

Working towards perfect

Achieving our best is something we should all strive for, and never more so than in the Leaving Cert

A perfect Leaving Cert is not something that everyone aspires to, but a couple of tips from those who manage to achieve it won't do any harm. This year 11 students managed the top score of eight AIs. We caught up with a couple of top students now studying in UCC, to find out how they did it.

KAREN O'MAHONY

From: Tralee, Co Kerry

School: Presentation Secondary School, Tralee

Now studying medicine

The quality of the study you do is much more important than the amount of time you spend doing it. Up until Christmas I was just keeping on top of homework. I wasn't really doing any extra study. It was really after Christmas that I decided to cop on to myself. I generally tried to do about three hours a night from then on.

The mocks really get you into the layout and the timing of the exam. You have to take the results with a pinch of salt, but they do help you to identify your weak areas.

Make a list of topics that you aim to cover in a week, but be realistic. It really helps you get organised. Focus on what you're doing yourself. Don't listen to other people. Figure out what time of day suits you to study. I used to get up early in the morning to study. There aren't a whole load of weekends left, so it's important to use your time well.

MARIA DONOVAN

From: Ballinhassig, Co Cork

School: Coláiste Choilm, Ballincollig

Now studying pharmacy

I started studying in October, but I wasn't really concentrating on the exam. I just kept up with homework and coursework. When I got into gear I focused on exam papers. I didn't do full questions, but rather I'd draw a spider diagram and plan how I'd write the answer.

Marking schemes are incredibly important in subjects like biology, accounting and chemistry. If you don't have the exact words they are looking for in your answer, you won't get the marks.

I actually found the mocks a little off-putting. I thought the standard of some of the papers was low, and they were badly marked. When I came out of the Leaving Cert German paper I felt that I had done worse than I did in the mocks. They do focus you though.

When I was studying, I found I had to say things or write them down in order to remember them. Condense things as much as possible into your own notes, and it'll be easier to remember key points.

I worked consistently, but I had a bit of a life outside study. That's imperative, I think. I did some running on the treadmill and I went out every second weekend. I'd stop working by about 10 each night and watch my programmes on television. It's not worth devoting your whole life to study.

PHILIP DONNELLAN

From: Tipperary

School: Borrisokane Community College

Now studying chemical process engineering

From the start I wasn't going to give up sport, so I had to be consistently on top of things. If I had training at seven in the evening, I had to discipline myself and start working at five. I couldn't come home and watch loads of TV. On evenings when I didn't have training, I'd do about four hours between

homework and study.

After Christmas the seriousness naturally increases, but if you start to do eight or nine hours from September, you'll burn out by June.

As the mocks came closer, the seriousness increased. They sort of put you into exam study mode. They also make you realise that the exam situation isn't so bad. You don't have every course finished by the time they come around, but you generally have enough to have a proper attempt at least. Our teachers didn't let us dwell on the results, but they are good for pointing out the parts of subjects that you're wobbly in.

Everyone feels panic at this stage. The Leaving Cert seems so big. There is a humongous amount of time left. If you do three hours a day from here on in, it's more than you will ever have put in before, but this is the time to do it.

It's actually this time that can make or break a Leaving Cert. It's all about consistency. If you don't let the work build up, it's easy to make progress. Just don't put it off. You have to start right away.

ANTOINETTE O'CONNOR

From: Coachford, Co Cork

School: Coachford Community College

Now studying medicine

I was studying consistently really. After Easter I went up a gear, but I had been working, so it wasn't so bad. I gave up sport for the year, but I still went out on a Saturday.

You have to grade your ability in different subjects, and spend more time on your weaker subjects.

I found the mocks helpful in English more than anything else. I did well, which was a confidence booster, but even if you do well you have to keep going. You can be lucky in the mocks.

I worked a lot through Easter. It was great to catch up on a lot of things. It's important to be focused when you study. I used to do one subject for one hour, and another subject for another hour. I'd have a broad plan of what I wanted to cover for a week. Having those sorts of goals helped.

There is this kind of hysteria that sweeps through schools around now, and it's just a complete waste of energy. Focus on yourself. You know how much you have to do, and how much you're able for. Just start now.

MATHS

Philip: You can't do maths unless you understand them. I went over the basics at the very start. In sixth year, exam papers are the biggest help. Maths is all about doing examples and making sure you're comfortable with anything the examiners might throw at you.

Karen: You have to keep practising. We had homework every night which helped. The most important thing is that you understand everything. If you don't, ask your teacher to explain it again, as many times as it takes.

Antoinette: Don't cut things out in maths because anything can come up. Last year the statistics question was easy, and the line question was hard. Predicting is a dangerous game. In school we went through every exam paper back to 1994, and I'd really recommend doing that.

Maria: Do exam papers. If you have a problem with part Cs, ask your teacher to explain it. It's often something simple that's going wrong. Remember that in the exam, multiple attempts are allowed. If you have time and you're stuck, write everything relevant that you can think of on the page.

ENGLISH

Philip: Go through the stuff you do in class, and take notes on it. Then read through it again and see if you can spot a couple of things for yourself. I'm not a fan of learning off. If you can get your own spin on things, it'll pay off. It's another subject you need massive practise in.

Karen: I tried to learn all the questions we did in class. I wrote out key points for the drama and the characters. My teacher corrected any questions I did, and I learned those. It definitely helps to write a couple of topical essays. I was able to use an essay I had already written in the exam.

Maria: I always left English till last. I hated it, but in January I really kicked into gear on it. I wrote out a table for each poet including the themes, images, the language, tone and so-on. For Shakespeare, I bought the movie and watched it. That helped a lot. I had about five or six essays learned off. I left nothing to chance.

IRISH

Karen: I listened to a lot of aural CDs. They were great for building vocabulary. When the oral was coming up, I used to go for walks with my mother in the evenings. She asked me questions and I answered them in Irish. You have to practise speaking out loud. It's not enough just to go through it in your head. For the written paper you have to practise the questions, but the main thing is to have a good vocabulary.

Antoinette: I focused a lot on Irish. There are easy marks to be had in the aural and the oral. I used listen to Raidió na Gaeltachta every evening. It really helps with the tape and the oral. It even helps with the léamhthuscint. It got to the stage where I could nearly bluff in Irish. I learned off essays and poetry answers. You need to be able to make reference to the poems.

The oral is all about practice. I prepared all of the usual topics like family and school, and I spoke to my neighbour who has Irish. Try to make it free-flowing. The marks are there to be taken.

Maria: I learned Irish in a Gaelcholáiste, which helped a lot when it came to the oral. I found we were almost over-prepared for the oral. The examiner is there to give you marks and you can almost steer the conversation if you want to. Irish study took hours though. I went through the paper and drew spider diagrams for the answers. You just have to prepare the essays. I tried to avoid the novel. For the history of Irish, you just have to learn it. There's no other way to go about it.

FRENCH

Philip: For the oral you have to say things out loud. If you haven't really spoken French before, it can be aggravating. It gets easier with practise.

Learning vocabulary for the topics helps with the written work. Practise with the tape. It's a skill in itself, and it feeds into the written exam as well. I went through the comprehensions, and picked out words I didn't understand and looked them up. It's amazing how quickly your vocabulary builds up if you do that.

Karen: This one is all about vocabulary and grammar. Learn a little every night. I used the same technique of getting people to ask me questions in English and I'd answer them in French. Past papers are valuable.

GERMAN/ITALIAN

Philip: I did German. Every language is based on understanding the verbs and building the vocabulary. There's no other way to do well.

Karen: The marking schemes are really useful for Italian. Definitely download them from www.examinations.ie.