

Revision Guide

Preparation and avoiding common mistakes
Checking the specification
Revision tips
Additional support



A pioneer of distance learning, the National Extension College (NEC) transforms lives through education. Founded in 1963 by Michael Young and Brian Jackson as a forerunner for the Open University, NEC is a long-standing independent educational charity and part of the Open School Trust. Today, we remain committed to our founders' vision to create *"education without institution, learning while earning, courses which people of all ages can take in their own time, at their own pace."*

Your future, your goals

How can I prepare myself to do well in my GCSE/A level exams? 3

Syllabus and specification 3

Breaking down the question 4

What common mistakes do I need to avoid? 4

How do I analyse an exam question? 4

Revision tips 5

Know your weaknesses 5

Work to your strengths 5

Stress management 6

Additional support 6

Gain qualifications, start a career, change direction. Whatever your goal we'll help you achieve it.

At the National Extension College (NEC) we've been providing distance learning to help young people and adults learn to change their future for over 60 years. During that time, we've seen, on many occasions, how someone's life can be transformed by taking the right course at the right time.

Each year thousands of students, like you, from around the world, access our quality courses and expert tutor support to develop their knowledge and skills, and achieve their goals.

Some of our students need qualifications to go on to further or higher education. Some plan to take professional courses in areas such as teaching or healthcare and just need that essential GCSE or A level to make it happen.

Whatever your reason for studying, we look forward to welcoming you to NEC as a student.

This guide will give you an overview of how to approach your exams and how to revise in the most effective way.

For more information on the courses we offer, visit our website www.nec.ac.uk.

How can I prepare myself to do well in my GCSE/A level exams?

If you are sitting your exams this summer, the earlier you start planning your revision and practising your exam technique the better. Here are some tips and suggestions from the team at the National Extension College.

MASTERCLASS

- Interactive activities which foster deep learning.
- Focused on topics and subject areas which students struggle with.
- Demonstrable impact on your knowledge, confidence and ability.

Syllabus and specification

The course specification needs to be your starting point when you are planning revision. If you are unsure of your specification, ask your school/college tutor. If you are a student with NEC, this information is available in your course on learn@nec, in the 'About Assessment' section.



Each exam board produces a different specification so it is important to book exams for the right specification. For example, if you are on a course preparing you for the Pearson Edexcel specification, you may find that the AQA exam covers different topics, therefore reducing your chance of success. This is especially important for subjects like history or English because the specification could cover different historical periods or different set texts.



Read the marking criteria and specification carefully to get a clear idea of what the examiners are looking for. This together with tutor feedback from your assignments will make it easier for you to work out a plan of action.



Familiarise yourself with exam questions and exam techniques. Make sure that you do plenty of past papers, practice answering questions in the time allowed, check out revision guides, and understand the key terminology you will need to use in your exam.

Breaking down the question

Learn how to read exam questions. They can usually be analysed word by word in order to extract the full meaning and understand what the exam is asking you to do. As well as doing past papers, examiner's reports can be very helpful. These are produced using the actual question papers from previous exam sessions and give examples of how questions could have been answered. They also compare how students actually answered to the ideal answer. Examiner's reports provide a clear overview of the different types of questions and what the examiners are looking for.

What common mistakes do I need to avoid?

- ▶ Not answering the question.
- ▶ Not recognising the meaning of specialist or technical terms central to the subject, or not demonstrating an understanding of them by defining them.
- ▶ Not writing answers in the form specified in the question.
- ▶ Not giving yourself enough time to answer all the questions.

Underline key concepts or ideas in an exam question before you start writing. Use this to define and analyse the question. If you ask yourself questions about the meaning of these concepts, it will provide you with the beginning of your answer.

How do I analyse an exam question?

'It was the development of the railways that enabled Britain to experience an economic boom in the middle years of the nineteenth century'. Assess the validity of this view.

(sample history question)

1. First, you might focus on the key concepts of 'the development of the railways' and 'economic boom'.
2. Next, you would need to define the period of time you understand to be covered by the term 'middle years of the nineteenth century'. Was there an economic boom? If you agree that there was, how do you know?
3. At this point, your thinking could be focused on drawing up two lists: one with evidence for the development of the railways driving the economic boom (if you agree there was one), and another putting forward alternative points of view, e.g. that the railways developed as a response to the industrial revolution and the need to move goods around the country.

Try out this method on an exam question in a past paper. First, underline the key concepts in the question. Then put together a list of questions to make the meaning of the question clear.

This is just one example of how to approach and interpret an exam question. The questions will usually give you a very clear idea of how the examiners want the question to be answered. By taking the time to study the question carefully, you can ensure that you are economical with your time in the exam itself, and feel more prepared when you begin writing.

More information about what the examiners will be looking for in your answer will be found in the marking scheme for the subject and specification you are sitting. Assessment guidance documents will be available online which will further explain what the examiners are looking for and their expectations for answers.



