

Revision and Exam Technique

Steve Smith, 29 January 2018

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Prerequisites

None.

Notes

To put this document together I have exhaustively scoured the web (for about five minutes) for resources and fallen back on my own experiences of helping students through exams.

The online resources I discovered during that comprehensive research process include: [Pearce(2013)], [AQA(2015)], [Mendham(2014)], [Gould(2011)], [Steele(2014)], [ACCA(2012)], [ExamTime(2013)], [MathsNet(2015)], [Marszal(2013)] and [University of Greenwich(2015)].

Document History

Date	Version	Comments
3 February 2015	1.0	Initial creation of the document.
29 January 2018	1.1	Cosmetic changes only.

1 Introduction

A lot of people fail to do themselves justice when it comes to taking exams. And it's not necessarily their fault. Quite often, the very important skills of revising for and taking exams are not adequately dealt with in schools. Which is surprising, as for a lot of people the reason you go to school is to pass the exams and then go onto the next stage, whatever that is.

Dave Pearce at the University of York ([Pearce(2013)]) has a nice anecdote about people having differing abilities to do exams, and so do I.

When I was at Aberystwyth University in the mid-1970s, I was one of only two people doing my course: it was the first time the course had ever been presented. The other person was my mate Pete, who was far smarter than me. And he had the world's best set of notes. In lectures, he would record the lecture on a tape-recorder, then go back to his room and transcribe the lecture into his notebook. I've never known anyone before or since who did that.

When it came around to our finals, Pete got a II(1), and I got a first. Why? I was better at preparing for and doing exams than he was. I made the absolute most of my abilities by being really good at taking exams. And I had a bit of luck.

So - how do you wring every last mark you can out of an exam? Well, read on...

Part I

Revision

After I got my bachelor's degree from Aberystwyth, I went to the University of Michigan in the USA to do a masters degree. I loved being a student in the USA, and I would highly recommend it to anyone who gets the chance to do it.

While in the USA, one of the things that I used to enjoy was ribbing the American students, whenever possible, about the way they spoke, the language they used, and the way they pronounced things.

Why is it called American *Football*, when they hardly ever kick the ball?

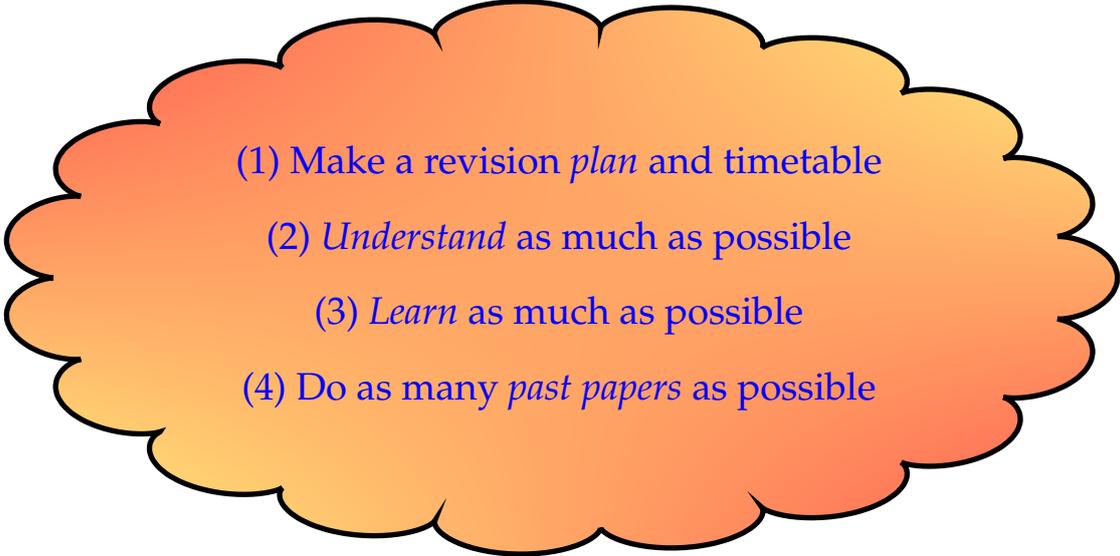
They would ask me where the bathroom was. I'd tell them. They'd come back saying that they didn't actually want the *bathroom*...

