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by Simon Rushby

INTRODUCTION

Revision can be a word with largely negative connotations. For teachers, it can mean producing 'packs' and summary resources, going back over old ground with students, and finding innovative ways to help them remember content and hone exam skills. For students, it can represent a mountain to be climbed, one that's fraught with insecurities about facts forgotten, questions not clearly understood and huge amounts of content to be digested. For parents, it's a carpet of broken glass, brought up at home at their peril, with the potential to spark arguments and misunderstandings with their stressed offspring.

Let's face it, the most talented PR people would struggle to make the concept of revision attractive. There will always be thousands of things that students would prefer to do. It is likely that any attempt to make revision 'fun' and 'positive' is going to fail, or at the very least be treated with cynicism. But revision is necessary, and it is important to look at ways in which it can be made **effective** and **manageable**. 'Normalising' revision for GCSE and A level music exams is essential if students are to feel prepared, engaged and supported during the exam season.

The word 'revision' does not strictly mean 're-visiting' in the sense of going over things again. Its root is in the Latin word for seeing, and so 'revision' in its literal sense means re-imagining, re-thinking or re-visualising a concept. Revisions of books, plans or even political speeches usually involve updating, changing, adapting and improving them, rather than simply repeating them.

So, the first thing to reject when it comes to revision is that it is a tedious process of going over old ground, re-reading notes and trying to remember things learnt some time ago. The content to be revised – such as the analysis of a set work, for example – remains the same, but the process of revising it needs to be as much of an engaging, interesting learning experience the second time round as it was the first time. To this end, the key piece of kit in a student's revision armoury has got to be their **method**: they need to know exactly **how** they are going to approach each topic, so that their first steps in revising it are positive and active.

In this resource we'll look at the 'hows' of revision, starting more generally and gradually homing in on more specific activities useful in preparing for written music exams. Over the coming months, there will be further, more specific resources where we look at different aspects of the GCSE and A level music exams, and investigate the most effective ways to revise for them.

FIVE GOLDEN RULES FOR REVISION

Let's start with the basics. These five golden rules are essential if revision is going to be effective. They need to be discussed with students regularly, and from very early on in the course. They are not just rules for revision, but instead common-sense guidelines for any kind of study, whether it's completing a homework assignment or preparing a presentation for a lesson. (They also apply to writers who need to meet deadlines for resources about revision!)

1. START REVISION EARLY

Ensure students understand that they need to write a timetable and make it as detailed as they can, right down to what needs to be done each day and how much time to spend on each topic. They also need to schedule breaks and 'time off' into the plan. Every student is different, but few will be able to work in a focused way for more than 45 minutes or so without the need for a break. Learning what their 'focus time' is will also be helpful for the exam itself, when they can schedule in short 'sit back' breaks during written papers. There's more on this at the end of the resource.

These five common-sense rules are adapted in part from Seeta Bhardwa's excellent article on revision written for university students, which you can read [here](#).

2. TAILOR REVISION TO YOUR LEARNING STYLE

Whether it's flash cards, copying information, recording themselves into their phones, listening to podcasts, watching videos, or drawing diagrams and pictures, students need to find the methods that work best for them for each topic. They also need to think about the times of day when they're most receptive – early mornings or late evenings, for example. Everyone is different. Discuss with them how they can be creative and varied with their methods, and get them to think of interesting, engaging ways to revise that are different from their normal lessons.

3. CREATE A GOOD REVISION ENVIRONMENT

Once students have worked out how and when they learn best, they need to think about where. This will vary for everyone, but they will need to be strict about keeping disruption and distraction to a minimum and choosing an environment that works best for their concentration.

This could be different from where they *want* to work. A teenager's idea of pleasant surroundings is usually somewhere with lots of distractions. They need to be honest with themselves and think about the type of environment where they are **most productive**. Comfort is important, but so is the separation of 'work zone' and 'relax zone'.

Some students prefer to work in complete silence, others with music playing. If they have music on, ask them what kind of music works best (some research, for example, suggests that instrumental music is better than music with lyrics). Students could share revision playlists with each other – or better still, have playlists relevant to the exam with appropriate set works and wider listening included.

