

TASSOMAI



GCSE Survival Guide
Practical advice for students

Welcome to Tassomai's GCSE Survival Guide

If you're reading this, you're very likely to already be thinking about your approaching GCSEs... and there's every chance that the thought of sitting a large number of serious national exams in the **future feels pretty daunting**, and possibly still a bit unreal to you.

This guide has been put together by the team at Tassomai with the help of **subject specialists and education experts** to try to break down what you as a student need to know about the year or years ahead.



What you'll learn

- What motivates you to get the best out of yourself
- Which subjects or topics make you feel positive about yourself
- Which challenges you are most determined to overcome

The years leading up to this first great test are a **tremendous opportunity** for you to understand yourself and work out who you think you'd like to become.

But our guide also focuses on something more important – **supporting your mental and physical health** as you prepare. Our contributors give advice on looking after your own well-being and breaking down any concerns you have about assessments. Approaching the tests ahead with a healthy, balanced attitude will be key to your success, not only in GCSEs, but for years to come.

Murray Morrison
Tassomai founder
[@MurrayTassomai](#)

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Master your revision technique & make studying more efficient with Tassomai

Tassomai is an award-winning platform that works on the principle of little and often revision to embed learning and understanding. Feel motivated and confident for your studies with the adaptive learning app, the smarter way for you to learn and revise.

- Bite-sized multiple choice quizzes to reinforce learning
- Short explanation videos to deepen your understanding
- Daily goal and weekly challenges
- Track your knowledge progress journey using the Tassomai tree





Supporting your Wellbeing & Mental Health

How Can you Support your Mental Health and Wellbeing Throughout your GCSEs?

The GCSE years are some of the most difficult and frustrating that young people go through. Academic success can easily become the centre of attention during this period, even when there is so much else going on, but it is crucial that this pressure isn't allowed to **overshadow your physical and emotional wellbeing**.

It's time we broke down some of the myths surrounding GCSEs and that starts with thinking about the stress that is often associated with the assessments. Exams are probably one of your **first encounters with this kind of stress**. People who are already struggling with any other aspect of their life, be that with their family, friends, with illness or financial worries, find the struggle even harder.

We have spoken to **psychotherapy experts and mental health** campaigners to put together their top tips on how students can look after their mental wellbeing throughout their GCSEs, some are good reminders of age-old sayings and others bring a fresh perspective, either way we hope they help you to conquer GCSEs with confidence and understanding.



What's Really Happening When We Are Stressed?

The best way to minimise stress and anxiety for students is to understand **what it is and how we can combat it**. Everyone has experienced some form of stress in their lives, but how often do we stop to analyse its symptoms and its effect on the body?

Understanding and being prepared for the **physical and emotional signs of stress** can stop students from getting overwhelmed in new situations. It really does all come down to a bit of basic biology...

“By understanding what is happening biologically, you are better equipped to take yourself through some logistical steps or techniques to regain control and be able to focus in the assessment.”

– Karen Collins



Physical signs

Science teaching expert Karen Collins explained that *“many students show physical signs of stress right before assessments as their fight or flight response kicks in with their adrenaline.”*

These symptoms can include:

Hands
shaking

Breathing
quickens

Trouble
sleeping

Sweating

Heart
beating
faster than
normal

Headaches

Stomach
pain or
feeling sick

The Teenage Brain



Teenagers are going through **monumental changes** in most aspects of their lives during the time when you sit your GCSEs. With this in mind, knowing what is physically changing in your own brain can be really illuminating when it comes to **looking after your mental health** and maintaining good communication with those around you.

