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Introduction

If we wanted to do any job like carpentry, teaching, bricklaying or medical research we would have to learn the skills needed to complete the various tasks involved. Yet we all tend to launch into learning and study without ever considering that there are skills involved that we should master first.

This book aims to help you equip yourself with the skills you'll need in your school career to learn, study and do exams.

Learning can be a frustrating business. Often, we feel dejected because we have too many tasks and not enough time. We sometimes don't know where to start and it feels overwhelming. And then when we finally do get down to doing some learning, the next day we've forgotten almost it all and we start to think, why bother?

Couple this with some depressing statistics about not being able to concentrate for more than 45 minutes at a time and losing 80% of what we learn within eight days and we're almost ready to throw in the towel.

The purpose of this book though is to help you beat these odds. With some careful strategies and some useful techniques, you'll learn the skills necessary for study and exam success.

It's not essential that you read this book from front cover to back cover in perfect order. Feel free to dip in and out as you need advice. Each section is self-contained and can be read in isolation.

Section 1 is for parents. This section offers parents some advice on helping and supporting their children through school and exams.

The rest of the book begins with the basic foundation skills that will stand to your benefit in all your learning. The first section shows you how to prepare for and organise your study. Chapter 1 explores ways you can maintain your overall physical and mental health throughout the school year and during exams. It discusses diet, exercise and even includes exercises that will teach you how to relax if you find yourself getting stressed. It also shows you how to organise timetables, organise a study space and generally establish good study habits throughout the year.

Section 2 shows you how you can 'take it all in'. Here, you will learn how to master reading, listening, and note-taking skills. You will also, I hope, enjoy learning about different memory tricks that you can use for retaining information that you are learning both in class and at home.

Section 5

How to Do Well in Exams

Of course, all the work you are doing is leading to a key aim: succeeding in your exams. This section guides you through the process of preparing for your exams, doing the actual exams, and what to do once the exams are over.

What you will learn in Section 5

In this section you will learn:

- general study tips and techniques for practising exam questions
- how to manage the exam itself
- how to identify the types of questions and vocabulary used in exams
- how to get organised before the exam
- how to stay calm and focused during the exam
- what not to do after the exam
- how to prepare for oral exams
- how to prepare for aural exams.

14 Preparing for exams

Practice makes perfect

When you are studying, it makes sense that the only real way to prepare for those exams is to practise them. A huge amount of your learning, especially coming nearer the exams, revolves around trying exam questions. This is where you put your learning into practice. For some subjects like Maths and sections of Business Studies, actually doing the calculations is the only way to learn effectively. For this you'll need to refine your practising skills.

Answer blind

Answering blind is when you revise a section from your textbook and notes and then put everything away. Find a question relating to this section from past exam papers and try to answer it without looking at any notes. Answer in full exam format and when you feel you've done all you can correct it with the help of your book and notes.

You can also do this in relation to homework. Think of homework as a test, especially in something like Maths. Try to complete the homework without your books and then consult them once you've answered the question to check your answer or make adjustments.

Time answers

It's very important that you can answer a question in the time you will have available in the exam for that type of question. When you answer blind, make sure you time yourself and then check against the recommended time. If you are very much under the time allowed, you'll probably need to do some more study on this section in order to be able to build up your answer a little more. If you are over the time, you need to work on planning your answer more effectively.

Use marking schemes

When an examiner corrects an exam paper, they have a marking scheme to help them. This marking scheme tells them what to expect in the answer. You can make use of these marking schemes to help in your answering of past papers. You can find marking schemes on <http://www.examinations.ie>, where you will get them under 'Examination Material Archive'.

After you've attempted a question blind, use the marking scheme for that question to help you correct your answer. You will learn a lot about where you could have improved your answer and it will give you an insight into what the examiners look for.

Rework mock papers

When you get your mock paper back, make full use of it. Rework the questions you already answered, based on your teacher's comment or the marking scheme, which the teacher will be able to give you. You should also work through some of the other questions you rejected in the actual test for added practice on other options you may have to take in June. For example, in English you will only have answered on one poet in the mock exam, so now choose one of the other poets and use the marking scheme to help your practice and learning.

Follow examples

When you're practising mathematical-type problems, go back to your class notes and find a problem you know is correct. Rework this question without looking back at your original answer. When you're finished, correct against the original. Now find a similar one in the exam papers and work through that one. Continue to work through similar problems until you feel confident you have mastered this section.

Piece together solutions

When you're trying to learn the steps involved in solving a mathematical-type problem, work one through correctly, and cut up the answer to leave one step per piece of paper. Now leave it aside for a while, then come back to it and piece together the steps in the correct order.

Work with friends

Work on mathematical problems with a friend or group of friends. One person should start the solution and complete Step 1, pass to the next person who completes Step 2, pass along again and complete Step 3. Continue passing the solution around (or back and forth if there are just two of you) until it is completed. Start another problem; this time a different person begins.

For some advice on working as part of a group, see Chapter 4, 'Motivating yourself'.

Make use of revision books

Revision books can be good guides to the important topics in a subject. Work through any questions in the book and check the answers against those provided in the book or against your textbook.

Work with your teachers

When you practise a question from an exam paper or book, feel free to ask your teacher to look over it for you. Ask for any comments on where you might improve and make sure you put those into practice next time round. Don't be afraid to approach teachers; they always admire initiative.

15 Doing exams

So you've done your study and you want to display your knowledge to the examiner. The best way to do that is to see the exam as a type of game where a good strategy will get you the results you want. That strategy will ensure that you answer the questions you are actually asked and that you give the examiners the information they are looking for in a clear and logical way.

If you want to approach the exam logically and methodically, you will need to manage your time and method in a strict way.

Reading the paper

Read the entire paper

Before even thinking about putting pen to paper, read the entire exam paper. Read all the questions carefully and, in the case of comprehending sections, all the reading material.

Read instructions

Even if you know what you need to answer on the paper, always read all the instructions carefully. Make sure you're clear about what's expected – such as the number of questions you need to answer and which sections have choices. This will help ease the nerves a little and help focus your mind on the task ahead.

Choosing your questions

Mark off questions

Mark off the questions you definitely want to answer. These will be the ones you know you feel comfortable with. When you've answered these and you still need to choose a few more, read back over the choices you have left and take the ones you know the most about. To decide this, it might be a good idea to jot down a few ideas for your answers and then choose the ones you have more ideas for.