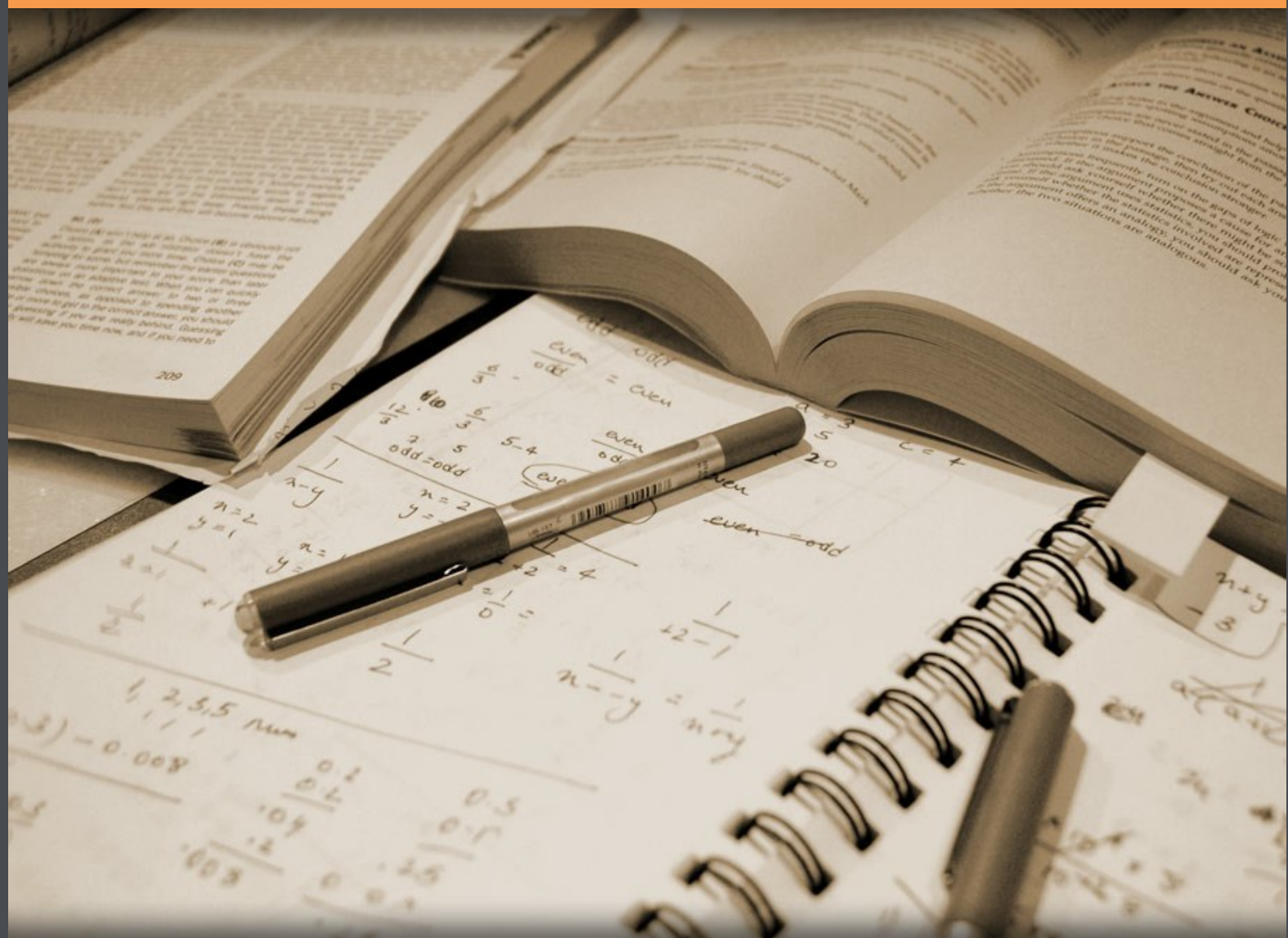


Strategies to Fight Exam Stress & Achieve Success

Will Stringer ACA CTA ICSA



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Will Stringer ACA CTA ICSA

Strategies to Fight Exam Stress and Achieve Success

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1 Preface

What follows is written for people who want to succeed at Exam taking and know that they have a fight on their hands.

And that is the first point to make - any Exam is a fight of wills, a struggle between you and the people who set the Exams. That fight takes place each time you take an Exam. It is very important therefore to be at your peak of fitness then, not before not after.

Fitness is

- Knowing what you need to know
- Knowing how to answer the Examiner's questions
- Having a positive attitude (I can win I will win),and
- Physically being 'fit to sit' and concentrate for the length of time any Exam paper lasts.

In the 1980s I stayed at a Hotel in Tarifa- Spain. Tarifa is along the coast from Gibraltar and famous for windsurfing. I like to play tennis too and soon made friends with Tim- then a student doctor from a Germany university and a key member of their tennis team – and also for those holidays – the hotel's tennis coach.

Tim told me a story that still sticks in my mind to today – about different attitudes to fitness.

