

# Achieving highly in GCSEs at Bishop Wordsworth's School

Use this booklet to help you to reflect on your revision strategies. Within this booklet you may find strategies which you are familiar with. Some may be helpful.

Ideally you will learn some additional strategies to help you to revise more effectively - success in the summer is not necessarily about working harder but perhaps being smarter in the way that you revise.

# Top Ten Revision Tips

1. Short bursts of revision (30-40 minutes) are most effective. Your concentration lapses after about an hour and you need to take a short break (5-10 minutes).
2. Find a quiet place to revise - your bedroom, school, the library - and refuse to be interrupted or distracted.
3. Make sure you don't just revise the subjects and topics you like. Work on your weaker ones as well.
4. Make your own revision notes because you will remember what you have written down more easily. Stick key notes to cupboards or doors so you see them everyday.
5. Rewrite the key points of your revision notes; read them out loud to yourself. We remember more than twice as much of what we say aloud than of what we merely read.
6. Use different techniques. Make your own learning maps, use post-it notes to write key words on, create flash cards. Record your notes and listen to them back. Ask friends and family to test you. Use highlighter pens to mark important points. Chant or make up a rap song.
7. Practise on past exam papers or revision tests available on the web/ made available by departments on the school system. Initially do one section at a time and progress to doing an entire paper against the clock.
8. You will need help at some stage, ask parents, siblings and teachers. Use websites specifically designed for revision.
9. **Don't get stressed out!** Eat properly and get lots of sleep!
10. **Believe in yourself and be positive.** If you think you can succeed you will; if you convince yourself that you will fail, that's what will probably happen.



# REVISION - Do's and don'ts



## DO

### 1. Make a list of all the topics you need to revise:

Each subject that you are studying can be broken down into its constituent parts, with main sections, sub-topics and supporting details. A very useful start is to list out all the topics on the course according to this hierarchy and use this as a 'revision checklist' for the subject. Tick topics off as you've learnt them.

### 2. Create a realistic schedule.

Block the waking part of each day into three portions. Allow yourself one portion a day off and allocate subjects and topics to the remaining two. Put the schedule on display so that your family can see when you are available. It will also reassure your parents that you are in control.

### 3. Plan ahead by working backwards

By using revision checklists in your various subjects, you should know what quantity of material has to be covered over the coming months. Start from the final date (Exams start at the beginning of May and some will continue into June after Half Term) and divide your revision up week by week, allowing some flexibility for unforeseen delays. Surprise yourself by being ready in time! Use the timetables and other sheets you have been given.



### 4. Revise using your preferred learning style.

Have you tried..... mindmaps, diagrams, colour, mnemonics, recording yourself and listening back to it, rewriting your favourite song using your revision notes for a topic as the words, walking round (Great for kinaesthetic learners - try read out the positive effects of X standing on the left hand side of the room and negative effects on the right hand side).

## DON'T

**Just keep going!** The body and the mind need regular 'time-outs'. When you're tired, concentration is more difficult, you get distracted much easier and learning and memorisation is less effective. There comes a point in an evening study session when it is counter-productive to stay at the desk - nothing is going in and you are only tiring yourself further. Use breaks effectively, particularly after completing a task.

## **Effective revision**

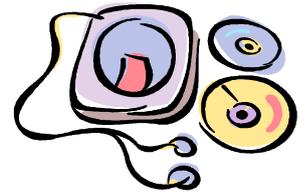
To be effective, revision must be:

**Active** - always work with a pen and paper, look for key points, test yourself.

Never just sit down and read for a set period. Focus on tasks, not time. If you just read notes you'll only retain about 10% of the information.

**Organised** - always ask yourself at the start of a study session "what do I want to have completed in this session?" Have a plan for what you want to cover this week and this month. Have an overview of the priority areas in each subject.

## **Getting started on revision**



### **Where?**

Find a fixed place to study (a particular desk/room at home, a spot in the library, etc.) that becomes firmly associated in your mind with productive work. All the equipment and materials you need should be within reach, and the room should be well lit and ventilated, but not too comfortable! Turn your room into a positive learning environment. Keep books and notes on the desk to a minimum and decorate your walls with colourful notes and key facts. Music is fine as long as it helps you to study and blocks out distracting noises. The very best sound to study to is thought to be that of Baroque composers or Mozart. Experiments show that brains are positively stimulated and IQs boosted by such music.

