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Study So It Sticks, in 6 Days

In six short sessions, replace re-reading and highlighting with techniques that are measurably better — and build a revision schedule you can actually keep.

6-day guide · 6 chapters · Self-Directed Learning Framework

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide was built with the Self-Directed Learning Framework (SDLF): every chapter gives you a short starting action, the one idea you actually need, a fully worked example, a checklist, and exercises done on your own current material — no filler, no re-reading required.

This is a general study method, not a claim about any individual's results, and not advice about concentration, sleep or wellbeing — for those, talk to your institution's support services or a professional. Work through the chapters in order; each takes 20–35 minutes.

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CHAPTER 1 OF 6 · DAY 1 · 25 MIN

Why Re-Reading Feels Like Learning and Isn't

> **Outcome:** "I can tell the difference between recognising material and being able to produce it."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Close the book you have been studying and write down, from memory, everything you can recall from the last page you read. Then compare. The gap is the whole point of this guide.

The minimum you need to know

Re-reading and highlighting are the two most popular study techniques and among the least effective, and the reason is a single trap: **fluency**. The second time you read a page it goes down smoothly, and your brain reads that smoothness as "I know this." But smoothness measures familiarity, not retrievability — and an exam asks you to retrieve. The technical name for the mismatch is the **illusion of competence**, and it explains the common experience of walking into an exam confident and walking out baffled. The test that cuts through it is brutally simple: close the material and try to produce it. If you cannot write it down, say it out loud, or explain it to someone, you do not yet know it, however familiar it felt. This chapter is not a technique; it is the diagnostic that makes the rest worth doing.

Worked example: the same hour, two ways

Two students have one hour on the same chapter. The first reads it twice, highlighting as she goes, and finishes feeling that she has a firm grasp. The second reads it once, closes it, and spends the remaining forty minutes writing down what he remembers, checking, and re-writing the parts he got wrong. His hour is unpleasant — he keeps discovering he does not know things — while hers is smooth and reassuring. Tested a week later, he retains substantially more. This pattern is one of the most reliably reproduced findings in the study literature, and the uncomfortable part is central to it: the student who struggles during the session is the one who remembers afterwards. Feeling fluent and being prepared are different states, and only one of them is graded.

Checklist

- ☐ Tested yourself on one topic by closing the source and producing it from memory
- ☐ Compared what you produced against the source and noted the gaps honestly
- ☐ Understood that ease of reading is not evidence of knowing
- ☐ Identified your current default technique and whether it is recognition-based
- ☐ Accepted that the better methods will feel harder, not easier

Exercises

1. Take a topic you believe you know and write everything you can recall on a blank page, then check it.
2. Count how many of your last five study sessions involved producing material from memory.
3. List the three topics where your confidence is highest — those are where the illusion is most likely hiding.

CHAPTER 2 OF 6 · DAY 2 · 30 MIN

Retrieval Practice: Testing as a Way of Learning

> **Outcome:** "I turn my notes into questions and answer them from memory before checking."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Take one page of notes and turn its headings into three questions. Do not answer them yet — just write the questions.

The minimum you need to know

Retrieval practice means pulling information out of your head rather than putting it back in. Every act of successful retrieval strengthens the route back to that memory, which is why testing yourself is not just a way of measuring learning but a way of causing it — the **testing effect**. The practical form is to convert your material into questions and answer them cold. Crucially, the **effortful** retrievals do most of the work: an answer that comes instantly teaches you little, while one you have to dig for builds the strongest trace. This is also why getting it wrong is productive rather than wasted, provided you check and correct immediately. Flashcards work on exactly this principle, but only if you genuinely attempt an answer before flipping — flipping early converts the whole exercise back into re-reading. For anything longer than a definition, the better tool is a blank page and a question written in your own words.

Worked example: converting a page of notes

A page of biology notes on enzyme function becomes: "What does an enzyme do to activation energy, and why does that speed up a reaction?" — "Explain, without using the phrase lock-and-key, why enzymes are specific." — "What happens to an enzyme above its optimum temperature, and why is that irreversible?" Each is answered on a blank page from memory before the notes are opened. The first comes back easily; the second is half-remembered; the third is a blank. That blank is the most valuable result of the session, because it is a gap that re-reading the page would have concealed — the words would have looked familiar and the session would have ended in false confidence. The gaps get corrected, and those three questions go back into the pile to be asked again in a few days.

Checklist

- ☐ Notes converted into questions written in your own words
- ☐ Every answer attempted from memory before the source is opened
- ☐ Wrong and blank answers corrected immediately, not left for later
- ☐ Questions that came back instantly marked as low priority
- ☐ Questions you could not answer kept for the next round
- ☐ At least one question per topic that asks "why", not just "what"

Exercises

1. Turn one full topic of your current notes into ten questions.
2. Answer all ten on a blank page without looking, then mark yourself honestly.
3. Sort the ten into three piles — knew it, half knew it, blank — and keep the last two piles.

