UCL Student Support & Wellbeing

EXAM SUCCESS GUIDE
2017

DO NOT GIVE UP
Exam Success Guide 2017

The examination period is an understandably stressful time, and very few of us can honestly say that we don't get at least a little nervous before sitting an exam! As much as we might sometimes dislike them, exams are in most cases an essential means of assessment, and they're nothing to be afraid of!

This guide will help you perform at your best of your ability on the day and get the best possible results. It'll show you how to become a revision champion, and will give you all the tips, advice, handy apps and other resources you need to own organisation, conquer concentration and master motivation.

So what are you waiting for?! Let's do this!

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1. ORGANISATION

Planning is key for success, and good revision always begins with good organisation. Follow these easy steps to be an organisational champion!

**STEP ONE – CONQUER YOUR SPACE**

Separate your working space from your relaxing space. This is easier said than done in a single room, but try to at least create a tidy workspace on a desk or table. Clear away clutter and distractions. Don’t work in your living space, and definitely don’t work in bed! Get the physical in order first, and the mental will follow later.

A mix of library work and work at home might be advisable, to give you a change of scenery. If you’d like to study in a library, you’ll be pleased to know that there are 3,800 study places across UCL’s 18 libraries and other managed learning sites. You may find that some locations are less busy than the Main Library, so try a few different spots. Some sites even allow you to check online for real-time availability of study seats (search “UCL available seats”) and if you’re a postgraduate student, don’t forget that there are dedicated spaces available to you in the Wilkins Building and the Science Library. If you’re setting up a group revision session, you might want to book a study room (search “UCL study room”).

If you’d prefer to work on a computer, you can find 20 different computer workrooms around campus, alongside large open access computer areas that can't be booked for teaching, such as the 200 PCs located on the ground floor and mezzanine of the Science Library. Use the handy UCL Go! app to find a free PC on campus, and remember that you can borrow one of roughly 260 laptops free of charge if you need one (search “UCL laptop loan”).

The UCL libraries have extended opening hours through the exam period, up to 3rd June. This includes the 24/7 opening of the Main, Science and Cruciform Hub Libraries and the Graduate Hub, but remember that revising at 4 am is most definitely not recommended!

**STEP TWO - KNOW YOUR ENEMY**

Put together a calendar showing all your exams, and prioritise each one based on when it is and how much revision it needs. Look at past papers, speak to your classmates and lecturers and try to understand what you’ll be asked to do in each exam, in as far as you can.

Although it may sound obvious, make sure you know exactly where you need to go on the day! Given the number of students sitting exams and the obvious space limitations in London, some of your examination venues may be some distance from the main Bloomsbury campus. Plan ahead using the Examination Venues Guide available on the UCL Exams and Student Assessment website (you’ll need your UCL login to access this) to work out how to get where you need to go in good time.

Similarly, take time to read through the examinations regulations available on the same Exams and Student Assessment website in some detail before you sit your first exam. This contains comprehensive information on what to expect, what you can and can't bring with you, what to do if you arrive late and a wide range of other practicalities.
STEP THREE – MAKE A BATTLE PLAN

Allocate a defined amount of time for each topic, lecture or book, and then allocate some more! Most people underestimate how long it’ll take. Set realistic, specific and measurable goals for each revision session. You’ll probably find that simply writing down “Study for module X” is nowhere near as effective as “Read four chapters of book X and take notes”.

STEP FOUR – CHARGE!

Study in short, concentrated bursts of 30 minutes or an hour, with short breaks in between. Avoid procrastination, stay focused and look after your wellbeing (read on for more about this). Don’t shy away from difficult areas, and don’t turn away from a challenge! You can do this!

AMMUNITION

The following apps can help you to organisational victory. Try searching for them in the iOS App Store or Google Play Store for Android (please note some of these may only be available on either iOS or Android, and that these are recommendations only – we do not endorse any particular app):

- **iStudiez Pro** - A comprehensive schedule planner for desktop and mobile
- **Timetable** - A simple and intuitive app for managing university life (Android only)
- **MyStudyLife** - Organise classes, tasks, revision and exams with this free desktop and mobile app
- **Passion Planner** - A planner (also available for free as a PDF) that has personal and professional to-do lists, with different priority settings and goal periods
- **Remember The Milk** - A to-do app that lets you organise your tasks with priorities, due dates and tags, that integrates with a range of popular apps and can even be used to delegate sub-tasks of a project to other people
- **GoalsOnTrack** - An app that allows you to record the goal, its purpose, start and end dates, metrics, sub-goals, habits and action plans
- Don’t forget you can always just use the calendar app that came with your phone!
2. EFFECTIVE REVISION

Revision is unique to everyone, but it's important to explore where your studying techniques could improve. Check off the statements below that are true for you…

❑ I have a good understanding of what's expected of me in the exam

It’s crucial that you’re aware of the marking criteria, the style of the exam and its length. Speak to your lecturer to get hold of some example questions or past papers for practice. Going through past paper questions and then marking them is key to preparing for what you’ll need to do on the day.

