Vision Activity 1 – Diver Goals and Thriver Goals

Three researchers (from the Universities of Pittsburgh in the US, and Toronto in Canada) worked together to find out what made students in their first year of university particularly successful or unsuccessful. They got 3000 students in the first two-weeks of their university courses to fill out a questionnaire. The 3000 were all students who'd applied to study Economics at degree level, and had really good college grades. *(Beattie, Laliberte, Oreopoulos, Universities of Pittsburgh and Toronto, 2016 Economics of Education Review, Volume 62, February 2018, Pages 170-182)*

The questions asked them about how hard they planned to work, what their typical study routines were, and most importantly asked them to outline their hopes and dreams.

It's this last section of the study that's particularly relevant to us in this activity. The questions the students had to answer were:

- What are your two most inspiring goals?
- What kind of person do you want to be later in life?
- What qualities do you admire in others?

A year later, the researchers took **the students who'd ended up in the top 10% of their year group**, and compared them to **the students in the bottom 10%**.

There seemed to be some superficial differences at first, but what struck the researchers was the nature of the goals students had set. Students at the top and the bottom had both set goals, but the goals were expressed very differently.

Here's a summary:

Bottom 10% - 7 examples	Top 10% - 7 examples
'be rich', 'get rich quickly', 'being successful' 'having so many successful businesses', 'Have my own company have my own house and car' 'receive a high level of education' 'be an actuary'	'build something' 'I can contribute to the human advancement of…' 'I want to try something different' '…fix people's problems' 'independent person who can deal with problems' 'working in the field of Computer Science' 'build a strong foundation to succeed'

Diver Goals: One group of students – the ones on the left – had diver goals. These focussed on 'being' or 'becoming' something – usually 'rich', or having/receiving something – money, a house, a particular job, status or power. These were goals about an outcome, not a journey.

Thriver Goals: The other group had thriver goals. These placed emphasis on activity and a sense of purpose – building, contributing, trying, fixing, or dealing with problems. These were goals that didn't specify an outcome, but gave detail about a process or a journey.

And the outcomes were clear. **Those students with thriver goals were significantly more successful**. They'd avoided procrastination and worked harder.

Here's list of ten other goals set by the same students. Can you guess which were top 10% students, and which were bottom 10% students? It's pretty easy once you see the patterns but in case you need them, we've snuck the answers in below...

1. ‘to enjoy working hard and working smart’
2. ‘to own a big company’
3. ‘to build my network, name and career’
4. ‘become a very rich guy’
5. ‘helping tackle space research to deal with overpopulation’
6. ‘be rich where I do not have to worry about running out of money’
7. ‘a person who changes the whole goddamn world and also can contribute to the whole society…’
8. ‘to be a person like Bill Gates’
9. ‘to provide assistance to others in need of help and support’
10. ‘to be a successful business man’[1]

What goals do you have?

There’s nothing wrong with wanting wealth and riches. The problem comes where your goal *is just about wealth and riches, and doesn’t emphasise action.* As if the wealth and riches are a magical outcome that just happens. This study showed that students in the bottom 10% actually spent longer thinking about their futures than top 10% students did – but they were just dreaming about what it might be like to be a millionaires. They did less work than their peers.

So instead, frame your goal in terms of what you might want to **do**. Emphasise action – the journey, the process.

Try these starters to help:

- *I want to build…*
- *I want to help solve the problem of…*
- *I want to tackle the issue of…*
- *I want to work every day in the ---------- industry…*
- *I want to deal with the issue of…*
- *I want to help people…*

Remember, if you set goals like this, you’ve still every chance you’ll end up very wealthy and successful. And you’ll also have the advantage of knowing a little about *how* you’re going to make a change in the world. It’s a win-win situation.

[1] The odd-numbered goals were set by top 10% students. The even-numbered goals were set by bottom 10% students.

Vision Activity 2 – Sweet and Sour Summers

In a 2015 interview on Tim Ferriss's podcast, lawyer, investor and former Google employee Chris Sacca tells a story from his childhood. *(https://tim.blog/2015/05/30/chris-sacca/)*

Once he was old enough to earn money, each summer his parents would make him work most of the holidays. They wanted to teach him the value of hard work, life experience and the importance of looking after money. Here's the trick, though: they made him do *two jobs per summer holiday*.

The first few weeks would be **on a job he wanted to do**. The work was hard, but he had the advantage of being interested. These would be **the "sweet" weeks**, where it was fun to go into work, good to hang out with colleagues, and the day-to-day activities were engaging.

The second few weeks would be **on a job he didn't want to do**. Typically, Sacca says, it would be a job which didn't interest him. These would be **the "sour" weeks**, where the work was hard and repetitive, often very boring. Sacca still uses the phrase "sweet and sour summers" to describe these holiday jobs, and explains it was these experiences that gave him huge advantages over regular students, who often had no life experience at all compared to him.

Let's imagine we had Chris Sacca's parents. It's a few weeks before our summer holiday and we're lining up our employment. We're about to make some phone calls and send some emails, asking for the chance to do some summer work. Make some choices here, and populate the two lists overleaf.

What would be amongst your best possible summer jobs, and what would be amongst your worst? (They have to be real jobs, so no "chocolate taster" or "Netflix watcher" allowed!) You might want to start by considering our list – we've imagined 40 organisations that you might find in a typical town or nearby city, all waiting for your phone call – but after that, add your own…

Advertiser/graphic designer running local campaigns, Architect's office, Art Gallery exhibition organisation, Beauty therapist, Book publisher, Bookstore, Charities fundraising organisation, Computer games company, Dieticians and health advisors, Eco/environmental organisation, Educational psychologist, Electronics company, Engineering firm, Farming/agricultural organisation, Fitness centre, gym and swimming pool, Foreign aid company, Laboratories researching and developing new products, Legal services and the local courts, Local library, Local MP, Local Police force, Local radio station, Logistics company of long-distance lorry drivers, Manufacturing company, Media company – local newspapers, magazines and TV, Media company – short films and animations, Medical company developing vaccines, Museum, Music therapist/teacher/recording studio, Pharmacy, Photographer, Pupil referral unit, Retail work, Science museum, Software firm, Tabletop/boardgames design firm, Theatre, Town planning and urban design firm, Veterinary centre, Web design company

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Sweet	Sour

Now that you've completed your list, imagine you're about to compose an email or make a call asking for work from one of your "sweet" summer jobs. You've got a chance to include:

- An introduction to yourself and what your interests are
- What you're hoping to get out of your summer work
- Specific projects or parts of the work you'd love to be involved in.

Use the space below to make notes about what you'd want to include in your introductory email:

Insert five lines

Some things to consider…

Are there any themes emerging from your imaginary job choices? Think about whether your sweet jobs have certain similarities, or your sour jobs do. These might be clues to pursue when you get to thinking about how you want to earn your money in future.

Finally – push yourself to imagine trying to get one of your 'sweet' jobs. Is it possible? What employers near where you live might take you on? Is there someone you could speak to? You never know, there might be a future career waiting for you…

Vision Activity 3: Ikigai

Ikigai (pronounced i-kee-gai) is a Japanese concept. It's difficult to translate exactly but means **a reason for being**; including a sense of joy and purpose.

It's very unlikely your schooling up to now has encouraged you to reflect on your '*reason for being'* – we often think of education in terms of money and contribution to the economy. (Less '*what's your reason for being'* and more '*what job do you want*.')

By contrast, we have found the concept of ikigai very liberating when talking with students because earning power is only one of four equal considerations on the table.

The four things you should consider are –

- What you love
- What you're good at
- What the world needs, and
- What you can be paid for.

Together they look like this:

Note to designer: this will need to be redrawn to avoid copyright issues

Of the four, **two are internal**. They're about you (what you love, what you're good at) and require some introspection and thinking. **Two are external**; about the world around you (what the world needs, what you can be paid for) and might require some research, discussion and further thought.

Not all four need to be equal. You need to find the balance that best expresses who you are; what you stand for; your values, beliefs, hopes, plans.

So here's one way of making this diagram work for you. Be ready to make two lists – one list addressing the personal, internal questions, one list addressing the external questions. We're going to suggest you go through six steps:

Step One: INTERNAL factors: List what you love.

In this list, capture every interest you have. When are you happiest? What gets you excited? Be specific and exhaustive – precise rather than general. Make the list as long as possible. This may take more than one sitting as you capture everything you feel passionate and positive about.

Step Two: INTERNAL: Add what you're good at.

Extend the first list by adding things you're good at. Be kind to yourself – 'good at' doesn't mean 'the best at' or 'good relative to a world-class superstar'. It means *good enough*.

Then see if there are connections between things you love and things you're good at. Some might be straightforward – you might love and be good at the same thing. Others might have looser connections. Shift things about, link them, scribble additional ideas down, turn your list into a vast interconnected mess of thoughts and ideas.

Step Three: LET IT REST. Set your list aside. Chances are it'll look pretty chaotic and you'll need some time for it percolate into your subconscious, where your brain can begin to make some sense of it. Then return and re-work it.

Step Four: EXTERNAL factors: what can you be paid for?

Take your list of passions and strengths and begin to add your external factors over the top. You might use a highlighter, post-its, or coloured pens if that floats your boat.

Of the things on the list – what can you be paid for? And how important is that money to you? Freedom, flexibility, creativity, autonomy, risk, challenge… all of these things might be more important to you than cash.

Step Five: EXTERNAL factors: what does the world need more of?

Architects? Insurance advisors? Graphic novelists? Physiotherapists? Teachers? Soldiers? You have to make these judgements; they come from your experiences and world-view. One person's roster will look very different to another's… and there's nothing wrong with that.

Look at your crazy list and add a final layer – *what's already there that the world needs more of?*

Step Six: LET IT REST.

From all the noise, you'll start to see clear themes emerging. You're not looking for a sudden, specific job idea, necessarily – instead look out for repeated patterns.

These are the clues to pursue as you study.

Vision Activity 4: A Question of Money

Many of our hopes and dreams often centre around money – getting it, having it and keeping hold of it.

But studies in motivation undertaken in the work place show that money doesn't necessarily improve performance, or make people happier at work. Experiments have been conducted in the US and India and they both come to the same conclusion: when a task is dull and repetitive, money is a reasonable motivator to improve. But when a task is complex – like most are in the world of modern work – more money doesn't mean better outcomes.

So what does? Well, it turns out there are other things that lead to a well-lived working life. Pay is just one element; others might be freedom, the power to take decisions, creativity, a sense of purpose, belonging, optimism and team-work.

So which ones might matter to you?

In this thought experiment, we're going to imagine you've got a job pays you very well. You can buy everything you need and you have no money worries.

So given that, what would be important to you in this job? Of the thirty possibilities we've suggested here either (i) choose your top 3 or top 5 (ii) put a top 10 in order of preference or (iii) put all 30 in order of importance to you.

1. ***to face unfamiliar situations and improvise solutions in the moment,***
2. ***to organise your own day on your own terms,***
3. ***to be making a difference in people's health, wellbeing or happiness,***
4. ***to be creative, producing new and original content,***
5. ***to have status, power and expertise,***
6. ***to solve problems for others, improving their lives,***
7. ***to have a safe role, a job for life with no threat of ever being made redundant,***
8. ***to wake early to an alarm clock and be up and active before everyone else,***
9. ***to wake up every day excited for the day's work ahead,***
10. ***to be finished at 5:00pm and not think about work until the next morning,***
11. ***to be travelling from place to place,***
12. ***to work in the same place each day, with the same commute and same workspace,***
13. ***to develop new skills through practice and feedback,***
14. ***to share your enthusiasm for something you're passionate about,***
15. ***to have time to laugh and joke; to not take work seriously,***
16. ***to lead others (making decisions about who does what),***
17. ***to have someone else make all the decisions and tell you what to do,***
18. ***to use your hands to practically build, maintain or fix something,***
19. ***to be operating in a high-stakes, high-pressure environment,***

20. ***to lead a low-stakes, stress-free life doing something unimportant,***
21. ***to be in a busy, bustling atmosphere with music, activity, conversation,***
22. ***to have predictable working hours with a set start and finish time,***
23. ***to have a list of predictable tasks – every day roughly the same,***
24. ***to stay late into the night, still focused long after others have gone home,***
25. ***to be active, moving, physical… to be away from a desk,***
26. ***to have a space of your own, and projects you complete entirely by yourself,***
27. ***to be helping to change people's opinions, attitudes and behaviours,***
28. ***to dress however you want,***
29. ***to respond to crises and emergencies as and when they come up,***
30. ***to have every day different.***

Now take a moment to see if there are any we missed off our list that are important to you.

So where might money fit?

Now you've got a list of preferences, we'd like you to consider exactly where money might fit in. using the space below, see if you can add some of the characteristics from the table above to the two columns:

I would be happy with lower pay as long as the job had….	**As long as I had really decent pay I would put up with…**	**Regardless of the pay I could never put up with…**

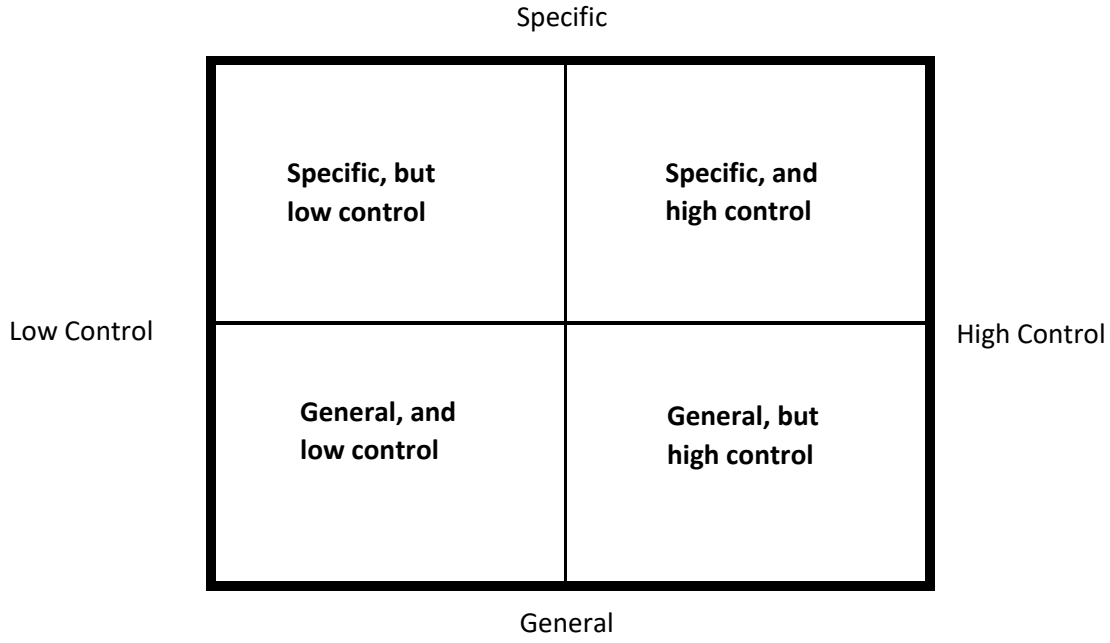
Rather than designing a work-lives that pay well, but we're desperate to get out of, we should perhaps be trying to design work-lives that energise and excite us.