And when it came to preparing for exams, Americans don't *revise* for exams, they *review* for exams. I laughed at them for ages before I realised that this time, they had a lot more truth on their side than I did!

So, whether you revise for exams or review for exams, there are a lot of questions that you should seriously think about when you prepare to take an exam.

For instance: How do you revise for an exam? During revision, what sort of activities should you do, and how should you do them? How do you make sure that your revision is working? How do you make sure that you are covering everything that you need to cover?

To try and answer these questions, you do the following four things:



(1) Make a revision *plan* and timetable

(2) *Understand* as much as possible

(3) *Learn* as much as possible

(4) Do as many *past papers* as possible

The following sections go through each of these steps in more detail.

2 Make a Revision Plan and Timetable

The first thing to do is to make a revision plan and a revision timetable. The plan will consist of a breakdown of the three activities you are going to do during the revision period (Understand, Learn, Past Papers), and the timetable shows when and for how long you will do each of them.

And of course you can break down the “Understanding” part of your revision into understanding each separate section of the course. You could look at your text book and have a separate section for each chapter of the book, for example.

More of this later: before you can plan your revision, you will need to know what you have to do during revision...

3 Understand as Much as Possible

Before we can start answering questions on a topic, and before we can start learning things about a topic, we have to *understand* the topic. It's so much easier to learn something when you understand it. If you don't understand something, you can learn definitions and things by rote, fine, but the chances of being able to answer a question on it are pretty slim.

3.1 When You Don't Understand Something

What happens when you read something in your notes or a book that you don't understand? Well, ask your teachers. Ask your mates. Ask people like me. Look on the internet. Don't stop until you have understood it. And when you have understood it, supplement your classroom notes or write some new notes explaining the thing to yourself in words that you can understand. That way, if you forget it again later, you can read your own notes, and you won't have to go through the whole thing again.

When I was doing my degree, at the Easter before my finals, I asked Pete (remember Pete?) if I could borrow his immaculate set of notes, topic by topic. I went through them all, amending my own notes with all the bits that I'd missed in the lectures. That cleared up a lot of things for me, but there was still a lot of stuff I didn't understand. So I tackled each point, asked my mates if they understood (many didn't, without realising it), or if they didn't, the lecturers (there was no internet in those days). There were still one or two holes, but that covered almost everything.

Remember I said that I had a bit of luck in getting my first class honours degree? Well, here it is. There was one course that we did, called “Properties of Matter”. I didn't understand a word of it. Neither did anyone else. There was one derivation of a formula in the course, so I had often thought that if a question was likely to come up, it would be to derive (whatever it was). But the derivation had always baffled me. And everyone else. The lecturer was never around, so it was impossible to ask him. So, *the night before the exam* I thought I'd have one final go at trying to derive this formula.

One thing that had always got in the way of understanding this thing was the symbols that were used for quantities in the equations. So I threw those away. I knew the initial assumptions, and I knew the final result. So I started with my own symbols, used basic general physics from the initial assumptions, and proceeded to have a go at doing it myself. There was one point where I had to introduce a quantity that didn't appear in the lecturer's derivation, but then a few lines later it cancelled out again! And I ended up with the proper formula!! Result!!!

The following day, the question came up. I couldn't believe it. I used my derivation. I was the only one in the class to answer any of the questions set on “Properties of Matter”.

And that all came about from a desperate attempt to *understand* something.

4 Learn as Much as Possible

OK, so you've gone through your notes, and you understand 90% of the course. Good stuff. Now what?

