

Selected  
activities from  
The VESPA  
Mindset  
Workbook  
Series

Steve Oakes and Martin Griffin

Name:



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## How to Use this Booklet

We've spent years interviewing successful students, trying to figure out what gets them such great grades. Partly we wanted to become better learners ourselves, and partly – because we're teachers – we wanted to share the tactics we discovered with our own learners.

We've written three books exploring the techniques successful students use because we want every learner to have access to them. All students deserve to take a glimpse into this toolkit of clever tricks and strategies!

Here, we've assembled just a handful of them. We've chosen the ones that will be easiest to use on your own if you're working from home. And we've put them in a certain order so they make sense as you work through them.

Here's what you've got:

1. The Roadmap
2. The Energy Line
3. Mission and Medal
4. The Bottom Left
5. The Power of If ... Then Thinking
6. Twenty-Five Minute Sprints
7. The Revision Questionnaire
8. Three Types of Attention

**The Roadmap** will help you work out what it is you want to achieve during your revision period, then set goals for making sure the work gets done.

**The Energy Line** will encourage you to empty your head of all the tasks you want to complete and prioritise them effectively.

**Mission and Medal** will help you plan and structure a working week so you can be a pro athlete of productivity!

**The Bottom Left** is an activity that gets you thinking about where your efforts need to go. A little scary perhaps... but really useful.

**The Power of If ... Then Thinking** helps with motivation and reduces the chances that you'll self-sabotage.

**Twenty-Five Minute Sprints** is a great activity to try if you just can't get yourself going!

**The Revision Questionnaire** allows you to assess your own revision, then consider if there are better ways of doing things: ways that might feel harder but deliver much greater rewards.

And **Three Types of Attention** helps you sequence work so that you do the right activities at the right time of day.

Together, we hope that these eight activities will help you through your revision period. They're proven strategies that have certainly worked for others. Give them a go ... and good luck!

**Steve Oakes and Martin Griffin**  
[vespamindset.com](http://vespamindset.com) @vespamindset

*Credit: Jo Phillips (used with permission).*

There are two main elements here – the positive and the negative. Have a look at how the student emphasises positive things that are going to help: ‘Peaceful Bay’, ‘Exercise’, ‘Up Early!’, ‘Mind Maps’ and ‘Tutors to the Rescue!’ And hazards to watch out for: ‘Loss of Focus’, ‘Sharks of Disillusionment’ and ‘Sea Monsters of Personal Disaster!’.

You can do the same on your map:

- » **Mapping your support.** Surround your pathway with good things that will encourage and help you. Rewards, celebrations and holidays all need marking on the map. Think about the people who might support you too. Could you ask friends, a mentor or your parents/guardian? Write the names of these people in your ‘support team’ box.
- » **Mapping your challenges.** Here you should include the things you’re going to need to watch out for. They should be specific to you – your bad habits! It might be laziness, procrastination, worry or distraction.

Unlike the example above, we’ve found it useful to add dates to the map so you know what happens when in the year ahead.

Once done, it’s a good idea to keep your map on display somewhere that you can always see it. This will help to remind you of the steps that need to be completed to reach that destination in the distance!

## Final Thoughts

It doesn’t matter whether you travel by land, air or sea, when you are working towards your goals you can expect some bumps that knock you off course. This is normal, so don’t feel too stressed if you end up shipwrecked for a short time on procrastination island. It can be useful to record how you got over or past these sticking points. This way, you can use the same strategy if you find yourself there again. For example:

- » Was there a teacher or tutor who gave advice or changed your thinking?
- » Did a friend help out by lending notes or giving encouragement?
- » Did you change the time or place you worked – by attending extra classes or staying behind after school?

Use the table below to reflect on how things have gone and how you dealt with the bumps in the road so far.

|                     | Bumps                     | How I got past them       |
|---------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>First steps</b>  | <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> | <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> |
| <b>Second steps</b> | <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> | <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> |
| <b>Third steps</b>  | <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> | <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> |

## 2. The Energy Line

## Step 2 – Prioritise Your Tasks on the Table

| Extreme      | High         | Medium       | Low          | Idle         |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Max: 2 tasks | Max: 4 tasks | Max: 8 tasks | Max: 4 tasks | Max: 2 tasks |
| .....        | .....        | .....        | .....        | .....        |
| .....        | .....        | .....        | .....        | .....        |
|              | .....        | .....        | .....        |              |
|              | .....        | .....        | .....        |              |
|              |              | .....        |              |              |
|              |              | .....        |              |              |
|              |              | .....        |              |              |
|              |              | .....        |              |              |

## Final Thoughts

Project management tools like this often work because they tell us what our next one or two tasks are. Even when our to-do list seems huge and overwhelming, as long as we know what's next, we're often OK. It means we can ignore the big picture for a little while and just concentrate on the next thing on the energy line.