We spoke to **Madeleine Inkin**, teenage psychotherapist and co-founder of Tassomai, about what is really happening in teenagers' brains, and this is what we learned:

- Complex hormonal changes are taking place in the limbic system and prefrontal cortex during your teenage years
- These changes are happening at the same age as academic, family and social pressures tend to increase
- Teenage brains are going through a large period of change during the GCSE years, so it is very understandable that things can feel overwhelming sometimes

The Limbic System

The part of the brain that is responsible for sleep, emotional responses and seeking rewards

The Prefrontal Cortex

The part of the brain that is responsible for decision making, organising and controlling impulses



"Knowing and recognising that these changes are going on makes you realise just how much neurological development is happening during these years and how unsettled teenage life really is."

– Madeleine Inkin

Practical Mental Health Tips

Do

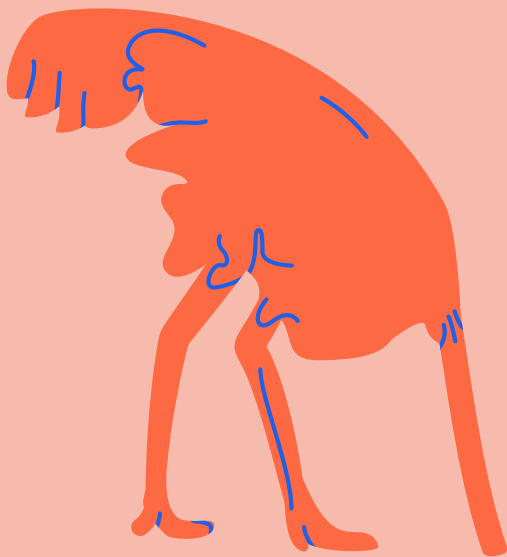
- **Start the conversation!** Ask friends and family about how they're feeling. Vulnerability is contagious! Open up to others, listen to their struggles and hopefully it will help you to see that you're not alone in how you're feeling.
- **Act early!** If you think you are struggling, don't sweep it under the rug. Even if you're not sure of the best way to get help, it's always better to address any underlying issues or unhappiness as soon as it arises.
- **Educate yourself** on mental health and the best ways to support your own, even if you aren't currently struggling. **Young Minds** has great resources for young people and their parents who want to feel a bit more informed.
- Try to set up a sustainable routine around GCSE preparation, even if it's initially 15 minutes each day. The confidence-building power of daily routine is transformative and can **prevent performance stress** before it starts.

Don't

- Stop seeing friends during revision time, it's good to break up the work with healthy social situations – **everyone needs some downtime**.
- **Try to take everything on yourself** – it's really important to remind yourself that you are not indestructible. There may come a time when the support of friends and family may not feel like enough, but asking for professional help is nothing to be ashamed of.
- **Allow stress to become sickness**. If you're able to identify when you're becoming overwhelmed, try to give yourself an intervention. It's all too easy for everyday stress over GCSEs to tip into something more serious, so don't let a fixable situation get worse than it needs to and reach out for support.
- Mistake a single test score for a **final assessment of your potential**. Instead focus on how your work is developing, what you want to improve on next, and on the positive incremental changes over time.

Are you Suffering from Exam Stress?

Students preparing for exams often display very similar characteristics and it is good to be aware of a few classic archetypes of exam stress so that you can recognise your own behaviour before it becomes too much. Make sure you're looking out for these signs in yourself and your friends!



The Ostrich

The ostrich is that student who, at the mere mention of their exams - or their revision - **buries their head** in the sand. You could be quite obvious in this behaviour - "I don't want to talk about it" - or it might be subtler, finding an excuse to get out of the room and avoid the topic. Don't let this behaviour take over your revision period, start small and make a plan with a friend or family member, because the very **act of avoidance** means that the revision work will pile up and the stress will increase.

The Porcupine

Feeling a little prickly? Similar to the ostrich in many respects, but rather than avoid the conversation, the porcupine might become **rather spikey** and start shaking their quills. The reasons are quite similar, and the approach, likewise requires calm, careful conversation with a trusted helper and a **structured plan to remove the fear** of the exams. Try not to prick anyone who is trying to help you!