What themes about work seem to be emerging for you?

Vision Activity 5: Outcome Control

One classic piece of goal-setting advice is to be **specific** with your goals. The more specific the goal, the better, people often say. And this is true up to a point. But what if your goal is to be a lifestyle influencer with two million subscribers and an annual turnover of £100K? That's specific but it doesn't mean it's more likely to happen. Here's a really ridiculous example: what if your goal is to be principal Clarinetist in the New York Philharmonic? That's so specific there's literally only one slot to fill *in the whole world*.

So being specific isn't everything. We have to also consider the **control** you have over the outcome.



These four quadrants might look complicated, but just take a moment to consider them again.

- In the top left is the specific goal that we have little control over. ("Become top scorer for Arsenal and retire a multi-millionaire at the age of 35.")
- In the bottom left is a general goal we have no control over. ("Just be super-famous.")
- In the top right, we have a specific goal we can control. ("Aim to beat my personal best in this next Maths test.")
- And finally, in the bottom right, we have a general goal we have control over. ("Just get some decent grades this summer. Whatever.")

Now is a good time to reflect and make some choices.

- What kind of goals do you typically set for yourself?
- Are the types of goals you are setting yourself helpful? Possible?
- Of these four types of goal, are some better than others, in your opinion?
- Do these types of goal serve different purposes? Are some just dreams we use to keep ourselves cheerful when we're down?

If you have high control over the outcome, there's no need to have general goals. You can afford to get specific. So…

If you have a goal in the bottom right ("general but high control"), change it so that it's in the top right ("specific and high control".) **Make your goal more specific**. Have a go now.

But if you have low control over the outcome, general might be better than specific. So…

If you have a goal that's in the top left ("specific but low control") think about how you might move it towards the bottom left ("general but low control.") **Make your goal more general**. Have a go now.

Vision Activity 6: The Paths are Well Lit

Whatever it is you want to achieve, the chances are someone else has already managed to do it. Of course, that doesn't stop it feeling impossible sometimes – we might look at an amazing student who has got a place at a university we'd love to attend and think, *'yeah but that can't be me.'*

But perhaps it can… if we somehow map out the pathway that they took, throwing some light on it. In this activity, we attempt to light up the pathway ahead using an activity we've adapted from Cal Newport's work. *(Newport, Cal, How to be a High School Superstar, Broadway Books, 2010 (pg 225))*

Newport uses the phrase 'innovation map' to describe *a visual guide showing the steps someone took in order to achieve something*. Have a look at the example below. (We've filled this one out ourselves, based on a combination of students we've worked with.) Newport suggests three stages to each cycle of progress and we've adapted them here:

1. **A Trigger Event:** The student takes *an initial action*, which leads to…
2. **An Accomplishment:** *a brave and repeated action which opens up an opportunity*, which leads to…
3. **Responsibilities:** *a series of actions which need to be regularly completed*, and that give the student valuable experience.

EXAMPLE:

Student: *Joe*

Achievement: *Got a place on a Journalism degree because of a great portfolio of work, then went on to write for the sports pages of a national newspaper.*

Pathway Part One:

Trigger Event	*I discussed Journalism with a teacher – they suggested I try and write a match report for a local non-league team.*
Accomplishment	*I got in touch with the club secretary via the team's website. I had to email him three or four times until he agreed to meet me. I went to the club and explained what I'd like to do. He agreed I could write up a match report for the club's website.*
Responsibilities	*I attended the match, took photographs and used the voice memo on my phone to remind myself of the main action. I wrote up the piece, asked a teacher to check it, then submitted it. The club published it on their website. I asked if I could do another and they said yes. After I'd done three match reports, they asked if I could report on every home game and of course I agreed!*

By the end of pathway part one, the student is in a really good position – and happens to be in the right place at the right time for the next cycle to happen. (It looks like luck, but of course it isn't!)

Pathway Part Two:

Trigger Event	*I was asked to do a piece on non-league football for the local newspaper. They'd heard of me because I'd been doing the match reports for the non-league team and I'd also started my own blog. I said yes and asked if I could visit the offices of the paper. They agreed.*

Accomplishment	*I made sure I talked to the staff and looked really enthusiastic when I visited. I completed the piece as they requested, asked my teachers to check it over and then submitted it. They printed it! It was just a short piece but I had my first article in print. I suggested a couple of ideas for other pieces I could do. They agreed to think about it so I kept on at them!*
Responsibilities	*I read a lot of sports journalism and kept a notebook of ideas for other articles. I knew from meeting the staff at the local paper that they liked small, local stories so I kept looking for things that might interest them. I wrote three more pieces for them by the winter of Year 13. When I applied to university, I was the only one who brought printed newspaper articles along with me. The interview went really well and I got the place.*

By using a map like this, we're beginning to see the steps taken by those who went before, and we're starting to see how they got themselves into positions that meant they were well-placed for other things to happen to them. Life is a series of cycles like this, with opportunities leading to more opportunities. The impossible is starting to look a lot more possible…

Now it's your turn!

1. Choose a student who's achieved something you'd like to achieve and interview them. Ask for half an hour of their time, and perhaps even show them the example above.
2. Complete the interview. It might feel a bit awkward, but just think of yourself of a journalist trying to find out the story of someone's success. It might be worth asking if you can record the discussion so that you can listen back later.
3. Once you've got your conversation, try and make sense of it. The answers might have come out in a jumbled way. See if you can start de-coding what it was they did in what order.

Trigger Event	
Accomplishment	
Responsibilities	

By the end (hopefully…) you've got a well-lit path and you know what needs to be done next. Now the challenge is to be brave and begin your journey. Good luck!

Vision Activity 7: Odyssey Planning

Bill Burnett, a professor of engineering and design, and his colleague Dave Evans (who also co-founded the games company Electronic Arts) run a course at Stanford University called Designing Your Life. It's a class you can take by choice but it's hugely popular and oversubscribed. The class helps students develop their vision, and the activity that follows is adapted from Burnett and Evans' book, also called Designing Your Life.

Odyssey planning (an odyssey is an epic journey) requires you to do *three five-minute pieces of writing*. In these short pieces, you write down an imaginary future. It's not an activity you can do in your head or skip through quickly – we really recommend you do this with a high level of focus and concentration. You'll be glad you did!

Here's how it works…

You imagine three possible future lives; three timelines. Each require you to imagine yourself five years into the future. The three must be substantially different, representing three different paths your life might take.

Timeline 1 is the thing you think you're most likely going to do. It's the path you're currently following. You'll finish your courses, you'll get a job or go to university, you'll look for employment… the first timeline is the likely, logical and obvious one.

Timeline 2 asks what you'd do if timeline 1 was completely out of the window. Here, you need to choose a different university course; the employer you're imagining in timeline 1 doesn't give you a job. Your career plans need to be completely reimagined. You need a plan B, and this timeline is it. Remember to make it completely different from timeline 1!

Timeline 3 asks you to consider what the next five years would look like if you didn't need to think about money, about expectations, about parents' hopes, about your ability. You're free of all those concerns. Total freedom! This is the timeline where you can do anything you've ever dreamed of.

For each timeline, describe your life five years from now. Write for five minutes. Don't overthink things or stare at a blank piece of paper; don't agonise or aim for perfect. Scribble it all down. If you want, use these prompts to help:

Where do you live? What are you doing? What does your daily life look like? What's a typical week like? Who are you surrounded by? What are your responsibilities? What's your leisure time like? What roles do you have in life? How are your family, friends and finances?

Timeline 1 – *my current path*	

Timeline 2 – *an alternative and different plan*	
Timeline 3 – *what if money and expectation wasn't a problem?*	

Once you've got these radically different versions of your future, it's time to become a bit of a detective. The clues to your interests, motivations and ambitions all lie somewhere in these three pieces of writing.

So what themes or ideas seem to recur? Is there something about where you imagine working, or working in teams, or being creative, or solving problems? Perhaps there's something about being physically active, working outdoors or helping others; maybe there's a clue about leadership, improving the performance of others or challenging injustice. Start exploring these themes. What do they say about what's important to you? Are there things here that you really need in your life?

OK, hopefully you're getting somewhere!

Now a plan might be forming – the beginnings of a thought about what you might want to be doing with your life. Remember, *you have options*. Any one of these future timelines has the potential to happen as long as you work towards it.

So what action could you take next to further explore your options?

Vision activity 8: Lifestyle Envy versus Job Envy

We were once working with a student who'd always admitted to us he never really knew what career he wanted. Not having any particular ambitions, he went off to university to study a subject he enjoyed. Then, two years later, he came back and told us he knew *exactly what he wanted to do with his life*. The realisation, he explained, had come in just one conversation.

We were shocked and fascinated. What could have happened in a single conversation that suddenly made his ambitions so clear?

He described the moment. He'd been talking to a classmate at uni, and she had told him she'd just got a summer job. And the more she described this job, the more envious he felt. By the end he was – to use his words – "insanely jealous." That was when he knew. He wanted that job too. He'd accidentally stumbled across the career he needed to pursue.

Ever since then, we've used this thought experiment to encourage others to put themselves in his shoes, giving them the scenario of a friend who shares some news about a job.

What kind of lucky break would make you envious?

We'd like you to try this thought experiment. In it you have to imagine a friend telling you about a new opportunity they're about to take up. They're excited, and they're describing to you what it is they're about to begin doing. And the more you listen, the more you become "insanely jealous."

Here's the crucial bit; it doesn't need to be a super-specific job; you can keep it pretty general. We don't need the whole picture to make total sense, so don't limit your thinking or stop because it doesn't sound realistic… just record exactly the kinds of things that would get the envy flowing.

Record your thoughts in the box below and use the ideas on the right if you need them:

	Think about: • Working hours • Working conditions • The typical working day • The place of work • The kinds of tasks and responsibilities • The rewards on offer • The further opportunities and chances that might follow • The status

Now consider all the things that have made you envious, and separate them into two groups. Group one we'll call 'lifestyle envy' – these are all the things *outside of the job itself*; the amount of time off, the pay, the holidays. The other we'll call 'job envy' – all the things that have made you envious about *doing the work itself*.

Lifestyle Envy	**Job Envy**
Insert ten lines in each column	

If you find you have the lifestyle column full and the job column empty – don't worry, this happens to us all sometimes; we can all get confused between lifestyle and job. We've seen students pursue a job or career because of the lifestyle they imagine it will give them, not because of the work itself…

- …like the student who applies to be a lawyer because they've seen legal dramas on TV and the after-work parties look glamourous and attractive…
- …or the student who wants to become an archaeologist because they imagine the travelling will be exciting, but haven't thought about the hours of back-breaking digging in the pouring rain…
- …or the student applying to be a teacher because "the holidays are great."

These decisions don't always make for a happy work-life. To be truly content, it has to *be the work itself* that is meaningful and important to you. So if you've nothing in the Job Envy column have a go at the activity again, this time focussing on what kind of work would make you envious. Keep it broad and general if it helps.

What themes are important?

Ignore the left-hand column and have a look at the patterns you can see emerging in the right hand column. What qualities to do you want in a job? Try turning it into a short paragraph of just a few sentences. If you don't know how to begin try starting with, "I'd like a job that allows me to…"

And remember – focus on the nature of the work itself, not the lifestyle elements around it!

Effort Activity 1: Proactive versus Reactive

There are two types of work you do on any course:

Reactive work is completed in response to instruction. This includes classwork, where, during a class, a teacher asks you to discuss something in pairs, or complete a particular task, or asks you a question. Reactive work also includes homework: though you do it on your own time you're doing a task chosen by someone else with a deadline they've.

Then there's **proactive work**. This is the work you set yourself. No-one's asked you to tidy your notes or re-write a topic summary or create some flashcards – you've done it because you know it will help.

We've interviewed thousands of students and asked them about their levels of reactive effort versus their levels of proactive effort. Here's what we've found:

Entirely reactive	**Mostly reactive Proactive on rare occasions**	**A balance of reactivity and proactivity**	**Some reactivity, but mostly proactive**
These students *only complete work if they're told to*. They've often never set themselves any work – even in the run-up to exams, they go to extra classes and react to the instructions they get there.	These students complete almost all their work because they're told to. Now and again, if there's a crisis, they'll spend a small amount of time proactively – revising for a test or tracking down some missing notes.	These students are close to matching their reactive work with proactive work. They're regularly setting themselves work; re-reading and tidying notes, asking questions, reading textbooks and submitting redone essays.	These students get their reactive study out of the way pretty quickly, completing it to a high standard so they can get on with more proactive work. They enjoy the proactive work, exploring topics in detail and challenging themselves.
Outcomes: These students almost always get the lowest grades in the year group.	**Outcomes:** These learners find themselves towards the bottom of most groups, but have the potential to climb up.	**Outcomes:** These students tend to be in the middle or towards the top of most of their classes.	**Outcomes:** These students are almost always at the top of their classes, and often end up getting places at the best universities.

What does this mean for you?

A good way to ensure much better grades is to shift your focus towards proactive study. This isn't easy if you've never really done it before. Below are some suggestions for how you might do it: 21 possible pieces of work you could set yourself.

We've split them into three groups. **The easy tasks** – the first seven – just consolidate your classroom learning. Try these if you've never worked proactively before. **The medium tasks** extend you beyond the classroom work and really boost your learning. Try these if you're feeling confident. And the last seven, **the challenges**, are great if you're on top of everything and really exploring beyond the syllabus.

EASY

1. tidying and re-organising your notes, 2. borrowing someone's notes, 3. reviewing your feedback to look for patterns, 4. handing a piece of homework in early and asking for advice on how to improve it before deadline day, 5. completing a one-hour re-read and re-organise of notes on any topic, 6. attending a support class or revision session, 7. summarising a topic in a single page of notes and diagrams

MEDIUM

8. seeking a book/study guide recommendation from a teacher, 9. handing in a re-done piece of work, 10. sending five emails asking for support, help, advice or an opportunity, 11. asking five complex questions of a teacher and noting down the answers, 12. listening to a podcast related to a topic you've studied, 13. watching a video-summary of a topic, making fresh notes as you go. 14. seeking out three short exam questions related to a topic and completing them under timed conditions

CHALLENGES

15. beginning a personal project to explore a topic studied at a level above yours, 16. contacting employers or employees to ask questions, 17. volunteering to teach someone else the topics you know inside out, 18. seeking out a reading list for a subject at a higher level than yours, 19. entering a competition or challenge, 20. organising a study-visit to an employer or place of study, 21. interviewing a student working at a higher level than you and summarising their advice in notes.