### **What?**

Remember that it's all about being active and *focused on tasks, not time!* Know at the start of a session what you want to have completed by the end of the period. Make the tasks specific and realistic, not vague and large.

### **How?**

Always work with a pen and paper at the ready. Getting started is often the most difficult bit, so start by 'doing'. It usually helps to begin with a subject you like, move on to other less favoured areas, then finish up with a favoured topic.

### **When?**

Try to schedule your study for times when you are more mentally alert. Most people find their ability to focus deteriorates towards the end of the day. Getting revision done earlier in the day aids efficiency and also offers the reward of having time to relax after the work is done.

### **Why?**

Test your progress at the end of a study session. Ask yourself "what have I just learned?" Review the material covered in your revision session. Merely recognising material isn't enough - you must be able to reproduce it without the aid of the book or notes.

# How should I revise?

Try one of these.....

**A: MIND MAPS:** Make mind-maps or association maps rather than taking linear notes. Mapping your notes by radiating key words out in a pattern of links from a central point will make best use of your memory. If you use colour and images on the maps, you'll be harnessing the power of both sides of your brain - creative and logical.

## How to mind map:

1. Start with the theme in the middle of the page.

2. Then develop your main idea.

3. Each branch must relate to the branch before it.

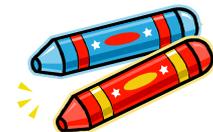
4. Use only key words and images.



5. Key words must be written along the branches.

6. Printing your key words makes them more memorable.

7. Use highlighters and coloured markers to colour code branches.



8. Make things stand out on the page so they stand out in your mind. (This doesn't show up well on a black and white photocopied booklet! You should use a different colour for each main branch and all its sub-branches)



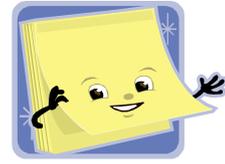
9. Brainstorm ideas. Be creative.

10. Design images you can relate to which will help you remember key information.



**B:** Read intelligently. Spend five minutes flipping through a book or your notes looking at headings and summaries. Then attempt to mind map what you have spotted and what you can remember.

**C:** Use cards. Write questions on one side and answers on the other. Then get your family to test you. Merely creating the cards will help your recall. You can also use them to test yourself when faced with 'dead' time at bus or waiting for someone.



use  
stops

**D: Condense.** Fitting notes onto one side of paper makes them easier to stomach, so rewrite and cut down as you go.

**E: Highlight.** Target key areas using colours and symbols. Visuals help you remember the facts.

**F: Record.** Try putting important points, quotes and formulae on tape. If you hear them and read them, they're more likely to sink in.



**G: Talk.** Read your notes out loud, it's one way of getting them to register.

**H: Test.** See what you can remember without notes, but avoid testing yourself on subjects you know already. Why not ask someone else to test you?

**I: Time.** Do past exam papers against the clock, it's an excellent way of getting up to speed and of checking where there are gaps in your knowledge.

# Improving Memory

We often blame our memory for poor academic performance ("I'm no good at remembering names / dates / rules / verbs / characteristics") when really we should be addressing our faulty input and storage system. There is a big difference between short-term and long-term memory. If you study a topic one night and can recall most of it the next morning, don't be fooled into thinking that you will be able to remember it accurately in two months time.

If the goal is to improve your long-term memory, then the key to success is based on the efficiency of input (the 'mental filing system' we employ). Reducing the burden on the limited short-term memory, and channelling information into long-term storage, is based on the creation of patterns and the avoidance of randomness.

- **'Chunking'**: as the average person can only hold seven 'items' in short-term memory, grouping items together into 'chunks' can increase capacity. This is generally used for remembering numbers (think of how you remember phone numbers by grouping the seven digits into 2 or 3 chunks) but can be applied to other listings in various subjects.
- **Repetition**: Studies indicate that 66% of material is forgotten within seven days if it is not reviewed or recited again by the student, and 88% is gone after six weeks. Don't make life harder for yourself - build in a brief daily and weekly review of material covered. It will save you having to re-learn material from scratch!
- **Application and association**: The best way to channel material to long-term memory is to organise it into meaningful associations. Link it to existing information and topics and create vivid personal examples which act as 'mental hooks' or 'cues' for recalling material in the future. Thus, new items are put in context. If you learn a new formula / verb / rule, try to put it into practice immediately with a relevant example.
- **Use of mnemonics**: these are various word games which can act as memory aids and which allow personalisation and creativity. Think of *stalactites* (come down from the ceiling) and *stalagmites* (go up from the ground); the colours of the rainbow - **Roy G. Biv** ('Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain' to remember red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet); the seven characteristics of living organisms - **Mr. Grief** (**M**ovement, **R**eproduction, **G**rowth, **R**espiration, **I**rritability, **E**xcretion, **F**eeding). You can devise many more of these to aid your personalised recall of items in your subjects.

