Guide to prepare for Postgraduate Examinations

Introduction

Postgraduate examinations are necessarily set at a high standard and the preparation required in order to pass any part of the examinations must not be underestimated.

This guide is written to help you fine-tune the techniques that already work for you and introduce new ones that may be useful for you in the future.

There are two fundamental differences in undertaking a postgraduate examination rather than one at undergraduate level.

1. You will be studying in addition to working.
2. At postgraduate level, the standard rises substantially

Therefore, it is essential that you address your studies with a seriousness that matches the nature of the undertaking.

Is this the right time to do this exam?

You should be able to dedicate a minimum of 4 months, preferably 6 months of intensive studying. You need to 'pace' yourself so your peak and optimal performance culminates around the examination period.

It is therefore not a good time to be moving house, getting married, having a baby etc.

Failing that, you will need a very robust social infrastructure to support you.

How to study:

Self -Directed Learning (SDL)- get your syllabus. Read, listen, attend the teaching delivered locally and regionally. Do you know your best learning style? - (**Learning style questionnaire).** Textbooks, journals, royal college e –learning modules, past papers, current editorials and review articles. Up- to -date developments etc

Group work- Lectures and tutorials, also provide a perfect forum to meet up with your peers who are preparing for the same examination. Why not set up a peer study group- support and challenge each other!

Examination orientated courses may be important to gauge the general level of knowledge required.

When taking part in a learning activity

- Before the session- think about what you already know about the topic and what you want to find out. This will help you engage with the session and retain information.
- Do any preparation work you have been asked to do.
- Take an active role as possible within the session e.g. asking questions, jotting down key points.
- Build in time after each session to actively recall what you have learnt, perhaps using a mind map or notes.
- Revisit this learning (e.g. at the end of the day and end of the week)
- Build in time to do follow up work from the activity, including adding detail or following up anything you didn't fully understand
- Reward yourself

Study Strategy- The key is to develop a routine. A routine which suits you and your family but to which you must ruthlessly adhere. Frequent and short periods of time are the name of the game.

Practice for any OSCE and viva parts of the examinations. The stress and anxiety generated when observed by your colleagues during a group mock viva/OSCE sessions is invaluable as it simulates the 'hostile' condition when you are faced with the real examiners.

How do I learn best?

There are several key points to think about:

- Memory skills
- Time management skills
- Reading skills
- Note-taking skills
- Study habits

- Revision skills
- Specific exam preparation

Memory skills

1. Maintaining attention and concentration is difficult beyond 20 minutes so design your routines round little blocks of time.
2. Limit the amount of information you acquire in each session to a maximum of 7 chunks.
3. Organise your knowledge so you work within a pattern - a clinical condition would for example include demographics, causes, presentation, history, signs from examination, investigation and management plan; whereas a basic science question would include pharmacodynamics and pharmacokinetic stems.
4. Understanding of the knowledge – this can be greatly enhanced by group learning i.e. explaining to your peers a certain pathological condition such as the aetiology & mechanism of myocardial infarction.
5. Make connections and links to what you already know. For example, you may have learnt about fibrosing alveolitis but cross referencing it with other causes of alveolitis would strengthen your understanding of the conditions.
6. Set 'SMART' objectives on what else you need to know having fully appreciated what you already learnt.
7. Essential active recall. It is known that if you revise a piece of information several times in a short period, the retention of the knowledge is less than if you space the revisions in a longer interval – 'spacing effect' – hence 4-6 months of preparation time.
8. Use meaningful patterns e.g. trying to learn the following series of words: dog, boat, spoon, hat, car, cat, cow, knife, coat . Organise the words e.g. animals, utensils etc.
9. Think of concepts as a way of organising your knowledge
10. Understand what you are reading or learning- teaching others on the subject can help, or using problem- based learning.
11. Link what you learn to the real world/clinical cases

Time management- Remember to make use of time off after night shifts and weekends. Plus, unexpected time available during your normal working day.

Reading skills- SQ3R

S=Survey- skim the material paying attention to headings, topic sentences, maps, charts, graphs, words you do not understand

Q=Question- make your own questions about the reading based on the information you have surveyed. Include your own questions you have generated

R=Read- read the material to answer your survey questions. Avoid getting sucked into the text itself. Much of what you read is padding.