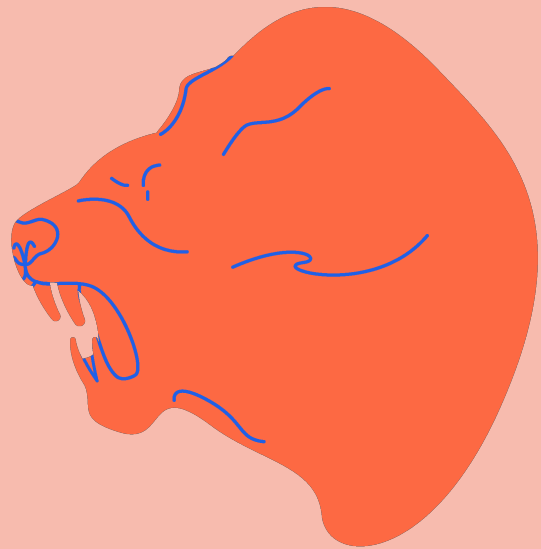


The Meerkat

You might think you're doing really well with revision if you fit into the Meerkat category: **super busy**, extremely diligent, revising late and requesting extra practice papers from the teacher. But this behaviour may indicate a lack of confidence and a **tendency to worry**. Talk to your family members and make sure you're keeping things in perspective. You might even want to limit your intense revision schedule in order to allow time for R&R. **You won't be your best if you don't have enough rest!**

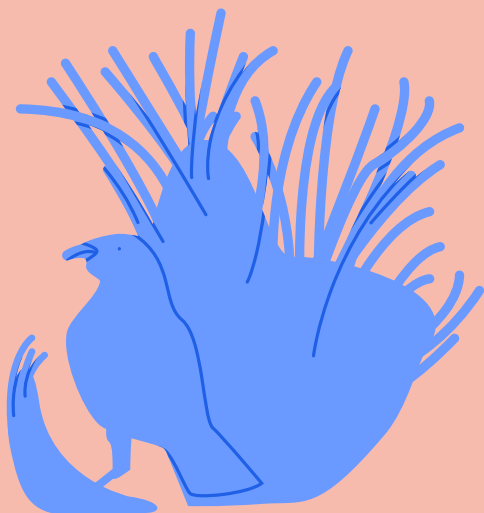
The Lion

A tendency of higher-achievers - the Lion is that student who seems to have it **all under control**, but spends an inordinate amount of time lying around. If you're behaving as though the exams present no problems - to the point perhaps of arrogance or laziness - then it's time for an intervention. Are you **hiding any anxiety** and feeling like you can't ask for help, or don't know how to? There's no shame in asking for help when you need it.



The Bower Bird

A classic behaviour, not unlike the Meerkat. The Bower Bird (who spends large parts of its life **decorating its nest**) lends its name nicely to the type of student who keeps themselves terribly busy focusing on **superficial tasks** like colouring in notes or organising files and revision plans. If you think you might be a Bower Bird when it comes to your revision, then have a good think about your aims for each revision session, and **hold yourself accountable** to see how much you achieve each day.



Mental Health Resources

[SHOUT85258](#)

SHOUT85258 is a text message based organisation that gives young people an accessible way of asking for help. Think of it as the texting version of the Samaritans. Even if you aren't currently struggling, you can save their number to your contacts so that you know they're there if you need them.

[Samaritans](#)

Samaritans is a registered charity aimed at providing emotional support to anyone in emotional distress, struggling to cope, or at risk of suicide throughout Great Britain and Ireland, predominantly through their telephone helpline, which is available 24/7 for those who need it.

[Papyrus UK](#)

Papyrus UK is a mental health charity specialising in supporting young people and they have great advice for parents on their website too. The resources on their site are fantastic. If you are unsure where to start when looking for support, head to their website.

[Young Minds](#)

Young Minds is the UK's leading charity fighting for children and young people's mental health. As an organisation, they are fighting for a world where no young person feels alone with their mental health. They have a wealth of resources on their website to help you understand more about your feelings and what support is available if you need it.