It's worth saying at this point though that many experts believe that revising with music on is not effective, since the music competes for the student's attention, and may hinder them from getting to grips with more complex skills. Suggest to students that they might like to try working with non-musical soundscapes like white noise or sounds of rain or the sea. There are websites available that provide these resources, including Noisli.

Ask your students if the comfort of their own room is best, or maybe a different part of the house – or even a different location such as the local library. What will make them feel most comfortable? And would changing their environment regularly help to keep revision engaging (for example, having a library day once a week)?

A school I taught at recently started opening its library on Saturday mornings for students to come in on a voluntary basis for revision. Phones and headphones were handed in at the door and silence was insisted upon. Within a couple of weeks these sessions were over-subscribed, and Year 11 students in particular were asking if there could be more of them. It's probably true that students don't always appreciate the benefits of a quiet, work-like environment until they've tried it.

4. BE STRICT

Once they've decided on their timetable, environment and revision activities, it's important for students to be strict and adhere to them. Discuss with them the best way to manage distractions from other people – whether this is through alerts from devices or noise in the house. Sitting down with other members of the family to discuss this is really beneficial, and keeping a copy of the revision timetable in a prominent place in the house will help parents and siblings understand when not to disrupt study.

Managing technology is a particular problem now. Switching the phone off is relatively easy and needs to be emphasised – the 'ping' of an incoming message is going to upset focus even if the message is not looked at. But it's harder if tablets and laptops that are to be used for revision themselves contain distractions such as social media alerts. Discuss how easy it is, for example, to go onto YouTube to look at a study-related video and find yourself sidetracked onto other videos. We'll look at how to manage these very modern forms of distractions later.

5. PRACTISE DOING THE EXAM

It's just as important to practise exam technique as it is to revise content, as it is very often the skills part of the exam – the **application** of knowledge – that causes the most lost marks. Every revision session should include some consideration of how the topic being revised is going to be tested on the big day.

Furthermore, a lot of wasted time can be avoided if students start revising a topic knowing in detail exactly what they're going to be asked to do in the exam. Revision resources can be tailored so that they mirror the format of likely questions, and allow students to 'hit' the important, mark-scoring points. Ensure that students know where to access past papers, practice questions and mark schemes.

MAKING THE MOST EFFECTIVE USE OF REVISION TIME

When thinking about preparing for exams, the first thing to address is the question of feeling 'on top' of revision, of being productive when sitting at the desk and having a sense of achievement at the end of every revision session.

These three feelings go a long way towards minimising stress in the exam period, so discuss with your students the importance of achieving them. Put more simply, students should ensure that they can say, every day:

- 'I am making good progress towards being ready for the exam.'
- 'I am productive when I am doing revision.'
- 'The revision session I have just completed was successful.'

The biggest step towards ensuring these three states of mind is not necessarily having an effective revision timetable or knowing how to approach the revision of a topic. It's actually something that students find extremely hard to do and are the most reluctant to address. It's **managing distractions**.

A distraction can be anything that takes part of the mind's focus away from the task at hand. Research completed recently in the USA found that the average person takes more than 20 minutes to get back to full focus following a distraction. Wherever we are, on average a distraction such as an email or phone message diverts our attention every two minutes.

If a student's revision session, between breaks, is 45 minutes long, and there is a distraction during that 45-minute period, it is easy to see how revision can become frustratingly unproductive very quickly. Moreover, once a student begins to feel that they did not achieve very much in a session, their motivation level falls and their stress level rises. In turn, these changes result in an increased desire to be diverted away from the task in hand.

Distractions are self-perpetuating, and it's easy to let them grow like a snowball. The important thing is to cut them off at the very start and not let them take hold. Talk to your students about their **attention management**, a concept discussed by author Maura Thomas in her book *Work Without Walls*, which is aimed at business executives, many of whom work from home. Some of Thomas's advice is included in the following look at common distractions and ways to manage them.

Distractions at home

If students are working at home, they need to have control of their work environment. Creating 'boundaries' that are respected by everyone in the house (including the student who is working) will help everyone to understand the importance of not disturbing the work. Get your students to list their most common distractions at home, followed by their ideas for managing them.

