages in your arguments where your expression has been unclear, go back to these and re-open the underlying issues; revisit the texts, focus your thoughts, write out some clarifications as a practice in getting meaning to fit with the language in which you work it out. Don't conduct a war on floating thoughts, but try not to be an habitually messy thinker.

9. Often your essays and discussions will run ahead of your organised

knowledge and practised judgement. So much the better, as your intelligence becomes more supple and your range of insight over-extends in response to new stimulus. Explanation may lag behind with the broom and mop. But skill with accurate expression, framing your thoughts and developing a discriminated vocabulary, provides a mode of revision right in the creative gap between uncertain thought and its verbal embodiment. Marshalling trains of thought into sequences of extended discussion, into paragraphs and productive reasoning, helps with framing skills. When you need to, you should be able to think in paragraphs, the building-blocks of mental linkage and of insight attached to purpose.

10. The above comprises suggestions for self-cultivation during the body of the course and before the project for specific exam-related revision looms into view. But during the term before the one in which you are to be a candidate for an examination you will need to address a scheme of revision and make a plan. You will need to construct the plan as a map and as a timetable, with tasks in sequence that are comprehensive and realistic, so that you can set a discipline of work that is rhythmic and sustainable. You will need to select certain strategies of coverage and choice, and to take advice from your Director of Studies or the supervisors you have worked with, to be sure that you are not misunderstanding the requirements that lie ahead.

11. Judging the point at which to begin the transfer of your main effort from new work to consolidation of previous material will depend on how much there is still left to do, as well as on the strategic management of time. Don't start too early in a half-hearted way, and try not to succumb to worry about revision before you have even begun. From earlier experience you will know that the full revision phase brings with it heightened levels of anxiety, and these too require management. All students cherish the mystique of stress and gleefully demonise its hampering disadvantages; but of course it can be a potent aid to effective study. Rightly harnessed, it can focus the mind, enhance connective perception, sharpen time-discipline and clarify choices of priority. But stress (which can be an aid) should be distinguished from tiredness or exhaustion (which cannot); stress management requires the recognition that anxiety is itself tiring, and needs to be regulated if its benefits are to be felt. All these considerations apply to making and using an effective revision plan.

12. But even here the skills of appropriate revision need to be seen as distinct from earlier school-based technique. It is true that reliable information and detailed secure knowledge are always needed to hold an argument in place, to give it weight and connection to its evidence; here you need to relearn securely what you already more or less know, so that you can select quickly and economically from your active memory of texts you have read and studied what you may need for an exam answer which will not strike an examiner as lightweight or loosely fabricated. However, only certain parts of your examination will place a specific premium on retained information as such.

13. More characteristic of an university examination are questions in which you are required to think and argue and reason out a viewpoint, mobilising lines of appraisal, imaginative response and critical judgement, where the

question put is designed to be not quite familiar, where you will not have a store of exactly geared-up material requiring more strength of wrist than power of thought. Here you will have to diagnose the focus of the question and its terms, and then think out on the spot your worked argument in response. Within the context of what you know and have previously encountered you will essentially have to improvise.

14. There is of course danger in this, but also the prospect of considerable reward. You reveal your powers of mind by discovering how to provoke them into performance under stress. You make links and connect one insight to another in more than mere narrative succession; you make the argument work itself forward cumulatively and by self-critique; more as if you are writing a new essay than rehearsing an old one. The requirement to do this sets very low rewards to simply adapting a memorised prepared answer, since this will easily be recognised as precisely not rising to the challenge of its occasion; it will read like a 'dumped' essay, merely hooked up to its question, defensive and uninspired.

15. It is these aspects of the exam challenge which justify earlier advice to keep thought fully active in all stages of work and to hold material in a live environment rather than in storage. It may seem that, in this context, revision becomes hard to gear up for such tasks. But in fact it changes its nature while being no less essential for success.

16. Individual, disconnected insights are difficult to incorporate swiftly and productively into a condensed, active argument; just as whole slabs of prepared argumentation will lack the flexibility and point required to take on a pointed question. But there is a median option, which is to cultivate habits of modular thinking, with short passages of bridgework open at the beginning and end for adapted connection into a variety of novel larger formats. A full array of such component parts within a field of study, active in mind and linked to evidence and perceptions about text and context, can provide a repertory of semi-worked precursor materials for exam answers which specifically meet the challenge of intelligent improvisation. Modular working of this kind has direct connection with the thinking in paragraphs already mentioned.

