

32. Practice Activity: Test Yourself!

Dr Jennifer McGahan is a lecturer in psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her research has focused on helping pupils to improve their memory, which is pretty useful for GCSE pupils. She shared this activity with us – many thanks, Jennifer. Over to you!

Taking a test does more than just assess your abilities; research has shown that it can also improve your memory for the information tested. Henry Roediger at Washington University has led the research in this area, now known as the ‘testing effect’.

The term ‘test’ in this context refers to the act of retrieving information from your long-term memory. This can take many forms such as reciting facts about the Second World War aloud or completing a practice essay question. The test format is irrelevant; as long as you recall the information from memory, the rate at which you forget this information in the future is slowed down. This is in stark contrast to repeated study (reading over notes/highlighting text); when this technique is used information is forgotten much more quickly afterwards.

Despite huge amounts of research all showing the clear benefits of testing, most pupils prefer to revise for exams by reading information repeatedly. This is because the more you read something, the more familiar the content feels, resulting in a false sense of understanding and accomplishment. In contrast, testing yourself can feel challenging and frustrating, especially when you start to revise a new topic and it feels like you are not recalling very much at all. Don’t let this put you off: searching for the right answer (even unsuccessfully) strengthens the pathways in your brain for that information. Although it may feel counterintuitive to test yourself, struggling is good for your brain and results in excellent learning in the end!

Remember that *all* exams require you to recall information; it is unlikely that an exam will test you on how well you can read text over and over again. Every time you test yourself you are reinforcing the connections in your brain in an outward direction, making them increasingly accessible for when you need it most – in an exam!

Top tips for testing yourself:

- » Create elaborate links between new information and existing knowledge. This will make it easier to cue yourself during tests.
- » Mind-maps are a great way of testing yourself. Close your books and scribble down everything you can remember. Number the points to track your progress.
- » Feedback is essential when testing yourself to make sure that you do not learn any mistakes you may have made. This is especially important if you are using multiple choice tests as the right and wrong answers can be very similar.

How to Build a Killer Test

Step 1: Select a topic for study. Generate some headings and subheadings yourself that will act as cues.

Subject:	Topic:
Sub-heading 1:	Key information:
Sub-heading 2:	Key information:

Subject:	Topic:
Sub-heading 3:	Key information:
Sub-heading 4:	Key information:
Sub-heading 5:	Key information:

Step 2: Close your books/switch off the computer and write down everything you can remember about your chosen topic. The first time you do this it may not be a lot of information, but stick with it.

Step 3: Review your work, check for any errors and correct these areas.

Step 4: Repeat steps 2 and 3 two more times.

Step 5: Change topic. Mixing up the topics tested results in greater memory recall.

Step 6: Two hours later try to recall the information selected in steps 1 and 5.

Step 7: One day later try to recall the information selected in steps 1 and 5.

Final Thoughts

Sometimes we have a tendency to return to topics we know well. It makes us feel comfortable and confident to keep reviewing material we're confident about. But really you should be prioritising topics which you find trickier.

Try organising your topics from easiest to hardest. Which do you need to be spending more time on?



Easiest topics

Hardest topics

[illegible]