**Teaching and Learning Centre podcasts: the DISSERTATION SERIES**

**Revising and preparing for** **exams**

I’ve received a lot questions from students about how to get ready for exams. Of course, there are different types of exams—and everyone has their own strengths and challenges.

But in this podcast I’d like to propose a key idea to think about as you prepare for exams and then I’ll suggest a few practical ways to work this idea into your exam revision strategy.

My proposal that you prioritise **understanding** the material you’ve studied, **recognising** the implications and applications of the theories and explanations you’ve learned, and that you prioritise **making your own connections** among different parts of your course. And that these are more important than trying to **memorise** lots of facts, authors, dates, and other details.

Let me tell you why: Just like in your essays, your markers expect clear arguments and an analytical approach in your responses to exam questions. Of course, exams essays will be shorter than regular essays– and, there’s no formal citation or referencing in your exam essays. But you still need to present a clearly structured, critical response to every part of the exam question.

When markers are asked about what makes a weaker exam essay, something they say most often is that the student simply reproduced the content of lecture slides and class notes or that they seemed to describe everything they could think of about the topic – without building any kind of narrative or argument.

If we think about this kind of weakness in terms of how to revise – it should be clear. Working hard to memorise facts sets you up to write an exam essay where you’re more likely to simply reproduce the content of lecture slides, or worse – in the excitement of the moment in the examination, you just write down everything that comes to your mind about a key word in the question.

But maybe you’re wondering *how* to prioritise understanding, making links, and using ideas to make arguments over simply memorising? Well, I have four specific suggestions:

-use past papers

-practice writing with past exam questions

-work with others

-make a plan.

**USE PAST PAPERS**

First, I want to talk about how you can use past exam papers – and when I say exam papers, I mean the questions only! In the early stages of getting prepared for revision, gather some past exam papers from your course. They’re available on the LSE Library’s website. Look at the various questions and try to discover some themes that recur among the questions. Let’s say you find exam papers from the past 5 years, with 10 questions from each. Examiners don’t ask the very same questions every year - but I’m nearly certain that there are not 50 completely different questions, either. Instead, you’ll discover different ways to frame the same ideas or themes.

As you discover themes across the questions, try to use them to gain a new perspective on your course. That is, try to structure your own “story” of the course around these themes – and not necessarily how the topics were presented over the weeks of the course. Try creating groups of topics – according to what fits together – or which topics seem logically opposed, or simply by your own priorities: which topics did you enjoy the most and wish to specialise in. How might they be linked – or relate to each other? Try to reconsider the parts of your course not in terms of the weeks of the term – but in a novel, thematic way – with themes that make sense to you.

Remember, it is not realistic to think you can cover the entire course with the same degree of attention. You’ll have to make some choices about what you focus on more or less closely. You’ll have to build your own “repertoire” of material. You should choose areas to specialise in that allow you to build arguments in response to the kinds of questions you find in past exam papers.

**PRACTICE!**

In addition to helping you get a broader, thematic overview of your course – past papers are valuable because they allow you to practice the precise skill you’ll need on exam day: developing, planning, and writing a logical argument, clearly. And under rather unusual circumstances – in a limited amount of time, and with a pen and paper.

Now, on one hand – this seems daunting. On the other hand, realise that there is an obvious limit on how much you can possibly write! So, do you revise with the goal of writing as much as possible? A lot of things that you memorised? Or do you revise in a way where you can practice understanding what is being asked, formulating a reasoned response, and developing a clearly structured argument – that flows logically and responds directly to the question? Let me suggest two different ways to use exam questions for practice.

Let’s presume that you have 2 hours to answer 2 questions, or 3 hours to answer 3 questions. Once you’ve selected which questions you’ll answer and decided what order to do them in, this leaves you with 55 minutes or so for each question. In the exam, it’s a good idea to use the first 10 minutes or so to UNDERSTAND the question. It’s all too easy to jump in, under the pressure of time, and write a lot of things about the key concepts you see in your quick reading of a question.