CHAPTER 3 OF 6 · DAY 3 · 30 MIN

Spacing: Why Cramming Loses What It Gains

> **Outcome:** "My revision for each topic is spread across days instead of massed into one sitting."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Look at your calendar and find three separate 20-minute slots this week. Those three slots beat one 60-minute block on the same material.

The minimum you need to know

The **spacing effect** is that the same total study time produces far more durable memory when it is distributed across days than when it is massed into one session. The mechanism is the useful part: as time passes you forget a little, and the effort of retrieving something you have partly forgotten is what strengthens it. Cramming removes that effort, which is exactly why it feels efficient and why the material evaporates within a week. Practically: revisit a topic after about a day, then three days, then a week, then two — the intervals stretch as the material gets more secure. You do not need a perfect algorithm, and spaced-repetition software is optional; the difference between roughly-spaced and massed is enormous, while the difference between roughly-spaced and optimally-spaced is small. The one thing that makes spacing work is starting early enough to have days to spread across, which makes it a planning problem more than a studying one.

Worked example: six hours, two schedules

Six hours are available for one module before an exam three weeks away. Schedule A: two three-hour sessions in the final weekend. It feels productive, the material is fresh on Monday, and by the exam a fortnight later much of it has gone. Schedule B: eight forty-five-minute sessions spread across the three weeks, each one starting with ten minutes of questions from the previous session before anything new is added. Every one of those openings is uncomfortable — things that were solid on Tuesday are hazy on Friday — and each recovery is the mechanism doing its work. Same six hours. The second schedule also surfaces problems three weeks early, when there is still time to ask about them, rather than on the final Sunday when there is not.

Checklist

- ☐ Each topic scheduled on at least three separate days, not one long block
- ☐ Intervals stretch as a topic becomes more secure — a day, then a few days, then a week
- ☐ Every session opens by retrieving the previous session's material
- ☐ Revision started early enough that days exist to spread across
- ☐ The discomfort of having partly forgotten is treated as the method working, not as failure
- ☐ Weak topics revisited more often than strong ones

Exercises

1. Take one subject and put three short sessions for it in your calendar on three different days.
2. Start your next session with ten minutes of questions from the previous one before opening anything new.
3. List your topics and mark each as secure, shaky or blank — then space them accordingly.

CHAPTER 4 OF 6 · DAY 4 · 30 MIN

Interleaving and Elaboration

> **Outcome:** "I mix related topics in one session and explain ideas in my own words rather than copying them."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Take two topics you normally study separately and write one sentence explaining how they relate. If you cannot, that is a gap worth knowing about.

The minimum you need to know

Two techniques stack on top of retrieval and spacing. **Interleaving** means mixing related problem types within a session instead of doing twenty of one kind in a row. Blocked practice lets you apply the same method mechanically without deciding which method applies; interleaving forces that decision every time, which is precisely the skill an exam tests. It produces worse practice sessions and better exam performance, which is the same trade-off as everything else here. **Elaboration** means explaining material in your own words and connecting it to what you already know — asking how and why rather than what. The strong version is explaining it to someone else, or out loud to an empty room, because speech exposes the places where your understanding is actually a memorised phrase. The test is whether you can say it without the textbook's vocabulary. If you cannot, you have memorised the sentence, not the idea.

Worked example: a maths session, blocked and interleaved

Blocked: twenty quadratic equations in a row. By the fifth, the student has stopped thinking about which approach fits and is running the same procedure on autopilot; the session feels smooth and the accuracy is high. Interleaved: the same twenty problems shuffled with simultaneous equations and inequalities. Now every single problem starts with the question the exam will ask — what kind of problem is this? Accuracy during practice drops noticeably and the session feels much harder. The elaboration layer sits on top: after a problem, the student says out loud why factorising was the right route here and would not have been three questions ago. Tested later on mixed problems, the interleaved group outperforms the blocked group, and the gap is largest exactly where it matters — on choosing the method rather than executing it.

Checklist

- ☐ Problem types mixed within a session rather than blocked
- ☐ Each problem begins by identifying which method applies, not by applying one
- ☐ Key ideas explained aloud in your own words, without textbook phrasing
- ☐ "Why" and "how does this connect to" asked as often as "what"
- ☐ Links drawn between topics that are taught separately
- ☐ Lower practice accuracy accepted as the cost of a harder, more useful session

Exercises

1. Shuffle three problem types into one mixed set and work through it.
2. Explain one core concept out loud in sixty seconds without notes, and record yourself.
3. Write three sentences connecting the topic you studied today to one you studied last week.