Consider the following possibilities:

Are you burying an important job lower down the line – one you really need to get done? What is the one item on the list that you're dreading the most ... and is there a way you could get it started right now?

Could you take a task you're reluctant to start and replace it with three smaller jobs – the beginning, middle and end of the bigger task? You'll have more jobs on your Energy Line, but they'll each be easier to complete.

Try estimating the time it would take to complete each item on your list and write this next to the task. Then add up all the tasks and see how much time you've predicted this will take in total. You might be surprised – it might be four or five hours when you thought it would take much longer!

Each time you complete a task, consider transferring it to a 'done' list. As you see the list grow, you'll feel more and more positive about everything you've achieved.

### 3. Mission and Medal

Effort is just a habit. Pupils who have the effort habit have created a weekly routine of repeated activities that allow them to respond to teacher requests (homework) and reinforce learning (independent work). Pupils without the effort habit have little or no routine and respond to work as and when it hits them.

Increasing your levels of effort can be a tiring task because it means moving away from a comfortable and familiar way of working into a less comfortable one. So rewarding yourself for increased levels of effort is hugely important. Parents and teachers might not spot the change in your work patterns right away, so it will be up to you to give yourself a pat on the back.

That's where mission and medal comes in: *the mission is the work, the medal is the reward!* This activity helps you to design and structure an effortful week of work that you can then repeat until it becomes a routine. Pretty soon you won't be the only person rewarding yourself – teachers, tutors and parents will spot your new routine and you'll be in line for some praise!

#### Step 1: Audit of a Typical Week

Before you design your mission and medal week, you need to figure out what's currently happening. In the space below, record what you do with your time during a typical week. It might be the week just gone or the week you're in. Make a note of what work you do, where you do it and how much productive work gets done in each section of the day.

|           | <b>Before school<br/>(early morning –<br/>7am–8.30am)</b> | <b>During school<br/>(morning and early<br/>afternoon – 9am–3pm)</b> | <b>After school<br/>(twilight –<br/>4pm–5.30pm)</b> | <b>Evening<br/>(7pm–9.30pm)</b> |
|-----------|---|--|---|---------------------------------|
| Monday    |   |  |   |                                 |
| Tuesday   |   |  |   |                                 |
| Wednesday |   |  |   |                                 |
| Thursday  |   |  |   |                                 |
| Friday    |   |  |   |                                 |
| Saturday  |   |  |   |                                 |
| Sunday    |   |  |   |                                 |

Are there particular slots that work best for you? Are there slots that are hopeless – times when you find it very difficult to work or where you sit down to work but you don't get anything done?

#### Step 2: Creating a Mission and Medal Week

For five of the seven days, set yourself a *sixty minute mission*. It might be to complete homework, plan ahead, consolidate learning, organise notes, research sixth form colleges, fill out an application or begin a revision guide. Complete the mission all at once or in parts. Choose times of day when you work well – without distractions.

For the same five days, set aside a *medal to be awarded on completion of the mission*. It might be a session on your games console, a TV programme, a football match, some time on social media, something nice to eat or drink or some favourite music. Vary your medals.



Don't forget to assign yourself two *bonus* medals – a mid-weeker to pep you up and a Sunday-nighter to get you feeling good for the week. These medals should be a little larger than your regular medals.

|                     | <b>Before school<br/>(early morning –<br/>7am–8.30am)</b> | <b>During school<br/>(morning and early<br/>afternoon – 9am–3pm)</b> | <b>After school<br/>(twilight –<br/>4pm–5.30pm)</b> | <b>Evening<br/>(7pm–9.30pm)</b> |
|---------------------|---|--|---|---------------------------------|
| Monday              |   |  |   |                                 |
| <b>Mission:</b>     |   |  |   |                                 |
| <b>Medal:</b>       |   |  |   |                                 |
| Tuesday             |   |  |   |                                 |
| <b>Mission:</b>     |   |  |   |                                 |
| <b>Medal:</b>       |   |  |   |                                 |
| Wednesday           |   |  |   |                                 |
| <b>Mission:</b>     |   |  |   |                                 |
| <b>BONUS medal:</b> |   |  |   |                                 |
| Thursday            |   |  |   |                                 |
| <b>Mission:</b>     |   |  |   |                                 |
| <b>Medal:</b>       |   |  |   |                                 |
| Friday              |   |  |   |                                 |
| Saturday            |   |  |   |                                 |
| Sunday              |   |  |   |                                 |
| <b>Mission:</b>     |   |  |   |                                 |
| <b>BONUS medal:</b> |   |  |   |                                 |