Getting Started and Building Up

Starting out: In the early stages of learning to be proactive, try and complete one or two proactive tasks a week, spending about half an hour on each. Choose the 'easy' ones.

Aiming for a balance: Once you're more confident, you can up your proactive hours, closing the gap between your reactive study and proactive study until they're balanced. You might be able to do this by completing loads of the 'easy' tasks above, but the likelihood is you'll be doing some 'medium' ones too. You'll begin to see your grades improve – your teachers might even express some surprise at how well you're doing!

Hitting your stride: Once you're close to a balance of reactive and proactive, try introducing a few of the tasks labelled 'challenges' into your working week. By this time, you'll be regularly performing well in tests and exams and should feel much more optimistic and confident!

Effort Activity 2: The Peloton

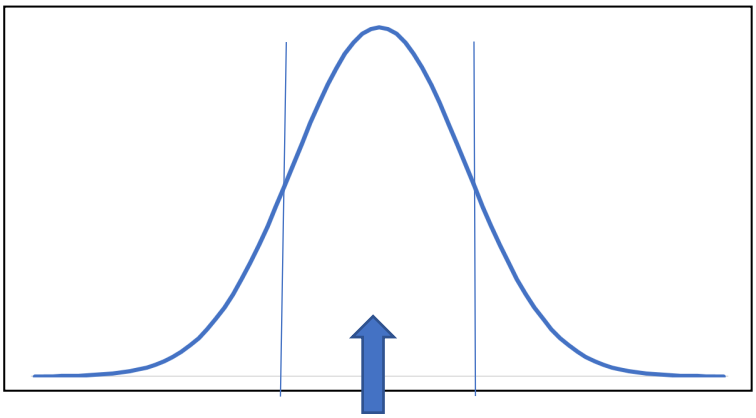
In cycling, the word peloton is used to describe a group of cyclists who ride close together. They do this to preserve energy; riding alongside others reduces the drag you get from the air so there's less wind resistance and it's easier to speed along. Apparently if you're cycling in the middle of a peloton, surrounded by other riders, you're experiencing just 10% of the drag you would if you're out on your own at the front.

In a race situation, pelotons don't last forever. There's a stage of the race where they're useful, but if everyone stuck in the peloton all the time, the pack would cross the line together. Instead, what happens is one rider eventually decides to go for it. They push hard, leave the peloton and race for the finish. Other riders follow. The peloton becomes a stretched-out line of cyclists all pedalling for the win.

We've taught hundreds of classes over the last 20 years and it's interesting to see pelotons in action in classroom situations.

Some students – just a few to begin with – are out front, working really hard. Some are at the back, doing virtually no work at all, falling further and further behind. But most stick in the peloton, working 'hard enough to get by'.

Then, as exams approach, everything changes.



The peloton

Where Are You?

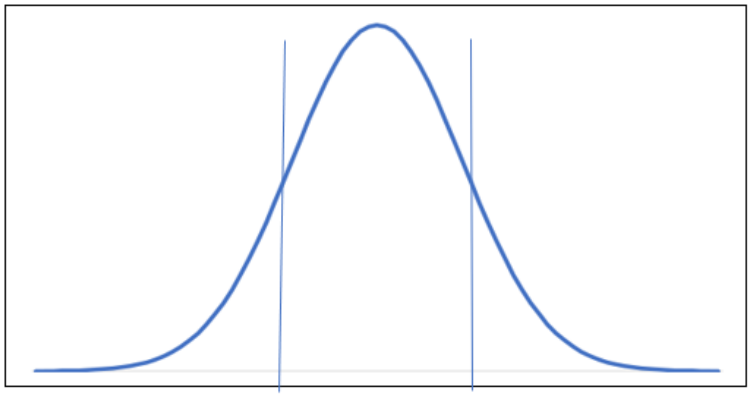
For each of your subjects, you've already chosen where to be in the pack of riders. In some subjects you might be the cyclist out front, pedalling hard. These might be subjects you love, with teachers you get on well with, or topics that interest you. In others, you might be out at the back. In some you'll be in the peloton.

Consider your current position in each of your subjects. Think carefully. Sometimes it's tempting to put yourself at the back because you're feeling bad. But in order to do this accurately you have to consider yourself honestly against the other riders.

- Who's out in front? How do you know? What are they doing differently?

- Who's 'average', sticking in the peloton, preserving their energy and biding their time? How do you know? What are their typical behaviours?
- Who's currently towards the back, and how do you know?

Once you've thought about this you can more accurately consider your position in the pack and label it below…



Some riders win the race by being out at the front right from the start. Some win by sticking towards the front of the peloton and timing their charge for the finish perfectly. Some surprise everyone by speeding ahead from out of nowhere. There are lots of ways to do it.

- What would you need to do to move up the pack?
- Choose one, two or three actions which might push you further forward and make a note of them.
- Now schedule one of them… and get it done.

Effort Activity 3: Becoming Indistractable

Lecturer and consultant Nir Eyal has written a book, 'Indistractable', in which he explores why it is we find our lives controlled by tech giants thousands of miles away even when we have something important to do right in front of us. Often our time slips away in a haze of checking social media, sending text messages and looking at cat videos… and before we know it, we've spent two hours half-concentrating on something we could have finished in thirty minutes if we'd only been fully focussed.

We've found that for many students, the key to **increasing levels of effort** is **decreasing levels of distraction**.

Eyal suggests something we've found really useful. He argues we should recognise that discomfort (ie something feeling hard or boring) precedes distraction – so we need to be ready for it. We shouldn't sit down to do an hour's hard work without first admitting, "I'm going to feel uncomfortable and then I'll look for distractions. I need to be ready."

Once we've admitted this to ourselves, ***we can anticipate distraction***.

Where might it come from?

Eyal argues we need to keep our eyes on two places: the external triggers in the environment around us and the internal triggers we feel inside ourselves. Here are some examples:

External triggers	**Internal triggers**
• Phone alerts for text messages, updates, likes, new videos… • The behaviour of those around you – people coming to chat, ask questions • TV in the background • Radio stations, music… Others?	• Hunger • Thirst • Loneliness • Boredom • Insecurity • Negative self-talk ("What's the point? Why do I even have to do it? This task is stupid!") Others?
A possible solution:	**A possible solution:**
Use 'indistractable spaces'	Use 'indistractable routines'

Indistractable spaces

One of the solutions to our external triggers is to design indistractable spaces. These are spaces that are quiet and calm – spaces that promote concentration and feature none of the devices or people we associate with distraction.

Design or discover an indistractable space.

What might it look like? What might it contain? Where might it be? When might it be at its best for you?

Many of the most successful students we've worked with have 'airplane settings' as a feature of their indistractable space.

Indistractable routines

Eyal argues most internal triggers are sudden urges to do something else, and that these urges typically pass within ten minutes. Indistractable routines help with this.

Design a study period, with breaks, that will maximise your chances of concentrating for the full period.

How long would it be, and how would the breaks work? (Twenty minutes of work with a five minute break? Thirty minutes on, then fifteen off?) Think about chunking the session so that you move through phases. (Could you do fifteen minutes note-taking then a fifteen minute exam question? Or twenty minutes preparation for a ten-minute test?) Finally, consider the rewards that might come with successful completion. (A ten-minute check of social? A walk and a chat? A cup of coffee?)

Combining the Two

Once you've got your indistractable space and your inistractable routine, put the two together. Schedule a study session for some time in the next day or two, and try it out.

You never know – it might mean you get way more done in less time!

Effiort Activity 4 – Disruption Cost and Deep Work

Gloria Mark, a professor at the University of California Irvine, is particularly interested in examining what she calls disruption cost; the amount of time or energy we lose because of interruptions to our work. *(Gloria Mark, Daniela Gudith and Ulrich Klocke, 'The Cost of Interrupted Work: More Speed and Stress', University of California, Irvine and Humboldt University, Germany)*

The observation she makes is this: if you're disrupted during work, you lose the number of seconds the disruption took – maybe thirty seconds if someone stops to say hello and exchange a few words – but you also lose something else too.

In one experiment Mark ran, she gave university students an email inbox to work through. Then she had actors interrupt them as they tried to work. One group of students had no interruptions, other groups had varying types of disruption. Then she times how long it took the students to complete their inbox task.

Here's what she found – *all students completed the tasks in the roughly same amount of time*; just over twenty minutes.

Hang on, you might be thinking, doesn't that disprove Mark's ideas about disruption cost? Well, here's what she did next – she measured the levels of certain feelings in the participants: 'stress' 'frustration,' 'time pressure,' 'workload' and tiredness because of task-directed 'effort'. And she discovered that the students who'd been interrupted felt significantly higher levels of all of these. They got the task done in the same time because they powered through, but, as Mark writes, "…people in the interrupted conditions experienced a higher workload, more stress, higher frustration, more time pressure, and effort."

Avoiding Distraction Cost - Introducing Deep Work

One way you can avoid all the bad things associated with disruption – all the frustration and pressure – is to design study sessions differently. Rather than interrupt yourself by switching topics, or stressing yourself out by working in places where you'll get distracted or disrupted, you can organise your study so you **work deeply and with concentrated effort, on the same thing for a period of time.**

In his book Deep Work, the academic Cal Newport argues that tricky, demanding tasks require us to work deeply. By 'deep work' he means work that is challenging; that requires extended periods of effortful concentration and hard thinking. When we sequence periods of deep work, we minimise distraction cost and lower our levels of stress and frustration – and as a result, we get more done.

Begin by making a list of possible deep work tasks. Choose tasks that are going to require high levels of effort – tasks you'd love to get done without distraction or stress:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Now timetable a deep work study session, and attach a tricky task to it. The table below might help you plan it out:

Deep work topic:		
What exactly do I need to get done? *(the more detail here, the better)*		
Date:	Start time:	End Time:
Location(s): *(choose somewhere where you'll minimise distraction cost. Some students we work with like changing location mid-way through their session; the movement gives them energy and focus)*		
Reward: *(do something good to celebrate!)*		

You could do a deep work session every week and begin a high-effort habit. Soon you'll find you can get more done – your feelings of control will go up, and you'll feel lower levels of stress and pressure.

That can only be a good thing.

Effort Activity 5: Questify

This is a great tool to use if you've got a task ahead of you that you're dreading. We all have pieces of work like this; ones that feel so horrible, such a terrible slog, that we just can't summon the effort and we do anything we can to put them off.

If that's the case with a task you've got on your plate, *try turning it into a quest*.

Questify the whole experience. Make it epic. Set aside a whole afternoon to tackle it; take snacks with you, tell everybody you're off to battle the dreaded job in hand, then put your phone on airplane settings. And on the day, keep going until, exhausted, you finally defeat it.

We've seen it work for many students in the past because they've included some important elements in their quests. There are five common characteristics. Don't skip these! They're the elements that make the quest feel real and they seriously increase your chances of success.

1. **Location**

The best quests take you away from familiar spaces. Don't choose your usual study spots and certainly don't stay at home – there are way too many temptations for you there. Quests should require you to travel, taking you away from your usual habits and routines.

Consider a library you don't go to often, a coffee shop on the other side of town, a hotel lobby you can reach by a short ride on public transport, your gran's house. Or go in to work with a parent and borrow a corner of their workspace. All of these options make the quest feel real.

2. **Food and drink**

You're not going to be hijacked by hunger. Pack a couple of sandwiches or take two or three snacks that you'll enjoy breaking open when things get tough. You'll need plenty of water too.

3. **Publicity**

One of the ways you'll find quests motivate you is by *putting you on the hook*. If you tell your parents, peers of friends that you're off to slay a terrible task and by the evening it'll all be done – you're going to feel a fool if you end up bailing out. Force yourself to do it by telling others about your plan.

4. **Radio silence**

For the duration of the epic battle, you need to make sure you've got no contact with the outside world. You'll need complete concentration during the quest, so switch off all alerts. The only call you'll make or take will be from your parents to sort out lifts or other issues. Make sure you go totally dark apart from this one important exception: find a study playlist – search 'music for concentration' and you'll discover loads of them – and make sure that's the only thing you listen to until you've slayed the beast.

5. **Celebration**

Finally, all great quests finish with the hero (that's you!) returning from afar having defeated the dreadful monster. Then there's a big party in the square and you're lifted up on the shoulders of the townsfolk while a band plays celebratory music. OK, you might not be able to get that to happen, but make sure you've lined up something great to enjoy when you're done!

And that's it – the five rules to successful questing. Good luck out there, adventurer…

Effort Activity 6: Activating and Sustaining

We hear a lot of talk about motivation – but have you ever looked at a definition? We hadn't properly thought about the concept until we did this some years ago. We thought we knew what it meant but we only had a simplistic understanding of the word. Maybe you're the same.

Motivation is **the ability to initiate and sustain goal-oriented effort.**

Initiate means to begin. Sometimes we need motivational tactics *just to get us started*.

Sustain means to continue once we've started. Sometimes we need motivational tactics *to keep us at it.*

So what techniques might we use to motivate ourselves to put effort into our studies? And should we be using the same techniques to initiate as we do to sustain?

Have a look at the following twenty techniques and choose which ones you might use to initiate effort (just get you started on something) and sustain effort (keep you going even when things are tough.)

1. Scaring yourself by imagining failing everything.
2. Begging for a £20 cash payment for every good grade you get.
3. Devising a punishment for not doing work.
4. Telling yourself, "I'll just do twenty minutes then I'll stop."
5. Developing a clear sense of why grades are important and the freedom they can give you.
6. Listing the grades you want then telling other people that's what you're aiming for.
7. Looking in the mirror and shouting, "Come on! You can do this! Let's go!"
8. Scheduling a small reward after every hour of work.
9. Comparing yourself to others who are working harder and imagining that they're revising right now and you aren't.
10. Removing all your favourite apps from your phone and choosing a date when you're going to reinstall them.
11. Looking at your worst grade and feedback to make yourself feel so bad you do some work.
12. Making a list of topics and ticking them off one by one as you revise them.
13. Visualising the consequences of success.
14. Making a list of all the family and friends who would be really proud of you if you worked hard and did your best.
15. Offering to revise something so you can teach it to someone else.
16. Putting an inspirational quote over your desk or using it as your phone wallpaper.
17. Keeping a scoreboard with every day crossed off if you've done some work that day.
18. Having a start-time that you stick to every single day, and alarm that goes off on your phone at that time.

19. Speaking out loud to yourself, going through a prepared speech that starts, “I’m doing this because…” or “I’m working hard *now* because in the future…”
20. Arranging to meet someone else so you can test each other once you’ve covered a topic.

