

A guide to surviving (and succeeding) at A Level



By now, many teachers will have discussed with you that you need to be independent and study for five hours outside of lessons for each of your A Level subjects. This may seem daunting and you may be a little unsure of what you are supposed to be doing so let's have a look at this element of successful A Levels first.

Some key aspects of any definition of independence are:

- Understanding what you are learning/expected to do
- Choice
- Reflection
- Asking for appropriate support when needed
- Research skills
- Accountability

So, in order to develop the independence your teachers want you to, consider the following:

- Do you understand exactly what they you supposed to be learning?
- Is there a choice in how you choose to learn?
- Are you making decisions about how and when you learn? What decision-making strategies are you developing?
- How do you reflect on your learning and choices?
- What research skills have you learnt?
- Are you aware of all of your deadlines, when your mock, or real examinations are scheduled for etc?
- Do you know what exam boards you are on? Have you looked at their website to see what resources they have?

The 5 hours a week – what should it look like?

All students are expected to spend 5 hours per week per subject on independent study. You need to be aware that this is essential as the allocated lesson time needs to be supplemented with extensive independent study. You need to recognise that the majority of learning should take place outside of lesson times. To make this time effective you need to;

1. Make an independent study timetable – this is a clear timetable of your independent studies. The timetable should cover use of private study time and also work at home and the timetable should reflect at least 5 hours per subject per week
2. Organise your subject files carefully. Each subject should have its own file with sections for class notes, handouts, staff feedback and curriculum targets
3. Use study areas and your time wisely and make sure that you are not sitting in the common room when you could be working. If you are easily distracted, take responsibility and ask to sit at the back of one your teacher's rooms.
4. Study areas at home - It is recommended that you, where possible, should have a quiet study space at home, with organised resources, a desk and lamp, and away from distractions

The following list will provide you with a range of activities that you could use to develop your independent learning skills.

1. Individual learning targets – Ask your subject teachers to set you some that you can work on
2. Read over the section in the textbook that covers what you will be learning in your NEXT lesson (this will make sure that you are familiar with any difficult concepts and keywords so you can make better use of the lesson time).
3. Complete all homework to the best of your ability
4. Make revision notes on the work that has been covered in class (choose the topics that you struggled with the most first – don't avoid these!). Revision notes could take the form of;
 - a. Mind maps, flow charts, diagrams
 - b. Flash cards
 - c. Reading the information, covering it, saying it out loud , writing it down and then checking to see if you got it correct
 - d. Answering questions in the textbook
 - e. Mnemonics to remember lists of names and dates
 - f. Loci – if you are a visual learner and don't know what this is then look it up
 - g. Turning paragraphs into diagrams
 - h. Turning diagrams into paragraphs
 - i. Watching you tube animations and video clips and making notes (your teacher will be able to suggest some good sites)
 - j. Answering past paper questions, marking them and then revising the content that you missed or got wrong (all past papers are on the exam board website)
 - k. Attend any additional sessions put on by your A Level teacher
 - l. Refer to and use the exam board assessments criteria (this is all on the exam board website)
 - m. Create a study group. It is recommended that small groups of students work together on topics / subjects as this can be highly effective and supportive. It is an opportunity to share resources and learning. You could take it in turns to 'teach' topics.

Top Ten Tips

1. Organisation

This one's a bit of a no-brainer; if you approach your A-Level revision in an organised manner you're more likely to get the grades you need to get into your preferred university. And that's what it's all about. From the offset, approach revision responsibly.

The best way to ensure you stay on top of everything is by making a revision timetable. Splitting your revision into tiny little chunks will make it look much less scary and more achievable. So first, write in your commitments then timetable in different revision sessions each day. Don't forget to be realistic, though – don't just cram all your revision into one whole day, it'll stress you out.

2. Tell Everybody

After making your timetable, stick it up right where everyone can see it – on the fridge, or any place where other people can see what you're supposed to be doing, and when. It sounds weird, but knowing that everybody can see your commitments actually helps you to get down to it. Plus, it's great when someone reminds you you're supposed to be revising Psychology rather than looking at funny cat videos on YouTube.

3. Give Yourself Plenty of Time

Start early. Start as early as you can – especially for the subjects that you find most difficult.

4. Assessment Objectives

Make it your goal to understand exam questions. Often, different questions are designed to test different skills, so a fantastic way to exercise your question answering dexterity is to be aware of the assessment objectives. If you recognise the question type, you're more likely to be able to give the markers exactly what they want. Assessment Objectives are available on the exam board websites (so you need to know which board's exam you'll be sitting).

On top of this, a bright idea would be to look at past papers (lots of past papers). Do them and check the answers, or get your teacher to mark them. You should also be able to find past papers on the exam board's website.

5. Go with the Flow

Make flow charts, diagrams, posters, charts and mind-maps – that sort of thing – then post them everywhere. Try recreating them from memory. Another way to kick start your brain is by defining a colour coding system – highlight important facts/dates and names. Also, stick post-it notes everywhere with important facts.

6. Brain Foods

The popular saying goes, 'you are what you eat' and going by that, eating junk food when revising will turn your brain to, well, junk! What you put into your body really does affect the mind. Get on the brain foods, be a brainiac and destroy your A-Levels:

Memory Boosting Foods:

Fish – fish being a 'brain food' may be a bit of a cliché, but there might be some truth in it; there's been a lot of research, all of which points to fish, especially the oily kind, being awesome for memory. Okay, so fish is not to everyone's liking – if you can't think of anything worse than tucking into a huge plate of kippers, you could always try take Omega 3 supplements (you can even get vegetarian ones).

Whole-grains – foods such as wholegrain pasta, cereals (no, not Frosties) *et al*, will help boost short-term memory as they're bursting with B-vitamins.

Other foods that'll ensure your brain is firing are eggs, brown rice, nuts and seeds, which are great sources of vitamins. Eating these foods will give your memory the kick it needs.

7. Energy

Sticking with the food theme, let's talk about energy: Red Bull may very well give you wings, but the effects don't last very long – pretty soon you'll find yourself crashing down to earth. Alas, continued drinking will not grow you more wings – it'll just make your head hurt. The best way to keep alert is by loading up on bananas – get peeling!

8. Take Breaks

Don't overwork your poor brain: take regular breaks (every 45 minutes) – watch TV, walk the dog – whatever. Taking time out allows your brain to process all of the information you've been stuffing into it.

9. Go See Your Friends

Starting a group or inviting a friend over to help you revise could be a nice change of pace, though (it helps if they're doing the same A-Levels as you). Eat crisps, enjoy yourself but also share notes, test each other, and swap tips – and who knows, maybe a bit of laughter might help it all stick in your mind.

10. Turn off Your Computer

Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and friends will not help you revise. That is all.