

Helping Boys to Prepare for Exams

Many boys don't give schoolwork and exams high priority, and being natural risk-takers, leave revision until the eleventh hour. Last minute revision works well for some boys, but for others it is too little, too late. What can teachers do to get boys to prepare adequately for exams?

The most useful advice I can offer is this: do not expect boys' characteristics to change – they won't; rather, take account of these characteristics and use them to set boys up to win.

In contrast to girls, most boys do not like to admit their shortcomings or to ask for help, and they often over-estimate their ability. It is important to enable them to identify and sort out any problems early on, without risking losing face. Carry out a quick class review of the curriculum, asking students to give a thumbs up or thumbs down for each topic. From the front of the class the teacher can quickly assess which topics need whole class revision, and which students need individual help. The facial expressions accompanying the thumbs up or down will speak volumes.

To motivate boys to revise, avoid lectures on the importance of grades to get a good job – such exhortations are a sure way to turn them off. Instead, teach them timesaving revision techniques. What you offer should be up beat, challenging, immediate, achievable and not take too much of their valuable leisure time! Concepts like: "economy of effort", "work smart not hard" and "return on investment" are likely to appeal. Ask them for creative and time-efficient revision techniques for your subject. Have 'Ideas for Revision' on the notice board; include suggestions from all exam groups.

Take advantage of boys enquiring minds to get them involved in deciding what, how and when they are going to revise. Coordinate the approach to revision with other subjects and with year group tutors. If boys hear the same thing in each class it will seem like a nag and they will lose interest.

Tutors can explain the notion of individual learning preferences, then set students the task of finding out what revision conditions suit them best, for example:

- morning / afternoon / evening / night
- home / school / other – which room?
- sitting/ lying /standing / moving
- seeing / hearing / saying / writing / doing
- silence / noise / music – what kind, how loud?
- half-hour / one hour / hour and a half / other
- short breaks / long breaks
- alone / with others – who?
- like help / don't like help – from whom, what sort?

Ask students what motivates them, and how they can use this self-knowledge to get themselves to revise. Do they want to win; have fun; be right; not fail; do their best; relax; be cool? Friendship groups might allow frank discussion; limit time to keep boys focussed. Ask groups to identify revision methods and rewards that suit each person's motivation.

Tutors can also help students with speed and legibility. Put the group into boys-girl pairings, do time tests to practise speed, then get partners to assess each others' legibility. Or set up same gender pairings and get the boys to advise each other on sneaky ways of making untidy writing legible.

Getting boys to explore ideas is relatively easy; getting them to implement them is harder. Having explored with tutors which study techniques are likely to suit them, boys need subject revision homework to test the techniques out. Even if you are still teaching the course, find a slot in the lesson to check the effectiveness of revision homework: such checks should be light-hearted, pacy, but important. Fellow students can help each other troubleshoot areas of weakness.

Before boys go on study leave they need to be in the habit of revising regularly. Some boys can manage their private study well and benefit from study leave; others simply treat it as extra holiday. Get students to make a revision plan before they go; make yourself available during the period for revision classes, individual tutorials and progress checks; ask boys how you can make revision sessions relevant and useful to them; set appointments to review progress.

Some boys really need to come into school each day to revise, but would only do so if it seemed a 'cool' thing to do: approach them privately; use your relationship with them to encourage them in; provide space in an empty classroom; offer inducements such as non-uniform, music, food and drink; reward them with attention and good-humour.

The key to getting work out of a boy is to set up a process that is easier for him to opt into than opt out of, to give him work that has to be done in short regular bursts, to provide him with immediate feedback on his progress, and to create an environment that he enjoys and where he feels he can win. Set boys the challenge of finding imaginative ways to combine exam preparation with ample leisure time and they are more likely to achieve the grades they should.

Coursework

Whilst you are thinking about boys and results, spare a few moments to consider how to get boys to hand in good quality coursework on time. Set boys up to succeed by asking for work in manageable chunks and monitoring their progress. For example:

- Step 1 – state choice of topic
- Step 2 – hand in a coursework plan
- Step 3 – hand in a copy of research notes
- Step 4 – hand in first draft (rough but legible)
- Step 5 – receive first draft back from teacher with comments and guidance
- Step 6 – bring second draft into class, check and plan final amendments
- Step 7 – hand in final draft (high quality presentation)

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