We’re not making any judgements about any of these possible techniques – they might all work for you in certain situations. Consider these questions:

Are techniques for initiating effort the same as techniques for sustaining effort? What happens to the person who only has motivational techniques for initiating effort? What happens if the only techniques you have are for sustaining effort?

Make a list of your best tactics for initiation, and your best for sustaining effort. Ask other people what their tactics are, and steal the best to add to your list. Now print your list off prominently and keep it close by.

Next time you’re in a rut, look back at your list and pick a technique that you think will most likely work!

Effort Activity 7: The Clarity Countdown (a safety system for difficult topics)

Students have to deal with hundreds if not thousands of pieces of information per week.

Every teacher is convinced their course is the most important, and they're all throwing out new content every day; new ideas, new topics, new vocabulary… it can be exhausting just keeping up.

But it can get way worse if we fall behind. New ideas arrive and we haven't even figured out the old ones; new topics are started but we don't fully understand the bits we're supposed to have finished. Over time, these tricky, half-understood topics can build up and build up… and pretty soon there's huge amounts of stuff that we haven't got our heads around. It can feel overwhelming and stressful.

If this describes you, the following activity could be really helpful. It's like a safety system to prevent you falling behind. Here's how it works. Begin by attending a class and staying alert. Listen carefully to the content, engage with the topic and…

…as soon as something crops up that you don't understand, imagine a countdown clock starts ticking.

You have until the end of the day to get clarity on this confusing point. You cannot let this confusion wait, it'll only get worse with time. You have to sort it ***on the day***. Don't worry though, here are your five chances to get clarity while your clock is ticking. We've organised them from immediate to delayed:

Immediate ⟷ Delayed

CHANCE 1:	CHANCE 2:	CHANCE 3:	CHANCE 4:	CHANCE 5:
Raise your hand, ask the teacher right then and there	Wait until the end of class and ask the teacher	Ask another class member for a quick one-minute recap	Go to see the teacher at (i) lunchtime or (ii) at the end of the day and ask	Research the issue yourself at home using a textbook or online resource
This gets the problem solved quickest, and lowers your stress levels. **But** it can be embarrassing to use over and over. **However**, if in doubt, go for it.	**This is also a quick solve**, and avoids the issue of slowing down the whole class. **But** sometimes teachers are in a rush and don't have time. **However**, most will make a few minutes for you, so it's worth it!	**This is a speedy solution too**, and can often give you quick clarity. **But** sometimes your peers are also confused, and can't help. **However**, if you pick the right student, you can often get the answer you need.	**This is a delayed response**, so by the time you get there, you may not be able to fully express your confusion. **But** you often get a few minutes more of your teacher's attention, and get the answer you need.	**This is the most delayed of responses**, and you're left on your own, trying to figure out the tricky topic. **But** you can take your time, spend twenty minutes or half an hour to be sure you've really got it.

The alternative is to let confusing information go, and never sort it. We've seen this happen with plenty of students over the years, and it's not a nice situation to be in. These poor folks often end up stressed, confused and dreading tests and exams.

By trying a clarity countdown, you might put yourself under a little bit more pressure on the day, but you ensure that problems don't build up.

Why not try…

1. **Using a clarity countdown for a particular subject**

Commit to doing this in your Maths class, or a tricky run of lessons in Biology or English. Reserve a small amount of time for clarity countdown work at the end of each day. Keep it up until you feel you're through the tricky section of the course.

2. **Using a clarity countdown for all subjects, but for a short period of time**

This works particularly well in the run-up to test, mock exams or even the real thing. It can be an intense week or fortnight, but you end it knowing you're absolutely on top of everything.

And your future self will thank you for it!

Effort Activity 8: Red Flag Rescue Plans

It can feel really good to begin a new habit.

You might have planned to put more effort into your work – and for a week or so, it's been working. You've paid attention in class, taken part in discussion, offered a few answers to open questions… you might even have completed a piece of work to twice your normal standard and handed it in early. Things have been going great! Except… now you're feeling your motivation fade. You can sense yourself slipping back into old patterns of work.

So what can we do when we feel our positive start ebbing away?

That's when red flag rescue plans come in. Creating one of these now is a great way of preventing slips in the future. It's a simple three-part plan which helps you keep an eye on yourself. When a good habit fades it doesn't collapse in one disastrous afternoon, it falls apart in two stages…

Stage one: small slips and excuses

Slips feel insignificant to start with. They happen now and again and we often find ourselves excusing them. *It's no big deal*. And that's true… as long as you spot them and adjust. Everyone's slips are different but look out for things like…

- You let one lesson go by and realise you just weren't paying attention.
- You realise your work has got scrappy and you haven't engaged in classroom activities.
- You notice you've rushed off a homework in ten minutes – deep down you know it's poor.
- Your gaming and TV time has gone up a lot over a few days, usually a sign that you're avoiding something.

Stage two: red flags

This is where the fade gets more serious. It's when a number of slips combine over a few days or a week. Things begin to feel like they're falling apart. Look out for issues like…

- You notice three lessons have gone by and you've switched off in all of them and missed some crucial stuff.
- A topic seems to be hard but for a few days now you've just ignored it.
- You've skipped study sessions and haven't gone back to check-over class notes for almost a week.
- You're using social media, games, videos and other distractions much more regularly.

It's your job to put a rescue plan in at this point! As soon as a red flag goes up, you need evasive action to get back on track.

The rescue plan

Everyone's rescue plan will be different; the more varied the better. Think of all the things you could do if you notice red flags going up. It could be options such as…

- Stay behind after school for a couple of nights, go to the library and put in some rescue work.
- Speak to a teacher, admit you're struggling, ask for a re-cap of a tricky topic.
- Borrow a friend's notes and go through them.
- Ask a class-member to talk you through a difficult section, or attend a lunchtime catch-up.

By writing these down now, you're strengthening your commitment to them. Students with clear red flags and well-organised rescue plans have two main advantages over everyone else:

1. They've got a list of red-flag indicators to watch out for – and these make it much more likely that they spot when a good habit is fading.
2. They have a list of actions to complete as a ready-made solution to a red-flag, so they're much quicker at problem-solving.

Use the space below to list what your behaviours look like at each stage, and then make some notes on a possible rescue plan:

Small slips and excuses	**Red Flags**
When a good habit wobbles slightly, I'll know because I tend to do the following…	*When a good habit gets into serious trouble and starts to collapse, I'll know because I'll be doing the following…*

A red-flag rescue plan
When I see red-flag behaviours start to happen I'll take the following action…

Systems Activity 1: The Sunday Night Ritual

In his book *How to Win at College*, writer and professor Cal Newport suggests the following for students studying A levels and degrees at university:

"Sunday is the most important day of the week. Why? Because Sunday sets the tone for the week that follows." He goes on to give this advice: *"If you take control of your Sunday, you take control of your week." (Newport, Cal: How to Win at College, Crown, 2005)*

Now we're not recommending you do tons of work on Sunday, but inspired by Newport's advice, we are suggesting you spend thirty minutes on Sunday to complete a sort of pre-working-week ritual.

This might sound strange. Stick with us.

Set aside thirty minutes every Sunday. It can be any time of day that suits you, though we like to do our Sunday checklist at around 6pm before we relax for the evening. Your Sunday night ritual should follow a simple A, B, C, D pattern:

A is for activities. *What's coming up this week? Is there a P.E. lesson that needs certain kit? Is there an after-school club? Have you got a Zoom call you need to prepare something for? Did you promise you'd lend someone something? Do you need to reply to an email?*

B is for bag. *What needs to go in there this week? A late homework you need to hand in? A book you borrowed from a teacher that you have to return? Are the basics there? Pencil case, pens, books for the right subjects? Bus pass? ID?*

C is for crisis. *What's getting out of control at the moment? (It happens to all of us…) Is there anything you can sort out this week to avert a disaster? A conversation you have to have? A promise you need to keep? A subject you're behind on, a teacher you need to hassle for help?*

D is for deadlines. *When's your homework due this week? Are there any tests coming up? Anything overdue? Any signed notes you need to hand in, or issues you need to sort out?*

Activities	Bag
Crisis	Deadlines

Using the ABCD structure for your Sunday night ritual will really help you calm your mind. You can kick back and relax on Sunday evening, knowing you're ready for the week to come. You can sleep well, knowing you're on top of things.

And who knows, maybe the whole week will be better because of your Sunday night ritual. Like Cal Newport says, get it right on Sunday and, *"you will start your week with momentum behind you."*

Systems Activity 2: Night School

There used to be night-schools all across the country – regular colleges and schools that taught young students by day would then open their doors and teach adults at night.

Night school classes didn't last long – an hour, sometimes 90 minutes – but teaching there always felt very different to day school. Some differences were obvious: no uniform of course; no assemblies and tutorials, non-one using 'Sir' or 'Miss'. Other differences were more subtle. The students who turned up really wanted to be there. They were keen, asked lots of questions, went over their notes in detail and enjoyed the learning process. There was no sitting slumped in a corner, no whispering or checking phones while the teacher looked away; night-school students were organised and focused.

For this activity, consider *what a night school would look like if you designed it yourself*.

There's one student – you. And there's one teacher – you. You get to decide which days of the week it runs on, and when the classes start and finish. You decide where night school takes place. You're in charge of the curriculum, so each session is designed by you. Most of all, you're in charge of the culture and behaviour; you get to be focused, engaged and interested, and do things that fascinate you, or turn dull topics into interesting quizzes and activities.

It's a lot to think about and will take some planning, so grab a pen and scribble some impressions…

1. **Activities and resources**

What would attending your night school feel like? What kind of activities would be happening?

Night school should be active and interesting. Are there are videos to watch, new ways of taking notes, colourful summaries, pictures and displays? Are there big sheets of paper and felt-tip pens? Mini-whiteboards and quizzes? Is there sometimes a homework club? A 'hard-questions' section of the class? A time when you have to give a mini-lecture, out loud, summarising a topic?

2. **Rituals and Rewards**

What are the traditions that always happen?

You're the boss, so you could have a night school where you have a blast of music that starts the session, or the radio on quietly in the background. You could have biscuits, fancy drinks. You could take a break at a certain point or end each session a certain way. There could be scoreboards, calendars and charts to record progress.

3. **Timetable**

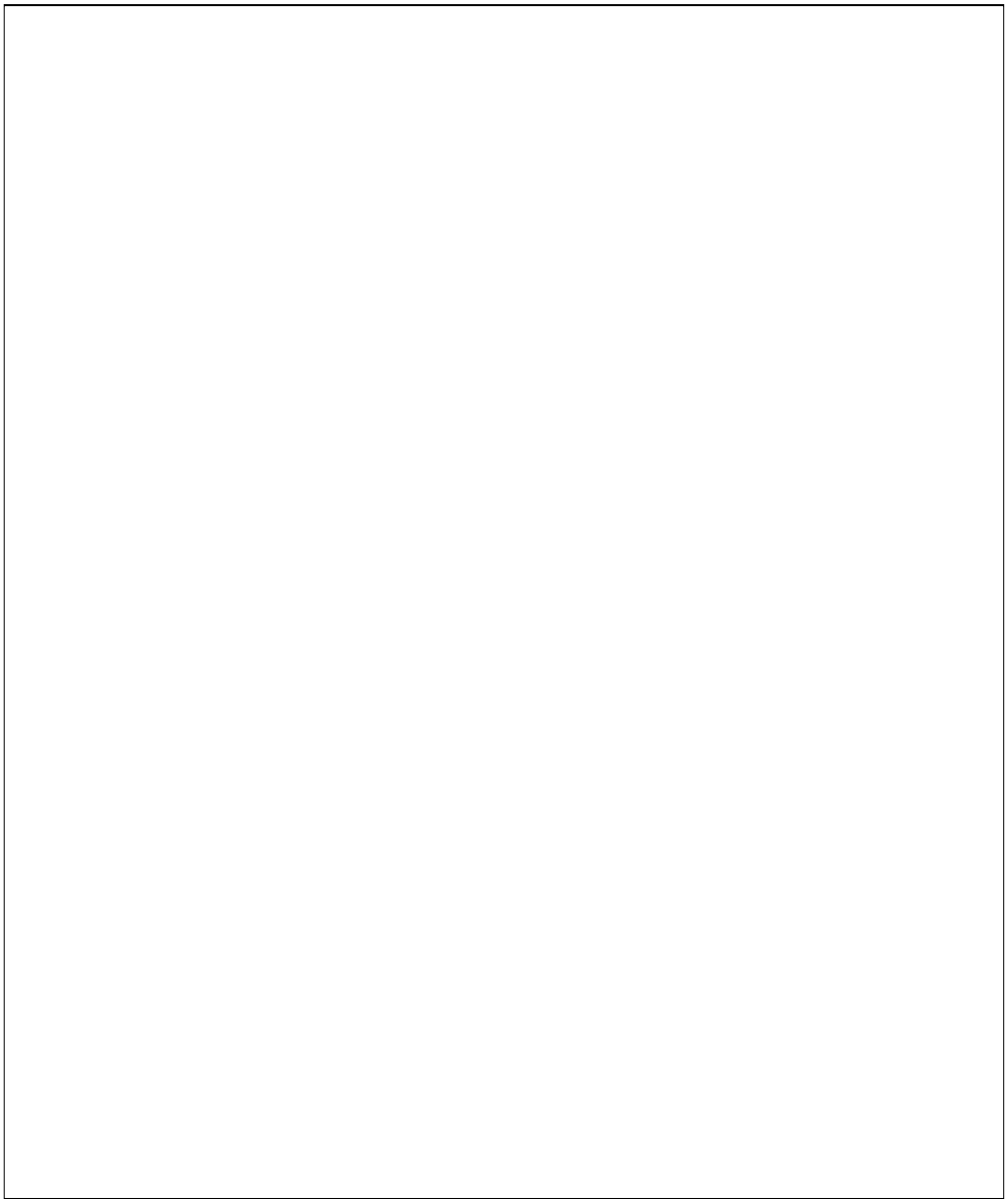
When would your night school run?

90 minutes on Tuesdays and Thursdays? Once a week but for two hours? Straight after school/college in that fallow period between 4:00 and 5:30pm? Or does it start later after you've had a chance to recharge, running from 7:00 until 8:30? How might you break down the time? Three 30 minute sessions? One full hour then a short blast of admin?

4. **Campus**

What does your classroom look like?

Are you in a branch of a coffee shop or an ice-cream place? Is there a library that you use? Is there a room or space on your school/college campus that acts as your HQ? Or is it your bedroom at home? Wherever it is – can you design the environment a little? Organise your desk a certain way to indicate night school is in session; close some curtains, move furniture, switch off phones?