R=Recite- answer your questions without looking back on the reading. Use the method of recitation which best suits your particular learning style. The more senses you use the more likely you are to remember what you read - Seeing, saying, hearing, writing.

R=Recall- look away from the reading material and focus on the major ideas and concepts. Review the reading material frequently i.e. every 30 minutes, at the end of the block of learning, at the end of the day and at the end of a week or fortnight. Periodically review the sheet, some students make flash cards which can be very effective

Note taking skills- Use the method that works best for you. Visual- mind maps work well. Summarise what you have learnt- key ideas or concepts

Study habits- You work more effectively if you are consistent in the way you work. Being consistent means the brain does not have to work out what you are up to. Consistency applies to how you work as well as when you work.

Make a space in your room for work – that should not be the bed, as your brain will be confused whether you should be sleeping or working.

Many students find the library is an ideal place to work, and find it anchors them into work mode.

Remember that success is achieved through a few simple behaviours that are repeated daily.

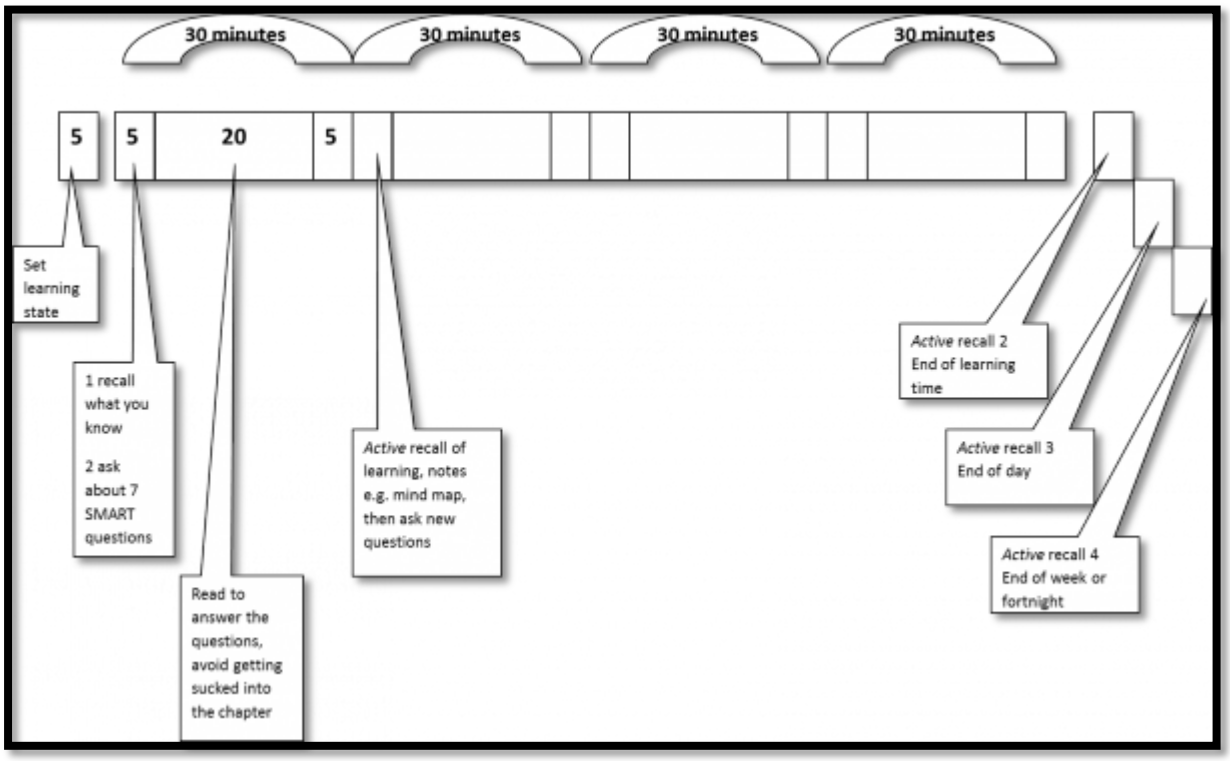
Revision Skills-

Planning

- Study at the same time every day (As much as possible, it will make it easier to habitually follow the schedule and to maintain an active approach to study.
- Make use of the free time (10-20 min blocks) during the “normal working day”.
- Plan study periods to follow scheduled activities.
- Space study periods. 60-90 of study at a time works best.
- Relaxation periods of five minutes should be scheduled every 20 minutes.
- Plan for weekly reviews of new learning. At least one hour each week (distinct from study time) should be scheduled. The weekend is a good time for review.
- Leave some unscheduled time for flexibility. This is important!
- Allot time for planned recreation.
- Prepare your work space
- Prepare your rewards

