

Gateway To Exam Success

Dave Spencer

Key Concepts

- 1) English exams are virtually omnipresent nowadays, beginning at low-level primary exams passing through school-leaving exams, University exams all the way up to high-level professional qualifications.
- 2) Stress is a real factor. It can sometimes be positive, giving students the energy to reach a goal. But it can often be negative and de-motivating.
- 3) Teachers can have a real effect on stress-levels. We can increase stress by going for exam overkill. Or we can lessen stress by giving students useful information and strategies to deal successfully with exams. We can also lessen stress by using enjoyable tasks that help with exam preparation.
- 4) Exams really do affect the way we teach, the way students learn and the way students perceive English.
- 5) Exam preparation, tasks and texts do not have to be dull and boring.

Exam Success Tips

Look at the tips. Which do you think is the most useful and which is the least useful? In general, do you think the advice is worth giving to students or not?

- 1 In some listening exams you have to listen and say if a series of statements are true or false. When should you read the statements – before listening or after listening? Why?
- 2 Don't forget to take a spare pen, a pencil and a watch to your exam.
- 3 Look at the composition you have just written. Is it easy to read your handwriting? Show it to other students. Do they agree? How important is good handwriting in an exam?
- 4 Don't be nervous in oral exams.
- 5 Read the exam composition task. How many words should you write in your text? Who are you writing to? Why is it important to know this in an exam?
- 6 When you describe a photo in a speaking exam, what should you do when you don't know the word for something in the photo?
- 7 Look back at your answers in the reading exam that you have just completed. Have you got an answer for each question?

Ideas for successful exam preparation

- 1 inform students and give them exam success tips and advice
- 2 integrate exam and revision advice with skills and/or language work
- 3 let students predict and prepare exam tasks themselves
- 4 rehearse and repeat oral activities to gain confidence and fluency
- 5 give concrete tasks and manageable goals
- 6 help with exam techniques but don't forget the personal, human side of exams
- 7 be positive with your advice, feedback and correction
- 8 aim for a balance between:
 - 1) *English as a school subject/English as a life skill*
 - 2) *Testing/Training*
 - 3) *Exam-related work/Non-exam-related work*

Gateway To Exam Success

Dave Spencer

Some practical ideas

A Integrating exam advice with language practice

Students choose the correct alternatives in the Efficient Revision text and then complete sentences below with the gerund or infinitive form of the verbs given. These two activities are from *Gateway B2 Student's Book*.

Efficient revision

It's incredible 1 *thinking/to think* that we do hundreds of exams at school and university, but many students never pay much attention to how they revise. Here are just some ideas to help you 2 *revising/to revise* efficiently. Some people think that 3 *revising/to revise* is a question of 4 *sitting/to sit* down for hours and hours with their notes. It isn't. It's essential 5 *taking/to take* frequent (but short!) breaks. This way our mind stays alert and active. Just 6 *reading and reading/to read and read* is not very sensible either. After a while we think we know everything and we no longer pay attention to what we are reading. Instead of 7 *doing/to do* this, read and then stop and answer questions. Why? 8 *Seeing/To see* if you have really understood what you have read.

That's one reason why it can be a really good idea to work with other students. Some people don't mind 9 *revising/to revise* alone but some people hate it. The good news for those people is that 10 *discussing/to discuss* past exam questions with other students can really help 11 *checking/to check* that you know what you're doing. And when you don't understand something, don't be too frightened 12 *asking/to ask* other people for help.

Lastly, don't forget 13 *keeping/to keep* healthy. Eat good food. Find enough time 14 *sleeping and taking/to sleep and take* exercise. When your brain stops functioning, do sport, go 15 *cycling/to cycle*, move your body. You know what the Romans said – a healthy mind in a healthy body!

2 Complete these ideas about doing exams using the gerund or infinitive form of the verbs.

- a) Plan your time at the start to make sure that you have enough time _____ (finish) the exam.
- b) _____ (Start) the exam before you have read all the questions can be a bad idea.
- c) We suggest _____ (take) more than one pen or pencil to the exam.
- d) Don't write too fast or carelessly. You risk _____ (create) a bad impression.
- e) Think about _____ (leave) yourself time _____ (check) your work before you hand it in.
- f) Avoid _____ (write) your opinion unless the question specifically asks for it.
- g) When a question involves _____ (answer) two or more different parts, make sure you answer them all.

Gateway To Exam Success Dave Spencer

h) Check that you know how many questions you need _____ (complete) because sometimes not all questions are obligatory.

B Describing photos

Use your own, or the students' own, photos to create a slideshow. You can time each photo so that students get used to speaking for exactly the same amount of time that they will have in their exam. Follow-up activities can include students guessing or discussing the personal relevance of each photo for the person who brought it, or could involve students predicting, writing and asking each other typical exam follow-up questions for each photo.

C Define it

Have a volunteer sit at the front of the class with their back to the blackboard. Write a word that you want to recycle on the board. The class must help the volunteer identify the word. They can give examples, definitions, or synonyms. E.g. for the word *banana*: *They're yellow. They come from the Canary islands, for example. Monkeys eat them.* This gets students used to paraphrasing, a useful skill in oral exams when students don't know the word for something and have to keep talking.

D The personal factor

Get students to discuss their....

funniest

most frightening

most memorable

best

strangest

exams.

Talking about the personal side of exams can lessen stress by getting these things out in the open.

E Word formation tennis

Word formation is commonly tested in Use of English-type exams. Students are usually given a root word (e.g. *strong*) and they have to put it in the correct form (e.g. *strongly*, *strength*, *strengthen*) within the context of a short text. To get students used to forming words with prefixes and suffixes, try this game. The students are in two teams. Each team nominates a captain. The teacher gives a prefix or suffix, e.g. *mis-*, *re-*, *un-*, *-ment*, *-ship*... In turn, each team, via its captain, says a word including that prefix or suffix. When a team cannot think of another word, or says an incorrect word, or repeats a word, they lose the point. The score works the same as in tennis. The teacher 'serves' new prefixes or suffixes until one team wins the match.

Gateway To Exam Success
Dave Spencer

www.facebook.com/macmillangateway