

Helping students to revise

Practical ideas and strategies
to prepare students for
their exams

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Acknowledgments

About the author

Mike Gershon is a teacher, trainer, writer and educational consultant. His teaching resources on Tes Resources include The Starter Generator, The Plenary Producer and The Assessment for Learning Toolkit. Together they have been viewed and downloaded more than 2 million times by teachers in over 180 countries. Mike teaches at King Edward VI School in Bury St Edmunds. He divides his time between Suffolk, London and Yorkshire.

He is the author of six books on teaching and learning, including three bestsellers.

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Introduction

It is sometimes assumed that revision means the end of learning; that at the end of a course, students move on to simply remembering what has been covered in the past and that it is up to them to remember well enough to pass an exam in it.

But it is unrealistic to expect students to go it alone. Being able to revise well is a skill that must be taught. Effective revision requires new learning to take place and is therefore a practice that calls for significant teacher support.

This e-book aims to help you and your students to get the most out of those last few revision lessons, providing ideas for classroom activities and games that will take the tedium out of going over the same old material.

More importantly, it also offers suggestions for how to teach the essential skills that form the foundation of effective revision. Good time-management, the abilities to prioritise areas of the curriculum and to make strong notes that can be referred to throughout the revision period are essential if students are to succeed.

Although teachers will always be biting their nails outside of exam halls, the knowledge of having provided a strong basis for revision means that they can rest assured that they have done everything in their power to help their students to perform when it really counts.



Section one – Revision basics

1. Subject knowledge audit

A subject knowledge audit is a way of identifying the areas of the syllabus that students are most comfortable with. The information elicited can be used to inform your planning and your students' revision decisions.

Topic	Not confident at all	Not confident	OK	Fairly confident	Very Confident
Molecules					
Hydrocarbons					
States of matter					

Hand out a copy to all the students in your class and ask them to work through it, ticking the boxes that apply to their confidence levels for each topic.

You can collect these sheets in, look through them and identify patterns or trends that can be used to inform your planning. You can also hand the sheets out again following a few revision sessions and ask students to redo the exercise using a different colour. This will highlight the positive effect that revision has had on students' knowledge.

Another option is to let your pupils take the sheets home and use them as a tool through which to plan their own revision. This is a good way to help students to take control of their revision and focus on areas of personal weakness.



2. Knowledge traffic-lighting

A variation on the subject knowledge audit document is to create a table that uses the colours of traffic lights to identify how confident students feel with each topic on the syllabus.

Create a table that looks like this:

Topic	Date 1 (R/A/G)	Date 2 (R/A/G)	Date 3 (R/A/G)
Quadratic equations			
Probability			
Differentiation			

The **(R/A/G)** refers to a red/amber/green system of demonstrating confidence:

Red = I am not confident about my knowledge and understanding of this topic

Amber = I am fairly confident about my knowledge and understanding of this topic

Green = I am very confident about my knowledge and understanding of this topic

Give every student in your class a copy of the document and three coloured pens – red, orange and green. Ask them to write the date in the first date box and mark how they feel about each topic.

An extension of this is to use red, amber and green cards. Students can display a card of the appropriate colour to indicate how they feel about a topic.

At the start of a revision lesson, introduce the topic and ask students to rate their confidence by showing a colour card. You can ask them to repeat this halfway through the lesson and again at the end – ideally, all students will be showing green cards by the time the lesson is over. In addition, you can get an idea of how much students have retained from a previous revision lesson by asking them to rate their understanding at the beginning of the next lesson.

The traffic light system can also be a good way to get students working together to help each other revise. For example, you might ask a group of amber students to team up to see if they can develop their confidence through combining their knowledge. At the same time, a group of green students can peer-teach a group of red students, allowing both groups to revisit a topic in a productive way.

3. Chunking

Information becomes easier for us to process and remember when we divide it up into chunks. When it comes to revision, chunking is an excellent way to make large quantities of information more manageable.