Helping other people who live with your students to understand the need to let them work undisturbed is paramount, so some family rules for the revision period, and clarity about when the student is working and when they are not, can be really helpful. Some students might also benefit from imposing rules on themselves, such as:

- No sitting or lying on the bed to work.
- No switching on the TV or games console except at pre-agreed times.
- No looking at the phone during work periods.

Controlling technology is probably the most important thing of all. Smartphones and watches make it very difficult to avoid distractions, and the lines are now very blurred between social messages and work. Students will receive school emails and information about their work on the same device as their Instagram or Snapchat feed, and given the addictive nature of this technology, it's virtually impossible to stick to a policy to regulate the use of phones during work sessions.

However, the more a person allows technology to interrupt them, the more they expect it, says Thomas. She suggests keeping the phone, tablet and laptop in offline mode during work periods, by using the *do not disturb* or *flight mode* setting and closing down email applications. Putting devices out of arm's reach is a brilliant idea. If the internet is needed for revision, ensure that alerts from social media are switched off, and have strict rules for resisting those non-relevant Google search results or YouTube video suggestions.

Setting a timer for 35- to 45-minute work sessions is a good idea. The ability to ignore devices is improved if the student knows they can check them at the end of each of these sessions. Help them to understand that a message from a friend will wait – it does not have to be replied to instantly. The Forest app is a simple but effective tool to help manage distractions from devices.

You could also encourage students to think about the times of day when distractions are less likely. For example, during study leave, working in the evening when more friends are online might be less productive than working during the morning.

If motivation is needed to make that step towards actively restricting the use of social media while studying, discuss these points, all of which have emerged in recent research on student productivity:

- Work assignments such as essays will take longer to complete when there are distractions during the process. It can take more than 20 minutes to return to complete focus following a single distraction, yet distractions from social media can be as frequent as every two minutes.
- The constant switching of attention between more than one thing (eg revision and a social media feed) causes increased tiredness and less productivity.
- Information studied where distractions have occurred will be more easily forgotten – retention of information is better when the study has been uninterrupted.
- **All kinds of study will be more quickly and successfully completed in an environment free from distractions.**

DEVELOPING METACOGNITION

Now that we've discussed the issue of managing revision time, let's look at how to plan the actual content of these revision sessions. At the beginning of a lengthy revision period for impending exams, it's easy to get overwhelmed by the scale of the work required and struggle to get started.

A useful starting point is to help students develop their **metacognition**. This is their ability to analyse the ways in which they think, and in turn develop their awareness and control of their learning, and come up with useful strategies. In a nutshell, it's their understanding of how they learn.

If a student is aware of how they learn best, they will be able to plan very productive revision sessions. In almost all cases, passive digestion of notes (for example, by reading a textbook or class notes) is the least effective way to improve the understanding of a topic. The important thing for students to discover is how they personally can re-imagine a topic to increase their retention of its content, and their understanding of how to apply it.

There are some activities you can do in class that will help students to develop their metacognitive skills and produce their own revision methods when they're away from the classroom. These are mostly to do with **questioning** and **feedback**.

Here are three things you could do with your exam class in a lesson where a topic is being revised.

1. THE GROUP RULE

Arrange students into smallish groups (four is a good number) and set them a revision task, such as to list the characteristics of melody and rhythm in a set work. Tell the students that there is one simple, indisputable rule: no individual is allowed to ask you (the teacher) a question. Instead, the group must work together to find all the information they can without help from you. At the end of the process (you can set your own time limit), the group may ask you agreed questions collectively through a spokesperson.

This allows students to develop their powers of self-reflection and deduction – very important metacognitive skills when it comes to the appraisal of music. Through discussion and detective work in the group, they can see how to get past the ‘facts’ of the task and focus more on the ‘reasons’ and ‘signs’ that will help them find this information in an exam situation. Remembering the fact that a Mozart melody has conjunct movement is much harder, and far less useful, than being able to recognise conjunct movement visually or aurally.