Do your best to take a few minutes to analyse every word of the question in order to understand what is being asked? What assumptions are being made? What can be read between the lines of the question? If you listened to my Michaelmas Term podcasts on essay-writing, this is the same process as “questioning the question”. Then, decide on the main points you’d like to make in response to the question. Plan how to structure your argument in a few parts, and how to justify and support the argument with evidence or examples.

Basically, you’ll spend the first 10 minutes questioning the question and planning your essay. Ideally, you can write a quick outline or map of your answer; or perhaps even plan the main points of your 2 or 3 paragraphs, and any examples, evidence, or authors you can bring in to support those points. You can do this in your exam booklet as a sort of rough outline of your answer. Then you have the rest of the time – to write your essay, following your plan.

For example, the next 5 or 10 minutes are for your introduction. In essays AND exams, the introductions presents: The Question, The Answer, The Plan. The introduction of your essay – where you explain how you’ve interpreted the question, explain what your answer to the question is, then give a very brief plan for the essay. -should simply be a matter putting on paper the fruit of the first 10 minutes’ work.

From there, you then move to the main body of your essay where you elaborate further on the 3 or 4 main elements of your argument – that you sketched out in the first 10 minutes. What can be useful is to go back to the rough outline you made and literally tick the various ideas and authors that you thought of as you weave them into your essay. The important thing here is that you are working from a plan! And not free associating and trying to write down whatever comes to your mind.

Which brings me back to the 2 ways you can use exam papers. First, you can use each question as an opportunity to practice this 10-minute start! Of course, the first times you try it –might take 30 minutes or even an hour! But with practice, you WILL improve. You can even re-use questions – take the same question and try to formulate a different answer than the one you wrote in the previous attempt. Remember that the point of the exercise is not to get the “right” answer – but to practice building arguments with the knowledge that you have.

Once you’re more comfortable with the 10-minute start exercise, the second way to use past exam questions is to write a full answer - in one hour’s time, with no interruption, on paper with a pen! This will help you develop the skills you’ll need on exam day. More importantly though – it will guide you in your revision!

Read your practice introductions and timed essays and decide what you do well and what you still need to know more about. This way you can test whether you can actually use what you know – rather than trying know more things! Of course, you should be reading back over your course materials! But by writing practice essays, this can help you see which notes and texts you should go back and review –or what kind of evidence or examples are still missing from your arguments. Repeat this cycle of trying to write arguments, then reading them to see how you did on a regular basis.

One of the key skills to taking essay-based exams is thinking on your feet and writing clearly with very little time. That is, interpreting a question and formulating a coherent, structured response quickly. Also, you are asked to do this WITHOUT being able to cut, paste, or move the text around once you’ve gotten your ideas on the screen. This is something we rarely ever do. Yet, many students do not spend much time practicing this skill. Instead, they try to read to cover as much material as they possibly can. Given how little time you have in the exam, and the nature of what your markers are looking for – aiming for maximum breadth and minimum depth may not be a good strategy!

Build a revision strategy around practicing the skills that you’ll need in the exam – in addition to reviewing the material.

As you practice timed writing more and more, you’ll can plan for a final 5 or 10 minutes to conclude your essay AND you may even find a rhythm that allows for a few minutes to have a look back over your entire answer – just to be sure things are clear and that the introduction and the conclusion are both supporting the same argument.

I understand that this might be quite a different approach to exam revision than the ways you’re more accustomed to. In addition to getting more practice in writing under exam-style time constraints, another way to make the transition from memorising to understanding and using course material to make arguments is to work more closely with other people.

**WORK WITH OTHERS**

One option to work with others is to discuss your 10-minute introductions and your 1-hour timed essays with some helpful people. There are plenty of options! You could share these texts with teachers or GTAs in your department, with advisers in the LSE100 Writing Lab. Or to see the study advisers and the Royal Literary Fund Fellows at the Teaching and Learning Centre.

Another idea is to prepare for exams with a study group. Discussing the themes that emerge from past papers, or various views on specific questions with your classmates can be an excellent way to challenge your ideas and discover new perspectives on your course.