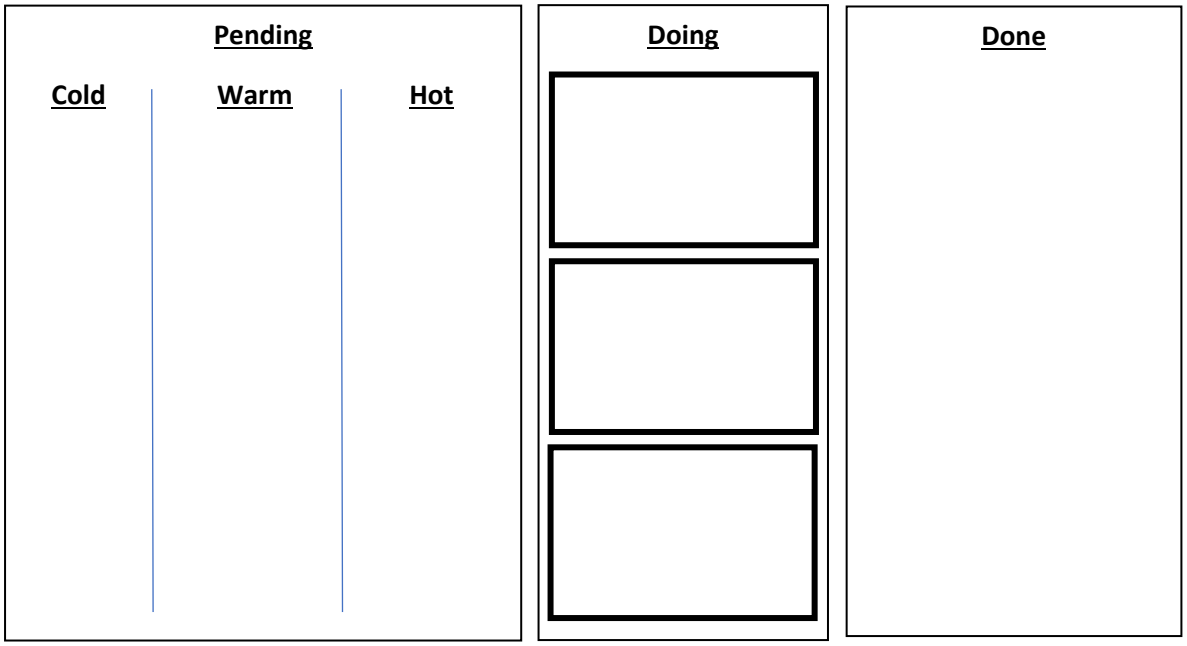
Now that you've got some ideas – run night school for a couple of weeks. Start as soon as possible, get into it and see what it feels like. Plan some simple sessions reviewing notes or recapping day-school topics. It won't be long before you're getting ahead on your work. You'll understand things more in class; stress and anxiety will melt away. Your grades might improve, your teachers might seem surprised and delighted.

You might even consider combining schools for a session a week with a friend.

Systems Activity 3 – Pending, Doing, Done

In this activity, we suggest organising your entire study-life into a simple three-part system. It's one we've seen work in a lot of work-based contexts, where employees use what they sometimes call 'taskboards' (big whiteboards split into sections) to create quick, visual summaries of everything on their plate.

This three-part taskboard should help get you feeling much less stressed and anxious – it gives you an at-a-glance understanding of everything you need to do and what you're currently up to. It looks like this:



OK, some explanation is needed!

Pending is where you put new tasks and jobs as they arrive. You write each task or job on a post-it note, being clear and specific about what the task is. *"Complete Geography work started in class"* or *"Send email to teacher,"* or *"Write introduction to English essay".* When you place a job in **pending** you have to make a decision about exactly where to put it – **cold** if it's not urgent, **warm** if it needs doing pretty quickly, and **hot** if it's a top priority.

Doing is the stuff you're working on right now. You don't want to be overwhelmed trying to do half a dozen things at once so there are only three slots here. Move the jobs that are hottest from the pending column into one of the three boxes. This is where you focus your work every day.

Done is where you put your post-it when the task written on it is finished. Why not just bin it? Well, speaking to people who use these systems, we hear a lot of them say how motivating it is to fill up the done section of their taskboard. They might only clear it every few weeks.

And that's it! Pretty simple, but a fantastic, streamlined way of keeping on top of your work.

Of course you need to review your taskboard fairly regularly to make sure things are sitting in the correct columns. Cold, warm and hot need constant reorganising depending upon what's coming up and what tour deadlines are, for example. Keep on top of it, and it'll help save your life!

Systems Activity 4 – Boosters and Sappers aka 'Energy Makes Time'

Former company boss and leadership coach Mandy Brown makes a good point about time management on her blog, Everything Changes. So many of us, she says, have the feeling that we have too much to do and not enough time to do it. Brown argues that when our levels of energy are low, we often take much longer doing tasks we might have once completed quickly. We're feeling sluggish so…

- The maths homework that should've taken half an hour ends up filling fifty minutes of your evening, or
- The textbook read-through takes twice as long because you find you're not concentrating or,
- You want to write up some notes, can't find them… and suddenly, you just can't be bothered anymore.

The solution, she suggests, is to sequence tasks better. The phrase she uses is, *"energy makes time."* In other words – when we're feeling inspired or boosted, our focus lasts longer, we get more done, and seem to have more time. *(https://everythingchanges.us/blog/energy-makes-time/)*

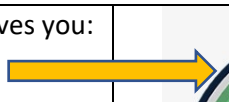
So could we organise work in a way that boosts us, instead of sapping us?

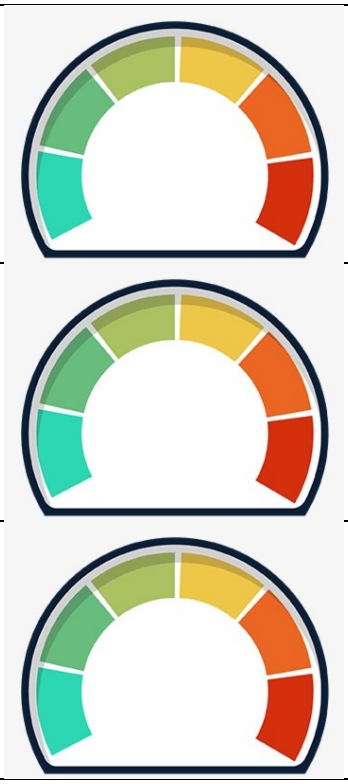
Take the tasks you do in a typical day's work, and choose whether they boost your energy or sap your energy. It's often easy to do this – there's just a feeling we have. But if you find it hard, consider these ideas:

The booster: If you've just organised and completed an energy-boosting task, you've often got just as much or even more energy after you finish an hour's work. These tasks often leave you feeling positive, pleased, excited to do more. (They're not necessarily easier subjects or tasks, by the way!)

The sapper: Working on an energy-sapping task feels the opposite. These tasks might not be hard – but they might leave you feeling flat and drained, as if your energy gauge is low.

OK, have a go at this now. Make a list of tasks you've got coming up, then try and assess how they're going to change your levels of energy…

Task:	Level of energy it gives you:  
	

What themes emerge? What tasks do you thrive doing, and which require a bit more grit to complete?

Now organise and sequence a day's work that **considers your boosters and sappers**. Some of the following advice might help:

- Start your day with a booster. Whatever happens afterwards, you'll have given yourself the energy to push forwards feeling positive.
- Follow a sapper with a booster. If you've got a sapping task, it's often good to have something to look forward to.
- Do two sappers with strict time limits, then give yourself a break. Churning through a couple of tough tasks, and being strict about how much time you're going to spend doing them, deserves a reward. Take a little time off, go for a walk, watch a little TV, play a game. Then begin again with a booster.
- Finish your day with a booster, not a sapper. You don't want that final task of the day extending out as you get more and more exhausted. Aim to finish your day with some that's even a little bit positive.

Systems Activity 5: The Catch-up Week

Often we can find ourselves adrift.

Term is a few months old and we've fallen behind where we wanted to be - we've let things slip, our systems have collapsed and we know we need to get back on track.

If that describes your situation at all, what you might need is a catch-up week. A catch-up week is a carefully planned and timetabled week where you work with much more organisation and focus. The aim is to plan like crazy, then throw yourself into a highly strategic seven days of concentration to recover all that lost ground.

Catch up weeks need planning on paper first, with particular tasks assigned to particular days, even to particular time-blocks. They need a checklist of tasks you need to do, each of which gets crossed off when it's done.

Planning a week like this can feel daunting, so we've given you a simple place to start. First collect together all the work you want to catch up. Some will fill you with dread, others will be fairly straightforward. Why not arrange them all somewhere on this continuum:

Least Daunting **Most Daunting**

"I'll quite enjoy this." *"I'm dreading this."*

Now you can plan your catch up week. We've suggested a 'one big task per day' structure, and filled the week with the kind of things that might go in each day. You could follow our plan if you wanted, but the activity becomes even more effective when you design your own, or design one as a study-group.

Day One	Day Two	Day Three	Day Four	Day Five	Day Six	Day Seven
Complete: **…a job you should have done ages ago that really needs finishing** or **a short job that will take 30 minutes and get you started**	Finish: **a piece of homework ahead of the deadline**	Complete: **the piece of work you're most dreading** or **explore a possible future career online**	Complete: **a one-hour re-read and re-write of your notes on any difficult topic**	Start: **The reading and research for a piece of work you know will be challenging**	Complete: **...a job that's fallen behind schedule** or **a short job that will take 30 minutes or less**	Finish: **a piece of work to *twice the standard* you would consider your 'normal' level of effort**

If you can take action on these seven steps as the week goes by, you'll be significantly closer to living that stress-free, pressure-free life we all dream of.

And the best thing is, you can celebrate at the end of the week! Take some time off, and reward yourself.

So every time you feel demotivated or overwhelmed, forget the big picture. Instead, make a plan for a super-organised catch-up week. Return to this activity or design one of your own, using the advice below to help you…

- Some students plan a week like this at the start of every half term to get them up and running
- Some students have alternated weeks like this, one on, one off.
- Towards exam season or coursework deadlines, we've seen students plan two or three weeks of organised and time-blocked activities to keep them on track.
- The best plans we've seen include rewards, with students scheduling something good to keep them going.

Systems Activity 6 – Have to, Ought to, Want to.

A lot of our systems activities are about time management. But what if we have mega-organised time management… but we're spending all our precious time *efficiently doing the wrong things*?

This is where attention management comes in. Attention management tools start by looking at how our time is being spent, but then ask us to consider whether we're doing the right things; the tasks with the biggest impact on our learning and our positivity. Attention management asks us to consider whether we've got a healthy balance of tasks that keep us at our best.

For example: if you worked through a super-organised week of prioritised tasks that were repetitive, boring and (crucially) had little impact on your learning and confidence, you might end up frazzled, exhausted and frustrated.

Instead, you should consider the following task. It asks you to reconsider the tasks you have to do, and encourages you to plan a week that:

- Allows you to do meaningful work,
- Encourages you to build for the future and
- Gives you space to connect with things that make you happy.

We're calling these three categories Have to, Ought to and Want to.

- The **Have to zone** reduces your anxiety and keeps you on track
- The **Ought to zone** gives you permission to set aside immediate challenges and build for the future
- The **Want to zone** keeps you positive, healthy and balanced.

So what's on your lists? Have a go at filling in the table below:

Have to… **These things feel crucial and if ignored will keep me awake at night:**	**Ought to…** **If I just had time and a little headspace I'd do these helpful jobs/tasks:**	**Want to…** **If only I could design my life the way I want it, I'd have more time for:**

If we're going to stay positive, we need to consider designing weeks that allow us to move between these three zones. Here are three possible approaches to consider. They each assume you can get ten things done per week, but you might be different so you'll need to plan accordingly:

The Hard Work Week – for churning through tasks and getting things done

- 7 have tos (choose the most important, or the ones with the biggest impact)
- 2 ought tos
- 1 want to

The Balanced Week – for staying on top and future-planning

- 5 have tos (again, choose the most important, or the ones with the biggest impact)
- 3 ought tos
- 2 want tos

The Self-Care week – for refocussing

- 3 have tos (as before, choose the most important, or the ones with the biggest impact)
- 4 ought tos
- 3 want tos

Are things in the right category?

Some of the more frazzled and stressed students we speak to mis-categorise. They fill the Have to column with things they don't really have to do. Watch out for this. It's worth considering your Have to list for a moment. Obviously, homework and other assignments need doing – there's no room for negotiation here. But are some of the other things *really necessary*? One student had a huge list of have tos, and when we suggested removing some, acknowledged that they weren't crucial but added, "I'd feel really guilty if I didn't do them."

It's a very reasonable and understandable response. But saying no to requests is perfectly fine. In the adult world of work, we're constantly negotiating what we have time to do and what work might be best given to someone else. It's not lazy to acknowledge you haven't got time to do something. And you'll have time to give back once your period of hard work slackens off.

Systems Activity 7: Cornell Notes

You might not think that the way you take notes has any effect on how much you might remember or how well you might do on a test or exam.

But a professor at the University of Nebraska has run a range of experiments about note-taking, as well as studied many experiments conducted by others.

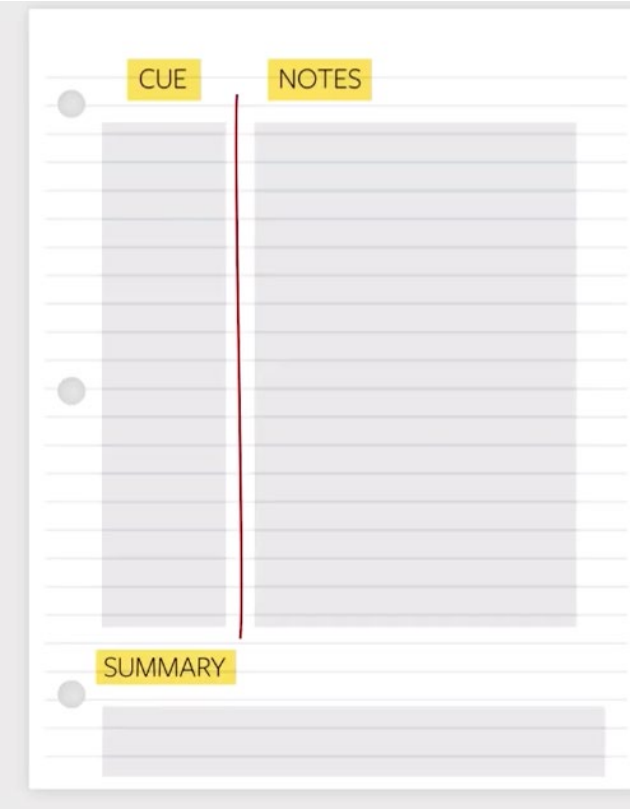
The key seems to be the work you do *after you've taken the initial notes*.

