

Getting the right balance

Freya Vaughan, a transition year student in St Aloysius College, Carrigtwohill, Co Cork got 11 As in the Junior Cert last year. Here, she gives an insight into how she did it

GENERAL STUDY

I started studying in September, but I wasn't doing much. I just kept up with my homework and went over what we did in class each night. It wasn't until after Christmas that I started making timetables and really getting down to studying. The hard thing with the Junior Cert is trying to balance out the attention you give to each subject. With 10 or 11 subjects it's easy to focus too much on one at the expense of another.

Rather than dividing up my time, I would make a list of topics and chapters I wanted to cover each week. I did about three subjects in a night, but it depended on the evening and how I was feeling or the topics I was covering.

Before Christmas I used Saturday mornings and evenings for study, but I'd normally go up town or something during the afternoon. It's important to have time to relax as well. After Christmas I worked for all of Saturday but I still took Sunday afternoons off. You can't let study take over your life.

English and maths were my weaker subjects so I spent much more time working on those.

LEARNING FROM THE MOCKS

The mocks are a useful exercise to practise your timing and exam technique. Make sure to look at the exam time plans that you used and see if anything needs to be changed. Look at your exam papers when you get them back.

They will give you a real indication of what you need to work on. Before the mocks you're not as focused because you don't know what your weak points are. After them you know exactly what you have to do.

THE REAL THING

The Junior Cert is very different from the mocks. You've finished the courses and I think you feel more confident in general. It's just really important to stick to your time plans and to have practised enough questions so that nothing really feels new. I was studying up until the end of the exams – Nothing hectic, just reading over notes but it definitely helped.

There's a lot to remember in some subjects. It's really useful to jot down any points you remember about different questions as soon as you get the exam paper. I did little brainstorms for certain questions and that really helped.

You have to remember that even if you think you don't know anything, you've done these subjects for three years. You know way more than you think you do.

ENGLISH

I probably spent more time studying English and maths than any other subject. We did a lot of exam questions in school so when I got home I'd read over the answers and try to write my own.

Original thinking is really important in English. We got notes on poetry and the novel, but I used to take my own notes as well and add them to the ones we got in class.

Learning things off by heart is a complete waste of time. It doesn't really work. If you understand the texts and have your own opinions about them you'll find it a lot easier to answer questions.

Practise is the key to the comprehension. Just do lots of exam questions.

The essays can be tough because it's often difficult to come up with such a long piece of writing in an exam. I used to go through titles that appeared on exam papers. You can't write everything out, but you can at least brainstorm ideas for each title and work out the structure that you'd use.

Make sure to practise exam questions over and over again. Know your poetry techniques, your novel and your play inside out. Practise is the main thing though. It definitely stands to you.

MATHS

Learn your formulae and theorems in maths, but the key is in doing exam questions. Completing questions and the revision sections at the end of each chapter is much more useful than learning off chunks of the book.

Knowing your time plan for the exam is really important in maths. You have to be sensible. If you get stuck on the harder parts you have to leave them if you can't work out the answer. Staying with it and not going onto another question means you're just giving away marks.

You can always go back to it if you have extra time at the end, so leave yourself some extra working space before you move on.

I actually came out of the maths exam thinking that I had done terribly. Surprisingly I was wrong. Our teacher had told us to write down everything in relation to a question and never to erase anything. It was great advice. You get lots of attempt marks even if you don't get the answer.



Transition year student Freya Vaughan advises students to keep

IRISH

I liked Irish. I think that it was definitely a three-year process though. In first and second year we did lots of work on the essay and the comhrá. In third year we did loads of tape work and vocabulary. That was really helpful. It feeds into everything. If you get used to words on the tape, you recognise them in your comprehensions and use them in your essays.

Our teachers always told us to listen to Raidió na Gaeltachta and to watch TG4. I didn't think that would work but it actually does. After practising the tape work I found that I could understand a lot more and I'd pick up more vocab that way.

It's not a good idea to learn essays off by heart but I definitely think it's worth learning phrases that you can use in all sorts of questions. Again, exam papers are really important.

FRENCH

My method for studying French was similar to what I did for Irish. Again I found that vocabulary was very important. I practised tape work and built lists of vocabulary to learn. Exam papers were great for practising comprehension and the letter. The most important thing for me was to understand as many words as I could.

SCIENCE

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