[Switchboard](#)

Switchboard is a hotline, instant message and email service run by volunteers who all identify as LGBT+. They offer a safe space for anyone to discuss sexuality, gender identity, sexual health and emotional well-being.



“People don’t compare mental health to their physical health enough - if you were concerned for your physical health you would be straight down to your GP asking for a check up and making sure everything was ok. You wouldn’t leave an infection to ‘clear up by itself’, you would act, and the same has to go for mental health.”

– Ben West, mental health campaigner

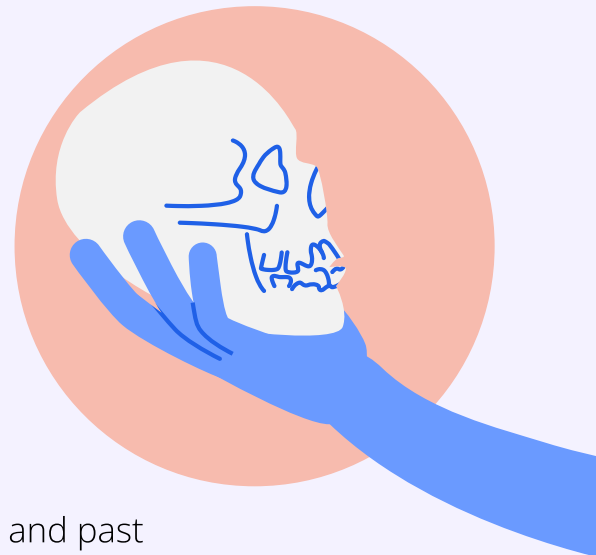
Tackling GCSE Subjects

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GCSE English

English language and literature can feel like a lot of reading, especially if you are more scientific in your approach to revision, but there are lots of ways to master this brilliant subject, even if you don't necessarily think it's 'for you'.

Kathrine Mortimore, English teacher at Torquay Academy, advises that revising for the GCSE English literature exam is ***“not all about memorising quotations – it’s also about knowing how to use these quotes to illustrate a point.”***



Practical Tips

As well as typical revision practices such as flashcards and past papers, when it comes to revising for the exam, Abi Ludlow, English teacher and Head of KS3, also recommends doing a ***“30 minute writing challenge: give yourself a Unit 2 task and start a 30 minute timer. Aim for a detailed plan and at least one side of writing!”*** Mix up these more formal practices with short quizzes and engaging conversations about what you're studying with family and friends.



“If you know the content of the texts you’ve studied and you know the structure of the papers inside out, then you’re perfectly set up for being able to apply the knowledge of the former to the latter - it’s all about getting a good understanding of both textual and procedural knowledge.”

GCSE Science

Science is a very content-heavy subject and it's easy for the GCSE to start to feel overwhelming if you don't have an organised plan. Revision doesn't have to be intense from the very beginning, but it does help to get the ball rolling early. It's important to ensure you fully understand the content you are studying and aren't just regurgitating memorised facts.

One teacher we spoke to explained that *“for all three sciences, there are basic facts and premises the students need to learn but the real challenge comes in the exams when they have to apply this knowledge to questions.”*