In this example, you've been given Friday evening and all day Saturday off. You might want to adjust these depending on what you do with your time – feel free to! Choose exciting medals which make you feel good about the work you've done!

### Building a Scoreboard

There's a lot of conflicting research about how long it takes to create a habit. Unless you keep track you'll have no idea. Now you've devised a mission and medal week, you can use a scoreboard as a simple way of helping you with motivation.

We developed this idea after hearing the American comedian Jerry Seinfeld talk about how he writes jokes. He sets himself the goal of writing a joke every day and keeps a diary to check off when he's been successful. His argument is that once you see the days being ticked off, you don't want to see the pattern being broken,

so you keep going. After a few weeks, this new behaviour just becomes a habit and you might not even need to think about it – you just do it!

So, for every day you follow your mission and medal programme, you simply tick off the days. You'll need a monthly calendar like the one below.

| Sunday | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday |
|--------|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|
|        |        | 1       | 2         | 3        | 4      | 5        |
| 6      | 7      | 8       | 9         | 10       | 11     | 12       |
| 13     | 14     | 15      | 16        | 17       | 18     | 19       |
| 20     | 21     | 22      | 23        | 24       | 25     | 26       |
| 27     | 28     | 29      | 30        | 31       |        |          |

## Final Thoughts

**Reactive missions** are those set for you by others. It might be your teacher insisting on a finished piece of work by Friday, a tutor asking you to complete an application form, or your mum reminding you to do a job at home.

But what about **proactive missions** – targets you actually set yourself? Try this. Finish the following sentence:

'If I were the perfect student, the kinds of things I might be doing at this time of year include ...'

.....

.....

.....

You don't have to be perfect, of course – no one is. But there might be one or two things in the list above that you *genuinely could do*. Missions you set yourself that will make life so much easier later on in the year.

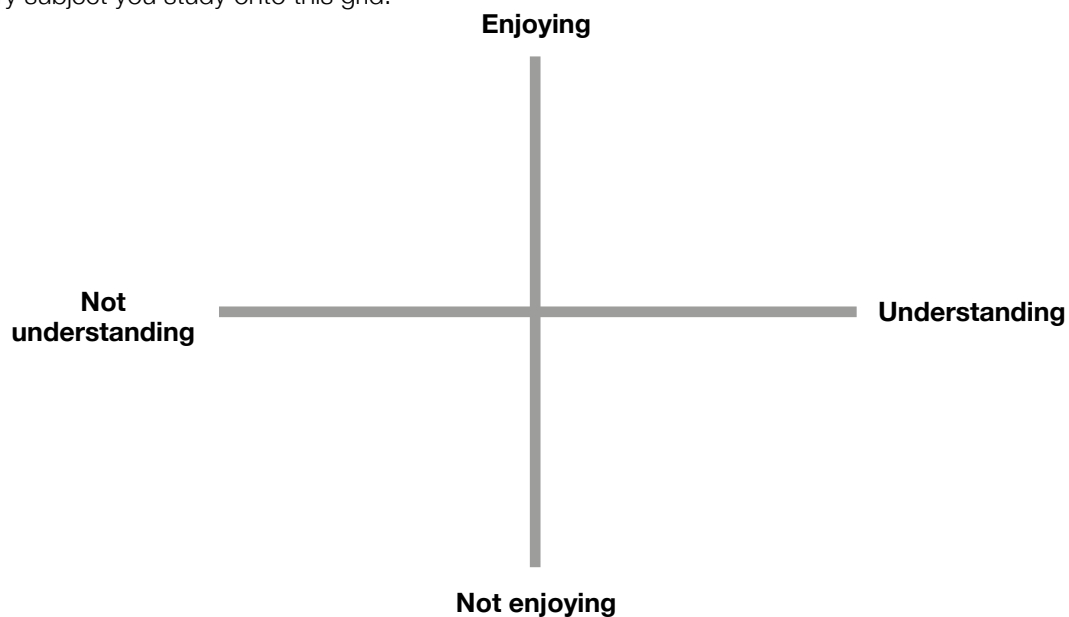
Why not choose one?

