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# GCSE Revision Guide

*Evidence-based techniques to help you revise smarter*

- Under each technique, reflect and make notes on what works for you.

## 1. The six best revision techniques

Not all revision methods are equal. Research consistently shows that some techniques are far more effective than others. This guide explains the six highest-impact methods and — crucially — what to avoid.

### Retrieval practice

*Test yourself without looking at your notes*

The most powerful revision technique. Closing your notes and forcing your brain to recall information strengthens memory far more than re-reading. Use brain dumps, flashcard quizzes, and past paper questions.

**Tools / methods:** Brain dumps, past papers, flashcards, quiz apps

### Spaced repetition

*Review material at increasing intervals*

Instead of studying a topic once and moving on, revisit it after 1 day, then 7 days, then 21 days. Each time you review it just before you're about to forget it, the memory gets stronger.

**Tools / methods:** Anki flashcard app, revision planner, index cards

### Interleaving

*Mix topics and subjects within each session*

Instead of spending a whole session on one topic ("blocked practice"), switch between different topics or subjects. It feels harder, but research shows it leads to better long-term retention.

**Tools / methods:** Mixed revision timetable, rotating topics each session

### The Feynman technique

*Explain the topic as if teaching a child*

Choose a concept, close your notes, and explain it aloud or in writing as simply as possible. Anywhere you get stuck or vague is a gap in your knowledge — go back and fill it.

**Tools / methods:** Blank paper, voice recording, teach a friend

## Past papers

*Practise under timed exam conditions*

The single best preparation for the exam itself. Work through past papers under real conditions — timed, no notes, in silence. Then mark your work carefully using the mark scheme.

**Tools / methods:** Exam board websites (AQA, OCR, Edexcel), revision books

## Mind mapping

*Link ideas visually around a central theme*

Useful for subjects with lots of interconnected ideas — History, Geography, English. A mind map helps you see how concepts link together. Most useful as a connection tool, not for memorising facts.

**Tools / methods:** Blank A3 paper, colour pens, digital tools (Miro, Coggle)

# Effectiveness at a glance

*Based on research! (Dunlosky et al.)*

Technique	Effectiveness	Time to see results
Retrieval practice	★★★★★ Very high	Within sessions
Past papers	★★★★★ Very high	Within weeks
Spaced repetition	★★★★ High	Weeks of use
Feynman technique	★★★★ High	Within sessions
Interleaving	★★★ Moderate–high	Weeks of use
Mind mapping	★★ Moderate	Varies

## 2. Avoid these common traps

Students often spend hours on revision that feels productive but produces very little learning. These three methods are the most common culprits.

### Re-reading your notes

Re-reading feels productive because it's easy — but that ease is the problem. Your brain is recognising words rather than retrieving them. After a few passes through your notes, everything looks familiar, which you mistake for knowing it. It isn't. What to do instead: close the notes and do a brain dump.

### Passive highlighting

Highlighting is low-effort and gives a false sense of progress. Colouring text does not help your brain store or organise information. If you must use highlighting, pair it with a retrieval task immediately after — highlight a section, then close the book and write down what you just read.

### Last-minute cramming

Cramming the night before can push information into short-term memory, but it disappears quickly — often before you even sit the exam. It also leaves you exhausted on the day. Start using spaced repetition weeks in advance instead, so material is already stored in long-term memory.

### 3. How to do retrieval practice — step by step

Retrieval practice is the single highest-impact revision technique available. Here is exactly how to do it in a 30–40 minute session.

1

#### Close everything and pick a topic

Close your notes, textbook, and phone. Pick one topic you have already studied. Retrieval only works if your brain has to work to find the answer.

2

#### Do a brain dump (10 minutes)

Take a blank piece of paper. Write down everything you can remember about the topic. No structure needed — bullet points, diagrams, equations, dates, key words. Everything. Set a timer.

3

#### Check and mark in a different colour

Now open your notes. Go through what you wrote and mark it. Add anything you missed in a different colour pen. Correct anything wrong. The gaps are your revision priority list.