Give students time in lessons to work through a syllabus and break it up into separate sections; this will make it easier for them when they come to revise the material on their own.

Chunking can also be used when planning revision sessions. If you create revision lessons that contain a series of short activities, each of which focus on a different aspect of the course, you give students a better chance of retaining information. For example, in a one-hour lesson you might have a 10-minute starter, followed by two 15-minute activities and then a 10-minute plenary.

You might encourage students to plan their own revision in this way too, so that they look at specific sections of material for chunks of time – roughly 20-30 minutes – before taking a short break and then returning, either to go over the same material a second time or to move onto something else.

4. Narratives

When we turn information into a narrative, we give it structure and chronology, making it easier for us to remember. Storytelling can therefore be a useful tool to help with revision.

Ask students to retell certain units of work as stories, or to create narratives explaining the connections between different bits of learning. You could also try weaving together your own stories to communicate some of the areas that students are least confident with.

Encourage students to include narrative elements, such as comic strips, causation chains and stories in their revision at home. Explain that these will be easier to remember than lists of facts, although do warn against focusing so much on the mode of storytelling that the information becomes secondary.

5. Revision grids

One of the most common problems that students face when it comes to revising is working out exactly how they should divide up their time.

To help overcome this, create an A4 grid containing all the topics that need to be revised and make sure that each student has a copy. The topics can be placed in the order they were originally taught or arranged at random. Explain which topics you will be focussing on in class and ask students to make a note of this, perhaps by highlighting the relevant boxes. It is then up to the students to plan when they will revise the remaining topics. Ask them to write dates and times on the boxes to help them to remember their plan.

To check how students are progressing with their revision, you might want to ask students to bring their grids to subsequent lessons and talk to them about the areas they have covered so far.

6. Prioritising

Identifying areas of weakness is a good place to start when it comes to prioritising what to revise. Give students a list of revision topics and ask them to highlight which ones they feel least comfortable with.

Explain that they should use this information to prioritise their revision. This involves focussing first on their weaker areas; only when they have improved their knowledge and understanding of their weaknesses should they move onto material that they already feel comfortable with.

Another option is to ask students to prioritise their revision based on the length of time that has passed since they first studied a topic. This means returning to the start of the course and beginning to revise whatever you looked at first. It makes sense to tackle these areas first, as the more time that has passed since a topic was studied, the less students are likely to remember about it.

7. Exam technique

When students sit examinations, they are being tested as much on their ability to successfully take exams as they are on their knowledge and understanding. Rather than complaining about this inevitability, it is much better to acknowledge it and teach about exam technique during revision lessons. This will ensure that your students will have the skills to complete the exam successfully and that they are revising material within an appropriate context.

Here are three ways of including exam technique in your revision lessons:

- Model exam technique. When students are practicing under exam conditions, sit with them and complete the same practice questions yourself. You can use your model answer, planning or working out as a teaching device later on.
- Set students questions from past papers and ask them to peer-assess these using the appropriate mark scheme.
- If your exam contains short-answer questions, set a few of these as your lesson starters and then go over the best way to answer them.
- Ask students to work in pairs to create a guide explaining what needs to be done in order to answer each type of question that they might face. Provide them with resources such as past papers and mark schemes if appropriate.



Section two – Classroom activities

1. Worked exemplar questions

Completed example questions, whether produced by the exam board or the teacher, demonstrate to students how to deal with that particular type of exam question. Not only do they help model exam technique, they also provide a clear illustration of the processes and the level of detail that are required to achieve a specific grade.

Here are three ways to use worked exemplar questions:

- Display a worked exemplar on the board and talk students through the various aspects of it.
- Hand out worked exemplars to groups and ask students to produce a checklist of characteristics that demonstrate that the answer is of high quality.
- Photocopy a worked exemplar and hand this out to students along with a corresponding mark scheme. Students should work in pairs to annotate the exemplar, referencing different aspects of the mark scheme as they do.