Well, there will be things that you have to learn. In A-Level Maths, you have to learn the quadratic formula, the product rule for differentiation, the index rules, the log rules, how to differentiate $y = ax^n$, $y = \sin(x)$, etc, etc. In Physics you have to learn the names for all the fundamental particles; the definitions of things like potential difference, resistivity, angular speed, centripetal acceleration; concepts like wave-particle duality, half-life, etc, etc. There are *a lot* of things to learn.

So what can you do to help you remember stuff? Here's a few ideas. In all cases, you have to...

4.1 Learn Actively

- A common theme of mine during sessions I have with my clients is *visualisation*. Can I draw a picture of this somehow? Often you can, and it will *always* help, both to understand something, and to learn something. For example, I have come up with my own replacement for “SOH CAH TOA”. I hate “SOH CAH TOA”, and don’t believe it should be taught. My replacement is a picture. See [Smith(2012)].
- Summarise the notes you read on a given topic onto flashcards, or into Mind Maps (pictures, again), etc. Find some way of making “key points” easily and quickly reviewable.
- Find or make up mnemonics to remember lists or sequences of things. One of the things that you need to know for Physics is the order of the regions of the electromagnetic spectrum. I’ve just done a quick Google¹ search and one of the first clean mnemonics I liked was: Rabbits Mate In Very Unusual Xpensive Gardens. You can even picture this. Now you have the picture of a couple of rabbits in a very expensive garden in your head, it’s going to be quite difficult to get it out. And you’ve now learned the regions of the E-M spectrum.
- Write a poem, or a song about something. People find it relatively easy to remember lyrics to songs. That’s because the music helps you learn the words. So if you have any kind of musical bent, write a song about something you want to try and remember. And make it funny. You’ll remember it better. If you think that this is a crazy idea, check out a song I’ve written about Integration by Parts ([Smith(2014)]).
- Make up quizzes on topics that you can have a go at yourself later. Working out the questions is a really good way of learning stuff.
- Give presentations on topics to your friends, parents or pets. Preparing a talk is a great way to learn something (and to be able to present something, you will also need to understand it). Because you are telling a story, you have to work out the flow of the thing. By forcing you to think through a logical sequence of steps, you will discover bits of the story that you yourself were missing.

4.2 Learning Parrot-Fashion

This really is a last-ditch solution. But it gives you at least something to do with the questions on subjects you really don’t understand. Even questions on these subjects usually start off by giving you a few marks for “describing XXX”, or “defining YYY”. Even if you don’t understand it, you can get a few marks by writing down the description or the definition straight from your notes.

Sometimes I would read something in a textbook and think to myself “Hey - that’s ambiguous”! And if this was something that I might have to explain in an exam, I would learn that phrase from the book parrot-fashion. I’m presuming that the marker of my exam will know the real definition of this thing. And he will read my ambiguous statement, see what he wants to see, and give me full marks. Psychology.

5 Past Papers

Once you’ve understood and learned as much as possible, then we can move on to the final act in the drama.

The single best way to practise for an exam is do the same exam that was set at some point in the past. You have to be slightly careful here, because course specifications change from time to time. But usually your school will provide you with access to the past papers that are relevant to you.

When you start doing past papers, don’t do them against the clock. Just do them at your own pace, and use your books, friends, internet, etc, to help you do them.

Once you don’t need your textbooks any more, start doing past papers against the clock, because you will be under time pressure in the real exam, and you need to learn how to manage that. More about that later, but the techniques that you learn to use to manage your time in the real exam will need to be practised at home first!

When you’ve done all the past papers you can get your hands on, do them again. And again. And again. One student of mine was given this advice by a teacher of his: after you’ve done a past paper, go through the mark scheme, and mark your work. But use the mark scheme to see what you should have done wherever you lost marks. Keep doing the past paper until you get 100%. If you have 10 past papers, do them all once first. For any that you didn’t get 100%, do them again. And repeat.

