

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.

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