When studying/revising

1. Start with a 5 -minute think- get motivated, ‘empty your bucket’
2. 5 minutes thinking- what do you already know about the subject
3. Map out what you need to know on top of that, create SMART questions (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timely)
4. Find the answer to the questions you have created. Avoid getting sucked into reading the text, use SQ3R (see earlier) as a way of helping you read more effectively. Do this for 20 minutes.
5. 5 -minute break, exercise a bit, stretch, and have a glass of water.
6. Active recall what you have learnt without notes- check to see if you are right, if not do a spot of revision
7. Repeat the cycle
8. You can do this cycle three or four times.
9. Reward yourself.
10. Spacing Effect'- if you revise a piece of information a number of times with an ever-increasing interval this is meant to be better. E.g. One strategy for active recall is to do this after 30 minutes, at the end of each study period, at the end of a block of learning, at the end of the day, and at the end of a specialty module.



Specific exam preparation- practice doing the different styles of exam in exam conditions.

Self- Care during revision times

During this period of intense demand on your discipline and stamina, you must have a strategy to regularly relieve the tension. This could be exercise or any pleasurable activities which you enjoy – the important message is to make it part of your routine. This 'downtime' is enormously important to recharge your battery.

Stress management - It is very important to recognise symptoms of stress and depression (Iversen et al 09). The idea is not to manage this yourself but to recognise them in yourself and the peers working with you should you come across them. Some of these symptoms are: lack of interest, trouble sleeping, and problems concentrating on things e.g. reading paper or watching TV.

'Empty the Bucket'- empty your mind of other information not relevant to the exam before you start, so there is lots of processing space for the exam. Also, treat each OSCE station/viva/written question as the only one that matters, forget the one before.

Fake it until you make it- imagine you have already passed the exam. Imagine yourself leaving the exam happy or getting a pass.

Some exam Q&A's:

- ***Should I work late the night before?*** Working late before the exam only results in an overloaded and tired brain that cannot cope with a demanding exam. Sleep really is more productive than last minute cramming
- ***Should I read the answers and questions at the same time?*** No. Sometimes seeing a particular answer convinces your brain to read the question in a way that fits the answer. Always read the question first and think what the answer might be before looking at the answers. Remember some answers may be there to trick you.
- ***I tend to read the questions in a hurry, is that* okay?** All parts of the question are relevant. Read it carefully. You might find it helpful to underline words or jot down key points.
- ***I am nervous about doing that first skim through and prefer to go through slowly one question at a time. Is that okay?*** There is a risk if you go through the paper slowly one question at a time of running out of time so a whole section of the paper (usually the last part) is not answered. Remember, this section may include 2 or 3 questions you could easily answer and missing these could significantly affect your score. If you are someone who tends to be short of time, it is particularly important to do a first trawl through the paper.
- ***I sometimes feel that if I wrestle long enough with the hard questions, I am bound to find the right* answer**. It is not a good idea to spend valuable time and brain energy on questions you know nothing about and are very unlikely to be able to answer. Follow the advice above, identify these questions and move quickly on, saving your time for questions you have more chance of getting right.
- ***I tend to be a perfectionist and feel very uncomfortable guessing.*** Only answering questions where you are absolutely sure of the answer will almost certainly lower your score. You need to be prepared to go with your hunches and make educated guesses. Being a good doctor/dentist/pharmacist includes feeling comfortable with a degree of uncertainty. And in the real world you

can always put systems in place to make sure the patient is followed up so you'll know if they aren't getting better!

Study skills questionnaire
Blank study skills questionnaire to complete with supervisor
Guide to independent learning
References for study guide info
I failed. What now?