Tim and the rest of the university's tennis team were at an international competition that included a chess tournament - where German and UK university students competed. Each morning during the competition both the German tennis teams and chess teams went for runs - and did stretching and simple exercises in the gym - to keep supple and fit. The UK tennis teams were also regulars in the gym but there was no sign of the UK chess team.

It seemed the German and UK chess teams had different approaches to fitness. With a marathon week of tournaments in prospect - the German chess coaches saw being 'fit to sit' as important to the chess teams' success as knowledge of chess.

At the end of each section you will find space for your notes.

I hope what follows shows the way through the minefields to the success you want.

Will Stringer ACA CTA ICOSA

About the author

Will Stringer is a UK Chartered Accountant and UK Certified Tax Accountant. He has also qualified in recent years as UK Chartered Company Secretary (company legal advisor) with the Institute of Company Secretaries, and is a member of the Worshipful Company of Chartered Secretaries and Freeman of the City of London by redemption. He lives in Hertfordshire, England with his wife and daughter. His son is now away studying at University in Scotland.



2 Start the clock running

The Clock runs from when you commit yourself to pass a set of Exams. So start to measure off the most important resource you have - time.

Set the timing of the Exam in your mind and make it part of your day. In your diary start from two weeks before the Exam date and count backwards to today.

In your private place of study put up a clean sheet of paper listing the countdown. As you mark off the days you can then assess your fitness against the target date. Equally important the day count reminds you despite any pressures from tutors, teachers or others not to peak too soon.

YOUR NOTES

3 Handling subjects

This applies whether you are taking one paper or many.

Look at the syllabus-it's your terms of reference.

- Assess what percentage of your time to give to each area
- Be independent - do not let tutors or others guide you off line - into concentrating on their pet subjects.
- Remember you are expected to deliver a total package - to excel in one area and fail in another can be a failure - whereas to pass well in one area and adequately in others is a pass.

The percentages depend on your previous experience, your skills and your areas needing extra work.

Do not rigidly stick to your first thoughts -often what you think is strong may become weak. Apply those percentages to the time you are going to give over to study each week. Then set your hourly subject study targets for the weeks ahead.

Earlier I talked about outside pressures - one of these is pre-exam tests - set by tutors or teachers. These in-house tests can upset your planning - as you can see as your competitors - the group with which you study .It is natural to want to be top. Time though is wasted by being too good too soon especially if other subjects are not kept up to date.

Keep in mind that the real 'Competitors' -the Examiners - will not show their colours until the day of the Exam. Tests are only practice. So of course revise for tests - but make time to keep fresh the other subjects you will need to know shortly.

YOUR NOTES

4 Parallel targets

Once, maybe twice a month in the period leading up to the Exams set yourself physical challenges. Saving them for when the pressure is on.

It is true sport is one of the best ways to relax, but most competitive sport measures you against your opponent. Pure competition- which is what exams are about - measures your ability against fixed standards. Therefore consider setting yourself physical targets as well as studying targets.

You do not have to become a gym or aerobics fanatic overnight- though it might help. No, occasionally set yourself a physical target such as to walk or maybe run from home to a local land mark and back again or say swim non-stop for 20 lengths at the local swimming pool.

Make the challenge tough but safe. Repeat throughout in your mind – if I can overcome this.... I can pass my Exams.

Where I lived was an old air-field. My challenge was – ‘If I can run round the airfield perimeter road without stopping or walking- however slowly - then I will pass my Exams’.

YOUR NOTES

5 Creating the environment

I think it's true of most of us that we feel at our most relaxed, open and fittest at home, away from stresses and strains. But for most people who take Exams- the Exam hall is unfamiliar, unfriendly and very uncomfortable.

What I want you to do is to work towards taking your home into the Exam hall. Create an unburstable bubble in which you can remain relaxed, but attentive.

The way I have done this in the past is to set aside one special place to revise. It should be where you feel 'at home', comfortable and have few distractions. Try to do study always in the same place- and take out time - to picture in your mind what's in the room around you. As you do so - relax your body and breathe gently and easily. Practice remembering that relaxing sequence in the train or in the bus. You can then use those memories to shut out the unsettling effects of the Exam Hall. If where you live is noisy – then, if you can, stay somewhere quite with friends or relations. Failing that try the local library. Or block out household sounds by using headphones.

When I completed my final exams for the Institute of Chartered Secretaries - my son was an excitable eight years old -with a six years old sister who loved to sing- and the exam centre was two hours journey away! At the time I was incredibly lucky to have a truly supportive line manager and wife who agreed that - before each set of papers - I could stay away overnight near to the exam centre.



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What a difference– the day before the exam paper I would time my arrival at the hotel to coincide with the earliest occupation time – got my revision material out onto the bed and spent until late that evening completing my final revision for the day ahead. In the early morning– I covered off final topics – and then walked down the road in good time for the morning exam start time. Having first phoned home and made my apologies to my eight years old and his six years old sister!

YOUR NOTES

6 Methods of revising

I have used with equal success a number of ways to revise.

- Taking existing notes and writing them up again in shorter note-lets.

The advantage is that by writing shorter notes you tend to concentrate on key issues and remember the subjects better.

- Highlighting key details in manuals and textbooks.