❑ When reading, I actively engage with the material

If you feel you’re more of a passive reader, then try searching for the **SQ3R technique**, where you Skim, Question, Read, Recite and Review your material for better comprehension! This is especially helpful if you are having trouble concentrating or find yourself hitting a wall when reading the study material.

❑ I test my knowledge frequently, in short bursts

Because of a psychological phenomenon called the "testing effect", testing yourself is key to reinforcing your learning, even if you get the answer wrong. Quizzing yourself frequently, but with breaks in between, gives your brain time to store and reinforce the material. Although it helps to test yourself in the format of your exam, you can test your knowledge of the material simply by teaching it to someone or talking about it.

❑ When I test myself, I know that I'm recalling and not just recognising information

Recall is remembering the information on your own, whereas recognition is simply remembering it when you see it. You’ll only rarely be asked to do this in exams, which is why study methods that involve re-reading and re-writing material are only useful during the early stages of revision.

❑ I take steps to help me recall and understand the study material

This may involve connecting your learning with other topics you’re familiar with, or perhaps your personal experiences, to make the key associations necessary for better memory recall. You can get quite creative if you want, by making up songs, drawing doodles, creating stories, imagining situations, relating the subject to yourself, or just taking the time to think about the study material in depth.

❑ I get help from my peers to understand the material, and I engage in group work

If the latter doesn't apply, you could still consider asking your peers any questions you have regarding the material, or talking through any difficulties you’ve been having. A problem shared is a problem halved, and you’ll probably find you’ve all been facing similar issues. You might also decide to put together revision booklets, give each other short talks on different topics or swap mnemonics, essay plans and questions.
3. MOTIVATION

Everyone struggles with procrastination and a lack of motivation every now and again. Search for our articles on “10 ways to generate study motivation” and “The science behind procrastination and how to overcome it” in the UCL Student Support & Wellbeing Blog for full details. In the meantime, here are three key steps you should follow if motivation is running low.

STEP ONE – ACKNOWLEDGE THE RESISTANCE

When not feeling motivated, it’s important to acknowledge your resistance to the task at hand and any difficult feelings you might have. Remember that studying is meant to take you out of your comfort zone, and avoiding work does not improve the situation. Know that the initial unpleasant feeling will quickly fade once you get going. You might find it helpful to quickly write down your thoughts and any feelings of resistance to get them off your chest, and then leave them to one side so you can get down to studying.

STEP TWO – CHALLENGE THE RESISTANCE

It may be that writing down your thoughts and feelings helped you regain motivation, but don’t worry if it didn’t, because next we challenge the resistance!

If you’re having negative thoughts about failing, it’s vital that you create a positive narrative to think about the exam. You can do this by visualising a positive exam experience. For example, imagine calmly walking into the exam room and turning over the paper, preparing and beginning to write. Similarly, visualise yourself starting to study and realise that the trick is just to get going.

You can also challenge your resistance by rephrasing any limiting beliefs into positive goals in action. For example, you may believe that you’ll do badly in your exams, but instead try rephrasing that belief into “I am working towards doing well in my exams”. A positive goal in action like this can help you overcome your resistance to studying.
STEP THREE – LEARN TO OVERCOME THE RESISTANCE

Learning how to overcome procrastination and improve motivation is a long-term journey that will benefit you long after your exams and graduation. This step involves understanding your studying style better, figuring out what works for you and putting structures in place that can help you generate motivation.

Try talking to others about your plans and the difficulties you've been having - they may help you identify where you've been going wrong. You could also try putting some reward structures in place to encourage studying, and to give you something to look forward to.

Although a system of goals is effective for most, you might find it unhelpful to get too caught up with targets, and you might instead want to focus on the benefits of the process itself as well. Remember that revision and sitting exams are hard tasks, that actually require considerable focus, an important skill for later life.

Most importantly, don't blame yourself for procrastinating, but work on identifying what triggers your habitual response, whether that's technology, unhelpful thoughts or negative feelings. Once you've worked out the root cause or contributing factors, you can figure out how best to combat them and get back to studying.
4. CONCENTRATION

People vary significantly in how long they can concentrate, so you should be aware of your own limitations, and take them into account when you plan your study. However, there are several things you can do to make sure you focus and stick to your study plan:

1. Break up your revision schedule into manageable chunks. You might even want to use an online app to help you with this, such as Focus Booster.

2. Make a small oath to yourself that you will spend the next 25 minutes on a task without interrupting yourself - this is called the 'Pomodoro Technique'. Search for it to find out more.

