

Practice Activity 8: Sticky Timetables

Educational Researcher Douglas Barton gives an interesting talk about revision, using data his organisation has collected to find which revision activities have the biggest impact on exam performance. (*TEDxYouth, Douglas Barton – What Do Top Students Do Differently?*) If you've read any of our other practice activities, you won't be surprised to find that the winner was 'practice exams'. However, another high impact activity was 'designing and sticking to a revision timetable.'

The trouble is, Barton says, huge proportions of students don't stick to the schedule they've designed. He's interviewed those students who abandon their timetables to find out why. His conclusion? They design them incorrectly.

So what's the mistake they make? They start by putting in the slots where they're going to work, and then try and fit real life around these revision sessions.

As a result, these students create days and weeks that are dominated by revision, and activities that might bring them joy, happiness, relaxation or connection, are squeezed out. It becomes impossible to sustain and soon the timetable is consigned to the bin.

Designing Sticky Timetables

We think there are five things for you to focus on to create a successful timetable. Have a go at designing one for yourself now. You don't need anything fancy and the internet is bursting with templates. And anyway, as you know, it's not the template that's going to make a difference. It's these five steps...

1. Start by putting in some key moments of connection, joy and relaxation into your week.

Aim for five or six moments of between one and two hours – totalling about ten-to-twelve hours – when you're doing something rewarding. Consider taking part in sports, going to the gym, watching something on TV, meeting up with friends, a shift in a part-time job.

Organise these so they're not happening all at once. You might have an hour on a Monday when you meet a friend, ninety minutes on a Wednesday when you watch a football match, an hour on Thursday to go for a run and relax, pizza night on Friday, a period of time on Saturday to go into town.

2. Now begin to organise the work-slots around these periods of relaxation.

Check carefully that your relaxation slots aren't crowding out your work. You're aiming for balance, so that you've got plenty of time to do the work you need to do, but you've got these moments of celebration and freedom to keep you going.

3. Mentally rehearse the week, thinking about 'mission and 'medal'.

Run your week through in your head. You're aiming for a week that feels *challenging but do-able*; a week that will ensure you do plenty of revision, but a moment of relaxation or joy is never far away. For every tough period of revision, you need a reward (a mission then a medal) – something small like a fifteen-minute break and a snack, a twenty-minute sit-com episode, a playlist of uplifting tunes that's only three-songs long. Look as well at your longer periods of relaxation and joy. If your week doesn't feel quite right in your head, look for tricky periods – is there too much relaxation happening all at once? Is there a run of three days that's solid revision and needs breaking up?

4. Run it through once, then adjust.

It could be the figures we've mentioned here aren't right for you, and that's fine. With each completed week, you've got a chance to redesign. This is going to be a flexible and constantly changing document that responds to your progress and your levels of energy.

5. Ignore the setbacks.

There's going to be a day when you don't follow your timetable. Guaranteed. If this happens, don't beat yourself up. Just start again tomorrow as if nothing had gone wrong!

How will you apply this idea in your own revision / study?