This can reduce what you really need to read again by up to 70%. If you use this method - use it miserly - highlight only key phrases or words not whole sentences - reducing the text to brief notes.

- Dictating notes using mobile phone or iPod Aps (applications) - playing them back on headphones on the bus and train - or by media connectors in the car.

It's useful here is to picture yourself and the text book as you were dictating the notes. I have even been known to listen to myself and read the text in front of me at the same time for really complicated subjects.

- Making up briefing cards - pick out keywords and underlining subject headings.

Do not depend solely upon your own tutors for revision material. Get copies of other tutor's manuals and revision notes. Buy some 'expensive' subject books and find time to read round the subject or better still look at what is on offer at <http://www.Bookboon.com> . It is not always new information which helps - equally important are new perspectives.

I was in a group of 100 or more students at a private study college in London. We were sponsored by our employers to take tax exams. The exams included a 3 hour paper on Estate Taxes – mostly to do about who is entitled to a deceased's estate – money and property – and what taxes are payable – when and by who. We were given by the college study guides focused on what we needed to know to pass all the most likely questions to come up in our exams. It was not always easy to follow – I am not the smartest on the block! So I bought another college's study guide to compare notes.

Well we were told in no uncertain way by our tutor that one subject was just not coming up that year. The tutor did cover it off – but advised us strongly to drop it from our final revision. I always save something 'new' for the morning of the exam. I just feel trying to cram again in the last hours what you should know already, can be more stressing than helpful. And guess what, you are right, that subject was the first on the paper. You could hear the room groan. Me, I gave a silent cheer. I had spent two hours reading the other college's treatment of that subject on the train on the way to the exam hall!

In 'boring' lectures think about what the tutor is saying and compare it to your views – ask the tutor questions to develop your own thoughts - even if by the end you have answered the question yourself. It is better to look a little bit foolish in class - if getting then an answer to your question - means potentially more marks in the Exam.

YOUR NOTES

7 Gaining performance

A winning car is not entered into a race with an overused engine, old oil and the wrong petrol. It is the same for BRAINS and MINDS. You have got to tune them and feed them with a good source of pure energy. That means the best quality products with the least additives.

The routes of supply are your eyes and your mouth. Too rich or too poor a basic fuel and the brain will not be fully usable and your mind will under-perform.

Turning to food there are two important aspects, which work together, diet and the state of the rest of your body. Try to keep to good simple foods - that means a lean low fat diet, little alcohol and no smoking.

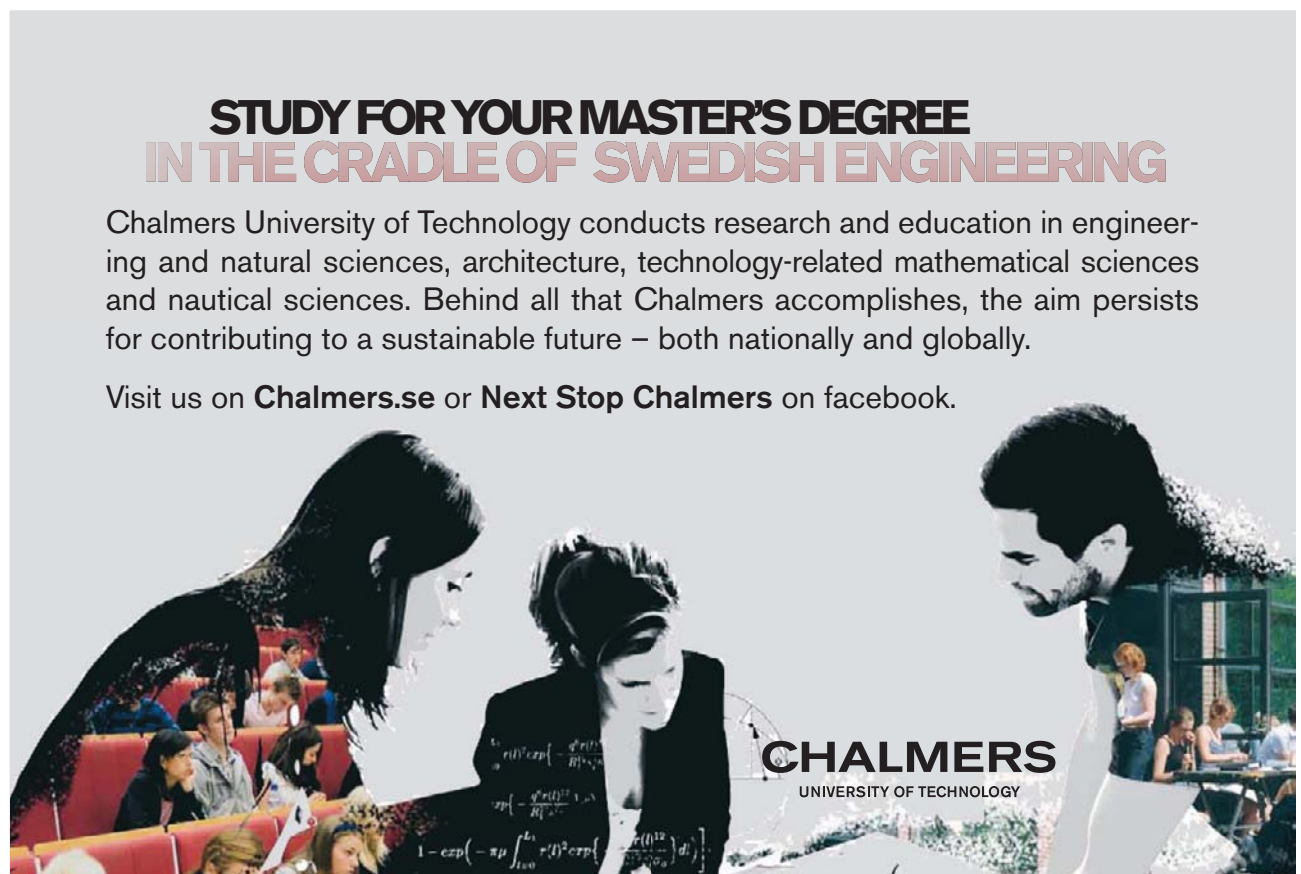
- If you do smoke, remember you cannot reach for a cigarette to ease your nerves in the Exam Hall. Start by not smoking on the days when you attend lectures.
- If you can, give up smoking at least six months before the Exams.
- If you like to drink socially try to switch to non alcoholic alternatives.
- If you are stressed and cannot resist food binges, binge on fruit and salad.