Revision tips

Know your weaknesses

Whether you are studying at a school/college or with NEC, you should make sure you ask your tutors to give you feedback to identify areas you need to improve on. Here is an example: maybe you tend to overwrite your essays? Work on identifying the key points and becoming more economical with your wording to not only reduce the length of your written answers, but to save you time in the exam. If you are struggling to understand what your tutor suggests you do to improve, don't be afraid to ask them to provide clarification. It will be worth it when it comes to revising and ultimately sitting the exam.



Your tutors at NEC are all subject specialists and their carefully structured feedback will guide you towards improvement. Many tutors are also examiners and so have in-depth knowledge of the requirements of the awarding bodies. They will be able to share top tips and nudge you in the right direction.

Work to your strengths

Everyone learns in different ways so you might find that some methods of revision help you to retain information better than others. However active revision, like drafting your answers to an exam question, are more effective than 'passive' revision like just reading your notes.

There is an extensive body of scientific research which has proven time and time again that reading aloud, writing notes and even drawing can enhance the brain's ability to retain information. Unlike reading silently, reading aloud requires the body to perform auditory processing and motor/articulatory processing*. Put simply, when reading aloud, the body has to process information in different ways, and hearing information in your own voice and syntax aides memory.

Make a revision timetable - as soon as you know when the exams will be, it is important to structure your time in a way that will give you the best chance of success. Life inevitably throws up something unexpected so schedule in some spare time to ensure that you're not rushing towards the end or missing things out.

Create flashcards - these could be quotes you need to memorise for English literature, the format of mathematical equations, or specific dates in history that may crop up in the exam. The process of creating flashcards is just as important as reading through afterwards. Like reading aloud, the writing, drawing and compilation of flashcards means that you have already processed the information several times before reading through and revising.

Discuss with family and friends - discussing the topic can help you to break down the core principles of a theory and distill the important facts. It also means that they can question you about the topics you're working on, improving your memory recall in preparation for the exam.

Write notes - trying to memorise large blocks of text will be a difficult undertaking. No matter the subjects you are studying, breaking down the information into manageable chunks will be the best way forward.

* Forrin, N. D. and MacLeod, C. M. (2018) This time it's personal: the memory benefit of hearing oneself, *Memory*, pp. 574-579.

Draw maps and images - your notes don't have to be an artistic masterpiece! However, drawing pictures can be useful when revising certain subjects, particularly languages. If you can link the image with the correct words in your mind, it may help to retain the information.

Read in a different medium - this is a particularly useful tip for students studying literature. The first read through a novel will give you an overview of the plot and the characters, and you will be able to pick out specific quotes and themes on a second reading. It is advisable that you reread the set texts that may come up in the exam again during your revision period. If you read the paperback the first time around, why not try out the audiobook? Not only will you pick up on different aspects of the story through listening to it read aloud, but you can follow along with your physical copy, making additional notes.

Stress management

The lead up to exams can be a stressful time so planning and preparation is key.

- ▶ **Location** - finding somewhere quiet to study where you will be uninterrupted will help you revise. The library or your room are the best places.
- ▶ **Timing** - trying to revise when you are rushed or distracted will increase stress levels and may be detrimental to your ability to study. If you have children, wait until the evening to study. If you know you have prior engagements, work your revision timetable around these events.
- ▶ **Exercise** - giving yourself a break is important. Exercising increases your productivity by reducing tiredness and stress. By increasing your heart rate your brain gets more oxygen, so go for a bike ride, a run or to the gym, or even just take the dog for a walk!
- ▶ **Take breaks** - it's not all about studying. Set yourself study goals, give yourself breaks between study times, and when you've met some of your goals, spend time with friends and family. Finally, make sure you get enough sleep!

Additional support

Sometimes you need a little extra support in order to achieve the best results. If you are a student with NEC, there are several additional services that you can use in order to gain a bit of extra support that you may feel you need.

Past paper marking

You can choose to add a past paper to be marked. Our AS and A level courses include one past paper as standard, so if you'd like more to be marked, this service would be useful.

Revision tutorial

If you'd like help to plan and manage your revision timetable before taking your exams, you can choose either a one hour or 30 minute tutorial, designed to help you to structure your revision. The session will be tailored to your individual needs and led by the tutor.

Optional tutorial

As with the above, you can choose the duration and this will be useful if there is a particular area that requires additional attention. You can choose the subject of the tutorial.

For further information, including prices and more additional services, visit our website www.nec.ac.uk or call 0800 389 2839.



Visit the NEC website



National Extension College

Woolpack House, 70 High St, Sawston, Cambridge
CB22 3HJ

0800 389 2839 info@nec.ac.uk www.nec.ac.uk

Published April 2024. Review due April 2025