17. It will be seen that these aspects of strategic assemblage have evident implications for the revision process, both as a means of preventing revision from becoming a dead rehearsal of previous study and also in order to generate live material readied for live employment. Each stage of the revision plan should provide for stabilising the supports of accurate knowledge, and also for generating short segments of argument only provisionally equipped with links, so that planning out an answer in the exam room can draw on a repertory of elements and can focus on the specific challenge of the set question for generating the overall frame and the apt inventing and tightening of the links.

18. A further means of reducing the merely retrospective aspect of revision is to re-examine in your own mind the methods and conclusions of earlier work, in the light of your now more developed opinions. Such reappraisal will activate old material and promote connections between its whole field of reference and your current thinking practice. Make time to go back to some

for you crucial and defining parts of texts: re-read the passages or scenes or chapters on which your critical insights and arguments have leaned or pivoted for support; don't be too ready to accept uncritically your own earlier working. There is no need to unpack everything into a state of unresolved uncertainty, because the body of worked argument should hold up well; but the uses to which its various aspects may be put, the directions in which it might unfold, can be enlivened by re-enactment. In this way each of your earlier questions can re-emerge as a live issue, actively connected to the text-focus of its original contexts.

19. It is possible to gauge the effectiveness of these various approaches, also honing them to greater precision, by addressing yourself to some past exam papers and, without necessarily drafting out a complete answer, simply laying out (in your mind or on a single sheet) a planned sequence of the components which you think you could deploy in building up a pertinent essay without too many gaps or sagging joints. In this way you will come to recognise more distinctly the different climates which prevail within within the traditions of each individual paper and its field of study. You will discover, paper by paper, where some further bridgework needs to be prepared, and at the same time the practice in diagnosing a specific question will improve your confidence. Reasonable, justified confidence counts for a great deal in keeping up morale.

20. During the run-up to the exam period itself you should also set yourself projects to compose and write some full specimen answers, under timed conditions, in response to previously unseen questions from earlier papers; your supervisors and Director of Studies will be altogether ready to co-operate, if you request their support, in providing rapid feed-back. For Part I candidates this exercise can be especially valuable, since for many it will have been some time since you last addressed a formal examination. Writing specimen answers will not only focus on practical techniques of choosing the optimal question, rallying thoughts and framing the sequence of an answer working really close to the direction and terms of the question; it will also act as a spur to final revision and its fine-tuning as preparatory to exam-room production. The aim is to open up all the channels for controlled natural flow from one to the other: from the weeks before, to the day itself.

21. A few brief words of caution. In the very late stages of revision, when your mind may be somewhat in ferment, it is possible for a powerfully alluring new idea to float into view and suddenly to seem decisively clarifying: a whole new way of making sense! Be sceptical of such last-minute illumination, because you will not have time to test it fully: the current season's buzz-words are for sure already on their way to the exit. Another sometimes enticing last-minute manoeuvre is to get yourself tired out with overwork, as if thereby to feel virtuous. Don't slide into a cycle of fatigue and exhausting late nights just when you need to be at your best. Plan for sustainable exertion and don't clock up punishing sleep deficits or talk yourself too far into fanciful gloom by chat with fellow-victims. It is always going to be true that you haven't done enough, that with more time you could be more ready; but exams are like an athletics contest and training for them requires that you understand your own limits, how you function best. Look after yourself. Don't skimp on regular sleep and rest, don't stop eating sensibly or ignore usual meal-times; don't

dose yourself with too much coffee and stimulants outside your normal range. If you feel exhausted, take a short power nap, fifteen minutes is good (set the alarm clock). Get some fresh air in the outdoors, listen to some calm, strong music; take trouble to keep yourself in tune, physically and mentally, right through to the end of the line. In the week before your first paper it might be a very good idea to give yourself a break, and take a day off. Ripeness is all.

22. The major benefits of well-paced revision are in speed and economy and relevance, and in cogency of connection, so that a written answer has a direction, a close bearing on textual evidence and insight, and an outcome in some kind of worked conclusion. This way of approaching the final phase of preparation ought also to assist in preventing the boredom of an inert mechanical grind, since boredom can set up a cycle of hectic lassitude and surely deadens the spirit, whereas good revision can discover a rewarding new sense of enhanced insight. If the tasks of assemblage sound somewhat defensive and mechanical, be assured that with this groundwork in place you will be free on the day to improvise many further brilliancies of thought and expression. For all the abstractness of this description these skills are certainly learnable, and well-managed revision can build on earlier habits to promote a buoyant overall preparedness and restrict merely wasteful anxiety. Timely planning for revision is important; but even more so is developing early habits of study which lead through into revision and performance without too much strain and with a good sequence of working practice.

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14th August 2001