3. Make your revision interactive – use the SQ3R technique above for reading, make flashcards or other visuals, speak out loud, and keep your goals in mind.

4. Alternate easy and difficult topics, and interesting and dull topics.

5. Search for and read this handy article on our Student Support & Wellbeing Blog on how to deal with digital distractions: “Take control of technology with these 10 evidence-based tips!” Use apps and plug-ins, such as Forest, Stayfocusd, Leechblock, and Offtime, to prevent you from getting distracted.
5. STRESS MANAGEMENT

Prolonged exposure to high levels of stress while not looking after yourself is likely to lead to illness and burnout. However, you can take control of your stress levels and maintain good wellbeing through the exam period by trying out the following steps:

STEP ONE - A HEALTHY BODY

A healthy body means eating a balanced diet, exercising regularly and making sure you get enough sleep, which should be about 7-9 hours a night. A hard-working mind needs its nutrients, so make sure to eat healthily and remember that a home-cooked meal can also replenish your motivation. As an easy way to get some exercise, you could try something as simple as walking, running or cycling to the library. Most importantly, if you’re ill, you need to rest! It's always better to sacrifice 2-3 days taking things easy, as opposed to struggling through an entire week only to feel worse at the end of it.

STEP TWO - A HEALTHY MIND

A healthy mind will be more resilient and will be able to cope with stressful situations more effectively. Here are some things that you can do to achieve this:

- Search for “Resources to help beat anxiety and stress” on the Student Support & Wellbeing Blog, our article explaining some of the great resources provided by UCL to help beat anxiety and stress.
- Consider practising mindfulness, breathing and body relaxation to help you fight anxiety, unhelpful thought patterns and not being in the present moment. Search “UCL mindfulness” for more info.
- Why not listen to the Mental Health Foundation’s short podcast, “Stress and relaxation: quick-fix breathing exercise” (less than 5 minutes!)? This presents a simple example of a breathing exercise, which will help you to calm your body and mind when you feel tense. There are many other examples of breathing exercises available online.
- When revising, don't forget to recharge your mind and get outside! London is full of parks, so if the weather is nice try revising outdoors for a while.
- Leisure and hobbies are also very important for maintaining a healthy mind, so factor some 'me time' into your revision plan and try to distance yourself from thoughts of study during these periods. This can be achieved by jotting down daily unmet goals, in which you specify where, when and how these unfulfilled goals will be met later, and your mind will then be able to rest up.
- Always remember that you are not in this alone. It could be helpful to talk through any worries you are having with a friend, a family member or Care First, which works in partnership with UCL to offer remote short-term advice sessions over the phone and online.
STEP THREE - STRESS REGULATION STRATEGIES

Whether they're aware of it or not, everyone has a coping strategy when placed in stressful situations. Unfortunately, not all of these work well. Some are avoidant coping strategies, deliberate or otherwise. These include procrastinating, escaping through substances such as alcohol and drugs, and denial. These can often feel effective and satisfying in the short term, but in the long term they not only make the situation worse, but they also perpetuate further stress.

Problem-focused coping strategies are much more effective, and you should be using these when faced with stressful situations in life. Although these strategies can make you feel slightly more stressed in the short term, they are highly effective at alleviating stress in the long run. These strategies include analysing situations, tackling them proactively and taking ownership of results.

Similarly, you can work on translating your worries and ruminations into constructive thinking. Instead of fixating on the problems presented by a stressful task, try to think how you can make that task successful, and actively seek solutions. Reflect on things that have gone well for you, instead of things that went badly.
6. ON THE DAY OF THE EXAM

The day of the exam requires careful planning in advance. You need to make sure you know where you're going, exactly what time you need to be there, how you're getting to the exam location and what you need to bring with you (search for the UCL Exams and Student Assessment website for more information).

On this important day, consider doing the following things, in order to take it gently and conserve your energy for the exams:

☐ Make sure to get enough rest, eat well and stay hydrated. This is more important and effective than trying to do some last-minute cramming. If you're feeling a little nauseous, try to at least eat a little something, such as nuts or a protein bar, to give yourself enough energy to concentrate.

☐ Leave yourself plenty of time to get to your exam venue(s), and check your route first thing in the morning using TfL or Citymapper to make sure there aren't any unexpected transport issues.

☐ Have a quick final look at the materials and avoid learning any new material. Feeling guilty on the last day is a natural reaction, even if you prepared well, so relax.

☐ If you have spare time, do something to unwind a little - have a bath or go for a stroll. Avoid discussing the subject with friends or classmates, and keep away from those whose stress levels are contagious.

☐ If you don't have any spare time or still feel anxious after unwinding, reframe how you interpret the feeling of stress. Shift your thinking from “I am afraid of this test” to “I am excited to do my best,” and keep on visualising a positive exam experience.

☐ Arrive at the exam hall comfortably on time but not too early, as the tension during the waiting time can be contagious and so you should minimise your exposure to it.