2. Model answers using a mark scheme

This activity combines revision of subject knowledge with revision of exam technique. Ask students to work in pairs and then distribute a mark scheme and a question paper to each pair. Invite students to select two or three questions and work together to create model answers with the help of the mark scheme.

When pairs have completed their answers, they should join with another pair, creating a group of four within which to share and discuss the work they have produced. Students should concentrate on talking through the reasoning behind their answers, using the mark scheme to support this.

Conclude the activity by leading the whole class in a discussion about what demands the mark scheme is making for different types of questions and how they should go about meeting those demands in the exam.

You might like to develop the activity by asking students to swap model answers with another pair for peer assessment using the mark scheme.

3. Past paper analysis

Exam boards provide past papers for specifications. These are excellent preparation for the real thing and should be used as much as possible during revision.

You can ask students to work through past papers in different ways. For example, you may ask students to work in pairs to analyse a past paper and identify the different types of question, the command words and any potential areas of difficulty. They can then compare notes with the rest of the class.

Alternatively, students can work in groups to create a how-to guide for answering a past paper that you have given to them. This can be done on a large sheet of sugar paper that can be used to present the guide to the class.

A final suggestion is for students to look through a past paper individually and assess how confident they would feel with answering each question on the paper. This will help to identify personal areas of weakness that can become the focus of their revision.

4. Question cards

Create a pack of question cards, each of which contains a question that is connected to the topic you are revising. You can use these cards to set students questions at random.

Develop the activity by having students pick the cards out and read the questions to the rest of the class. Alternatively, create a number of decks and distribute these to groups of three or four students. Groups can pair up to test each other and you can even hold a tournament, with the winning groups facing each other in a final round.

This activity does require a bit of preparation, but the resources can be used year after year once you have made them.

5. Tests and mocks

Revision tests and mock exams are excellent tools for helping students to revise.

To give the classic revision test a kinaesthetic slant, try pinning test questions up around your classroom. Give students an answer booklet to fill in and invite them to walk around the room to read the questions they need to answer.

In order to add a bit of variety to mock exams, ask students to design their own mocks. Divide students into groups of three or four and give each group a collection of past papers. Following the structure of the papers they have been given, students can create a mock paper of their own. Groups should then swap papers with another group and complete the mock that their peers have produced.

6. Student quizzes

A revision quiz is a common activity. You can breathe new life into this format by asking students to create their own quizzes to test their peers.

One way to go about this is to divide the class into six groups. Give each group a different part of the syllabus and ask them to come up with ten questions and answers. Collect the material in and then lead the class in the style of a pub quiz – the teacher reads the questions while the groups confer and write down their answers. Groups should answer all the questions apart from their own and the group with the most correct answers wins.

Another option involves students working in pairs. Each pair comes up with a set of ten questions and answers based on the topic that the class is revising. Pairs should then stand up and move around the room to meet other pairs and quiz them. Each group should quiz three other pairs during the course of the activity, answering their peers' questions in return.

7. Student teaching

One of the best ways to refresh our knowledge of a topic is to teach someone else about it. Asking students to teach one another is therefore an excellent way for them to revise material.

Here are three ways to use student teaching in revision lessons:

- Divide the class into groups of five and give each group five separate topics from the syllabus. Ask the groups to assign the topics amongst themselves. Students then revise their particular topic in preparation for teaching the rest of their group about it. When the time is up, the teaching begins.
- Divide the class into groups of four or five. Give each group a different topic to revise and explain that they will be teaching the rest of the class about it. Indicate that their mini-lesson should be engaging, interactive and highly informative. When they have had enough time to prepare, invite each group up to the front in turn to teach the rest of the class.
- Students work in pairs. Display a list of topic areas on the board and ask students to work through these in turn, discussing how they would go about teaching each topic to a group of students who were a year younger than them. Provide some criteria for guidance such as: What are the key things they would need to know? What are the most difficult ideas? How would you test students' knowledge?