Building Confidence



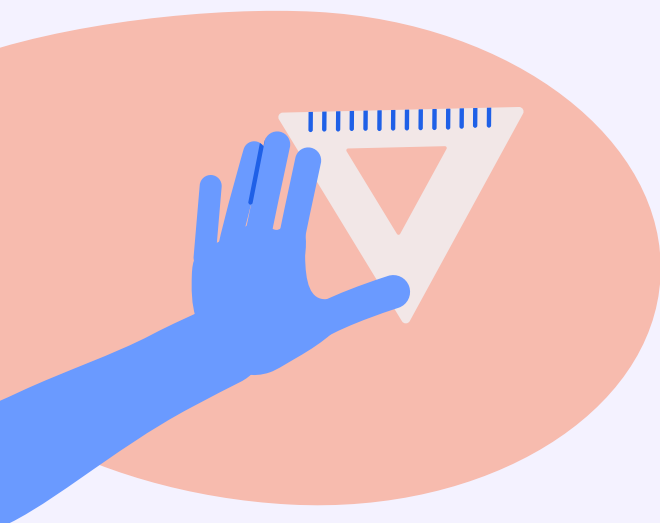
Matt Green, 'The Rapping Science Teacher' on TikTok, says that *“the best way to build confidence is to start with the topics that you find hard to understand. It can be a really great motivator for a student to feel like they've mastered a topic that they have been told is the 'most difficult one on the course', because from that point on everything gets easier and slots into place.”*

Kit Betts-Masters, science teacher and YouTuber behind 'Gorilla Physics', says that *“science is definitely seen as a trickier subject but I think it is also one of the most interesting and there's a route into it for every student.”*

Science is all about asking questions: not necessarily knowing the answers, but seeking answers. So if you don't feel like you're mastering a topic right away, don't worry, it's all part of the learning process!

GCSE Maths

It's all too common for students to say that they are 'bad at maths', however, maths expert Wendy Finan says that *"maths is largely about the mental attitude you have towards it."* Having a positive approach to your maths work, rather than dismissing the subject as soon as you start to struggle, is key to building your confidence in the subject.



Laying the Foundation

Like our other GCSE specialists, Wendy supports getting started early when it comes to revision: *"the key to doing well in mocks and exams alike is consistency. By remaining consistent and being strong in the basics, you are much more likely to succeed both academically and emotionally."*

Wendy also says that *"the key thing to getting the most out of GCSE maths is laying strong foundations – the basic core topics include number properties and calculation, ratio, fractions, decimals, percentages, and using negative numbers. If you don't have a solid understanding of these ideas, then piling on the harder topics is simply not going to work."*

Therefore, when it comes to revising GCSE maths, sometimes it can be useful to pinpoint topics where you are struggling and then return to revising the basics related to that area to fix any gaps in basic knowledge.

"Just like a Jenga tower, maths needs a solid foundation, otherwise everything laid on top will come crumbling down."

GCSE Geography

Geography is a subject that looks directly at the world around us and teaches us how things formed in the past and are still forming today. It's a brilliant subject to get stuck into but there's also a lot of content to cover in your GCSE years.

Where to begin?

Flashcards are a classic for a reason! If you start making them early enough, they're a great way to test yourself and ask others to test you.

Josh Tipping, former Head of Geography, told us that his favourite piece of advice for students is to always ask **SO WHAT?** *"I had this phrase written in big letters all around the classroom to remind students to expand their answers beyond just stating facts. It's all well and good to know that polar bears have white fur but if you can't tell me WHY then that knowledge won't help you to get the top marks."*

Which areas require the most work?

Our geography experts all agree that there are a few key areas that students should pay attention to when they're learning and revising for geography:

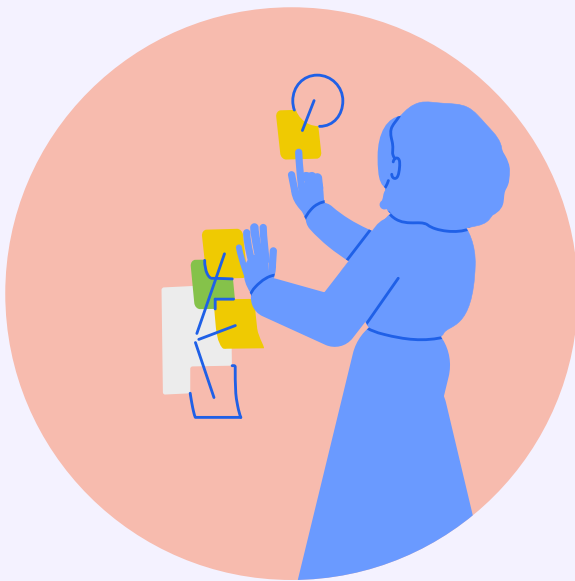
- **Model answers for key 4 mark questions** – these will be questions like 'how does a meander form' or 'how does a volcano form' and they are easy ways to pick up marks if you pay them enough attention
- **Learning key facts about case studies** – even name dropping a case study can help towards higher grades so make sure you have a good understanding to draw on when they need it
- **Revise some basic maths** – averages, bar graphs and charts all make appearances in geography papers and it can be the difference between grades if you can get them right