## 4. The Bottom Left

Sometimes the number of jobs you have to do can be overwhelming. Teachers are making demands from all angles and it's difficult to know where to start. The trouble with listing jobs is that a list doesn't allow you to see the bigger picture; you can't assess the progress of whole projects, you can only pick off small individual tasks.

Using a matrix or a grid helps you to assess the status of entire subjects. And once you've got a good sense of how an entire subject is going, you can use your time much more effectively, targeting your energy where it's most needed.

Put every subject you study onto this grid:



Once you've made these decisions and placed these projects as dots or crosses on the grid, make notes under each dot explaining the reasons why you've positioned it there. Then have a look at the projects in the bottom left of the grid.

### The Terror of the Bottom Left!

Many pupils will subconsciously avoid the subjects in the bottom left because even the thought of them feels uncomfortable. They might lower the standards they expect of themselves in those subjects, work less hard at them or try to ignore them altogether. But they're not going to go away. By spending some time on them now you could avoid a real crisis later on in the year.

Let's examine the subjects closest to – or in – the bottom left quadrant. We've given you enough space here to deal with three or four problem subjects! For each of your bottom left subjects make a note of:

» One task you could do that will push the dot further to the right.

.....

.....

.....

.....

» One task you could do that will push the dot further upwards.

.....

.....

.....

.....

It might be speaking to a teacher, borrowing some missing work, speaking to a pupil who's better at it than you, finishing reading a textbook or redoing a rushed piece of homework.

Good prioritisation means knowing *why you're doing what you're doing*. This task will help you to focus on your weaknesses.

## Final Thoughts

Here's the problem with to-do lists. No matter how you prioritise your list, all the tasks there still take up the same amount of physical space (a line of A4 paper), and so end up taking the same amount of mental space.

But not all tasks are equally important.

Any associated with subjects that are currently in the top right quadrant, where you're understanding and enjoying the work, are a little less important than the tasks associated with the bottom left.

Have a look at the tasks you've got for subjects in the top right quadrant. Is there any way you can complete these tasks more quickly and efficiently? Any small corners you can cut? Any favours you can call in or people you can ask for help? Your aim is to buy yourself some time by working super-efficiently in the subjects that are currently going well.

Scribble some possible ideas here:

.....

.....

.....

.....

Now you've potentially saved yourself some time, which task in the bottom left quadrant needs the most work?

.....

Use this saved time to get started on it now!

## 5. The Power of If ... Then Thinking

Professor Peter Gollwitzer of New York University says that many people who want to put their efforts into achieving great things, but don't, are derailed by seemingly small problems like these:

- » They want to finish a task to a high standard, but a phone call disrupts them.
- » They want to complete a coursework piece, but the weekend is just too busy.
- » They want to do some serious revision, but some friends disturb them and the work is abandoned.

In their book *The Psychology of Action* (1996), Peter Gollwitzer and John Bargh argue that if this happens to you, it's because you have low 'implementation intention' – you *sort of* want to put in the effort, but you will be easily put off if one thing goes wrong.

The solution? Successful students anticipate these problems and plan for how they will respond to them with maximum effort. You sequence actions that anticipate obstacles and build in pre-prepared solutions – you effectively beat self-sabotage before it even happens.

Consider these examples:

Student 1: 'I'll get started on this first thing in the morning.' This is a really common internal dialogue you might experience as a student – lots do it! And with one small disruption the whole plan comes to a standstill.

Student 2: 'I'll get started on this first thing in the morning. And ...

- » *If* I wake up late by accident, **then** I'll use my morning break to start it instead and ...'
- » *If* I feel really demotivated, **then** I'll get two coffees from the canteen and drink them quickly to give me a boost and ...'
- » *If* I get disturbed by friends, **then** I'll make an excuse and go to the library and ...'
- » *If* the internet is down, **then** I'll start by using my class notes and save the research work until later.'

It's easy to see which student might be the one most likely to succeed. Student 2 has listed a series of potential problems and has recognised their tendency to self-sabotage when small things go wrong. By planning a change in action when those small obstacles come along, they are much more likely to keep pushing forward.

