

Exam season: What you need to know about the top five revision strategies

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Alex Quigley, director of research at Huntington School in York, has scoured the research to bring you the verdict on the five most common forms of revision:

1. Highlighting

We like to think we guide our students to use highlighters meaningfully in their revision, instructing them to identify important key points. But the seminal **Improving Students' Learning With Effective Learning Techniques**, quashes that hope. Highlighting is found to be an ineffective tool.

One of the main problems is that it is a very familiar strategy to students (and teachers), so they employ it without thinking – when revision feels too easy, it usually is.

Verdict: *Ditch the highlighters*

2. Making revision notes

Making good notes is perhaps the foundation stone of good revision – all other strategies can build on high-quality notes. But much like all good revision, *it ain't what you do, it is the way that you do it*. Simply copying out chunks of a text is likely to prove ineffective. The research indicates that *elaboration* is the key – students need to interpret the information and connect it, drawing out questions and patterns.

Verdict: *Thorough guidance, modelling and structuring are required*

3. Reciting

By reciting crucial knowledge and learning it by rote, we help students to make recall almost automatic, enabling them to tackle the challenges of tough questions and apply their exam skill more confidently.

But reciting alone is not an effective method of revision. In **The Read-Recite-Review Study Strategy: Effective and Portable**, Mark A McDaniel et al present us with their own twist on the tried and tested method, asking students read, then recite, before testing their knowledge of what they have recited.

Verdict: *If it's good enough for great actors...*

4. Graphic organisers

Robert Marzano and John Hattie, both famed for their large-scale synthesis of research evidence, have corralled lots of studies that support the notion that graphic organisers work very effectively. More specifically, concept maps have been shown to be an excellent device for testing students' knowledge.

Verdict: *It isn't just pretty pictures – restructuring topics using graphic organisers makes them stick in the memory*

5. Flashcards

The evidence says the most effective revision method is retrieval practice. Put simply, retrieval practice is any type of revision that gets students to remember information without checking their study aids. In short, it is a quick, painless test. Flashcards are perfect for this – parents can test their children in the car on the way to the supermarket; friends can sit in the library and fend off Facebook procrastination with some flashcard fun.

In many ways, the flashcard is the most effective revision tool, as it combines all of the high-impact strategies in one handy rectangle. We need only support and scaffold our students to devise them successfully.

Verdict: *Small cards, big impact. A highly recommended strategy*