

## ■ EDUCATION ■

# HOW TO DO WELL

## in your A level exams

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The past two years of my life have been a hectic rollercoaster consisting almost entirely of long hours of studying, grinding out past papers, and catching tiny pockets of sleep and recreation in between. O levels were pretty much a breeze – it was two years of minimal studying followed by examinations that followed the exact pattern of questions as in previous years. Going into A levels with four subjects was, therefore, a sheer shock to my senses.

A levels are tough; there are no two ways about it. Instead of skimming across the surface of the topics, we suddenly took alarming deep dives into the underbellies of these subjects. The adjustment period was difficult because I had suddenly gone from scoring full marks on my O level papers to barely getting an A on my A level tests. It was bizarre and upsetting, and getting used to the massive workload took some time. However, when I finally settled into the groove of A levels, the key to doing well clicked: it was simply a matter of significant determination and conscientiousness. This has been my mantra for the past two years. And, I would say, it has worked out pretty well for me. After all, I came out of the hellish waters of A levels with four A\*s, two world-highest scores, a country-highest score, and a “Best Across” award.

One of the first things I realised upon entering A levels was that there was no room for me to allow my work to pile up. Unlike O levels, I couldn’t afford to try to study and solve papers within the last four months before the exams and expect to come out unscathed. As soon as a topic was covered in class, either at school or at coaching, I delved into the theory using textbooks and external resources. For each topic-wise test, I completed a set number of past papers to adequately familiarise myself with the question and marking patterns. Consistent effort was an absolute necessity if I didn’t want to drown in work right before the board exams. Arijay Meghdoot, a recent graduate of Maple Leaf International School and a current student at the University of Oxford, fully agrees, “I took every class test very seriously, sitting for each like it was a do-or-die situation. So, as the full mocks and actual examinations rolled in, I had most of the syllabus covered already thanks to the topic-wise tests and monthly tests I studied for.”

A levels are very conceptual, and this cannot be disputed. “Knowing and understanding the course material is extremely important,” advises Irfan Parvez, a freshman at Hong Kong University and a member of the Sunnysdale School class of 2024 who graduated with four A\*s.

Learning all of the nitty-gritty of the course content by using the officially published syllabi as a guide or checklist was immensely helpful when I later moved on to solving papers. It was crucial, too, to not simply learn but to also comprehend all of the things I was learning.

Memorisation or rote learning are terrible strategies for A levels, particularly if you are taking subjects like Biology or Physics that have extremely case-based questions. With the A level examinations, especially the sciences and mathematics, increasing in difficulty in recent years, understanding the subject content has never been more necessary. Answering these more difficult questions will require a good level of understanding of what is being taught.

Many of the concepts we are taught in A levels are initially hard to grasp and being confused about them is pretty natural. However, I did not let any doubts or half-understood ideas linger for long. Any confusion I had, I dealt with it promptly by asking for clarifications from

my teachers or by looking through online resources. This allowed me to ensure that I was truly internalising the topic I was learning before moving to the next one.

The question now arises of where exactly this course material that you are supposed to be studying can be found. Using the coursebook to make your notes can help a lot since theoretical concepts are not only explained well but key definitions and explanations are written in a point-by-point manner, in the exact same wording as the mark schemes. However, while the coursebooks are well-written, they can sometimes seem to be filled with redundant information. It is necessary to use the syllabus as a guide to filter these contents out.

Aranyo Rishi Chowdhury graduated A levels from SFX Greenherald International School with three A\*s. On resources, he opines, “I think limiting your support system to just teachers is a bad idea because most don’t give enough individual attention to students’ needs. Finding

of what types of questions may show up. Raida Haque, a Cambridge awardee with a country-highest in Further Mathematics and a world-highest in Mathematics, is a recent graduate of Sunnysdale School and is, perhaps, one of the best people to vouch for this approach. She says, “Solving a tremendously large volume of past papers makes the tests extremely predictable. Hence, it becomes easier to do well in them.”

Lastly, giving A levels can quickly escalate to becoming a terribly stressful time if you don’t try to maintain a healthy balance between work and fun. When studying got too monotonous or tiresome, I made sure to remove myself from it for long enough to refresh my mind. Spending time with friends or doing things that bring you fulfilment are never bad ideas. Being burnt out by continuously pushing yourself to your limits like a machine will cause more long-term detriments than good. Efficient time management by micro-dosing studying throughout the year instead of



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resources online, such as YouTube videos that solve questions and explain content, educational websites that compile notes concisely from all chapters of a subject, or forums like subreddits that make all these resources more accessible, helps a ton.”

Learning the theory doesn’t amount to much if you are unable to implement your knowledge during the examination. This is where solving papers comes into the picture. Familiarising yourself with the pattern, i.e. what types of questions tend to come on the actual exam day, can make or break your grade. There is a certain trend for every paper, and doing a lot of past papers helps subconsciously identify these trends. It also helps you feel less nervous on exam day because you have a good idea

taking on the full brunt of the workload right before the exams is a good method to prevent burnout. It was helpful as well to set achievable, bite-sized goals for each day and to create a reward system to incentivise myself to reach those daily goals. Finishing three past papers would earn me two hours of *House MD*, for example. Additionally, I tried to make my study periods enjoyable by solving papers with music or a podcast playing in the background.

Doing well in A levels is a matter of discipline, hard work and not letting yourself get crushed under pressure. These are just some of the things that worked for us and each student will certainly have individual preferences. Trial-and-error is the only way to work out a methodology and schedule you feel comfortable with.