List all the usual blockers you use to prevent high levels of effort and for each one commit to a solution. Think them all through in your head and make notes. What you are doing is strengthening your implementation intention. You *will* put the effort in, even if small things crop up to stop you.

Use the following table to plan your response to self-sabotage:

|                          |                            |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| If ...<br>.....<br>..... | Then ...<br>.....<br>..... |
| If ...<br>.....<br>..... | Then ...<br>.....<br>..... |
| If ...<br>.....<br>..... | Then ...<br>.....<br>..... |
| If ...<br>.....<br>..... | Then ...<br>.....<br>..... |
| If ...<br>.....<br>..... | Then ...<br>.....<br>..... |

### Final Thoughts

If ... then planning often starts quite deliberately, with students using a grid like the one above to record their intentions. This keeps them firmly in mind when obstacles come.

But after a little while, you'll become good at internalising this kind of planning. You won't have to write it all down – you'll start doing it more instinctively. That's a great place to be.

## 6. Twenty-Five Minute Sprints

There's a very famous book by Italian entrepreneur and author Francesco Cirillo called *The Pomodoro Technique*. Pomodoro is Italian for tomato. (The tomato in question is one of those novelty kitchen timers, not a real one!) We'll come back to the tomato in a bit.

In his book, Cirillo argues that we can generate lots of energy and effort by working in short bursts, even on long tasks that we don't feel motivated to do. Think of all the tasks you've got to do that you just can't bear to begin – there might be revision notes, essays to write, jumbled notes to file away or a piece of coursework to start.

Choose one that's become a bit of a nightmare for you – that's hanging over your head and you just don't want to do. Make a note of it here:

.....

### Step 1

Now for the tomato. By which we mean getting hold of either a kitchen timer (needless to say, it doesn't have to be shaped like anything in particular!) or the timer on your phone.

Find somewhere quiet. Arrange the things you need to begin. You're going to do a twenty-five minute sprint. It's important to tell yourself this: *twenty-five minutes – that's all*. You're allowed no distractions whatsoever in that twenty-five minutes. Don't worry. You can be back on social media in twenty-five minutes' time, checking updates and messages. Now start the timer and go!

### Step 2

Congratulations! You've got that nightmare task started. All of a sudden, this job is going to seem less frightening. You'll be able to come back to it. Some suggestions for messing around with the Pomodoro Technique:

1. The Quick Sprint: try twenty-five minutes on, twenty-five minutes off, twenty-five minutes on. It takes one hour and fifteen minutes in total, and you can do it at a regular time each night after school.
2. The Serious Sprint: try twenty-five minutes on, five minutes off, twenty-five minutes on, five minutes off, twenty-five minutes on. It takes about one hour and thirty minutes, and is a useful technique for really attacking a difficult piece of work.
3. Try measuring tasks in sprints. How many will it take? This way, you'll develop a sense of how you work, and you can begin picking off scary tasks more quickly and easily.
4. Try using sprints to review work. Suddenly you'll find yourself ahead and on top of things. It's a great feeling!

### Setting Up a Quick Sprint

| Preparation  | 25 minutes on!  | 25 minutes off  | 25 minutes on!  |
|--|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Find somewhere quiet.</li> <li>» Gather everything you need.</li> <li>» Put phone on airplane settings.</li> <li>» Bring up timer, set countdown and alarm.</li> <li>» Tell yourself: 'Just 25 minutes. That's all.'</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Go!</li> <li>» Imagine it's an exam.</li> <li>» Stay intense, keep going.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Set timer and countdown.</li> <li>» Enjoy yourself.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Tell yourself: 'Just one last 25 minute blast. That's all.'</li> <li>» Put phone back on airplane settings.</li> <li>» Return to the task.</li> <li>» Go!</li> </ul> |

## Final Thoughts

One Quick Sprint per day for a week is nearly six hours' independent work per week.

One Serious Sprint per day is nearly ten hours' independent work per week.