8. Marketplace

This activity is another variation on student teaching. Divide the class into five or six groups and assign a task to each group. This could be creating revision notes on a particular topic, summarising key ideas or making lists of key words.

Give the groups sufficient time in which to do this, perhaps as much as twenty to thirty minutes depending on the tasks.

When the time is up, explain that the class will be set up like a marketplace. Half of each group will man a desk or “stall” devoted to their topic while the other half will move around and visit the other desks, letting their peers teach them about other topics.

Once the students moving around the room have had a chance to visit each stall, they should re-join their groups and teach the rest of their group members the information that they have learnt from their peers.

9. Silent debate

Take five or six large sheets of paper and write a question, contentious statement or topic area on each one.

Distribute the sheets around the room and explain to pupils that they are going to walk around in silence, contributing answers or information by writing on the sheets.

For statements and questions, invite students to write responses which make use of as many keywords or as much relevant information as possible. For topic areas, ask pupils to write as much as possible from memory.

At the end of the activity, divide the class into groups and give each group one of the completed sheets. Ask the groups to look through the material and to identify any interesting comments, omissions and areas in need of development or clarification. Conclude by asking students what the activity tells them about the current state of their revision.

Section three – Note-making

1. Succinct and powerful notes

Here are three tricks for helping your students to make effective notes:

- Use your knowledge and understanding of effective note-taking to make a model that your students can imitate. You could even annotate this model to point out why it is a useful approach to follow.
- Give out a set of note-making success criteria to make students aware of what you expect from them and how they can go about achieving these expectations.
- Ask students to peer-assess each other's notes – this can be done according to success criteria if you have chosen to create it. Not only will this give students a different set of notes to compare to their own, but everybody in the class will receive personalised feedback on the quality of their note-making and how best to improve.
- Encourage students to include mind maps in their notes to help them to visualise the connections between ideas and information. Diagrams such as mind maps also break up the notes on the page, making the information easier to digest and remember.

2. Pass the paper

Divide the class into groups of five and give each group five pieces of blank paper – either A4 or A3, depending on how much you expect students to write. Ask students to number themselves from one to five and follow this up by revealing a list of revision topics, also numbered one to five.

Students should write down the name of the revision topic that corresponds with their number at the top of one of the pieces of paper. They then have three minutes to write down as much as possible connected to that revision topic. When the time is up, students should pass the papers clockwise to the next person. This person has two and a half minutes to add as much as they can to the piece of paper that they have been given.

The process repeats until each person in the group has contributed to each piece of paper. You can keep lowering the timings with each turn, or you can keep them fixed.

You can develop this activity by asking students to work in groups of three. Give each group a piece of paper and a revision topic, which they should write about together. The pieces are then passed to from group to group until all groups have had a chance to contribute to all the pieces of paper.

3. A4-A5-A6

Give each student a sheet of A4 paper, lined or blank, and ask them to fill that piece of paper with as much information as possible about the revision topic you are focusing on. To increase motivation and create a sense of pace, you might like to set a time limit – five minutes, for example.

When time is up, ask students to turn their sheet of A4 over, so that they cannot see what is written on it. Hand out a sheet of A5 paper to every student instead and then give them a shorter time limit in which to summarise and synthesise their A4 notes.

Repeat this process once more with A6 paper. When the activity is finished, ask students to compare their pieces of paper and identify any gaps in their knowledge. They can take the sheets away to keep as revision notes.

4. Wallpaper notes

This is a revision activity that I picked up from a colleague. It works best with a small class.

You will need a roll of paper. Rearrange your classroom so that you have a line of desks placed end-to-end and then lay the paper out across the tables. This will result in a long, blank canvas for students to work on.

