

31. Practice Activity: Learning from Mistakes

Professor James Reason of the University of Manchester has done a lot of work about mistakes that lead to disasters (aeroplane crashes, mistakes in surgery, etc.). His findings can be applied to mistakes we make whenever we do something challenging. Luckily, the mistakes you make don't have any serious consequences – at least not compared to an air crash.

If you want to accelerate the speed at which you get good at something, it helps if you do the following:

- 1 Make mistakes. This may sound obvious but some students feel frightened or depressed when they make mistakes, so they avoid making them. If a piece of work is difficult and they are likely to make lots of mistakes, they copy someone else's or 'forget' to hand it in. You must make mistakes so you can learn from them.
- 2 Once the error is made, grab it. Mistakes are information. Don't ignore them, hide them or quickly correct them. Study them.
- 3 Categorise your mistake and work out why it happened. Professor Reason argues that there are three broad reasons for error:

Type of mistake	Possible response
1. Active mistake The wrong process is carried out (e.g. the calculation goes wrong because an incorrect approach is used, the mark scheme isn't present, the student doesn't know what to do to get a high mark).	Examine processes. Categorise them. Attach processes to problems – are you using the right one?
2. Slip-up The correct process is chosen but errors in the execution of that process lead to a lower mark (e.g. a paragraph lacks detail or is missing a key component, a science or maths solution works up to a point and then breaks down).	Practise the process. Collect examples of the process being done well.
3. Blackout The information needed to complete the challenge is either missing or forgotten.	Review notes and knowledge. Check another student's notes. Use course textbooks to strengthen learning. Strengthen recall through revision techniques.

Try categorising your errors, then draw up a list of actions you could take to reduce the chances of that error occurring again. Use the table below.

A level subject:

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Final Thoughts

Just the act of getting all your feedback together in one place is a fantastically useful activity. Many students have lots of teacher feedback, but it's scattered across nine or ten different pieces of work jammed into bags or stranded in different files.

Audit your teacher feedback and you stand a much better chance of working effectively on your weaknesses.