If you can’t do past papers, *GET HELP!!*

¹Other search engines are of course available.

6 Other Things to Consider During Revision

6.1 Question Analysis

This can be risky, but if you're playing the percentages it's worth a try. Look for any topic that was in the exam two and three years ago, but not last year. If you can get hold of papers from further back, try and spot patterns: does any topic come up every other year, for example? Which topics come up more often than others?

6.2 Looking After Your Body

To be in good shape for an exam, not only do you need to be in good shape *mentally*, you need to be in good shape *physically*. So, you need to get into healthy patterns of eating, sleeping and doing regular exercise. I'll write more about this in future versions of this document, as I am not an expert on this type of thing. Go and do some of your own research on this.

6.3 Just Before the Exam

In the last 24 hours it's too late to try and understand anything new. What you can do is cram some facts into short-term memory. This is the time to go through the notes looking at those "key points" sections. If you haven't already done it as part of your revision (and you should have done it), write out a sheet with just the key facts. See how many you can remember. Then write out another sheet with just the ones you forgot. See how many you remember now. Continue until you've either remembered it all, or run out of time.

In the last couple of hours, go for a run, or work out in the gym, or go for a walk. Seriously. Studies have shown that the most creative periods come after a period of exercise, and that the benefits of taking exercise can last for up to two hours. Exams aren't just about memory, you'll need your whole body to be in top working condition.

7 Revision Plan and Timetable: Reprise

Now we know the things we are going to be doing during our revision, we can start planning and timetabling them.

7.1 Structuring a Revision Period

So - how long is it going to take to do all your revision? How do you know how long it will take to understand Radioactivity? How long will it take you to learn all the things you need to learn for Circular and Simple Harmonic Motion? How long will it take you to work through a past paper properly?

7.1.1 The Understanding Part

You can start doing this way before the exam. If you have exams in June, why not start at the beginning of March? Or even Christmas? You will have gone through lots of the course by then, so it will be possible to start doing this a long time before the exam arrives.

And how long does it take to understand each topic in your notes (or textbook, or whatever)? This is important, because you will need an estimate of the time it takes to do things to create your timetable.

This is a very difficult question to answer. It will of course depend on lots of things, like how much you picked up during lessons, how much effort you have put into the course so far, how much homework you have done, etc, etc, as well of course, as the extent of your natural ability.

The best I can offer here is to start really early (say around the Christmas before your exam) going through your notes trying to understand two or three typical topics. And you can keep a note of how long it took you to understand each topic. That way, you will have some idea of how long it will take you to do understand the whole course.

For example, you are preparing to take the AQA Physics Unit 4 (2008 Specification) in June. In that module, there are eight chapters in the (exclusively endorsed) textbook. These are: (1) Force and Momentum, (2) Motion in a Circle, (3) Simple Harmonic Motion, (4) Gravitational Fields, (5) Electric Fields, (6) Capacitors, (7) Magnetic Fields, (8) Electromagnetic Induction.

Pick a couple at random. Say Simple Harmonic Motion and Gravitational Fields. Go through each chapter, and just try and *understand* the material. Record how long it takes. One day? Two days? Longer? There will be bits that you don't understand. Make a note of them and go and get help (see Section 3.1).

Let's say it took one day to go through Simple Harmonic Motion, and two days to go through Gravitational Fields. Use the average of 1.5 days then: so it will take you $8 \times 1.5 = 12$ days to *understand* Unit 4. Mark those 12 days on your timetable somewhere!

7.1.2 The Learning Part

As you work through the material trying to understand it, you could make a note of the stuff you will need to learn. Don't learn it yet - just make a list of the things to learn. And keep your formula booklet handy as you do this.

In Maths and Physics exams we get formula booklets. These have lots of formulas and constants in them. You obviously don't need to learn what's in your formula booklet (although by the time you get to the exam, you will have absorbed a lot of it, by osmosis almost, just because you've used it so often). But *you must know what is in your formula booklet*, and much more importantly, *what is NOT in your formula booklet*, because that's stuff you have to learn.