Returning to the notes obviously helps, but it's not the reading of those notes that necessarily has an impact – it's returning to *develop the notes* through things like…

- Clarifying material with additional underlining, arrows, subheadings and reminders
- Adding to the material with questions: 'how' or 'why' questions that work like a test, encouraging you to explain what you're reading
- Adding to the material with clarifications you've got from text books/study guides, expanding the material with deeper additional information

…that have such a significant impact. (Some studies show an increase of about 20% in test results if students do this kind of work!)

So can we take notes in a way that helps this process? We can. This note-taking system is called Cornell Notes, (named after an American university.) It looks like this.



Have a go yourself:

Take your notes as usual in the **'notes'** section of the page during class.

Use the **'cue'** column to add: questions, clarification, reminders, arrows, additional material. You can do some of this work in class, and some of the work afterwards as you revisit your learning.

The *'summary'* section is for you to try and – no surprise here - summarise your learning afterwards. Write two or three sentences of explanation for your future self, so when you return, you've got a clear sense of what the notes cover.

Systems Activity 8 – 1% Planning

Each day, every single one of us has the same number of minutes to spend – 1440.

Entrepreneur, coach and writer Allyson Lewis argues that if we spend just 1% of these minutes planning and reflecting, we should be able to spend the other 99% getting on with our work and enjoying our lives. 1% of 1440 minutes is about fourteen minutes, and Lewis suggests we split that into two seven-minute sections. *(Lewis, Allyson, The Seven Minute Difference, Kaplan Business, 2006)*

Inspired by her approach, we've developed our own seven-minute system with a focus on planning study. Here's how our '1% Planning' works.

1. **Every morning you set aside seven quiet minutes.**

This might seem ridiculously obvious but it's harder than it looks! You'll quickly realise how much of your day is the noise and activity of conversations, arguments, cafes and canteens, TV, social media, gaming, and travel. You'll need a space and time when none of that applies. You'll need to space to write (we like using a single flash card for this activity) and you'll need to be totally focussed. Once you're ready to go, scribble notes under the following headings so that you have three things you really want to do:

What one thing needs <u>completing</u> today?

Select one thing that you want or need to finish and cross off today, no negotiation. This is your must-do.

What one thing needs <u>further work</u> today?

Choose one thing you need to continue work on today – something you've already started but needs attention.

What one thing needs <u>starting</u> today?

Select one thing you haven't even begun yet, but you need to get going on today.

Left overs

Throw down everything else that's on your mind here.

Completing: Further work: Starting:	Left overs:

Then, at the end of the day…

2. **Every evening you set aside seven quiet minutes.**

Again – harder than it looks, but do your best to make sure you've got this small pocket of time to think back over the day and check through what happened. We find these five areas of questioning and reflection really useful:

- How did your day go? Did you get your three things done? What's left over?
- What's tomorrow looking like as a result?
- What's on your longer-range radar? (This is a brain-dump that should take a couple of minutes: anything and everything that you know is coming up, throw it onto the flash card.)
- In your studies, what do you need to do more of?
- In your studies, what do you need to do less of?

You might want to use the other side of the flash card for this reflection:

And that's it – your day's finished. Tomorrow gets another flash card and a fresh start.

If this system ever feels difficult or time-consuming remember; it actually isn't that bad. You still get 99% of your time to spend getting on with your day. And just because the 1% is a tiny time period, it doesn't mean it isn't effective. Just these two small pockets of quiet thinking and planning could make a massive difference to your sense of calm, your levels of stress, and your feelings of control.

That's the power of 1% planning!

Practice Activity 1 – High and Low Utility

Professor of Psychology John Dunlosky (Kent State University, 2013) has closely examined a wide range of practice techniques, then seen what impact they have on student performance. Those techniques that seem to have only a weak connection with getting a good grade, he calles 'low utility' techniques. These are necessary at times, but only have a small impact on success. Others he classifies as 'moderate' or 'high' utility.

The latter are the technqies that seem to have a very strong association with good exam performance and good grades.

His findings are in the table below – we've adjusted his language to make it more accessible.

Why not make a quick analysis of which techniques you use? Be totally honest. It's not a problem if you only use a few – that actually describes the vast majority of students in the country…

	Technique	Always use	Sometimes use	Never use
High Utility	Practice tests – moving in and out of exam conditions, practising recall, or executing on the skills required in the time you're given.			
	Spaced practice – scheduling practice tests and revision sessions out over time; snacking instead of bingeing.			
	Elaborative interrogation – explaining complex concepts and ideas to others – teaching someone else the material.			
Moderate Utility	Self-explanation – writing out explanations; explaining how new information is linked to old information. Clarifying connections between information.			
	Interleaved practice – designing study that moves you from topic to topic, task to task and subject to subject rather than blocking out long sessions of the same activity.			
	Summarising – writing out/recording summaries of the information that is to be learnt.			
	Highlighting – reading material with a highlighter and selecting the key information as you go.			
Low Utility	Mnemonics – creating phrases, memorable words, visualisations or lists to recollect material.			

	Text into Image – attempting to turn information into images so as to better recall it.			
	Re-reading – setting out all your notes and course textbook and reading them through again.			

- Which ones are you routinely doing a lot of?
- Which ones do you try 'rarely' or 'never'?
- Choose one technique that is moderate or high utility and try and break it down into steps. What things might you have to do in what order to use the technique effectively?

A healthy balance

We're not saying that you should abandon all low-utility tasks.

These tasks work well in the early stages of revision, when you're collecting and organising your material.

The problem comes when we continually use these approaches all the way up to the exam. As the exam draws nearer, you need to be trying out the high-utility revision tasks. By incorporating more high utility strategies into your revision, you'll make more progress in the same amount of time, getting more out of each session by making it harder.

High utility strategies aren't always easy, and they don't always feel comfortable… but they drive you forward faster than the low utility strategies.

Aim for a healthy balance!

Practice Activity 2 – Closed-book Notetaking

Here's a fascinating study: two psychologists working in Indiana in the US studied four revision techniques and their impact on test performance. *(Jeffrey D. Karpicke, Janell R. Blunt, Department of Psychological Sciences, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907, USA. Journal* Science *11 Feb 2011)*

The students were split into four groups before the test:

1. **Single-reading study**. In this group, students had to read a chapter once.
2. **Repeat-reading study**. In this group, students had to read a chapter four times.
3. **Mind-mapping**. In this group, students read the text once, then summarised it in a mind-map.
4. **Active recall**. In this group, students read the text once, then covered it up and tested their recall by writing out as much of it as they could remember in two practice tests.

Before they began the experiment, they asked the 80 science students taking part to predict which group would perform best on the subsequent test.

What do you think the students predicted would be the most effective technique?

_____

You know that activities like these have surprise punchlines, so you're probably guessing the students were wrong. And they were. So in the light of that – what's *your* guess as to the technique that was most efficient?

_____

Let's take this a step further. There were two types of question asked in the test, mixed up so the students didn't know what to expect.

1. Question type 1 were 'recall questions.' Students had to answer simple questions about the information that had appeared in the text.
2. Question type 2 were 'inference questions.' These questions were harder, asking students to connect ideas and concepts, requiring deeper knowledge.

Now guess which techniques yielded which results!

For the simpler recall questions:

	Which technique?
Winners: 65% of questions correct	
Runners Up: 45% of questions correct	
Third place: 40% of questions correct	
Last place: 27% of questions correct.	

For the more complex inference questions:

	Which technique?
Winners: 70% of questions correct	
Runners Up: 57% of questions correct	
Third place: 55% of questions correct	
Last place: 28% of questions correct.	

The same technique won both times: active recall. It was the technique that the students thought would work least-best of the four, but in fact it worked the best of the four! It just goes to show that our instincts about revision are often wrong.

Testing yourself will lead to better performance than re-reading notes *four times*. Think of the time you could save.

So active recall is definitely a technique you should add to your studies. A great way of adding active recall to your studies is to try Closed-Book Notetaking. Here's how to do it:

Closed-book Notetaking: an active recall study technique in five steps

First, you'll need to choose something you want to learn. You'll need a section of textbook – not too long – or a study guide or some notes you've already made. Once you've chosen what you're aiming to learn, here's what to do:

1. Read the section of textbook/information *whilst highlighting the key information.* Really connect and concentrate as you read and highlight.
2. Now close the book/put the notes away.
3. Now write notes on the section you've just covered without looking at the information! It will feel hard. You might get frustrated. You won't be able to remember everything. No problem; leave lots of space to add forgotten information. Scatter the notes around the page with subheadings and leave lots of white paper.
4. When you're done, open the book or turn over the notes. Re-read and note-take as you go but…
5. …add the stuff you missed or forgot in another colour, filling the white space you left first time around.

And that's it! This approach will be more effective than reading the material four times. You might even finish more quickly than you would have doing four re-reads.

Of course, it will feel harder than just re-reading. It's not as comfortable, and you might feel exhausted by the end. But you'll perform better in tests and exams if you make this part of your weekly study!

Practice Activity 3: Verbal Recaps

This tool is a habit-changer which will very quickly boost your understanding. Of all the activities here, it's the one that takes only a little effort but can yield big results – so it's well worth a try next time you have something you need to read through.

Here's what you do. Every time you read a page of a textbook or study guide, stop and then:

1. Close the book.
2. Calm your mind for a second and think – *what did I just read?*
3. Now talk aloud, summarising in your own words exactly what you've just been reading. Choose one of these starters to get you going if it helps:

    - "The writer has just been explaining that…"
    - "This section explores…"
    - "The important idea here is that…"
    - "This page outlines the importance of…"
    - "The writer's argument here is that…"
    - "I've been reading about how…"
    - "I've learnt that…"

4. If you can't summarise it clearly…there's been a problem. Not to worry. Go back and read the section again, and repeat step 3.

5. Once you're happy you can summarise the content, try asking and answering more complex questions; not 'what', but 'why' or 'how'. Try these:

    "*Why is this section important?* Because…"
    "*Why has it been included?* Well, it's crucial because…"
    "*Why is this bit detailed… or why isn't it detailed?* I guess it's because…"
    "*Why is the information in this order?* The writer covers this first/second/third because…"
    "*How does it relate to the previous section?* It's linked in the following way…"

Reading like this means you go slower. But it means you're testing yourself as you go along.

Two extensions to try…

1. Try adding **spoken summaries of whole chapters**, verbally once you've read them, like this:

"First, the writers explore…."

"…then they go on to argue that…."

"….then they look at -------- in more detail, explain how…."

"And they finish by concluding that…."

You'll find that the information you read goes in. It sticks, and it's easier to recall. Your reading might have taken a little longer, but you've been able to fully explain what it is you've just read.

2. Try putting together a short lecture as if to an imaginary class.

We often suggest this script if you want to have a go at this one. It looks pretty straightforward, but you'll quickly find you really need to know your topic in order to start your mini-lecture like this.

It's a good one to do in a study group – each member takes responsibility for one topic, and presents it using the script below:

This afternoon I'm going to be talking you through…

This part of the course is crucial because…

The key definitions you'll need to be able to handle are…

The big ideas that you'll need to be confident about are…

The exam is going to ask you to _____, so pay particular attention to _____

Right, we're ready to get started. A good place to begin this lecture is by looking at _____

Practice Activity 4: Test Your Future Self

There are a vast array of academic studies in which researchers have found that one of the all-time superstars of revision techniques is to test your recall. Sometimes this is called active recall – a technique where you deliberately strain the muscles of your memory by trying to remember things you've studied without referring to your notes.

But who sets these tests and where are they? It can be a pain trying to track down tests or search online for just the right kind of test. Instead, we're going to suggest you set yourself the tests.

Hang on, you might be thinking, *if I've set the test won't I know the answers straight away?*

Good point. It's a problem. But here's how to get around it. At the end of a period of study, the last thing you should do is **set a test for your future self**. It should take about ten minutes, and it's a really valuable way to finish a session. By the time you return to the topic a few days or even weeks might have passed and you'll have forgotten precisely what it was you put in your test. But because you're the one who set it, you'll know the test covers the material perfectly.

What Should Your Test Look Like?

Mostly that's up to you, but we'd make the following suggestions:

1. Use the question, "If my future self recalled this material perfectly, what would they know?" and make a list of the things to include in your test.
2. Start with easy questions and move on to harder ones. Leave the toughest questions until last. These can be the questions that might build on all the others.
3. Consider asking definition questions early, using the words "What" or "when" to start your questions. Get the basics sorted.
4. Think about moving towards harder question-words as you go along. "How" or "Why" will require your future self to do some explaining, so leave those until the end.
5. Consider finishing with a tricky question which replicates something a real exam might ask you.
6. Make a note of what kind of test-score would make you happy with your future self. It doesn't have to be 10/10 – maybe you'll be pleased if you score 7 or above.

And that's it – ten minutes' work that means the next time you revisit this topic, you can begin with a ready-made test to check what you remember.

Two other things to consider when using this method:

Make a note of your score when you first complete a test. Then come back to the topic again – maybe a week or ten days later – and retake the test. If your score is improving, you can start to feel more confident about that topic.

If you revisit a topic and you're scoring really well on recall, you can leave it for a while and prioritise those topics where you're not doing so well. Or if you're feeling brave… you can design an ever harder test.

Practice Activity 5: Cog P versus Cog A

A fascinating study experiment took place at the University of Georgia, led by a professor of Biology, Kathrin Stanger-Hall. *(Multiple-Choice Exams: An Obstacle for Higher-Level Thinking in Introductory Science Classes, Kathrin F Stanger Hall, Life Sciences Education, Vol 11, no 3, 2017)* Students were split into two groups. They were going to be taught exactly the same material by the same teacher using the same resources – but here was the one difference; the first group knew they were going to be tested at the end by a 90-question multiple-choice exam, and the second group knew they'd take the same multiple-choice exam followed by a more challenging series of short-answer questions.

Off they went to revise for their exam. The researchers watched them closely, examining exactly how they studied. It turned out there was no difference in the amount of time they spent studying. However, there was a difference in how they approached their revision.

Those who knew all they had to do was to prepare for a multiple-choice exam became passive (we're going to call this group **Cog P: cognitively passive**). They tended towards five revision strategies that were comfortable, repetitive and less challenging. Here they are:

1. Reading the assigned text
2. Re-reading class notes
3. Making flash-cards of notes
4. Highlighting key terms during reading
5. Looking up difficult information

Those who knew they also faced short-answer questions, however, prepared differently. They were active; testing themselves more regularly and pushing themselves to do harder revision sessions (we're going to call this group **Cog A: cognitively active**). Here are five of the activities they used:

1. Repeatedly asking/explaining "how does it work?" and "why does it work this way?"
2. Creating and answering challenging study questions
3. Closing notes and testing how much is remembered
4. Drawing and labelling diagrams from memory
5. Setting tests, trying to answer questions, then looking up information

Before we show you what happened to their results, think about the differences between these approaches, and make some observations or suggestions about the impact they may have had:

The researchers just looked at the responses to the 90 multiple-choice questions, because both groups answered these.