Explain that the class is going to create a piece of wallpaper that covers everything they have learned over the course of a year or while studying a certain topic. Provide students with coloured pens and ask them to work together to decide who is going to write and illustrate which parts. You might suggest that they start in the middle of the paper with a big title and fan out from there.

The end result will be a collaborative and highly visual revision tool that you can stick up on the wall of the classroom for students to refer to during revision lessons.

5. Guides and leaflets

Creating a guide or leaflet is an excellent task for helping students to revisit and relearn information. Synthesising past learning to make something new will not only reinforce that learning, but will also provide an opportunity for students to assess the existing strengths and weaknesses in their knowledge.

It helps to give students an audience and purpose to bear in mind. For example, you might ask them to create a leaflet that is aimed at introducing a younger class to the topic. You can also encourage students to make use of presentational devices, such as lists or diagrams, to convey information more clearly.

An extension of this activity is for students to consider different media that they could use to share information about a topic. For example, they might design a revision website or a poster. Once they have created a revision tool using the media of their choice, they can go on to present this to the class.

6. Videos

A really engaging activity is to get students to make videos based on a revision topic.

Divide the class into groups of three or four. You can assign each group a different topic or get all groups to focus on the same one. Ask students to mind map their topic to give them a clearer understanding of what their video needs to cover. Following this, ask students to come up with ideas for the style of their video, how they will present the information and how they will engage the audience.

Only when this planning work is complete should students begin making their films. The finished films can later be shown to the whole class to help everyone revise.

Section four – Revision games

1. Bingo

Ask students to draw a three-by-three grid in their books and then present them with a long list of keywords or phrases connected to the topic you are revising. Students should choose nine words from the list and write one of these in each of the boxes on their grid.

When everybody is ready, begin reading out definitions of the keywords or phrases at random. Continue until one student has crossed off all their boxes and shouted out 'Bingo!' Check their sheet by going through it and asking them to give the definition for each word.

You can develop this activity by inviting one or more students to come to the front of the class and give out the definitions for each of the keywords or phrases.

2. A-Z

Begin by asking the class to write the letters A-Z down the margin of a piece of lined paper and giving them a revision topic. Working either in pairs or in groups, students should come up with a word connected to the topic for each letter of the alphabet.

The first pair or group to list 26 words are the winners. When a team announces that they have completed their A-Z, ask them to read it out loud to the class. Their peers then have the chance to challenge any word that does not have a plausible connection to the topic. When a word is challenged, the winning students need to defend their reasoning to you and to the rest of the class.

You can develop the activity by specifying certain types of words or information for each of the letters. For example, you may request keywords, concepts or names of relevant individuals (such as characters). Equally, you might give a set of criteria for the word list such as: It must contain at least five concepts, eight keywords and three relevant people.

3. Dingbats

Dingbats are visual representations of words or phrases. Here are two examples of dingbats, along with their solutions:



Solution: Star-crossed



Solution: Underhand

Dingbats are a fun, visual way to help students remember key words and concepts. For revision lessons you can create dingbats to test the class or you can challenge students to come up with dingbats of their own, which their peers then have to solve.

4. Concept drawing or modelling

In order to make abstract concepts within a topic easier to grasp, it can be helpful to ask students to represent this concept either through drawing or modelling. For example, you might ask students to represent the key themes of a novel using building bricks or modelling clay.

Concept drawing works well as the starter or plenary to a revision lesson. Ask students to consolidate their learning by representing a key concept from the topic you were revising either in that lesson, or the lesson before.

You might like to ask students to draw or model a relevant concept of their choice and to leave their work unlabelled so that the rest of the class can guess what they were trying to represent. This can be done by students moving around the room to view work that has been left on desks.

Another option is to lead a Pictionary-style exercise in which students come up to the board to draw a concept for the class to guess. You could even introduce a competitive edge by dividing the class into two competing Pictionary teams and keep score of correct guesses.

5. TV game shows

TV game shows provide excellent formats for revision. This is because they contrive a fun situation wherein you can ask students a series of questions connected to the topic.