The other factor is exercise. Sitting down and studying for long periods is not a natural state for your body. After a while you will notice a creeping tiredness. The body needs regular exercise and to relax.

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Your body is a precious shell, housing your mind and needs to be in the best condition possible for the day of the Exam. So fit into your day a simple schedule of about 15 minutes - including at least 10 deep 'yoga' breaths - back, neck and arm stretches –and at least a 5 minute walk outdoors. If in doubt about your health - always check with your doctor and get guidance from your local gym.

YOUR NOTES

8 Mind exercises for the exam

For most people the first time they see the Exam Hall is when they step in to take their first paper. That does not mean you cannot get yourself used to the idea of being there.

When you are in the Exam Hall you won't really take anything in of the building. In six month's time you will probably not even be able to accurately describe the Hall. What will be easily remembered is the emotions.

So take time ever so often to walk yourself through these emotions by imagining all the events of the Exam day. Spend time 'experiencing'. Feel the emotions. Look through your own eyes and not at yourself from a distance. Imagine seeing the first question on the exam paper and wondering how to answer it. It may upset you and make you angry or want to cry. Now increase the intensity of your concentration and see yourself calmly tackling the exam paper -and coming out of the Exam Hall - saying to yourself - I answered all the questions well!

In time for the Exam you will then have experienced all your doubts, feelings of frustration outside of the Exam Hall. You will then be able to accept the situation, and react positively to the challenges set by the Examiners.

YOUR NOTES

9 With what to write?

A ball-point pen - because most exams require written answers in permanent ink. But then what type of pen? There are two main criteria - speed and can what you have written be read. The last of these two is the most important. Remember that your writing is new to the Marker along with a hundred others. If after two minutes your hand writing still cannot be easily read - you are in trouble. Markers are not tutors who have time to learn your idiosyncrasies. If you cannot bother to write to be read - no one is bound to mark your paper properly.

I can hear you saying 'that is not fair!' You have to put down on paper all the facts and as many more thoughts in too little time! There is a conflict between speed and the ease with which your writing can be read.

Select your pen with the same mind set as marathon runners might running shoes. Their running shoes are light to save energy but strong and well built to last the duration of the race and comfortable so they can run their best race.

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My choice was something like a BIC or similar pencil like biro - for lightness and speed – I avoided felt tips as they tended to thicken. The downside of a biro is that the grip is thin and after two hours' writing I suffered from finger cramps! I treated the biro like a tennis racket – and built the grip up – by first binding plastic tape round the base of the biro until it was a comfortable size and then wrapping round a long soft plaster to finish the grip. I made up a few sizes and tried them out. For my exams I usually had about three bound biros of different sizes – and swapped between them when my hand got tired or sweaty. I found that the changes of grip - by allowing my hand muscles to subtly alter positions - greatly reduced tiredness. Nowadays you can find in most supermarkets pencil like biros with grips. It is important to take time to find out which brand or type work best in exam conditions for you.

YOUR NOTES

10 Testing yourself against past exam papers

You have got to get into the habit of handling the Exam hall time pressures. The only way to do this is to create that experience at home and for each subject work through passed Exam Papers.

- Put on headphones if necessary - but retreat to a desk or table in a room on your own.
- Sit on a hard kitchen chair - get yourself used to what you can expect to be provided with in the Exam hall!
- Set out the desk as you will for the Exam.
- Put the watch or travel clock you are going to use onto the table and refer to it checking your timing.

From your revision you should know the form of the questions. Chose typical questions. Avoid questions everyone has agreed were offbeat or badly written. Make your selection from questions about 18 months old and more. If you are lucky those questions may in part come up again.

There are two distinct reasons for doing past papers - revision, but also getting used to the format of the papers and how the questions are worded by the examiner.