4

#### Answer exam-style questions on your gaps

For every gap found, write a full answer to an exam-style question on that topic. Don't just re-read — write. Use past paper questions where possible.

5

#### Schedule your next retrieval session

Write in your planner when you will revisit this topic. Review after 1 day, then 7 days, then 21 days. Each review, the brain dump will be faster and the gaps smaller.

### Session timing

Activity	Time	Notes
Topic selection	2 minutes	Pick one topic, close everything
Brain dump	10 minutes	Blank paper, no notes
Check and mark	10 minutes	Different colour pen
Exam questions on gaps	15 minutes	Write full answers
Schedule next session	2 minutes	Into planner now

**Key point:** Writing a full answer — even a short one — is far more effective than re-reading. Your pen should be moving, not your eyes.

## 4. When to revisit — the spacing schedule

Spaced repetition works by reviewing material just before you are about to forget it. Each review pushes the next review further into the future. Use this schedule for every topic you revise.

Review	When	What to do	Expected gap size
Initial	Day you study it	Full retrieval session	Lots of gaps — normal
First	1 day later	Brain dump + check	Some gaps remaining
Second	7 days later	Brain dump + exam Qs	Fewer gaps
Third	21 days later	Brain dump + exam Qs	Mostly confident
Final	3–5 days before exam	Past paper questions only	Minor details only

**Why this works:** Each time you retrieve something and find it in memory, the memory trace becomes stronger. The difficulty of retrieval — having to really search for it — is what produces the benefit.

## 5. Choosing the right technique

Different techniques work best at different stages of revision. Use this as a guide.

### Weeks before the exam

#### Priority techniques:

- Spaced repetition — set up Anki decks or index card systems for each topic
- Interleaving — mix topics within revision sessions rather than spending a whole session on one subject
- Retrieval practice — brain dumps after each lesson or the day after

### Days before the exam

#### Priority techniques:

- Past papers under timed, exam conditions — this is now the highest priority
- Error analysis — every wrong answer gets a retrieval practice session of its own
- Feynman technique for topics that still feel shaky

### The night before

#### What to do:

- One short brain dump on a topic you feel least confident about
- Review your two-colour marked sheets from earlier retrieval sessions
- No cramming — rest and sleep genuinely improve exam performance

## 6. The Pomodoro method — structuring every session

The best revision techniques in the world won't work if you can't concentrate for long enough to use them. The Pomodoro method is a simple structure that helps.

- ▶ **25 min** Focused work — phone in another room, one task only
- || **5 min** Short break — stand up, move, no screens ideally
- ▶ **25 min** Next Pomodoro — different topic if possible (interleaving)
- || **5 min** Short break
- ★ **15–30 min** Long break after every 4 Pomodoros

**The rule:** No phone during the 25 minutes. Not face-down, not on silent — in another room. Research shows even the presence of a smartphone reduces cognitive capacity.

## Quick reference!

DO THESE	AVOID THESE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Retrieval practice (brain dumps, quizzes)</li><li>• Spaced repetition (review at 1, 7, 21 days)</li><li>• Interleaving (mix topics each session)</li><li>• Past papers under timed conditions</li><li>• Feynman technique (explain it aloud)</li><li>• Pomodoro sessions (25 min on, 5 min off)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Re-reading your notes</li><li>• Passive highlighting</li><li>• Revising one topic for hours in a row</li><li>• Cramming the night before</li><li>• Revising with your phone nearby</li><li>• Copying out notes without testing yourself</li></ul>

### Retrieval practice in 5 steps

1. Close all notes and pick one topic
2. Brain dump for 10 minutes (blank paper, everything you know)
3. Check against notes in a different colour — gaps = revision list
4. Answer exam-style questions on every gap
5. Schedule the next review: 1 day → 7 days → 21 days

### **Remember:**

The techniques that feel hardest — retrieval, interleaving, spacing — are the ones that work best. Difficulty is a sign of learning, not a sign of failure.