GCSE History

History is a content-heavy subject that can be tricky to revise for but as long as you master your exam technique, there's no reason why you can't succeed in your history GCSE!

History can be a challenge for students who don't feel confident in their essay writing skills, so practising structuring and writing these longer answers can be a real help when it comes to the exams.



It's All About the Connections

The best way to aim for the higher marks in history papers is to make sure you understand the links between the different topics you've covered, whether that's recognising that two events took place in the same time period and what that means or noting similarities in the treatment of people from a certain social class over time.

Keir Smith, Teacher of History at a school in Bristol, says his favourite method is:

“Write down everything you know about a topic or time period on a bit sheet of paper, spreading out each piece of information, and then draw lines between each fact and explain the connection between them. This really helps to visualise the links between different events, which will push you up the marking criteria in exams.”



GCSE Computer Science

Like most other subjects, computer science is just about learning new information and then understanding how it all fits together.

Learning the Language of Revision

It's best to treat computer science like any other revision: make sure you are practising and engaging with the subject regularly and have access to any resources you might need. This doesn't mean you need the latest MacBook, though access to a computer outside of school hours is a massive help, as there are plenty of ways of keeping up a little-and-often revision approach throughout the year, providing you are consistent with it.

Holly Billingham, computer science tutor, says that coding languages, just like any other language, takes lots of practice and exposure. Holly explains, *"if you turned up to your Spanish oral exam without having practised any Spanish all year, understandably, you probably wouldn't do your best, and the same goes for computer science. It's important that you become familiar with the code you'll use for your exams as early on as possible."*

It is also good to remember that you should never be afraid to ask teachers for help! They will be able to recommend extra resources and guide you in the right direction.





Our Experts' Top Revision Tips

The Science of Learning

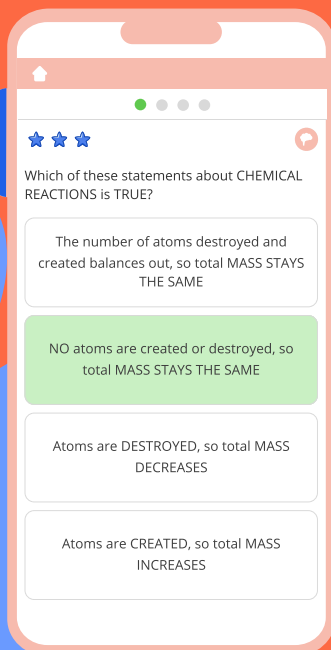
With a multitude of resources to aid studying available on the internet, it can be hard to know where to start when it comes to revision.

We have extensively researched the science behind how we learn and how students can best optimise their revision time.

“The evidence suggests that students prefer making notes and highlighting texts as their main method of revision - but the evidence also shows that this is the least effective way to revise!” – Kit Betts-Masters, science teaching expert

Instead of staring at revision notes, which don't engage your brain on an intensive level, Kit recommends revision that is more linked to **retrieval practice**.

Retrieval practice works because *“every single time you try to retrieve a fact, even if you don't get it right the first time, you code that bit of information deeper and deeper into your long term memory.”* This is an important practice for exams – we all know how hard it can be to remember facts under pressure.