# Review

Looking over a topic every now and then will help to keep it in the memory, taking away the need to cram before exams.

Make a summary of the work and look over it ten minutes later, the next day, the next week and then the next month for a few minutes each time. This reinforces the knowledge learned.

Understanding increases as time spent studying passes. However, the ability to recall things being memorised becomes progressively less efficient as time passes in a study session.

20 minutes is needed for the mind to get into the rhythm of and flow of the material. Any more than 40 minutes spent memorising means that memory declines to a point where it is no longer valuable.

The answer in revision lessons therefore is to do 30 minutes with a 5-minute stretch break and then review the topic.

After a one hour memorising session:

10 minutes later revise the topic for 10 minutes

1 day later revise the topic for 5 minutes

1 week later revise the topic for 2-5 minutes

1 month later revise the topic for 2-5 minutes

Before exams revise the topic as required.

**Each time knowledge is reinforced; it enters deeper into the long-term memory and becomes more stable.**

# Practising Output

To prepare for an exam, *you must practice doing what the exam requires you to do; giving out information, not taking it in!* This applies to regular class tests as well as the final exams.



Prior to May, you will probably have had the benefit of many class tests and exams where the GCSE conditions are simulated for your benefit - you can learn a lot by reflecting honestly on your performance in these tests. You also have the benefit of a wealth of freely available information about the exams. Past exam papers, marking schemes, study guides and examiners reports are all there to be used.

- **Make use of past papers**

These should be your constant companion in all revision tasks. For each topic you revise, consult the past questions on this subject and then attempt answers to them. Check your answers, fill in the 'knowledge gaps' where necessary, and file away the correct 'model answer' in your notes for future reference. You will also start to notice any trends in the questions asked.

- **Follow the marks**

Marking schemes are an invaluable aid to exam preparation. You can see how the marks are allocated for each question on the paper and what quantity or style of answer is required in each case. This knowledge will greatly inform your revision work and helps to remove the mystique of the exam.

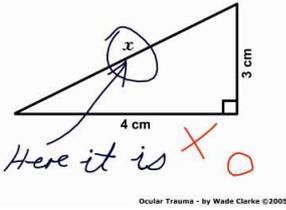
## **Try a dress rehearsal**

Each exam paper contains its own particular structure and challenge, with varying emphasis on answering style and depth. While much of your ongoing revision will be based on individual topics and questions, it is a very useful exercise to tackle an exam paper in its totality (at least once before May). It forces you to consider your strategy - the questions you will want to attempt or avoid, the issues of timing, the number of points you will need to make in each part of a question. Having performed this exercise a couple of times, your confidence levels rise as you fix on your strategy for the exam and realise that there can't be any major surprises for you in May.



# The Examiner's View

3. Find  $x$ .



You can largely determine the end result by simply heeding the voice of experience. The job of examiners is to give you marks, not to take them away, but they are powerless to help you if you fall into the most common traps. These are the **biggest pitfalls** they have identified:

- **Not reading the paper correctly**

Examiners say that this is one of the most regular and fatal errors. They call it the '*triggered answer*'. You have your pre-prepared answer ready but you don't look at the exact terms of the question and therefore supply the wrong information in your answer.

- **Not finishing the paper**

Mismanaging your time within the exam can easily cost you a full grade. The biggest exam 'crime' is to leave suitable questions unattempted. **Remember: it is much easier to get the first 20% of the marks for any question than the last 5%.** Therefore, if you find yourself stuck for time as you struggle through your third answer out of five, do not spend your remaining time extending and perfecting that answer. Instead, move on to questions four and five, even if your attempt is sketched or in point form. If you have answered only three questions instead of five, the highest mark you can get is 60%.

- **Ignoring the marking scheme**

You must take the marking scheme into account when you allocate time to each question or part of a question. If the marks allotted to a question clearly indicate that a few paragraphs are sufficient, do not write an essay on the subject. Avoid writing everything you know about a topic - just give the appropriate information.

- **Repetition**

Make the point once. There are no extra marks for restating facts, even if you phrase them differently. Examiners say repetition is a very common mistake.