Jeopardy is an excellent game show to use for revision. This is an American quiz show in which contestants are given a category and an answer and must respond with the appropriate question.

For example, within the category of “protein synthesis” a contestant might be given the answer “A large number of these make up proteins”. The correct response would be: “What are amino acids?”

You can use the *Jeopardy* format with any revision topic, giving students answers and asking them to work out the correct questions.

If you would prefer to use the format of a different game show, here are links to ready-made templates for five popular shows. These can easily be adapted to suit your own lessons:

- *You Say, We Pay* (bit.ly/YouSayWePay)
- *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* (bit.ly/Milli0naire)
- *Blankety Blank* (bit.ly/blanketyblank)
- *Million Pound Drop* (bit.ly/MillionPoundDrop)
- *Blockbusters* (bit.ly/Bl0ckbusters)

For whichever game show you are using as a format, you can ask students to come up with their own questions and take it in turns to test the whole class or smaller groups.

6. Twenty questions

In this game, one person must think of something connected to a given topic while the rest of the group have twenty questions to guess what they are thinking of.

Only questions that can be answered with “yes” or “no” are allowed. Somebody should keep track of the number of questions being asked because if the number exceeds twenty then the person answering the questions has won.

Guesses also count as questions, so you should advise students not to guess too early. This is not only because they are unlikely to get it right at first, but also because the revision purpose is getting students to think carefully about a topic and to pose thoughtful questions rather than firing off guesses at random.

You can develop the game by asking students to play amongst themselves, either in pairs or in groups.

7. What am I?

This dinner-party favourite can work brilliantly in the classroom. Divide students into groups of five or six and give each student a sticky note. In secret, each student should write down a word, person or concept connected to the topic of the revision lesson. They should then pass their note to the person on their left. Without looking at it, the recipient should place the note on their forehead.

Students now take it in turns to ask the rest of the group questions in an attempt to work out what is written on the note they are wearing. You might specify that students can only ask “yes” or “no” questions, or leave questions open.

Each member of the group is allowed to ask one question at a time and students take turns to ask. A student may choose to take a guess at the answer when their turn comes around.

The winner is the first student to make a correct guess, though groups should continue until everyone has worked out who they are.

8. Spot the lie

Present students with a set of five statements connected to the topic you are revising. Some of these statements should be false; I would suggest one or two, though you may want to go with more.

Working in pairs, students should try to work out which are the true statements and which are false. They will have to make use of their existing knowledge of the topic to do this. You might want to allow them to refer to text books or look back over notes from previous lessons to help.

You can alter the difficulty level of the activity by changing the complexity, similarity or ambiguity of the statements you display. For example, you might deliberately focus on commonly-confused ideas in order to really challenge your students.

Develop the activity by creating a series of themed statement sets. You can either display these one after the other, or give them to students on a hand-out. Another option is to let students come up with their own statement sets, which they then use to test each other.

9. Creative connections

Creative thinking can play an important role in revision. This activity encourages students to think creatively and to develop personal connections that will help them remember more about the topic.

Display a set of six images – chosen purposefully or at random – and ask students to make connections between these and the topic you are revising. Challenge them to make at least one connection for each picture. The connections can be tangential or circuitous, but students must be able to explain them.

Encourage students to think outside the box and to try to come up with connections that nobody else in the room will have thought of.

10. Chain link

The purpose of this activity is to form a continuous chain of words or phrases connected to the revision topic. Begin by asking a student at one of the corners of the room to give an appropriate word or phrase. The person next to them must then follow this up with a connected word or phrase.

The aim is to develop a chain that travels all around the classroom and includes every student in the class. If the chain breaks down at any point, go back to the start and begin again. Keep going until a full chain has been formed.

This is a whole-class activity that works really well at the end of a lesson or to lift the mood halfway through one. To generate a bit more energy, you might like to ask students to stand up for the activity.

