

16. Practice Activity: It's Time to Teach! (aka CASTT)

Cal Newport is a professor of computer science at Georgetown University, Washington, DC. He's written a few great books to help pupils achieve the best grades they can. It's worth taking a look at his website: www.calnewport.com.

In addition to teaching pupils at university, he's been fascinated by the strategies pupils use to help them get great grades. He suggests that when it comes to revision there are two types: active recall and passive recall.

- » Active recall is *actively trying to understand and synthesise the information by teaching it*.
(Don't worry – you don't need your own class of year 7s for this! You can do it alone, or to someone else; a friend, a parent or a sibling.)
- » Passive recall, by contrast, is just sitting passively reading your notes.

Newport makes a bold statement: **active recall is the only revision strategy that counts!** He argues that there are three huge benefits to this type of super-charged revision:

1. It's very effective.
2. It saves time.
3. It's difficult and mentally uncomfortable. (Don't worry, it's supposed to be!)

So how to do you do it?

We've set a little challenge for you. We want you to *only* use active recall for the next test you have in one of your subjects. During this time you are not allowed to use any other strategy. You are either doing active recall or preparing for it. No sitting comfortably and reading your notes!

If you're interested in trying this experiment, you'll need to start about three weeks before a test or mock exam and you'll need to set aside a few hours each week. Block the time out on your planner before you start, then follow our CASTT process.

Week 1: Collect and Arrange (C and A)

This week is preparation week – we call it 'collect and arrange' because it gives you chance to gather everything you need and make sense of it. The first thing you need to do is identify and collect the topics that you will be tested on; make a list of them. A syllabus might help here, or a list provided by a teacher. Once you've got your list of topics, you're really in business. You know the size of the job ahead of you.

Once you've identified and collected together your topics you need to arrange or organise your notes for the topics, and try and condense the material into a small space – one or two sides of A4, for example. It might be useful to use mind-maps for this, or other graphic organisers like tables, lists, bullet-points or flow charts. Consider trying one of our faves – a Nine Box Grid (page xx)

Weeks 2 and 3: Search (S) and Teach (T)

Now you'll need to do a search for any past paper questions connected to the topics you've collected and arranged in week 1. You're trying to find example tests that are as close to the one you're going to experience in the test coming up – in other words, to reproduce the test experience! Search everywhere. Do you already have exam questions in your books or folders? Did your teachers hand some out? Are there some on your school's online resources or in the school library? Maybe an exam-board website can help. You want to be the person who has searched out more exam questions than anyone else!

Once you've got your hoard, you can begin teaching – in other words, it's active recall only! Grab your exam question, write it in the middle of a piece of A4 and plan an answer around it. Now: imagine you're a teacher, explaining how to answer the question to your class. Imagine this class really need things explaining slowly and clearly, and you're at the front with a whiteboard, explaining exactly what to do, how to do it and why to do it.

In week 2 it might be that you try to teach the information with only yourself present. Have the mind-map in front of you and aim to recall and explain as much information as possible without looking. It might be useful to cover up your mind-map and then just expose sections if you are struggling. Don't worry if it's not perfect – it won't be at first. Remember that you have to speak out loud. It will feel odd at first but just keep going.

In week 3 you might try teaching with an audience. Give someone the mind-map while you try to recall. Get the observer to make a note of anything you miss. Then try it again.

Finally: Test (T)

Finally, to check that the process is working effectively you must test yourself. Put away all the midmaps and notes from week one, two and three, clear your desk and put your phone on airplane settings. Now, write a response to the exam question under timed conditions.

Take it to a teacher for marking, or check it against a mark scheme.

And that's it! Active recall in four steps. It might not always feel easy or relaxed, but it's quick, intense, and effective. Remember CASTT next time you need to practice for a test or exam!

Final Thoughts

Whenever you trail a different method of revising it's worth testing how effective it is! If you're not convinced, do one day of revising using your usual techniques and then test yourself at the end of the day and then do one day using C.A.S.T.T. and test yourself at the end as well.

Which worked best for you?

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One thing we've noticed is that pupils using the CASTT method generally say that it's much harder work than some of the other methods they have used – but it gets much more done. So expect to feel tired!