CHAPTER 5 OF 6 · DAY 5 · 30 MIN

A Revision Schedule That Survives a Bad Week

> **Outcome:** "I have a written plan with a defined minimum that still works when the week goes wrong."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Write down how many days are left until your exam and how many topics you have. Divide. That number is the real constraint, and most plans are made without it.

The minimum you need to know

Most revision timetables fail on the first disrupted day, because they are built as a perfect sequence where every slot depends on the one before. The fix is to plan **by topic rather than by hour**, and to define a **minimum version** of every session in advance. Start from the arithmetic: days available, topics to cover, sessions each topic needs. Mark topics by how secure they are and give the shaky ones more passes — not the ones you enjoy, which is where revision time silently goes. Then build in slack: plan about four days out of five and leave the fifth empty, because it will get used whether you plan it or not. The minimum version is the part that saves the plan — for each session, decide the fifteen-minute form you will do when the day collapses. Fifteen minutes of retrieval on a bad day keeps the spacing intact; a skipped day breaks the interval and, more importantly, breaks the habit.

Worked example: three weeks, nine topics

Nine topics, twenty-one days, roughly one session a day with slack. Topics get marked: three secure, four shaky, two blank. The blanks get four passes each, the shaky ones three, the secure ones two — thirty passes across seventeen planned days, so some days carry two short sessions rather than one long one. Four days are deliberately left empty. Each session is written as a topic and a method, not a time: "Topic 4 — ten questions cold, then correct." The minimum version for every session is the same: "five questions from the shaky pile, on paper." In the event, two days are lost to illness and one to a family thing; the slack absorbs two and the minimum version covers the third. The plan finishes intact, which is something no hour-by-hour timetable has ever done.

Checklist

- ☐ Plan written by topic and method, not by clock hours
- ☐ Days, topics and passes counted before the plan was made
- ☐ Shaky and blank topics given more passes than comfortable ones
- ☐ Roughly one day in five deliberately left empty as slack
- ☐ A fifteen-minute minimum version defined for every session
- ☐ The plan is on paper or in a calendar, not held in your head

Exercises

1. Count your days, topics and passes, and write the resulting plan down.
2. Mark every topic as secure, shaky or blank, and check that your time matches the marks.
3. Write the fifteen-minute minimum version for each of your next five sessions.

CHAPTER 6 OF 6 · DAY 6 · 35 MIN

Practising Under the Conditions You'll Be Tested In

> **Outcome:** "I have done at least one full past paper under real time pressure and marked it against the scheme."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Find one past paper or sample question for your subject and read only the instructions and the mark allocations. Do not answer anything yet.

The minimum you need to know

The last gap between knowing material and scoring on it is **conditions**. An exam adds time limits, handwriting, no lookups and adrenaline, and every one of those degrades performance unless it has been rehearsed. Doing a past paper under real conditions — timed, closed-book, in one sitting — is the highest-value single session in any revision plan, because it tests retrieval, speed and stamina at once. Two details decide whether it is worth the time. First, **mark it against the mark scheme**, not against your own impression, since the scheme reveals what the examiner actually rewards, which is frequently not what you assumed. Second, **read the mark allocations as a time budget**: a question worth a fifth of the paper deserves a fifth of the time, and the commonest way to lose marks is overrunning on an early question you enjoy. Do this early enough that the results can change your plan. A past paper done the night before is a rehearsal; done three weeks out, it is a diagnosis.

Worked example: one past paper, three lessons

A student sits a two-hour past paper at the kitchen table, phone in another room, timer running. She finishes twelve minutes over and leaves the last question half-answered. Marking against the scheme produces three findings. One: she spent thirty-five minutes on a question worth twelve per cent, because she knew it well and enjoyed writing it. Two: the scheme awards marks for naming the assumptions behind a model, which her notes treat as a throwaway line, so an entire recurring mark category was being missed. Three: two topics she had marked secure produced vague answers under time pressure — secure in a quiet room is not the same as secure at speed. None of the three would have surfaced from another session of questions at her own pace, and all three are fixable with two weeks left.

Checklist

- ☐ At least one full past paper completed timed, closed-book, in one sitting
- ☐ Phone and notes genuinely out of reach for the duration
- ☐ Answers marked against the official mark scheme, not against your own impression
- ☐ Time per question compared against the marks each question carries
- ☐ Findings fed back into the revision plan rather than just noted
- ☐ Done early enough that there is still time to act on what it shows

Exercises

1. Sit one full past paper under timed, closed-book conditions.
2. Mark it against the scheme and list every place the scheme rewarded something you did not write.
3. Adjust your remaining plan based on what the paper revealed, and write the changes down.

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