So what did they find? Here we go:

Cog A students "…scored significantly higher on these 90 questions."

Cog A students "…scored significantly higher on the higher-level questions."

Cog A students "…learned significantly more, including critical-thinking skills."

Of the Cog A students "…72.1% agreed or strongly agreed that they saw the value of learning."

Of the Cog P students "…57.3% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they saw the value of learning."

What does this teach us?

Cognitively active revision gets you better results, **even if you spend the same amount of time doing it.** This means you might not have to do more revision to be successful… you might just have to do different revision. That's great news for your work-life balance!

Plan a revision session that incorporates a cognitively active revision technique in the space below:

Practice Activity 6: The Command Verb Table

What do your exams actually ask you to do?

We've worked with students who despite revising hard, aren't fully clear on what to expect on the day of the exam. As a result they often have a meltdown or go blank. But this doesn't have to be you!

We've gathered together nearly a hundred command verbs from different GCSE and A level exam boards, then considered a further fifty command verbs used in professional work-place exams.

Then we've put them all together and tried to group them depending upon the types of things they want from us. We're not saying our groups are perfect, and we're not arguing that any of these groups are 'easier' or 'harder' than each other. But we're pretty sure most sections of your exams will be summarised in here somewhere, regardless of which subjects you take.

Exams want us to be able to…

1. **Define and describe things**

   This could be history dates, people or places, parts of processes, complex vocabulary in full sentences a foreign language, subject-specific terms, one or two-step processes to solve a sum and so on.

2. **Explain how things work, and show that we can use them to solve problems**

   This could be saying how the water cycle works, how the heart beats or breathing works, or how something is built, like a poem or novel, or a business. It might be showing we understand something by *using* it successfully - like arriving at an answer in a maths class by following a particular method, showing you know how stories work by writing your own, or using grammar correctly in translating a passage from French or German.

3. **Zoom into detail, analysing why things work the way they do**

   Here you might be pulling something apart to zoom in on it – the images in a poem or the shape of a river valley in geography; you might be translating and discussing a difficult passage, assessing a big table of data in science and comparing it to what you already know, or solving a complicated problem in maths using a number of steps. Often you've got two things to handle at once; comparing two advertising campaigns in media or two businesses, or exploring why two characters from a book are similar or different.

4. **Make judgements about things and justifying opinions**

   In these questions you're asked to offer an original opinion of your own. You use what you know to justify your opinion; you might be using evidence to argue a particular point of view in history or geography. You might be adopting a point of view that isn't yours in sociology, and arguing it through. You may be predicting 'what will happen if…' in psychology or economics or making recommendations about increasing profit in business studies or making judgements about the success or impact of novels or plays.

OK… how did we do and what have we missed? A great activity would be to go through these descriptions and check them against a standard exam paper. Have we covered some, most or all of the questions? If we're not covering everything in this model, what are we missing? What's your fifth or even sixth category?

Each one of these groups tends to come with its own command verbs – words used in the exam that make it clear what type of question it is. We've listed lots that we found here – but you'll find plenty of others you can add to our list…

Define and describe things	**Explain how things work, and show we can use them**
Label Annotate List Define Describe Select State/Relate Outline Summarise Illustrate (with examples…)	Explain Comment on Determine Demonstrate Identify/Infer Calculate Show/Prove/Set out Verify/Give reasons for/ Consider Translate Correct
Zoom into detail, analysing why things work the way they do	**Make judgements about things and justify our opinions**
Analyse Examine Explore Compare and contrast/Differentiate between/Distinguish between Survey Review Investigate Solve	Discuss/"To what extent…" Evaluate Assess Argue Justify Criticise Suggest/Propose/Make a case for Predict Recommend

Four Ways of Using the Command Verb Table

1. Take a subject you're studying and read a whole exam paper from beginning to end. Make a note of what every single question is asking you to do. Then see what types you've got. Is it mostly one type? A scattering of types? Is there one area of questions you don't have to worry about at all?
2. Have a look at the distribution of marks. Do certain question types seem to have more marks attached to them? This might tell you what the exam board thinks is important in your answers… and what skills they're less concerned about.
3. Once you've done step one and two, you can set yourself better tests. You don't need to chase down every exam paper ever published, you can create your own exam that follows the rough shape of other papers. Set and complete your own papers.
4. RAG-rate the question types you're going to face – red for question-types you find really hard, amber for those in the middle, and green for the type of question you can breeze through. Then adjust your revision so you're spending more time on red question types.

Practice Activity 7: The Overnight Boost

In 2016, a study in Lyon, France, examined students preparing for a test that was all about recall; participants had to learn 16 words in Swahali – a language they'd never studied before – and remember their translations when asked under exam conditions. So far, so predictable. But here's where the study gets interesting. The students were split into two groups of twenty and given different circumstances in which to revise. *(Relearn Faster and Retain Longer: Along With Practice, Sleep Makes Perfect, Stéphanie Mazza, Emilie Gerbier, Marie-Paule Gustin, Zumrut Kasikci, Olivier Koenig, Thomas C. Toppino and Michel Magnin, Psychological Science, Vol 27, no 10, 2016)*

Group 1 were called the "sleep" group. This lot revised the material at 9pm in the evening, then went to sleep, then took their test at 9am in the morning.

Group 2 were the "wake" group. They revised at 9am in the morning, then did their usual day at college/university/job, then took their test at 9pm at night.

Both groups were the same in terms of gender, age, quality of sleep and so on… but it quickly became apparent that there were differences in what happened when they sat down to complete their tests.

Exam 1 happened after **12 hours**. The students in each group saw the same 16 words in Swahali and had to type the translations from memory.

Exam 2 happened after **1 week** and the same procedure was followed.

Exam 3 happened after **6 months**; same procedure again.

There was no studying in-between these times. Why not have a guess what happened?

We've given you a table, and added the scores the groups achieved on their first attempt after 12 hours. We've left four missing scores… and put the four numbers you need below the table. All you have to do is match the scores to the correct box.

Have a go…

	EXAM 1: Average score out of 16 after **12 hours**	**EXAM 2:** Average score out of 16 after **1 week**	**EXAM 3:** Average score out of 16 after **6 months**
The sleep group	10.3 out of 16		
The wake group	7.5 out of 16		

Other scores achieved: 15.2, 11.3, 8.7, 3.4[2]

[2] Clue … (not that you need it!) the 'sleep' group scored better in all the tests

Once you've decided, have a think about why you've chosen the results you have. Assuming you haven't just put them in randomly…

- Why do you think the results might be happening the way you have predicted?
- What variables might be at play here?

The researchers concluded that:

- The sleep group performed better because – and here's a direct quote from the study – "…sleep has been shown both to passively protect memories against decay and interference and to actively consolidate new memories." In other words, **sleep allows the brain to process and store information without disturbance**, strengthening it in your memory.

And that…

- The sleep group performed better because the wake group, "operated on memories degraded by interference" – in other words, the busy events of the day 'get in the way of', or 'slow down' the brain's ability to process and store information.

What Does All This Mean for Us?

The study suggests a good way to tackle a subject or topic that won't stick in your head, is to try what we call **The Overnight Boost** to crack it. Here's how an overnight boost works.

1. Just like in the experiment, revise your hard-to-remember topic in the evening. Spend two short 25 minute bursts on it, with absolutely no distractions.

   Read it through actively. Make clear, simple notes in bullet points capturing the main information.

   The session doesn't have to be at 9pm like the experiment, but you want as little further stimulus as possible after the work. Try and do it close to bedtime. Avoid watching TV or doing any further work after your session. Just pack away, take it easy, then sleep.

2. In the morning, about ten hours later if you can, test your material from memory.

   Take out your notes, quickly scan the main points, then cover everything up. You're going to push yourself to recall it all from memory. Speak it out loud or write it down like a test.

That's it! Stick with the strategy, and pretty soon you'll find that the information is really embedding in your thinking and your recollection getting is stronger and stronger.

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!

Attitude Activity 1 – NAF and NAch

According to sports psychologists, there are two personality types when it comes to something testing or competitive:

Need to Avoid Failure (NAF)

These people tend to avoid challenges because they do not want to risk failing. They are sometimes slow workers who avoid responsibility. In class, they can be easily dissuaded from taking part or finishing a piece of work and do not like being assessed. **They may want to be successful, but the fear of failure outweighs the desire to succeed**. This means they will avoid situations where they might fail, by not handing work in, or telling everybody how little work they have done.

Need to Achieve (NAch)

These are the people that thrive on a challenge. They are usually determined workers who take risks and enjoy being assessed. Failure isn't a problem for these people. If they get a low score or a disappointing grade, they'll take it in their stride and move on. **The desire to be successful outweighs the fear of failure**, so even though they feel some fear, they still put themselves in situations where they might fail.

Last year, which were you?

We're all changing all the time – we can be NAF one day and NAch another. And since it's often easier to reflect on a period of time just passed, ask yourself, did you have a tendency towards one of these stances last year? Which one? And how did it affect your behaviour and grades?

This year, which are you?

Though we can change ourselves, we often get into habits of mind which mean we carry on doing the things we always have. Are you different this year, or the same?

Now…

Imagine you are a teacher trying to decide whether your students are NAFs or NACHs. Here's a list of behaviours you might see in your class. Do you think the student is a NAF or a NACH?

1. This student is struggling with understanding the work but won't ask questions in class to clarify their learning. When you ask why, they say they 'feel embarrassed'.
2. You gave this student a grade D for piece of work two lessons ago. They arrive this lesson with the piece of work re-done, and ask if you'd mind marking it again.
3. When you organise some group work, this student asks to work with a group of students who are doing much better than they are.
4. This student will often tell others, "I haven't revised for this test" or "I'd forgotten we were having this exam."
5. These two students, who are struggling with the content of this particular topic, ask a lot of questions during and after class, ("Can you explain that again?" "What do you mean?") even when other students roll and their eyes and tut!
6. These two students are both struggling and prefer to sit with each other, often talking about other things.

Further lists:

You might be able to define some further behaviours associated with NAF and NAch. Use the table below to capture another few:

NAF behaviours	NAch behaviors

A commitment

Now take two or three NAch behaviours that you might not currently be doing. Choose ones which look possible – the kind of thing you could integrate into your working week, and make a commitment to give them a try. They might not have an immediate impact, but they could be the start of improving grades!

Attitude Activity 2: Check Ahead, Check Back

"Comparison is the thief of joy." (Theodore Roosevelt)

The quote above, often attributed to the American president Theodore Roosevelt, suggests that if we compare ourselves to others, we may find ourselves unhappy.

It sounds common sense. Except perhaps it isn't always the case; it's true that sometimes we can make ourselves miserable by comparing ourselves to people we think have it better than us, but at other times we can actually make ourselves feel better by comparing ourselves to those in less fortunate positions… including our previous selves, or previous generations.

Consider this:

In the lottery of birth you got a winning ticket.

1. *You've been brought up in a country free from war or geological disaster. You don't have to worry about famine, conflict or persecution.*
2. *What's more, you're born in the 21st century. There's clean water, food, warmth and shelter. There are rights and freedoms your grandparents could only have dreamed of. Plus 24-hour internet access.*
3. *And you're a successful learner with a healthy and developing brain. You can read, write, pass high-stakes exams, absorb new information, follow your country's breakneck 24-hour news cycle, swim, maybe even drive or ride a bike, master tricky computer games, build flatpack furniture, cook a little bit, maybe skateboard, dance, use a Macbook Pro…*

Having read that, hopefully you're feeling just a little bit better! When it's well-used, comparison can be good. We just have to be careful about when it's best to:

Check Ahead (seeing what's on the road ahead; the challenges we've still to face, the people we think might be further along than us,) or

Check Back (by reminding ourselves how far we've come, considering how lucky we are and what progress we've made.)

It's well worth assessing your current state of mind, then choosing which column you might explore in more detail…

Check Ahead	**Check Back**
Best done when: you're feeling stable and confident, you're optimistic and ready for a challenge **Questions you might ask yourself:** What three challenges are coming up soon? What do I need to be ready for? Who is ahead of me at the moment? What is one thing they are better at than me? What technique could I learn by looking at how they do things? What qualities or characteristics have they got that I would like to cultivate? How do they approach their work?	**Best done when**: you're feeling like you've struggled through a few setbacks and you're doubting your ability **Questions you might ask yourself:** What has been the hardest thing I've achieved so far? If I had to choose three things I'm proud of myself for, what would they be? What didn't I know a month ago? A term ago? A year ago? ….that I know now? What couldn't I do in year 11 that I've mastered now?

	Who is less fortunate than me… and what might I do to help them?

Healthy comparison is about knowing what you need, psychologically.

- Some days, we need the reassurance and comfort of checking back and seeing everything we've achieved and how far we've come.
- Other days, we might need a wake-up call; a moment where we get ready for and enthusiastic about the hard work ahead.

Try this activity if you feel in need of either!

Attitude Activity 3: A Dozen Noticeboards

There's a department at Hertfordshire University called the Perrott-Warwick Research Unit. They're a research team that are interested in luck, and how/why people who consider themselves 'lucky' or 'unlucky' get that way. *(Wiseman, Richard, The Luck Factor, Century, 2003)* To begin their research, they asked for people who considered themselves particularly lucky or unlucky (there were 400 people in all) to complete a series of experiments.

In one experiment, subjects were given a newspaper to flip through and a task: 'count the number of photographs in this newspaper.' Three pages in, there was a large, half-page notice. It said, "Stop counting. There are 43 photographs in this newspaper." A few pages later, another large advert read, "Tell the experimenter you've seen this and win £100."

So what happened?

A large proportion of the people who considered themselves unlucky… flipped right past the adverts. The people who considered themselves lucky were much more likely to see them – and they ended up with the money.

The researchers concluded that people aren't lucky or unlucky, there are just **certain people who are better at noticing, or even creating, chance opportunities**. Their attention is open, and they see more of the world around them. They don't mind adjusting their routine or doing something new; they see things with fresh eyes rather than having 'selective attention.' These people end up with a wider range of experiences, meet more people and do more things… and they get more opportunities because of this.

The 'unlucky' people were stuck in routines and didn't notice new chances or opportunities. Their thinking is a little like this:

Attitude	**Emotional response to challenge**	**Decisions and behaviour**	**Result**
I'm unlucky. Other people seem to get chances and opportunities I don't.	I only have 'selective attention' about chances to try new and interesting things. Eg: I don't even see the posters advertising a particular competition. Now it's pretty much the deadline for entries.	I don't bother entering. A fellow student on my course does enter, and wins. The first prize is £1,000.	I miss out, and I reinforce my belief that good things only happen to other people. They are 'lucky' and I'm not.