- **Missing part of a question**

Sometimes, part of a question can be carried onto the next page and, in the pressure of the moment, you don't see it. As a consequence you might fail to do a compulsory part of a question or miss out on the chance to take an option that would have suited you better. Always take time to familiarise yourself with the whole paper before you start answering it.

- **Irrelevant quotations**

In literary subjects, don't use irrelevant quotations you may have learned off, as it only irritates the examiner.

- **Rough work**

Include your rough work with your exam script - you might get some credit for formulae or calculations contained therein.

# Performing on the Day



- **Get a good night's sleep**

While the temptation is to stay up half the night 'cramming' in more facts and figures, the evidence suggests this approach is counter-productive. In the context of a two-year course, an extra night's studying can make very little difference to your knowledge. However, having a mind that is refreshed, alert, and ready to respond to circumstances will obviously be of far greater benefit.

- **Arrive in plenty of time:** To perform well on the day, you need to be relaxed and to feel in control of the situation. This is difficult to achieve if you have missed breakfast and are stuck on a bus in traffic or standing on a train for 45 minutes as the exam time approaches. You will need about 15 minutes 'quiet time' to mentally rehearse your exam and run through your 'game plan' for the final time.

- **Have your equipment ready**

Each exam has its own requirements. Apart from properly functioning (black ink) pens, pencils, rulers, etc, you may need a calculator for the Maths or Science exam. Drawing pencils may be required for diagrams in some subjects. A lot of nervous energy can be expended on last-minute hassle if these items aren't checked in advance.



- **Think positive**

On the day of the exam, remind yourself of the good things (the material you know well, the revision you have completed, all the past exam questions done, the good grades achieved) rather than dwelling on areas of weakness. Having that self-belief will give you the confidence to trust your judgement within the exam hall and 'hit the target'.

- **Maintain your focus**

There can be a lot of tension, drama, and hysteria in the air on the days of an exam. You want to keep the balance between maintaining your focus and interacting normally with your friends and classmates. Try finding a quiet spot *far from the madding crowd* to 'warm-up' before each exam and 'warm-down' afterwards. Surround yourself with people who are likely to add to the calm rather than add to the clamour.

- **Beware of post-exam analysis**

The more you participate in the exam post-mortem, the more confused and disheartened you are likely to become. You can't change what has happened, you can only focus on the present and this will need your full attention.

# Top Tips on Exam Strategy

Success in exams involves two ingredients - having a thorough knowledge of the subject matter AND making the most of your knowledge in the exam through effective answering technique. Two students with identical knowledge and attainment levels can sit the same exam and their final grades can differ by as much as 25%. The difference is down to having an effective strategy and exam technique.

*Here are four golden rules to apply to all your GCSE papers:*



## **Allow time to read the paper carefully**

The importance of reading the paper carefully and choosing your questions wisely cannot be emphasised enough at this stage. The natural inclination is always to start writing immediately and launch into a favoured topic. Resist the urge. Take your time. Be smart and size-up the paper before answering.

## **Stick to your game plan**

An overall strategy should have emerged from your revision and exam preparation in each subject. This covers the areas you will tackle, the topics you will avoid if they appear on the paper, the sequence in which you will tackle the various sections, the style of answering you will employ in each subject, the amount of time you will allocate to answering each section. In some cases, this plan will work like a dream but there will always be surprises to deal with in some papers. Don't get flustered. Stick to your game plan, trust your judgement, and move on.

## **Sweep up any mistakes**

In the pressure of the exam hall, it is easy to make elementary errors. These will sometimes have the potential to lose you a lot of valuable marks. Misreading the instruction on a question can render an entire answer invalid. You might have known the correct answer, but you didn't put it down. A simple miscalculation can lose you valuable time as you try to figure out the balancing item. Be disciplined with your time. Always leave a few minutes at the end to tidy-up errors. Simply changing a definition / formula / calculation at this stage could be the difference between a good and an average grade.

## **Attempt all questions**

It is amazing how many exam scripts are handed up unfinished. Every year, capable students who just didn't get time to finish the paper lose easy marks. Don't fall into this trap. Work on the basis that you will get an answer written for the required number of questions. Remember that it is much easier to get the first 20% of the marks for any question than the final 5%. You can always polish an answer further but, if there is no attempt made at part of a question, the examiner can't give you any marks. BUT if the instructions on the front of the paper tell you to answer a certain number of questions - stick to this - don't answer too many!