Try using a Mission and Medal weekly planner to scope out a week with:

- » six hours' independent learning
- » ten hours' independent learning
- » fifteen hours' independent learning

|                     | Before school<br>(early morning –<br>7am–8.30am) | During school<br>(morning and early<br>afternoon – 9am–3pm) | After school<br>(twilight –<br>4pm–5.30pm) | Evening<br>(7pm–9.30pm) |
|---------------------|--|---|--|-------------------------|
| Monday              |  |   |  |                         |
| <b>Mission:</b>     |  |   |  |                         |
| <b>Medal:</b>       |  |   |  |                         |
| Tuesday             |  |   |  |                         |
| <b>Mission:</b>     |  |   |  |                         |
| <b>Medal:</b>       |  |   |  |                         |
| Wednesday           |  |   |  |                         |
| <b>Mission:</b>     |  |   |  |                         |
| <b>BONUS medal:</b> |  |   |  |                         |
| Thursday            |  |   |  |                         |
| <b>Mission:</b>     |  |   |  |                         |
| <b>Medal:</b>       |  |   |  |                         |
| Friday              |  |   |  |                         |
| Saturday            |  |   |  |                         |
| Sunday              |  |   |  |                         |
| <b>Mission:</b>     |  |   |  |                         |
| <b>BONUS medal:</b> |  |   |  |                         |



## 7. The Revision Questionnaire

We've found there is a strong link between the kind of revision someone does and the outcomes they get. So, which student will do better in an exam?

- » Student 1 does fifteen hours' revision – all of it reading through class notes.
- » Student 2 only does ten hours' revision – two hours making mind-maps, two hours creating flash cards of key terms, three hours writing timed essays, two hours working through past papers and looking for patterns in the questions asked, and half an hour doing the hardest question they could find, followed by half an hour talking it through with their teacher. Then they spend five hours shopping with their friends and watching TV.

The second student will perform better, despite revising for fewer hours! You too can make less mean more. Try this questionnaire:

Subjects: \_\_\_\_\_

- 1** How many hours of independent work do you do on your subjects outside of class? Please state the time spent on each subject.

.....

.....

.....

- 2** What sort of activities do you do? Use the table below, ticking in the column which best describes your revision and preparation:

|  |   | Always | Sometimes | Never |
|--|---|--------|-----------|-------|
| Reading through class notes                    | C |        |           |       |
| Using resources on the school's VLE            | C |        |           |       |
| Using course textbooks                         | C |        |           |       |
| Mind-maps/diagrams                             | C |        |           |       |
| Making/remaking class notes                    | C |        |           |       |
| Highlighting/colour coding                     | C |        |           |       |
| Flash cards                                    | C |        |           |       |
| Using a revision wall to display your learning | C |        |           |       |
| Writing exam answers under timed conditions    | S |        |           |       |
| Reading model answers                          | S |        |           |       |
| Using past exam questions and planning answers | S |        |           |       |
| Marking your own work to a mark scheme         | F |        |           |       |

|   |   | Always | Sometimes | Never |
|---|---|--------|-----------|-------|
| Studying mark schemes or examiners' reports   | F |        |           |       |
| Working with other students in groups/pairs   | F |        |           |       |
| Comparing model answers against your own work | F |        |           |       |
| Creating your own exam questions              | F |        |           |       |
| Handing in extra exam work for marking        | F |        |           |       |
| One-to-one discussions with teachers/tutors   | F |        |           |       |

### 3 Additional activities not mentioned above:

|  |  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |

### 4 Write a brief account of what you do if you can't understand something (e.g. try again, read textbooks, check the school's VLE, see teachers, see other students).

.....

.....

.....

.....

Now check over your answers. You will notice some activities in the table have a 'C' next to them – these are the *content* techniques. Some activities have an 'S' next to them – these are the *skills* techniques. Others have an 'F' next to them – these are the *feedback* techniques.

Notice in our example that student 1 only does content revision, while student 2 does all three stages and then takes some time off. In our experience, student 2 will pretty much always get a better grade than student 1. And they put in fewer hours.

Make sure you do some revision for each of C, S and F! Aim for three of each; nine methods in total.

Make a note of your current scores here:

» C score: .....

» S score: .....

» F score: .....

We've found that students who get the best grades at A level practise in a wider variety of ways. Our top performers had over ten ticks in the always column, and these were evenly spread across C, S and F.

However, students who got grades D, E or U had far fewer ticks in the always column – often only four or five. They were very restricted in the way they practised, often spending hours repeating the same limited range of activities.

Aim to increase the ticks in your always column to ten.

List three activities that you currently don't do, that you could add to your repertoire:

.....

.....

.....

### Final Thoughts

The following is a list of practice strategies suggested by John Dunlosky, a professor at Kent State University in the United States. Dunlosky and his colleagues (2013) carried out a meta-analysis to evaluate ten popular learning techniques and their effectiveness. (We've adjusted his language to make it more accessible in the table below.)