So, you should have a list of things to learn for Unit 4. Put a day aside to learn it. Mark that day on your revision timetable.

7.1.3 The Past Papers Part

How many past papers are there for your exam? 10? OK - set aside half a day to do each. That will include going through the mark scheme to find out where you went wrong. You are going to be doing each of them at least twice, so allocate 10 days for that. Mark those days on your timetable.

Are you getting the idea?

7.2 Structuring a Revision Day

If you start early, you will be doing revision when you are still going to school, working on homework, coursework, etc. So you won't be able to spend a whole day doing revision. You'll just have to fit it in where you can.

But nearer the exam, you will get study leave, so you have the whole day to spend revising. How will you structure all that time?

Well, this is what I did for my degree, and it worked really well for me. In the run-up to the exams, when I wasn't doing anything else, I would study for nine hours a day. Now you may think this is extreme, and how could anyone concentrate for that long. And I would agree.

What I did was to divide my working day into three three-hour sessions: 9am to noon; 2pm to 5pm; 7pm to 10pm. And in each hour of the time I was working, I would work for the first 40 minutes, and have the rest of the hour off.

So for 20 minutes of each of the hours I was working, and during the two-hour breaks between sessions, I could do whatever I liked. So if you are desperate to text your mate, otherwise the world will end, you can do it in at most 40 minutes from now.

The cool thing was that by taking lots of breaks, I never lost concentration. My mind never wandered during work because it knew it had a break coming very shortly, so it could do whatever it wanted then. And as it turned out, during the breaks I was always keen to get on with the next bit of revision!

[Marszal(2013)] describes a similar idea: the "Pomodoro technique".

This sort of regime might not be ideal for you, but it worked like a dream for me, and I would highly recommend it, or something like it. The important thing is to find something like this *that works for you*.

8 Revision Summary

When I was doing my A-Levels, the Physics teacher I had was not the best. Great guy, but this was his first teaching practise; he had no experience of teaching, and lessons were pretty chaotic. Demonstrations didn't work, derivations didn't get to the right formula, questions ended up with the wrong answer, etc, etc.

When it came to starting to revise, the first thing I did was to start looking through my two bursting lever arch files of notes, with the idea of trying to understand stuff. The second thing I did was to throw all my notes away. Apart from a considerable number of memorable quotes that had occurred in lessons, the notes were useless. They were **PULP**.

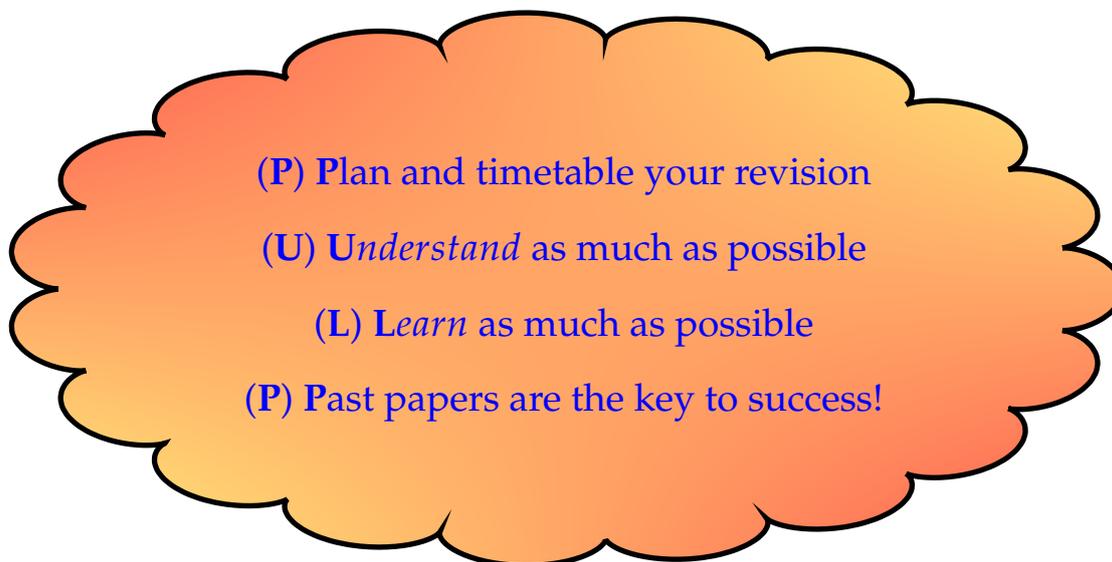
The third thing I did was to panic. What am I going to do now??