It is therefore important that you only give yourself as much time as you would be given in the Exam. Calculate that as:

| | Minutes |
|--|-------------------|
| Time for Exam paper | 180 |
| Cushion | (20) |
| <hr/> | |
| Available time α | 160 |
| Marks per paper β | 100 |
| Time per mark α/β | 1.6 minutes |
| 20 mark question -time to allow $20 \times \alpha/\beta$ | 32 minutes |

The cushion is a buffer to allow for selecting questions, correcting mistakes and pulling your answers together at the end.

For most Exams there will be past papers you can buy with answers attached. The answers should be approved by the Examining Body.

Frankly those answers for most written papers will be too long winded. They are model answers and are written by people with knowledge of the subject gained over many years. It is also a form of publicity by the Examining Body and the people who have written the answers. It is a way of showing how high their standards are. For most written questions there is just not the time to get onto paper that amount of detail - given the time allocated to the answer.

Model answers are therefore a guide to emphasis and content but not a guide to exam condition standards. Compare your timed answer to the model answers and mark yourself on the basis of the number of their points you have written down.

YOUR NOTES

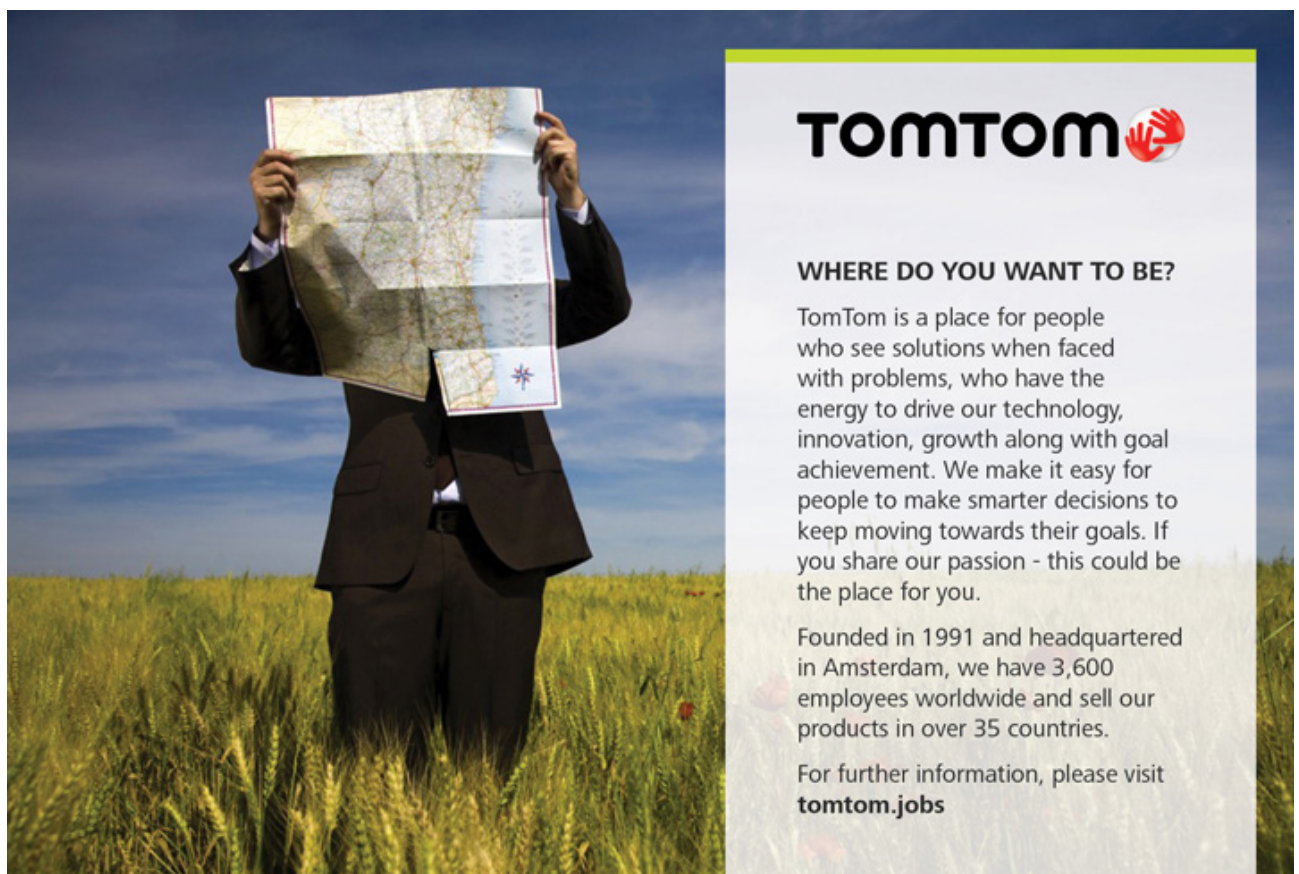
11 Positive think through


The rules of the market place apply to Exam passes. If an Exam is easy to pass it has no value. Therefore the more valued the pass the harder the Exam.

Bearing this in mind - use your imagination to think forward - to two to three years on from now. You have been successful having passed your Exams first time. Imagine you could talk to your future self. Of course the 'future you' would want to help 'you now'. So ask for that help. Tap forward into your future reserves of confidence and knowledge. If 'future you' will know the answers - then of course 'you now' must have been capable of learning the detail now.