The tasks towards the top of the table had the largest impact on learning and the tasks at the bottom had the smallest. There's a time and a place for all of them – but it's worth checking which ones you're using most of the time and which ones you're never using:

| Technique  | Always use | Sometimes use | Never use |
|--|------------|---------------|-----------|
| <b>Practice tests</b> – moving in and out of exam conditions, practising what is required in the time you're given.  |            |               |           |
| <b>Spaced practice</b> – scheduling practice tests and revision sessions over time; snacking instead of bingeing.  |            |               |           |
| <b>Elaborative interrogation</b> – explaining complex concepts and ideas to others – teaching someone else the material.   |            |               |           |
| <b>Self-explanation</b> – writing out explanations. Explaining how new information is linked to old information. Clarifying connections between information.                       |            |               |           |
| <b>Interleaved practice</b> – designing study that moves you from topic to topic, task to task and subject to subject rather than blocking out long sessions of the same activity. |            |               |           |

## 8. Three Types of Attention

Everyone's day moves through phases, and you're probably no different – there are times when you're fired up and raring to go, there are times when your energy levels are just average and there are times when you feel your attention is low and your motivation dips.

These three phases happen to everyone during a working day. You're not unusual if you have low energy levels or can't concentrate; if you catch yourself looking around you and seeing others hard at work, remember they're no different to you – they're just in a different phase of their day.

Some people can predict when they're going to be feeling fired up (it might be the mornings, it might be after breakfast or after exercise) and when they're going to feel slower. Others haven't noticed a pattern, but once they pay attention they see one emerging. For others, it's totally random.

Graham Allcott, founder of Think Productive (<http://thinkproductive.co.uk>), uses the following definitions for the three states:

1. Proactive attention (fully focused, fired up, feeling fresh).
2. Active attention (plugged in, ticking along nicely).
3. Inactive attention (flagging, fried, foggy).

He argues that really successful people get work done in all three states. They don't give up when they're in state 3, they just switch tasks.

Make a list of all the tasks you've got on your plate at the moment. Think of everything – homework, reading, essays, revision, upcoming tests, college interviews, etc.

Now categorise them. Complex and challenging tasks go in 'proactive attention'. When you feel fully focused, fired up and fresh, you tackle those. Regular tasks go in 'active attention'. They're tasks to get on with when you feel you're ticking along nicely. Repetitive tasks that are pretty easy go in 'inactive attention'. When you're feeling fried or foggy, you switch to those tasks.

| Proactive attention | Active attention | Inactive attention |
|---------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| .....               | .....            | .....              |
| .....               | .....            | .....              |
| .....               | .....            | .....              |
| .....               | .....            | .....              |

Keep the list with you for a week or two. Whenever you're about to start working:

- » Check your energy levels. Sit still for a second and listen to your body. Decide which attention state you're in.
- » Review the list of tasks you've got to do that suit your attention level. If there are none in that column, find one from the next column and tackle it.

After a week or two, see whether you can observe patterns in your attention levels. Really good learners have noticed these patterns in themselves and sequence their tasks beforehand.

## Final Thoughts

One way to log your attention is by colour coding. Use green for proactive attention, amber for active attention, and red for inactive. You could use a grid that looks something like this:

|           | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday | Sunday |
|-----------|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|--------|
| 8–10am    |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 10am–12pm |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 1–3pm     |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 3–5pm     |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 6–8pm     |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |
| 8–10pm    |        |         |           |          |        |          |        |

We've found that certain people move through predictable phases of attention. Some start the day full of energy, but dip slowly as the day goes on. Others respond to food (!), feeling more sluggish after lunch, for example. Others have worked out ways to jump into proactive attention before doing an important piece of work.

This last skill is really valuable. *If you can boost your attention, you can get more work done in less time.* Try experimenting with boosting attention. We've spoken to students who do the following:

**Exercise just before work:** A run, a walk, a quick jog around the block, even an intense burst of star jumps!

**Listen to music just before work:** A loud burst of motivating music with headphones on.

**Other pre-work rituals:** Some students talk about tidying their work spaces to get 'in the zone', or having a hot shower, or getting changed or a quick ten-minute burst of game-playing (bright, colourful puzzlers work way better than long, complex strategy or role-playing games).

Use the space below to record your experiments and plans:

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