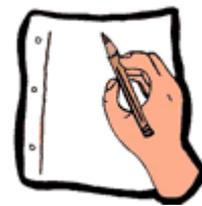
## Some key terms used in examination questions

<p><b>Account for</b> Explain the process or reason for something being the way it is.</p>	<p><b>Conclude</b> Decide after reasoning something out.</p>
<p><b>Analyse</b> Explore the main ideas of the subject, show they are important and how they are related.</p>	<p><b>Distinguish</b> Explain the difference.</p>
<p><b>Calculate</b> Find out using mathematics.</p>	<p><b>Enumerate</b> Make a list of the points under discussion.</p>
<p><b>Comment on</b> Discuss the subject, explain it and give an opinion on it.</p>	<p><b>Estimate</b> Guess the amount or value.</p>
<p><b>Compare</b> Show the similarities (but you can also point out the differences).</p>	<p><b>Explain</b> Describe, giving reasons and causes.</p>
<p><b>Complete</b> Finish off.</p>	<p><b>Express</b> Put the ideas into words.</p>
<p><b>Discuss</b> Explore the subject by looking at its advantages and disadvantages (i.e. for and against). Attempt to come to some sort of judgement.</p>	<p><b>Evaluate</b> Give an opinion by exploring the good and bad points. It's a bit like asking you to assess something. Attempt to support your argument with expert opinion.</p>
<p><b>Concise</b> Short and brief.</p>	<p><b>Factors</b> The fact or circumstances that contribute to a result.</p>
<p><b>Contrast</b> Show the differences ~ compare and contrast questions are very common in exams – they want you to say how something is similar and how it may be different too.</p>	<p><b>Criticise</b> Analyse and then make a judgement or give an opinion. You could show both the good and bad points. You could refer to an expert's opinion within this question.</p>
<p><b>Give an account of</b> Describe.</p>	<p><b>Give reasons for</b> Use words like <i>because</i> in your answer as you will be explaining how or why something is that way.</p>
<p><b>Define</b> Give the meaning. This should be short.</p>	<p><b>Identify</b> Recognise, prove something as being certain.</p>
<p><b>Describe</b> Give a detailed account.</p>	<p><b>Illustrate</b> Show by explaining and giving examples.</p>
<p><b>Differentiate</b> Explore and explain the difference.</p>	<p><b>Indicate</b> Point out, make something known.</p>

<p><b>Interpret</b> Explain the meaning by using examples and opinions.</p>	<p><b>Relate</b> Show the connection between things.</p>
<p><b>Justify</b> Give a good reason for offering an opinion.</p>	<p><b>State</b> Write briefly the main points.</p>
<p><b>List</b> An item-by-item record of relevant images. This would normally be in note form without any need to be descriptive.</p>	<p><b>Summarise</b> Give the main points of an idea or argument. Leave out unnecessary details that could cloud the issue.</p>
<p><b>Outline</b> Concentrate on the main bits of the topic or item. Ignore the minor detail.</p>	<p><b>Trace</b> Show how something has developed from beginning to end.</p>
<p><b>Prove</b> Give real evidence, not opinion, which proves an argument and shows it to be true.</p>	

## Answering Exam Questions

1. Scan all the questions.
2. Where there is a choice, mark all the questions you could answer.
3. Read these questions carefully.
4. Choose the correct number of questions in each section.
5. Decide on an order: *best answers first*.
6. Divide up your time, allowing more time for the questions with the most marks.
7. Underline the key words in the question.
8. Plan your answer.
9. Stick to the point of the question.
10. Write your answer.
11. Use the plan at every stage - e.g. every paragraph.
12. Check your answer against the plan. Look out for mistakes.
13. If you have time, re-read the questions and your answers and make any necessary corrections.



# Dealing With Distractions

## ***"I just start daydreaming"***

Become an active learner. Always work with a pen and paper. Focus on a specific task, not a specified time for your study.

## ***"I can't focus because I'm anxious about the exams"***

Try to limit yourself to your immediate concerns, the things you have some control over (preparation for the upcoming revision test) rather than the things you cannot determine (like what questions the examiners will choose for this year's English Lit paper.)