An Experiment: A Dozen Noticeboards

If the research we've described is right, we've all had opportunities and chances to do something new and different, and many of us have missed them.

What might we be missing right now?

Here's an interesting experiment for you to try.

In schools and colleges up and down the country, in the corridors, receptions, community spaces and classrooms, ***there are noticeboards***. Some of them display student work, some have sports results or calendars… but many of them have opportunities.

In this experiment, you're going to wander around the campus and look at twelve different noticeboards. And you're going to really notice the things on there – read the flyers, look at the posters, make a note of the clubs, competitions, societies or classes that are advertised there.

Noticeboard	Location (in case someone else wants to know)	Content
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		
11		
12		

Once you've done this, consider the opportunities available in your organisation. Remember, the 'lucky' people in the experiment simply saw more things the world around them, and acted on them.

Could you do the same?

If you were forced to follow up just one of the leads you've discovered, which one would it be?

Attitude Activity 4: 5,5,5

Sometimes study problems can seem insurmountable. And when we're feeling overwhelmed, it's easy to withdraw and let the issues pile up until we feel like we're drowning.

If you've got problems you're trying to solve, you're certainly not alone. This activity is designed to help you get started. It's a simple strategy which asks you to group together your solutions *depending upon how easy they are to get done.*

You need to begin with a study-problem for this to work, so choose something that's bothering you about the way you approach your studies at the moment. It could be that you find motivation difficult, that you're struggling with a particular topic area, or that you keep missing deadlines. Whatever it is, be as specific as possible in defining your issue and make a note of it here:

Insert line

Now spend some time generating as many solutions to your problem as you can. Don't judge your ideas as they come to you – you won't be doing them all, so feel free to throw everything down on the paper, from the smallest adjustment or solution, to something radical and scary. Aim for at least 20 things you might do to improve your situation…

…and remember, everything goes.

Now that you've got a huge list of actions you could take, try to categorise them according to how easy they would be to implement. Over leaf is a table with three columns.

The five minutes column is for the solutions that can be actioned really quickly. An email, a quick surf of the web, a few minutes finishing a late piece of work.

The five days column is for your more ambitious solutions. These you could get done in a working week at college if you put your mind to it. They might need two, three, even five steps to complete, but they're do-able.

And the five weeks column is for something that would need a bigger change in behaviour. Five weeks is about the length of a half term, and you only get six of those per year, so it's a solution so radical it will take nearly 20% of a year working on it – a big investment, but one you'd be proud of.

Five Minutes	Five Days	Five Weeks

Hopefully, you should now have a list of possible actions in all three columns.

1. The ones in the **five minutes column** will be over in the blink of an eye and you can cross them off.

- **Why not choose two of these actions and do them now. (Right now!)**

2. The **five days column** will be full of potentially interesting solutions. We'd suggest choosing one of these, and breaking it down into five short steps.

- **Then make a plan to complete the five steps next week.**

Insert five lines

3. The **five weeks column** might well have some really interesting solutions in it. Some could be ambitious, crazy or almost impossible. Nevertheless, try and choose one – the one you feel you might have a chance of taking some action on.

- **Take some time over it – just think about what you might need to do if you were to take on one of these more ambitious solutions.**
- **How many steps might there be?**
- **Can you break it down and just do parts of it?**
- **Is there a way to get it started in just five minutes?**

Insert five lines

Every time you hot obstacles that are getting you down, try this activity. It usually helps generate solutions and gets students unblocked!

Attitude Activity 5: O.D.A.

Observe, decide, act is one of the simplest-looking problem-solving processes we've seen; three simple steps whenever you've got an issue with study and, as if by magic, a solution should appear!

In theory, that is. Most study-related problems are actually really complicated, and an obvious three-step approach isn't necessarily helpful. We've found complex study problems often involve:

- Habits and beliefs that have strengthened over time and need changing
- Patterns of behaviour that seem logical but are part of the problem
- Relationships that aren't straightforward but messy
- Situations and locations that add to the complexity
- Resources that are incomplete or missing altogether

So over the last few years, inspired by Warren Berger's The Book of Beautiful Questions, we've been working with students to develop a problem-solving process that more accurately reflects what it's like to face a problem at school or college.

We've kept the simple O.D.A. structure, but we've filled each part of the process with a massive array of questions.

So if you've got a study-related problem…

Start with 'observe'. This section requires you to see the problem freshly and clearly, so take your time; stay here for at least ten minutes. Aim for fifteen. You don't have to answer every question but consider every single one for a moment or two before deciding whether it's useful or not. Make notes as you go – challenge yourself and *really get to know your problem from every angle*.

Now have a go at 'decide'. Stay here for ten minutes too, checking every question carefully, and answering as fully and honestly as possible. Generate as many thoughts and observations as you possibly can, and make notes as you go.

Finish with 'act'. There's space here to record plans. You'll have more than one plan here – you might have two or three possible solutions that have occurred to you as you answer the questions. Take your time noting them down. Once you got your solutions written down, use the remaining questions to test which solution might be best.

Then try it out!

Observe ***(Why does this problem or situation exist?)***
If I had to summarise my problem in one sentence, what would it be?
Why does this problem matter to me?
Why does it exist in the first place?
If I had to blame others for the issue, what would I say? If I had to take 100% responsibility for the issue, what would I confess to?
What are the underlying forces, the larger issues?
Is this a problem that keeps coming back? How have I tried to solve something similar in the past?
Am I seeing this with fresh eyes, or with old judgements?
What might I be assuming?
What might I be I missing?
What critical information do I have and not have?
Has someone else solved this problem already?
Who do I know that's least-likely to have this problem? Why?

What am I dreading about this problem? What might I be hiding from?
Do I seek out opposing views?
What am I inclined to believe?
What is the evidence behind my beliefs, and how strong is it?
What's the other side of this issue?

Decide ***(What am I really trying to achieve here?)***

What would a successful outcome look like?
How would I know things were improving? What would I see or feel?
What outcome matters most?
What feels like it might be important to me?
What do I need to go big on?
What does a solution need to be a classed as a 'good' one?
What have I tried already? Have I been persistent enough in the past?
What can I bring to this that others can't?
What might be a new way to come at this challenge?
What if I could only solve this by subtracting things?
What if I could only take one, high-impact action? What would it be?
What would my best-self advise me to do?
What could I simplify?
What could I put on a not-to-do list?
What am I willing to abandon?
What do I keep coming back to as I think?
Who could help me get solve this more quickly?
Am I prepared to truly listen to advice about this particular issue?
Would I rather be right, or would I rather understand?

Act ***(My shortlist-of-plans includes…)***

Which option allows me to flourish/develop the most?
Which options interest me most?
Which will take me furthest, fastest?
Which feel like they're easiest to start?
How can I lower the bar, make getting started easier?
Which has the strongest upside?
Which solution looks like the best use of my time?
What do I like least about these solutions?
Why am I resistant to a particular solution?
How would I justify a solution to others?

Attitude Activity 6: Think Three Positives

Winifred Gallagher is a science writer, magazine editor and journalist. In her 2010 book Rapt, she writes about our attention, introducing the idea that we have something she calls, 'top-down attention', that is, attention that we decide upon and control. *(Gallagher, Winnifred, Rapt, Penguin 2010)*

And this top-down attention is like money. We 'pay' attention to things, spending attention like cash during the course of a day. Social media companies want us to 'pay' them – the more people use their sites, the more they can charge for adverts, and the bigger the bonuses the board-members can get. Adverts want our attention. Online apps want it. Emails want it.

But, Gallagher says, we're in control of where we spend our attention, not them. We can choose what to pay attention to.

She goes on to argue that, "…the quality of your life depends not on fame or fortune, beauty or brains, fate or coincidence, but on ***what you choose to pay attention to***."

A Week of Positive Things

In this activity, we're going to suggest you spend one working week – five days – deliberately paying attention to positive things. (Psychologist Martin Seligman has written entire books about how people who focus on positive events, no matter how small, feel much happier, so maybe this will happen to you as well!)

Your aim is to collect ***three positive things each day.***

A couple of rules: (i) you don't need to be winning the lottery; your observation can be very modest, just a small change, and (ii) your observation has to be specific to that day. Tempting as it is to focus on your family or home or friends, if you're lucky, they're going to be there every day. Instead, you're looking for something that specifically occurred on the day you're thinking about.

Some areas of your life to think about:

Your lessons: was there just one moment in a lesson today that was positive? A bad joke, an interesting video, an activity that was OK, a word from a teacher that was positive, a smiley face scribbled in an exercise book, a topic you understood and felt good about?

Your interactions: was there a connection today that was positive? A friend saying something funny or nice? Someone holding a door open for you? A smile from a teacher or an arm around the shoulder from a friend? A member of the canteen staff saying hello?

Your surroundings: was there a break in the rain and the sun came out? A warm classroom after a cold break outside? A decent game of netball in the gym or football on the astroturf? A comfy chair in a common room or study space?

Your journeys: was there a moment on the bus on the way in that brightened your day? A chat while you walked between lessons? A discussion in the lunch queue or a walk with a friend?

For each day, record the three things.

We bet that, by the end of the week, you’re feeling more positive about your studies.

Attitude Activity 7 – The Myth of the Curve

You 'll have heard the phrase 'learning curve'. It describes the process of getting better at something. Sometimes, when a task is challenging, we use the phrase 'steep learning curve' to describe how hard it will be.

But we think there's a problem with the word 'curve'. It suggests the process will be smooth, and in our experience, learning is almost never smooth. There are setbacks, plateaus, sudden jumps forward – less like a neat curve and much more like a series of rising hills.

There really are particular periods of time when progress flattens out. We call these progress plateaus. These are the periods when you're making hard-won changes to the way you work, but they don't seem to be producing any difference in performance. Like these frustrating examples:

- You're working way harder than you were, but there's no change in your grades… yet.
- You've got to grips with getting up early, so your attendance and punctuality have improved, but no-one seems to have noticed.
- You're revising differently, pushing yourself to do more challenging work but your test results haven't changed that much.

There are tons of other examples of study changes taking a while to have an impact. And what's it tempting to do while we wait for that impact to be made? Jump to a hasty conclusion: *what's the point? I tried it for a little while but it made no difference. Waste of energy. I may as well go back to doing things the way I was.*

Before you do, try this activity. We've found it's a great one to help you persevere when momentum seems to vanish. It's about *changing the way you measure progress*. Progress isn't just test scores or grades; though these are nice, they often take longer to arrive. Progress starts as micro-changes in other measurements. Consider the following and note down some thoughts:

Progress in Peace of Mind	Progress in Confidence	Progress in Time Management
You're feeling better about your study habits. You're worrying less or feeling less stressed; you feel optimistic for the first time in ages; you're conquering unhelpful habits; you're enjoying classes more.	*You're feeling on top of your classes. You can follow complex discussions more easily; you find yourself answering difficult questions quite well; you understand something a classmate doesn't.*	*You're getting to grips with tasks as you rebalance. You have a clear sense of what you've got to do; you don't wake at night in a cold sweat; you feel in control of your time; you don't forget things and schedule work better.*

Capturing examples of these micro-changes in psychology, confidence or study management help remind yourself that you are actually moving forward. These improvements in the way you feel are worth the work. And soon enough, they'll be followed by upward movement in grades too – you just have to stick at it.

Attitude Activity 8: Worst Case Scenarios

Writer and entrepreneur Tim Ferriss openly admits that, like many of us, he feels the pressure when there's lots on the line and he can't stop imagining disaster ahead. The activity that follows is based on a process suggested by Ferriss; a process that can help us all tackle and tame our fears. (The original is at Tim's blog: *https://tim.blog/2017/05/15/fear-setting/)*

The thinking behind it is this: we often write down our goals and record plans for achieving them… but we never record our fears.

Instead, our fears stay in our minds, where they get distorted and exaggerated. We carry them around with us every day, creating worst-case scenarios and fretting constantly, imagining *what if…*

- we fail an important test, exam or portfolio submission
- we drop a grade and can't get into our first choice university
- we can't motivate ourselves and end up doing no work between now and the end of term
- we have to listen to teachers making critical comments at parents evening

Fears like these are not new. Seneca the Younger, a Roman philosopher living over 2000 years ago, observed that "we suffer more in imagination than in reality."

So rather than carrying our fears around every day, suffering as we imagine them all coming true, we could instead get them out of our heads and onto paper. That way we can put our worst case scenarios under a microscope and objectively study them. Here's how Ferriss suggests doing it.

1. First, ***define*** your worst case scenario. Objectively write it down without emotional language; just a statement of fact at the top of the table (*"I miss the grades needed for my chosen degree course"* not *"my grades are terrible and everything's a disaster."*)
2. Underneath in the ***prevent*** column, record all the things you could do to either (i) prevent or (ii) lower the likelihood of the fear coming true. Keep your actions small and realistic.
3. In the ***repair*** column, list all the actions you could take to fix things if the worst case scenario happened. Again, keep them realistic and achievable.
4. Finally, in the ***upside*** column, record the potentially good things that might happen as a result of your worst case scenario coming true. Lessons you learn, skills you develop, relationships that are strengthened, new opportunities that might arise.

Check out our example:

Define: I get a C in Biology, miss my offer and get rejected from Bristol University		
Prevent: *I could take the following achievable actions to lower the likelihood of my worst case scenario coming true…*	**Repair:** *If my worst case scenario happened, I could take the following actions to try and partially fix things…*	**Upside:** *The potential positives that might arise if my worst case scenario happened are…*
I could meet with another student who's really good at the bits of the course I can't do I could ask my teacher for a one-to-one on the hard sections of the course	I could contact the university and ask to be re-considered if a student with an offer decides not to take it up I could go through clearing	I might end up at another university and really enjoy the course there I might end up much more resilient because I've worked harder and solved problems

I could make small adjustments to my revision to give me more time on Biology I could do more past papers, focussing on the hard questions	I could start a closely-related course, then ask to be transferred onto Biology after the first year I could start a similar course with a slightly lower entry requirement	I might meet a really inspiring professor at another university My experience might mean I'm well-placed to help others

Now it's your turn:

Define:		
Prevent: *I could take the following achievable actions to lower the likelihood of my worst case scenario coming true…*	**Repair:** *If my worst case scenario happened, I could take the following actions to try and partially fix things…*	**Upside:** *The potential positives that might arise if my worst case scenario happened are…*

Hopefully this activity will help you get a clearer sense of perspective when everything feels overwhelming.

It pays back the time you put into it by calming your mind and giving you a better quality of life. Try it… what's the worst that could happen?