Fortunately, there was a set book that was recommended for the course ([Nelkon and Parker(1970)]).

- I decided to take two complete weeks of doing nothing else (making a **Plan** and timetable),
- and with those two weeks I proceeded to go through this book, all 1118 pages of it, **Understand** as much as I could,
- Learning all the derivations (we had to do that in those days), learning all the diagrams, remembering all the experiments,
- and doing all the questions in it (**Past papers**).

I got an A.

Here's the picture again:



Part II

Exam Technique

In order to be as calm as possible when we go into an exam, we need to have a plan for doing the exam. Just prior to going into the exam room, we can focus on our plan, rather than on our nerves. This way we stay on top of the situation.

So - what's an exam plan?

9 The Exam Plan

The exam plan is the set of things that you are going to do during the exam itself. These things will consist of:

- Read through **ALL** the questions first. This may take 5 or 10 minutes...
- ...and as you read, mark which questions you think you can do, those you can do bits of, and those you can't do.

As we will see shortly, one of the reasons for doing this is so that you can decide what order to do the questions in. Then:

- Do all the questions that you know how to do, easiest ones first.
- Then do all the bits of the questions that you know how to do, easiest ones first.
- If there is time, tackle the questions you don't know how to do, trying to squeeze as many marks out of those questions as possible.

And that's it. That's the plan. In the following sections, I'll explain why it works.

9.1 Read ALL the Questions Before You Write Anything

There are a number of reasons for doing this. You might think that the 10 minutes spent reading the questions before you write anything is wasted time. And when you look around at everyone else feverishly writing away, there is a very great pressure to do the same.

But reading questions first is *not* wasted time. Far from it. Here's why.

9.1.1 Figuring Out What Order to Answer the Questions

I don't know if this has ever occurred to you, but, *you don't have to answer the questions in the order that they have been set*. OK, you say, but what's to be gained in answering them in a different order? After all, I have to try and answer all the questions on the paper, right?²

Yes...but! The single most important thing to avoid in an exam is to run out of time when there are still questions on the paper that you can do. This is a cardinal sin. It might even be a crime. We *must* avoid doing this.

And we avoid doing this by identifying the questions we can do completely, and doing those first. Then we look at all the bits of other questions we can do, and do those. That means that we will still have some time left, and the only questions left on the paper are the ones that you can't do.

So the pressure is completely off. You've done all the bits on the paper that you can do, and for the rest of the time, you can try and squeeze out marks from difficult questions. More of that later.

Here is an example of making a question list. Let's say that we have read all the questions in the exam, and during that time I have come up with the question list shown in Table 1.

A tick means I think I know how to do the whole question, and a half means I think I know how to do some of it. A cross means I can't think how to do any of this question.

²If there is a choice of questions on your paper, say you have to answer any five questions out of the eight that have been set, then it's *really* obvious (I hope) that you have to read all the questions first. Why??

Table 1: Question List

Question Number	Assessment
1	✓
2	✗
3	$\frac{1}{2}$
4	✗
5	$\frac{1}{2}$
6	✓
7	✗
8	$\frac{1}{2}$
9	✓
10	✓

So, the order you should do the questions in is

- The ones you can do: 1, 6, 9, 10;
- Then the ones you can do bits of: 3, 5, 8;
- Then the ones you can't do: 2, 4, 7.