Work Smarter Not Harder

As time during the GCSE period is precious, it's important to use it effectively. One of the best ways to do this is **self-quizzing**!

Regularly testing yourself, whether that's through a Tassomai quiz, using flashcards or answering past paper questions, helps you to **identify the gaps in your knowledge**. Once you know where the gaps are, then you are able to revise more efficiently.

Just focusing on areas where you are already confident will not help you to succeed, but pushing yourself to understand confusing topics will help you get exam ready!

10 MINUTES OF
INTENSIVE
QUIZZING



STARING AT A
NOTEBOOK
FOR AN HOUR

Switch up the program!

It is also recommended that, despite it seeming the more obvious approach, students should avoid revising one topic at a time when it comes to studying for their exams.

Interleaving topics is a technique where you do smaller sections of revision for each topic, but more often and repeatedly revisit them over time. Studies show this is a more efficient way to build up long-term knowledge rather than focusing on one topic at a time.

This works on a similar principle to **spaced repetition**, which is the idea that you practise a topic, then leave it for a while, and then come back to it again.

You can read more about the science of learning on the [Tassomai website](#).

Practical Revision Tips: Get the Most Out of Your Revision

1. Take a **“little and often”** approach to studying. Studies have shown that students learn a lot more when they work for concentrated, short bursts every day, rather than cramming on one day for hours at a time.

2. Research online resources. There are tonnes of learning resources online, so make the most of the time you’re spending on your phone and find an interesting new way to revise! But be sure to **download past papers**, mark schemes and subject specifications from exam board websites so that everything stays relevant to your assessments.



3. Try out different revision techniques. The “Pomodoro” technique was developed in the late 1980s, and is shown to be an extremely effective way to work. It helps to break up stretches of work into manageable chunks, by studying to a 25 minute timer with a 5 minute break in between each round. This can help you to focus and to do more worthwhile revision.

4. Keep healthy revision habits. Different students react to revision stress in different ways, so it’s important to keep an eye on how you’re feeling. If you are overworking yourself, it may be time to take an hour or two off – this time to rest can be just as important as the revision itself.

Using the Tree to Identify Strengths and Weaknesses

The Tree is Tassomai's visual representation of a user's knowledge and understanding based on their Tassomai usage and the questions they've answered.

A learner's tree grows over time, and can be used to **identify topics** they are strongest in, and those that need more work.

Using The Tree for Revision

The Tree is a brilliant tool to map out a revision strategy. Try sitting down and going through 'red leaf' topics and make a plan of action on how you can try and improve on these areas. Once you know the areas you need to improve on, you'll be able to focus your efforts and have healthy, green trees flourishing in no time!

[You can find out more about The Tree here.](#)



Preparing for Exams: What to do When

Sometimes the hardest part of revising is simply knowing where to start! Here we will break down the sorts of techniques our experts think students should be doing in the lead up to an exam...

One Month Before



- **Start quizzing!** The best way to know how confident you are in a topic is to quiz yourself on it
 - **Use the Tassomai Tree** to identify weaker topics that could do with additional work and prioritise them over topics you are already feel confident in
 - **Explain topics** to a friend or family member - teaching others and switching up looking at a textbook is a great way to embed knowledge

One Week Before

- **Focusing on instant feedback** – answer one question from a past paper at a time, checking your results against the mark scheme so that you learn exactly what the examiners are looking for
- **Stamina training** – getting in some practice at sitting down and completing an entire past paper under timed conditions. This will get you in the headspace for assessments, but be careful that you don't burn out from doing too many!
- **Working on exam technique** – structure a model essay answer or explain how you would work out a complicated question. Planning how you can best use your time in an exam is really important



One Day Before



- **Don't attempt to cram** too much the night before, it's better to go over a few topics just to jog your memory and then relax
- **Have a restful evening** with a focus on getting a good night's sleep and some comfort food – being well fuelled is the best way to face an exam



The Learning Program

www.tassomai.com