

Poor exam technique can leave even the brightest GCSE/ A Level students with disappointing results. Whilst each subject differs slightly, here are our top tips for GCSE and A Level students:

1. Think like an examiner

Doing past papers is key to perfecting your exam technique. Ideally, revise a specific topic first and then answer an exam question focusing on that area. Try:

- asking your teacher to mark and give you feedback, ideally with model answers if available.
- marking your own past paper questions – you can learn a lot from understanding the mark scheme, analysing your answers and thinking about how many marks you would award yourself and why.
- reading the examiners report to identify and, hopefully avoid, the pitfalls of previous students!

2. Ensure you understand the meaning of command words

Ask your teacher for a list of key command words and their definitions or, even better, compile your own and ask a teacher to check it. Don't panic if you see terms like "suggest"; remember that the examiner simply wants you to come up with an idea by applying your knowledge and does not expect you to necessarily know the precise answer.

3. Use acronyms to help structure long-answer questions

Whilst you may be familiar with acronyms like PEE, PEA, PEAL, which have been used for many years to help structure essay answers, try using the acronym, PETAL: Point ; Evidence ; Terminology (ie key vocabulary or terms); Analysis; Link to help with the new GCSE and A Level exams, which place increased emphasis on subject specific vocabulary and terminology.

4. Practice time management and question planning

Rather than diving into the first question of the exam, allocate time to think and prepare. Use past papers to practice and challenge yourself to work quickly and effectively. Try:

- reading over the whole paper at least once and deciding the order you want to answer the questions in - answering your best questions first can really boost confidence
- highlighting command words and key terms, make a few notes for each question

For essay questions, write a quick plan, with everything you can think of to answer the question. If additional points come to you after you have started writing, just add them to the plan. Start with a short introduction outlining your direction/argument and then work through your essay plan. Keep an eye on time and try to be as succinct as possible to help ensure you have time to cover all your points. Once you've written as much as time allows, close off your essay with a conclusion and move onto the next question.

In the case of STEM exams, be sure to show and explain your working. This will ensure you get the maximum marks available, even if you get the answer wrong. Make the answer clear to the examiner by crossing out errors and highlighting your final response. For multiple choice questions, try coding the paper as you scan it: a) definitely can do (do these first) b) tricky/lengthy but doable questions (do these second) and c) tricky/lengthy and not sure about (do these last).

5. Don't leave early!

Use any spare time to read through the whole exam again and check for any spelling or grammar errors and whether what you've written makes sense or whether it needs clarification/rewording? In the case of calculations, check your working again and make sure it matches your written answer. Lastly, help the examiner by cleaning up your paper – make it easy for him/her to navigate by crossing out mistakes and highlighting your final answers.

For more advice and articles from Justin Craig Education on how to achieve exam success, please visit www.justinraig.ac.uk or call us on 01727 236135.