



No-stress memory tips



Efficient study is key to reducing stress. **Charles Garavan** is a memory and learning expert and the author of the book *How Best To: Learn and Remember for Leaving Certificate*. See memoryacademy.com for further details.

DO YOU SPEND A LOT OF TIME MAKING NOTES?

The first part of getting your exam preparation right is ensuring you strike the correct balance between making notes and learning from them.

A lot of students spend hours organising their notes, writing them out in their neatest handwriting, highlighting and underlining sections of them, organising them and putting them neatly into folders, and so on. But will any of this really help to earn you marks in the exam?

Remember, notes are a tool, nothing more. Their sole purpose is to make it easier for you to organise and learn the information that you need to do well in the exams.

Remember, your goal is to move the information you need to know from the paper in front of you to your brain, not to move it from one collection of paper to another. There are no marks for your notes in the Junior Cert, so make them as quickly as you can, and then focus all your energy on the real objective: learning what is in them.

READING AND RE-READING

Once you have made your notes, the key element of your exam preparation is actually learning what is in them. This is where people make the one of the worst study mistakes of all: confusing reading with studying.

To learn something you need to do two things: you need to understand the information, and you then need to retain that information in memory. These are two very different tasks, and they require two quite different approaches.

Reading is a great way of achieving your first goal (understanding), because you can move at your own pace, you can read back over things that are unclear, and you can read a different explanation (in another textbook, or on a website) if necessary. Unfortunately, reading is a terrible way of keeping something in memory once you have understood it – because your brain just isn't designed that way.

Seeing things over and over again will not help you to remember them. If anything, it just makes it difficult for you to concentrate, because it is extremely boring seeing the same material over and over again.

The best way to learn your notes is not to keep re-reading them; it is to test yourself on what is in them. Each time you test yourself on your notes, you will know them a little better. This will not only help you to remember what you have studied, it will also make you more confident about what you know, which helps to reduce exam stress.

At this stage of your exam preparation, the best ways to learn your notes are to:

- ◆ Quickly write down the key points from one section of your notes, and then scan back over them to see what you missed;
- ◆ Make index cards with questions on one side and the key elements of the answer on the other. Try to answer each question before flipping the card over;
- ◆ Form a study group with other students and take turns asking each other questions on the section of the course that you are studying.

Good luck!



GET ENOUGH SLEEP

Sleep helps reduce your stress levels, increase your concentration and improve your memory. It is very important that you get into a habit of relaxing before you go to bed, and going to bed at a reasonable hour.

Starting a routine like this is no good if you begin the week before the exam. Now is the time to get into the habit, so that by the time the exam comes around you are rested and able to relax.

RELAX

Ignore the hype. If your friends are getting panicked, pay no attention. It's normal to be stressed, but when it starts getting in the way of your study and your sleep, then it is becoming a problem.

Stress-busters include:

- ◆ Exercise.
- ◆ Sticking to your study plan. If you feel on top of things, you won't feel as much stress. If you don't have a plan yet, make one today.
- ◆ Treating yourself. Do a good evening's worth of study and then watch your favourite TV programme.
- ◆ Talk to people. Don't bottle up stress. If you are feeling under pressure, talk to your friends, your parents, or even a teacher. They will reassure you.
- ◆ Do something different. Doing a craft, playing music or reading a novel will take your mind off things.
- ◆ Have realistic expectations of yourself. Set things in motion now; be consistent but don't put yourself under unnecessary pressure.

EAT PROPERLY

If an athlete is preparing for a marathon in June, she is eating properly and looking after herself right now. The same should go for you. This does NOT mean eating lentils from here on in. A couple of minor adjustments to your diet, and you could well notice a huge difference in your energy and concentration levels. Now is a perfect time to start.

Eat breakfast – this is by far the best food advice I can offer. It jump-starts your brain and now is the time to get into the habit. Eating in the morning boosts your energy, your concentration and your immune system.

If you don't have time to eat breakfast in the morning, this is where your time management comes in. Get up 10 minutes earlier, and eat. You will notice the difference.

Have protein with every meal – protein repairs cells, boosts brain-power and satisfies hunger. You are much less likely to crave sugar if you have enough protein.

Eggs are great for breakfast, but if, like me, you can't eat anything proper before 10 o'clock, have a yoghurt and eat something more substantial later.

Snacks are fine – I'm certainly not going to advise you not to snack, but try to choose them well. Popcorn, liquorice and yoghurts are good options. If you want some chocolate or crisps, try to choose good-quality products.

Water is your friend – not only does it help your body function well, it improves your concentration and clears up tired or blemished skin.

Keep a bottle with you and try to substitute caffeine drinks for water as well.

Eat warm food during the day – this is not really the time of year for salads. Warming foods like soup at lunchtime will keep your circulation going and your system warm throughout the day.

All in moderation – the body is very resilient. Eating a good diet like this, even from Monday to Friday, will help a lot. Just make sure you make any changes now. The week before the Junior Cert is not the time to start a different eating plan.

WHAT IF MY RESULTS DISAPPOINT THE PEOPLE AROUND ME?

This came up time and time again.

You can only do your best. The Junior Cert seems like such a big event, and in many ways it is.

Your parents and the people around you would be horrified to learn that you are experiencing stress that's down to a fear of disappointing them. Talk to them.

Remember, keep a balance in your life. The Junior Cert is dominating your school day now, but this time next year you will seriously be wondering what all the fuss was about.

◆ *Tina Dunne runs nutrition and lifestyle courses for school-goers and is available to talk to the students at your school regarding lifestyle management. Her new book will be available in all bookshops in April. See tinadunne.com for more information*