What you *really* want to avoid is getting bogged down trying to do questions 2, 4 and 7, and running out of time before you got to questions 9 and 10!

9.1.2 Using the Power of Your Subconscious Mind

Whether you believe in this stuff or not, think about this.

You're in an exam that's 1:45 long. You take the first 10 minutes (of your 105) reading through all the questions. You read Question 7 and you think: "What?? I've never seen anything like that before. Pants." You mark it down as a question you can't do, and carry on reading the paper.

After 95 minutes, you have done all the complete questions, and all the part-questions that you can do.

You come back and read Question 7 again. Then you have one of those "Eureka" moments. How to do this question springs into your mind: "Aha! I remember now - that's how you do it!".

Now how did that happen? It happened because ever since you read that question, over an hour ago, your subconscious mind was working on the solution to it (and all the others you can't do). During that time, it may have figured out how to do the question. In which case, when you read the question again, you will get the "Eureka" moment.

Now you may not get the "Eureka" moment. *But you have given yourself the best chance of it happening.* And in my experience, it happens more often than not. Let's say it happens 50% of the time. Then by reading the questions at the beginning of the exam, you are giving yourself a 50% chance of answering the difficult questions.

The point is, if your brain needs an hour to work out how to do a question, and you only read the question with 10 minutes to go, you have *no* chance of answering it. 50% is better than 0%.

Revisiting Table 1: let's say that each question on this paper is worth 10% of all the marks, and will take 10% of the time for the exam. Then, the questions you can do will give you 40%. The questions that you can do bits of will give you $0.5 \times 30\% = 15\%$. *And the questions that you can't do will give you another $0.5 \times 45\% = 22.5\%$!* That's 77.5% on an exam where you can only do four questions out of ten. Not bad.

And you will have completed all the bits you thought you could do at the start after only 55% of the time. That keeps you in control of time so that you can spend all the rest of the time trying to tackle things you didn't think you'd be able to do.

9.1.3 Clues to Answers

Believe it or not, I have seen exams where the answer to one question is answered later in the paper by another question!!

As a stupid example, let's say that Question 1 (a) asked "What's the sign of the charge on an electron?". The intro to Question 8 might be "Figure 8.1 shows an evacuated tube down which electrons are attracted toward the positively charged...". Aha! Your subconscious mind prods you: electrons must be negative.

It is a poor example, I know. But this sort of thing *does* happen. And when it does, you will only be able to take advantage of it if you have read Question 8 *before* you start writing your answer to Question 1.

10 Looking After Your Body

Take water into an exam. Sip it occasionally. It helps physically, keeping you hydrated. But it also helps psychologically, by giving you something to do when you need a short break, such as when you get stuck on something. It can also help reduce anxiety. See [Sellgren(2012)].

11 When You are Running out of Time

This should *never* happen if you have had a good exam plan! But if you do find yourself running out of time, then with about 15 minutes to go, stop. Look at your question list. Of those you haven't started yet, which questions will get you most marks? Do them!

And: *never* leave an exam early! Is that just *so* obvious, or what??

12 Exam Technique Summary

- Read through all the questions before you start answering any of them.
- As you read the questions, make a question list, indicating which questions you can do, which questions you can do bits of, and which questions you can't do.
- Look for clues in the questions.
- Do the questions in the order dictated by your question list, *NOT* the order in which they were set.
- Drink water to keep hydrated and to relieve anxiety.
- Stay in control of time. This should take care of itself, but with 15 minutes to go, reassess your question list if necessary.
- Never leave an exam early!

(F) Familiarise yourself with the questions

(I) Indicate your ability to do questions

(C) Clues to the questions will be there

(T) Time management is essential

(I) Imbibe water to reduce anxiety

(O) Order your answers to suit you

(N) Never leave an exam early!

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