## ***"I often fall asleep when I'm supposed to be studying"***

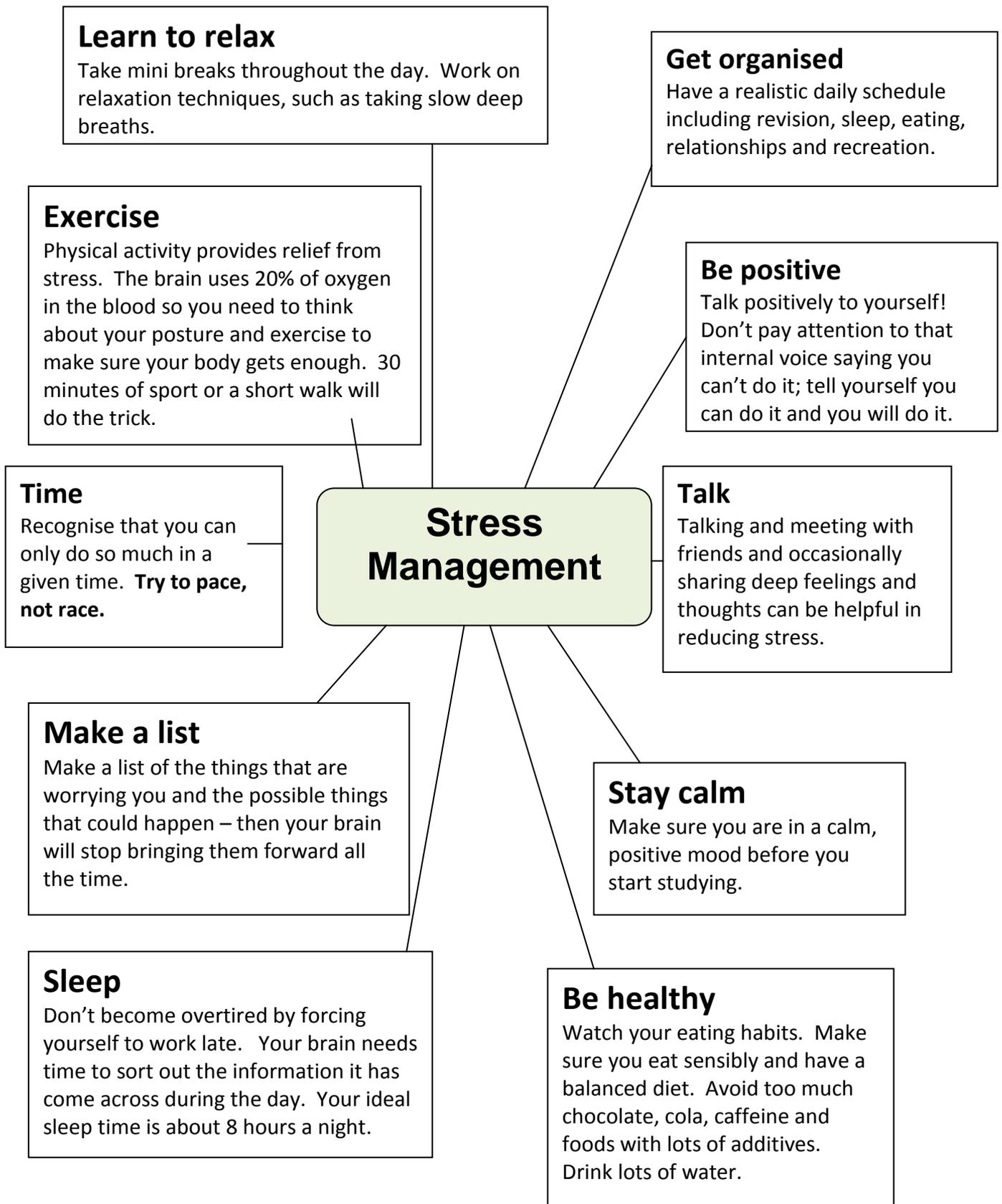
Try to get to bed on time over the coming weeks. A tired brain is very unproductive. Get some genuine rest at the weekend. Be sure to get regular exercise, even just a walk around the block at night to clear your head.

## ***"I'm constantly interrupted by other people"***

Study in the location most likely to offer peace and quiet. Ask for consideration from family members over the final run up to exams. Never have a TV, phone, computer game, or music system within arm's reach while you are trying to work. Make a rule of not taking phone calls within certain defined periods.

## ***"I keep thinking of other things while I'm studying"***

Divide the study session into smaller, short-range goals which demand your full attention e.g. vocabulary or poetry test. Keep a 'reminder pad' beside you, a little notebook to jot down something that strikes you (someone to call, a job to do, etc.) and deal with it after the study period. Having made a note of it, you can more easily re-focus on your work.



Adapted from H. Nurton