☐ Focus your thinking away from what you haven’t covered, what you never understood or what you thought you'd learnt but can’t seem to remember. Right now, you can only influence the future and so you should concentrate fully on the challenge ahead, and use the best of what you've got.
GO!

1. Enter the exam room calmly.

2. You may want to use some of the time before you begin to do some simple relaxation and breathing exercises to calm your nerves.

3. Begin by very carefully checking the instructions on the exam paper, highlighting or underlining the key points e.g. word limits.

4. Consider the amount of time you have, decide how best to distribute this among the different sections of the exam and aim to stick to your timings. Three average answers will usually get you more marks overall than two brilliant ones and an unfinished third!

5. Where there is a choice of questions, take some time to consider the potential of each option before making your decision.

6. Once you've made your choice, read the question(s) thoroughly, then re-read to make sure you've understood and haven't made assumptions about the question.

7. With an essay-based question, plan your answer briefly to ensure a strong, critical argument. Keep this simple, no more than section headings and your basic points and examples. If it's relevant, you may find it useful to quickly note down any sources or quotes to refer back to.

8. Remember you don't have to answer questions in the order they appear! Some may want to start by getting the more difficult questions out of the way, while others may prefer to build confidence with easier questions first.

9. Throughout the exam, try to stay hydrated and take regular ‘micro-breaks’, e.g. a brief pause at the end of writing a paragraph. Try putting down your pen and stopping to think for a moment to help you assume control and collect your thoughts.

10. Towards the end of the exam, try your best to conclude your essays in some way and find a little time to double-check your answers, if you can.
If you freeze up, take a few deep breaths, re-read the question and then do your best to proceed with the exam.

DEALING WITH PANIC DURING AN EXAM

During an exam you may find your mind going blank for a moment, after which you may begin to experience doom-laden thoughts and a range of physical symptoms of panic (e.g. heart racing, feeling faint or nauseous, feeling sweaty). These symptoms are very common and not at all dangerous. To help you get back on track you should take the following steps:

Pause for a few moments. You should put your pen down and sit back, concentrate on your breathing and slow it down a little. Perhaps close your eyes for a short while. Let your body relax. Relaxation and focussed breathing will help the panic subside more quickly.

Reassure yourself that you are not going to collapse, faint or lose control - these things never happen because of anxiety. It might be helpful to remind yourself that an exam is just an exam, nothing more, no matter how important it might seem at the time. You can only do your best, and it'll be over before you know it!

Push upsetting thoughts to the back of your mind and re-focus your attention on relaxing, and then back on the exam itself. No matter how bad the anxiety feels, do not leave the exam as panic is always fleeting, and the symptoms will reduce in a short while.

When you are able to, get back to work - remind yourself that it's always better to put something down rather than nothing at all. You can do this!
AT THE FINISH LINE

Whether it was just one exam or all of your exams, follow these steps to reflect on your experiences and help you prepare for the next challenge:

- Firstly, congratulate yourself for taking the exam! It's over, and you finished it!
- Consider what went well.
- What did you learn from the exam?
- What were your initial goals? Did you meet them? This might mean passing, but it might equally mean doing better than you have done previously, or simply completing the exam.
- And once again congratulate yourself for getting this far - well done!
- Go celebrate! If you have other exams coming up, treat yourself to a little something that evening before you get back to revision (a little chocolate or a glass of wine always goes down well, but be careful not to overdo it!) If you're all done, then firstly remind yourself how amazing you are for conquering the exam period, and then go do something fun! Congrats!

And that's it! You've successfully completed the Exam Success Guide!

Now go successfully complete those exams!

*Please note that some of the apps above may not be available on both iOS and Android. Charges may apply. These apps are recommendations only; we are not able to endorse any particular app other than UCL Go!
Care First

- Free advice and counselling over the phone and online, in partnership with UCL
- Qualified and accredited counsellors, who can advise on any issue, no matter how big or small
- Available out of hours, as follows:
  - 5 pm to 9 am, Monday to Friday
  - 24 hours at weekends
  - 24 hours on bank holidays and UCL closure periods

0800 197 4510
www.carefirst-lifestyle.co.uk

Student Support & Wellbeing

- Guidance on maintaining positive wellbeing during the exam period
- Referral service to other sources of support

student.wellbeing@ucl.ac.uk

Student Disability Services

- Information on special exam arrangements

www.ucl.ac.uk/disability
disability@ucl.ac.uk

Student Centre

- General guidance and administration for all UCL students

Chadwick Building, UCL Bloomsbury campus
studentstatus@ucl.ac.uk

Examinations (part of Academic Services)

- Exam guides for candidates, including venues guide

www.ucl.ac.uk/srs/exams-and-student-assessment
examinations@ucl.ac.uk