In a small group – say 4 or 5 students – you can review past papers, do timed-writing exercises, then read each other’s work and give feedback. If you choose to form a study group, it is important that all the members of the group share the same level of commitment to the work you decide to do together. Agree in advance what you want to accomplish, how you will work together, how often you will meet, and what you expect in terms of how much time and energy people are willing to devote to the group. Consider practical arrangements, too – like where you will meet, whether you should book a study room in the library, who will propose a plan for each meeting, and how you decide on the group’s tasks. Keep meetings to a reasonable length – probably 2 hours, maximum – and stay focused. You might agree to go out afterwards for a meal and a chance to chat – but don’t use study group time for socialising.

**MAKE A PLAN**

My last suggestion for exam revision is to make a plan. We’ve all experienced the effects of procrastination – and exam revision seems to lend itself particularly well to procrastinating!

This might be because, depending on how many courses you have to revise for – well, the task can seem so daunting, that it’s tempting not to even begin! And this of course can lead to last-minute cramming. This might work for exams that require you to memorise information. But for exams where you are being assessed on your critical thinking skills and how well you assert and develop an argument – cramming is really not all that useful. What’s more, it’s really pretty stressful. Without some kind of plan, you risk missing out on some course material and possibly running out of time. You may also worry more about whether you are making good progress.

Try to make a plan to help you spread your revision work over several weeks in advance of your exams. Decide when you’ll start your revision and consider how many exams you have, whether they are for full unit courses, or half unit courses, and the ‘weight’ of the exams in the overall assessment for each course.

Then use your calendar to decide how much time you have to devote to revision. Be realistic about how you plan – no one can revise effectively for 8 hours a day. Think about how you work; consider two or three sessions in a day. If you’re a morning person, plan for a more intensive session, another couple hours in the afternoon, and maybe an hour in the evening (to prepare for the following day’s morning session, perhaps?). Keep your plan flexible so that you can make adjustments if some material requires less time – and other things seem to warrant more time.

Plan around your social activities, part-time paid work, your research perhaps, and the things you do to relax. Plan so that you can take at least one day off every week. Remember, you also need time to let your ideas develop and to make links with the world around you – this means you need to leave the library and be in the world around you! In the materials to download with this podcast, I’ve included some tips and a couple examples of revision plans to give you some inspiration.

And speaking of the library – depending on how you like to work, it might not be the best place to do all your exam revision. Consider trying different ways to study. After you’ve spent a few hours reading and writing at a desk, why not try drawing a map of your ideas or a flow chart of information on a large sheet of paper or a whiteboard? What about standing up or pacing about and revising out loud? Moving around a room and using your voice might help you see things in a different way. Try recording yourself talking about a subject and listening back to what you have to say. Index cards, flash cards, colour-coding, music - be creative! There is no reason to limit your exam revision to long, arduous sessions at a table in the library. We don’t all learn in the same way, and surely it’s a tiny minority of us who learn in only one way. Get creative and mix it up!

So remember, the idea is to concentrate more on really understanding the material, being able to use it to tell a coherent story—to make an argument–not to be able to spout it out verbatim like a robot. Revision for exams doesn’t mean learning the entire course over again. Instead, it’s a chance to consider your course material from a different perspective. Now that you’ve taken the course for 10 or 20 weeks, you have a chance to look back on it, to make better sense of it – compared to when you first discovered the material. By “making sense” of it, I mean drawing links between ideas, understanding contrasts or oppositions, considering how various models or theories relate to each other and apply (or not) to the real world. Exam revision is the time to consolidate what you know and formulate your own views on the material.

You can do this by

-reviewing the questions asked in past papers

-practicing timed writing to test and improve your exam skills and guide your revision, and

-working with others – to help articulate your ideas and to get support in the revision process.

To do this most effectively, I suggest that you plan your revision to be sure that your cover your various courses in a balanced way – and to help you avoid unnecessary stress at exam time.

I hope this podcast has given you some new ideas about how to revise for your exams. There are many opportunities to develop your revision and exam-taking skills: from mock exams to TLC events and workshops on exam preparation. Be sure to check in your department and with the Teaching and Learning Centre for term-time support. We’d love to hear what you think of this podcast. If you have any comments, or ideas for other topics you’d like to hear about, please do get in touch – by sending feedback online – or drop us a line at tlc@lse.ac.uk.

Thanks for listening.