Even in the Exam Hall you can call forward in your mind asking your future self how to tackle difficult points with the benefit of hindsight.

YOUR NOTES



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12 You versus the examiner

The most natural emotions about the Examiner are fear and inferiority. Remember it's a fight. To pass first time - if you are going to bother to sit an Exam - is important. Avoiding taking an Exam twice is the greatest reward of all! So get your emotions right.

The Examiner is blocking your way forward but is certainly not superior to you. You must recognise you are in one to one combat. If questions are good compliment your opponent - do not be put off, and counter attack by answering the question well!

YOUR NOTES

13 Getting on good terms with the marker

The Marker is a judge in a times trial. He or she can only measure what you do in the time available against the standards that have been set for the time given. And there are two times - the time you are given to answer a question and the time allowed to mark it.

Bear in mind markers are human. Like most of us markers will favour those who make their job easier. An answer technically correct but hard to mark will probably get its writer fewer marks than the question partially answered but written in an easy to mark style.

Note I did not say stylistically good - unless you are taking language based exams -keep it brief, write in short well spaced notes. Underline using a coloured biro -headings and subheadings - and make corrections easy to follow and understand.

You can expect to win the Marker immediately onto your side, because out of 50 - 100 - 150 papers to be marked yours is easier to read and understand. Also the time you have saved gives you time to get more facts down onto paper!

Facts which are easy to pick out are what the Marker targets. Typically each question has been broken down into components forming a marking guide. Markers then look for those points awarding marks accordingly.



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What if
you could
build your
future and
create the
future?

One generation's transformation is the next's status quo.
In the near future, people may soon think it's strange that
devices ever had to be "plugged in." To obtain that status, there
needs to be "The Shift".



You may gain a few points for perfect presentation but you will lose more than this in trying to use good style instead of writing down markable points or having hand writing that is hard to read.

Tests are a good time to experiment - try answering in GOOD 'correct' sentences - then see the surprise on everyone face when you use note form next time and your marks shoot up!

YOUR NOTES

14 What to wear in the exam hall?

The first step to respect is respecting yourself. Pay that respect to your body.

- Keep yourself scrubbed and clean in spite of the pressure leading up to the Exams.
- Choose comfortable old clothes and shoes to wear.
- Avoid if possible 'formal' office wear.
- Comfortable jeans/cords, a soft long sleeved shirt plus training shoes is usually best.

Wear those comfortable clothes during your final revision period - especially when working through past papers. Associate them with the books you have read and make them very much part of your Exam environment.

I once faced 7 different subject exams in the same week. My strategy became to wear the same shirt for each exam on the same day, so over the four exam days I wore 4 different shirts. In addition for the 'afternoon' exams I wore a different wrist band when studying the afternoon subjects and in the afternoon on the day of that exam.

YOUR NOTES

15 Two weeks to go! The timetable.

15.1 Calculating available study time

Giving yourself a 'time-out' for final revision is important. Remember in terms of time and career prospects repeating an Exam or Exam Papers is expensive in terms of getting the best jobs or the promotion you want.

So you have counted your days to zero (see 'start the clock running') and have decided to take two weeks off for final revision. Set about thinking towards setting yourself a manageable daily timetable. You should aim to handle each major subject each day, building up overall competence. Giving over say the last 4 days to concentrate on answering past papers.

You will see from what follows that there are breaks of at least 10 minutes built in. Take them enjoy them, turn the radio on, watch TV have a cup of tea. You need to be in a state of relaxed awareness when studying which means frequent breaks so you can concentrate. Your body also needs taking care of. So stretch and avoid becoming stiff from fatigue. Start by working out how much time in the day you can spend on studying.

What follows was my daily revision programme.



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| | | | Hours | minutes | YOUR NOTES |
|------------|--------------------|----------|--------|---------|------------|
| PERIOD 1 | START | 8:30 am | | | |
| | FINISH | 11:00 am | | | |
| | | | 2 | 30 | |
| PERIOD 2 | START | 11:15 am | | | |
| | FINISH | 12:30 am | | | |
| | | | 1 | 15 | |
| | LUNCH/ EXERCISE | | | | |
| PERIOD 3 | START | 1:20 pm | | | |
| | FINISH | 3:10 pm | | | |
| | | | 1 | 50 | |
| PERIOD 4 | START | 3:20 pm | | | |
| | FINISH | 5:50 pm | | | |
| | | | 2 | 30 | |
| | DINNER | | | | |
| PERIOD 5 | START | 6:40 pm | | | |
| | FINISH | 8:30 pm | | | |
| | | | 1 | 50 | |
| PERIOD 6 | START | 8:50 pm | | | |
| | FINISH | 10:05 pm | | | |
| | | | 1 | 15 | |
| PERIOD 7 | START | 10:20 pm | | | |
| | FINISH | 11:10 pm | | | |
| | | | | 50 | |
| <hr/> | | | | | |
| STUDY TIME | | | 12 hrs | 0 mns | |

15.2 Allocating time to subjects

Next calculate the percentage of your total available study time you need to spend on each subject. Adjust time downwards on subjects easier for you.

