15. Effort Activity: The Three 'Hows' of Independent Work

We've worked with thousands of pupils who are great at designing revision; they create amazing revision and independent work plans that fill every minute of the day, but then just don't follow through on the plan.

It's something we've all done; if you have too, don't beat yourself up about it. Why do we procrastinate? Why do we avoid putting the effort in?

This might surprise you, but saying that you are going to do some 'independent work' or 'revision' is actually part of the problem. When you say that you are going to revise (as far as your brain is concerned), it's vague and ambiguous. When your brain thinks that you are about to do something that's vague and ambiguous it will often start to come up with reasons why you shouldn't do it (which can be quite useful). This probably sounds a bit odd, but your brain starts thinking that this isn't really a well thought-out plan. It's not sure what you are going to be doing, or how, and your brain starts to get you thinking that it might not even work. Then you procrastinate.

So how do you get past this?

It's quite a simple strategy but we promise you it works. You have to get specific. Here's how. Before every independent work session or revision session you have to sit down and answer these three questions:

1. How am I going to revise/work?
    Here you have to be specific about the *how* (what strategy you are going to use) and also *what* you are going to revise. This means identifying specifically the topics you are going to cover, and the activities you're going to do to cover the work.

2. How long am I going to revise/work for?
    Be very clear about the time. If you are doing active revision this shouldn't be any longer than two hours. Remember to build in short (ten minute) breaks every forty minutes. Use 25 minute sprints (page xx) to help structure sessions, and it becomes even easier to beat procrastination.

3. How will I know if I've made progress?
    How are you going to test yourself? If you just sit for two hours passively reading your notes you will have no idea if you have made any progress, so you'll need to test yourself in some way. It might be a set of questions you answer, a mini-lecture that you give to yourself, or a short-answer questions you're going to do under timed conditions towards the end of the session.

You can get into the habit of doing this mentally, but to start with complete the table below before you start every independent work or revision session. Then start!

| How am I going to revise/work? | . . . . |

How long am I going to revise/ work for?	. . . .
How will I know if I've made progress?	. . . .

Final Thoughts

Once you've done this a few times, you might start noticing certain revision sessions that feel easier than others.

Watch out for sessions that feel too straightforward and too easy. Often they're the result of planning an activity that isn't very challenging, and that is quite simple and often pretty boring to complete. When you're working, try asking yourself, "Would my strictest teachers let me get away with doing this for an hour?"

If the answer is "No," it might be that you need to step up the challenge a little. That way, you can get more done in less time.