2. SPECIFIC FEEDBACK

Set rules that students must follow **before** they ask for input from you. A really helpful skill for students is to be able to mark their own work and give themselves feedback through highlighting and annotating their answers, without any input from the teacher. Using a mark scheme becomes a very educational and valuable process, because the student is actively involved in the feedback process rather than receiving it passively through oral or written comments from someone else. Above all, it gets them out of the mindset of ‘I’ve finished, please tell me how I’ve done’, and forces them to consider what feedback they want, what advice they would give themselves, and where *they* think they need to improve.

Through the revision period, get into the habit in class of giving students time to complete their answer to a question, and then *further* time to mark it and write feedback notes to themselves. After this, they should write down what they need you to help them with. The intention is that students will have more independent control over their learning and progress, and therefore more ability to direct their own learning. The bonus is that your feedback will be more specific and more personalised because each student has indicated to you exactly what they need. Hopefully it will also go some way towards eliminating repetition on your part.

3. META QUESTIONS

For younger pupils (perhaps up to GCSE) a useful end-of-lesson activity is a task sometimes known as ‘exit tickets’ or ‘looking for learning’. Here, you ask students to select a small number (maybe two or three) of pieces of paper from a box.

These pieces of paper contain single questions about their learning experience during the lesson, and can be colour-coded using the traffic light model:

- **Red** questions will be about challenges that a student has encountered, such as: ‘What did I find most difficult in today’s lesson?’
- **Amber** questions will look for examples of different approaches and re-imagining, such as: ‘What aspect of today’s topic did I think differently about?’
- **Green** questions will allow students to celebrate their success by asking things like ‘When was I making the most progress?’ or ‘When was I learning really well?’

WORKING SMART: THE BEST WAYS TO PLAN AND PROGRESS

Over the coming months we’ll be looking at types of resources that can help students to revise effectively for the various aspects of the GCSE and A level exams. As we’ve already discussed, the myriad of different learning styles encountered by teachers among students in front of them make providing effective resources that work for everyone difficult, and it can be time-consuming for already busy teachers to provide them, especially if they need to be personalised.

The target is to find ways to help students make their own resources, which, if done well, will be by far the most effective way for them to revise. The process of making a revision resource is, of course, a form of revision itself,

and if the resource then works efficiently in jogging the memory and reinforcing the key skills and content as the exam looms closer, it will be an extremely effective use of revision time.

There are some styles of revision that work for everyone, and similarly, there are others that do not. For example, tried and tested effective revision activities include:

- Doing quizzes and practice questions, or being interviewed about a topic. **Retrieval practice** – as it is sometimes known – helps students to secure knowledge into their long-term memory.
- Planning to revise a number of related topics in short bursts throughout a day.
- Working with a partner, maybe by creating resources together or for each other.
- Teaching or explaining a concept to another person.
- Reimagining a concept – finding a different way to present it, visually or aurally.

Those that should generally be avoided include:

- Overuse of colour and highlighter pens. Making colourful resources can be very helpful, especially for visual learners, but excessive colouring in can actually be a form of procrastination, and too much highlighting of text is counterproductive.
- Cramming – trying to revise everything in a short space of time. Spacing out revision is far more effective. Similarly, losing sleep to revision as exams approach is always a bad idea.
- Focusing on one topic area for too long, and then not coming back to it for a long time. Mixing up the content covered each day is far more effective.
- Taking long breaks – it's important to have a sensible ratio of activity between active revision, passive sessions such as reading, and breaks.

Although working hard – putting in the hours each day in preparation for exams – is part of the route to success for students, it's important to emphasise the greater target, which is to work **smart**. Musicians are very familiar with the concept of practice when it comes to learning an instrument, for example. Ineffective practice includes activities like playing a piece all the way through and 'skating over' the more technically tricky sections. An hour spent working on a small section of a piece, with the play-through reserved as a treat at the end of the practice session, will allow students to progress in their playing far more quickly. The same applies to excessive listening-through in composition sessions, when a student is stuck on a passage. These activities, where the student focuses on aspects with which they're already fairly secure, are just another form of procrastination.