My adjusted allocation was:

| | | %age | Hours | minutes | YOUR NOTES |
|-------|---------|-------------|--------------|----------------|-------------------|
| PAPER | A | 10 | 1 | 12 | |
| | B | 20 | 2 | 24 | |
| | C | 20 | 2 | 24 | |
| | D | 15 | 1 | 48 | |
| | E | 15 | 1 | 48 | |
| | F | 10 | 1 | 12 | |
| | READING | 10 | 1 | 12 | |
| | | <hr/> | | | |
| | | 100% | 12 hrs | 0 mins | |

Now you have to perform a fine balancing act. Generally you are at our most receptive to learn and remember before lunch and an hour or so after dinner. A lot of homes do start filling up in that last period. So that is when noise and distractions are most likely to occur. Therefore as a general rule tackle your toughest subject first thing in the morning and as the day progresses pick up the less demanding subjects.

Matching periods with subjects my order became:

YOUR NOTES

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| Period 1 | Subject B <i>- getting into my stride</i> |
| Period 2 | Subject A <i>- hungry</i> |
| Period 3 | Subject D <i>- picking up again</i> |
| Period 4 | Subject C <i>- at my best</i> |
| Period 5 | Subject E <i>- after dinner</i> |
| Period 6 | Subject F <i>- running down</i> |

That left me time before bed for general reading.

16 The morning of the exam paper

Save something new to revise on the way to the Examination Hall. Be selective though. Choose something your tutors have not covered, but which you think may be a surprise on the paper. Make sure there is enough time to go through it. Some people like to carry around with them on the day of the exam their notes or points cards. Basically if you do not know or cannot remember your subject on the morning you never will. Better to choose something fresh to keep you thinking. (See earlier 'methods of revising' for how I gained a good grade by picking out a subject for the exam day).

Eat a light breakfast and drink as little as possible. Going to the toilet during the exam is a big disadvantage. You will be upset about waiting to ask to leave the Hall, being watched and losing concentration and time - worst of all you have to go back!

On the way in to the exam centre buy and eat a chocolate bar for quick energy.

Ensure you are certain to arrive at the Exam Hall with about an hour to spare - in case of delays. Do not travel in a rush – aim to take your time. Find the Exam Hall if it's new to you and use the toilets before they are used by everyone elsewhere!

When waiting to be called into the Exam Hall avoid long conversations with friends and groups of people. You need to focus positively on your battle with the Examiner. Remembering before you go in to check you have left all papers and notes outside - do not take any chances of being disqualified.

YOUR NOTES

17 In the exam hall

17.1 The warm up and start

Above all follow the instructions given to you by the people monitoring the Exam – the invigilators (the people running the exam administration in the exam centre) . Listen carefully. Keep in mind that after the time allowed for the exam paper is over in most exam settings you cannot touch your answer papers . You must therefore allow time to sort your answers.

When allowed put your pens, calculators and clock onto your Exam desk. Put them out in the same layout as you have found best at home. Do not look at anybody or the Exam Hall itself. Concentrate on relaxing yourself. Close your eyes, breath 10 times slowly and deeply in through the nose and out through the mouth, lifting your rib cage each time to fill your lungs.

You will hear the lead invigilator say “ You may begin “. Wait until you have completed your relaxation breathing and then set your clock to 12 o'clock .Put a wrist watch as a double check showing the true time next to it. Thereafter do not worry about outside time – just focus on the clock time from your 12:00 o'clock setting.

Now read the opening comments on the front of the paper - slowly and very carefully. From reading previous years' Exam papers you should recognise the format - how many questions to answers in each section and where and how answers are to be written. Misprints and errors can happen - if you do not understand an instruction put your hand up and wait for the Exam invigilators to come to you. Remember you will be disqualified if you speak to anyone else.

YOUR NOTES

17.2 Scheduling your time

From the front work out - without reading the questions, how much time to spend on each. Writing the times you have calculated onto the Exam paper against the marks shown for each question. (See also “TESTING YOURSELF AGAINST PAST PAPERS”).

Next select the first question on which to warm up. Generally you can assume the toughest questions /section is at the front. So I tend to go to the back of the Exam paper starting with a short question.

Remember your target is to write down the maximum number of mark winning points.

- You may find those questions seem too tough -work forwards until you find the easiest questions to answer.
- Always tackle easier questions first.
- There is no gain and a lot of loss from answering Exam papers the hard way.
- Do not though tackle a major 20%+ marks question without warming up, if you can help it.
- Like any athlete you need to slowly build up your pace.

YOUR NOTES



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17.3 The four golden rules

The first Golden Rule is to

- Always to give fully your calculated time for each question - no more - no less .

On a question to spend too little time may mean you have misread the question which is as bad as spending more than your allowed time on a difficult question.

In terms of difficulty - keep in mind for written answers that the first 60% of marks for a question are easiest - the next 30 % harder.

The second Golden rule is to

- Remember that the remaining 10 % is reserved for the 2 hours spent by your tutors writing model answers - so initially target for 50 % -70 % on each question.

