

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 calls '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 techniques 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. | | | |

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| | 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!