Students therefore need to be encouraged to leave their comfort zones. If there are two practice questions, and one looks harder than the other, then that's the one they should be doing. Revision timetables need to focus on the areas that students are least good at. That said, if the first task of the day is a really tricky one, the motivation to get started is severely tested.

A really good revision timetable needs to have all of the following qualities:

1. SPACING

The 'little and often' rule is very important when it comes to revision, since frequent repetition of skills helps to hone them and make them more natural. Research has found that the best length of gap between sessions on the same topic should be between 10% and 20% of the total time you want to retain the information. So, if the exam is a month away, review the topic at least once every week, but if it's a week away, review it every day.

2. VARIETY

I've already said that spending a long time on just one topic is not helpful, and students should be mixing up different topics and finding links between them on each day of their revision period. The same can be said of revision styles – a day filled with a variety of activities such as past papers, quizzes, reading, drawing mind-maps and working with a partner is a much more enjoyable and productive day than one spent doing the same kind of work.

3. SCAFFOLDING

Approaching revision randomly without careful planning is not likely to be effective. Teachers are very familiar with the concept of scaffolding, where each activity builds on previous experiences and helps students to link things together and secure information in their long-term memory. The scaffolding concept should be applied to revision planning too – start each session revisiting what was done previously, build on it with the current revision task, and then reflect on how the new work relates to the previous work.

4. TESTING

One of the best ways to improve memory is through application in quizzes and practice questions where the stakes are low but the benefit is high. Repeated low-stakes testing also helps to improve confidence and reduce nerves as the exam gets closer, as the memory becomes less effective by the stress of the exam environment.

Naturally, doing past paper questions also helps students with their time management in the exam room. Getting feedback having done a quiz or past paper, through using a mark scheme, improves their metacognition and gives them objective information about what they need to focus on in future revision.

REVISION TIMETABLE

Here is a mock-up of a revision timetable for four days of study leave that might be helpful to look at with your students. It's aimed at an A level student who has two other subjects as well as music, but the thinking behind it can easily be applied to a GCSE revision timetable where there might be eight or more other subjects vying for revision time. In all cases, the 'little and often' rule needs to be remembered – even for GCSE students, returning to music revision two or three times a week is much more effective than just focusing on the subjects whose exams are most imminent.

The timetable is just a suggestion, mainly to show how the concepts of spacing, variety, scaffolding and testing can be applied in revision.

| | Mon | Tue | Wed | Thu |
|---------------|--|---|---|---|
| 9 – 9:45* | Set work A: preparation for past paper question. | Subject 3 | Lie-in | Set work D: preparation for past paper question. |
| 10 – 10:45 | Past paper question on set work A. | Subject 3 | Subject 2 | Past paper question on set work D. |
| 11 – 11:45 | Mark question and note areas for further study. | Subject 3 | Subject 2 | Swap completed question with study partner; mark and discuss. |
| 12 – 12:45 | Skype with study partner on set work B. | Subject 3 | Subject 2 | Subject 3 |
| 13 – 13:45 | Lunch | Lunch | Lunch | Lunch |
| 14 – 14:45 | Subject 2 | Review yesterday's work on set works A and B. Make quiz and email study partner. | Subject 3 | Subject 3 |
| 15 – 15:45 | Subject 2 | Set work C. | Subject 3 | Subject 3 |
| 16 – 16:45 | Subject 2 | Do quiz made by study partner on set works B and C. Note areas for further study. | Subject 3 | Time off |
| 17:00 – 19:00 | Dinner/relaxation | Dinner/relaxation | Dinner/relaxation | Dinner/relaxation |
| 19:30 – 21:00 | Subject 3 | Evening off | Review areas for further study identified so far. | Subject 2 |

*This is based on the idea of 15 minutes' 'down-time' per hour and some 'treats' such as lie-ins and evenings off. Other things that could be scheduled in might include meet-ups with a study partner for a couple of hours' work followed by pizza and a movie, or excursions to the library or into school for a change of environment. There should also be a full day off each week to avoid burn-out and over-tiredness. Emphasise also to students the importance of regular, healthy eating and drinking, plenty of sleep and fresh air.