In all this though keep in mind the third Golden Rule.

- Presentation. Leave underlining to the end - when all questions have been answered - but take first steps by
 - a) Leaving a clear line under each heading, and
 - b) Using a new page for each question.

There are two reasons for this. Most papers are split up into sections and Markers generally only check one question. Secondly the gap may let you put in extra points later on.

The final Golden Rule is.

- By carefully watching your clock and occasionally comparing it to your wrist watch and the exam centre clock - make certain you have not spent too much time on any question! Whatever you feel the payback will not be there!

YOUR NOTES

17.4 Rounding off

You will probably now have about 10 -12 minutes left -allowing for overruns - as helped hopefully by one question you could handle quickly.

Get all your papers together and check that you have answered only those questions required.

- If you started a question and switched to another put a line through the incomplete answer do not rip it up - in case of mistakes – until the very end.
- Make sure question numbers and page numbers are shown on each page. That guarantees at least the marks for the questions correctly answered.
- If you have missed a question or running out of time select the question which needs to be answered - Do NOT bother with an explanation to the Marker.
- Markers can only mark what is there. Begin your answer with - “the following sets out the main points to be considered.”
- Then briefly list out in the best order you can as many of your thoughts on the subject. Try as hard as you can to put down enough to justify 50% of the marks due.
- It is important though to stop with 5 minutes to go to the finish of the Exam.
- Papers must at the end of the exam be in good order so that they can be accepted for marking.
- Make that your final priority. Assuming all questions have been answered as required - go through using a ruler and underline headings in a different colour to your writing pen. Do not overdo this - just enough to break up the page so that the Marker can easily follow your arguments.
- Check again all pages are numbered and the papers have been put together in the right order.

YOUR NOTES

17.5 Closing out the exam paper

In the last few minutes of the exam - go hunting for marks. Whatever you do - do not waste time carefully reading through your answers. By all means glance quickly though - but remember to look to add to your score - not to waste precious time correcting grammatical errors. Even for foreign language exam papers!

When the people running the exam - the invigilators - say 'Stop' - stop! Do not take the chance - of gaining half of one percent more - at the risk of being disqualified.

Throughout the paper you should have been concentrating on maintaining your bubble and remaining calm and confident. Do not rush out of the Exam Hall. Take your time to get yourself together and walk slowly and quietly out of the Hall.

YOUR NOTES

18 After the exam


After such mental strain you will be high on adrenaline and tired.


- Let off some steam. Telephone or talk to friends and relations - tell them how the day went. If you felt the Exam was unfair say so.
- Do not bottle up your feelings.
- Even if there is another paper tomorrow it is probably better to spend time letting off steam and unwinding. (Most people will be on your side and if you are feeling down will want to help you pick yourself up and get back the next day in good fighting spirit).
- Recognise your emotions let them out. Whatever you do, do not brood or rework answers in your head. Exams are unfair tests with not enough time!
- Think about what you could have done better in terms of presentation and use that for the next paper - forget about the detail of your answers - they cannot be changed.
- Remember if there are further Exams papers you cannot afford to take anything that may make you feel less than at your best physically. That includes alcohol, tobacco and sleeping pills.

YOUR NOTES

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19 Planning for when it is all over

Life goes on after Exams. But take into account the stress and strain. You need a break. Aim to take at least a few days holiday. Thereafter gradually pick up your normal responsibilities. Taking an Exam does take a lot out of you. It will take a long time for the body, mind and your routine to readjust to normal life. So take plenty of time to allow yourself to recover.

A neighbour - and Managing Director of a major importing company - told me a long time ago that he considered it best business practise not to hire any newly qualified accountant until at least two years after final professional exams. He believed it took time to recover and for people to be in their right minds to make the decisions about their future careers.

A final thought - to carry with you - is that passing an Exam permits you to do something. It is not a certification of competence - that comes with experience and making your career your hobby.

YOUR NOTES

20 Postscript: On being Dad

Having taken professional exams and qualified as a UK Chartered Accountant and a UK Certified Tax Accountant - I first thought about getting onto Paper my experiences of taking exams in the late 1980s. By 1991 I had got together my thoughts and committed them to Paper. Just in time as it proved - for in December 1992 my son was born – he is now nearly 19 years old and at University. To be followed by the birth of my daughter in January 1995 – who is now nearly 17 years old.

To a certain extent I'd like to claim my part in their success to date – on the basis of getting them to read and think about how my 1991 draft Paper was relevant to their needs. Mum and I are so pleased with their success to date.

However there was something new I did add for them.

I was reflecting on how more and more today pay is performance related and we therefore introduced my children to 'exam pay by performance'.

For GCSEs (English exams at 16 years old) the possible grades are A*, A, B, C ... Mum and I offered a 100% bonus for each subject score at A*, 80% bonus at A and 60% bonus at B - with no bonus payment below a B.

My son took his International Baccalaureate this summer (similar to 'A' level exams but broader) and we paid a basic bonus for a minimum 30 point score – with extra bonuses for each point on top.

We feel this approach models the external jobs market and moves focus from 'fear' towards thinking of exams as a 'positive opportunity'. It seems to be working so far!

YOUR NOTES