Jake Hunton

# Exam Literacy

A guide to doing what works
(and not what doesn't) to better
prepare students for exams

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# Foreword by Professor John Dunlosky

## Department of Psychological Sciences, Director, Science of Learning and Education Center, Kent State University

Learning is difficult. Or at least, learning anything novel and complex is difficult. There is no way around it. So much so that any technique which is described as 'it makes learning easy' almost certainly does not hold true, because learning is not easy and it cannot be made easy. What makes matters worse is that students and teachers can mistake fast-and-easy progress with actual learning success when, in fact, many strategies that give rise to fast progress also lead to fast forgetting. And by using ineffective techniques and schedules for learning, students (and teachers) may inadvertently be making it more difficult to reach their learning goals. All of this can be frustrating, both for teachers who seek to help their students retain what they have learned and for students who want to succeed but too often find themselves struggling.

What is the solution? That is, in order to reduce frustrations and ultimately improve student achievement, how should instructors teach and how should students guide their own learning? If you have ever asked questions like these, do not put down this book – because in *Exam Literacy* Jake Hunton provides the answers in an easy-to-read volume that will inspire teachers and students alike. His perspective is especially noteworthy. After spending many years experiencing the same frustrations while teaching students foreign languages, Jake realized he needed to make some changes, and in order to do so he turned to empirical evidence (the hardcore research that indicates what really works) about which learning techniques are most effective and how to use them with fidelity.

Some of what he learned you may find surprising, such as that some of the most effective techniques can be implemented in the classroom, yet many teachers do not know about these techniques or how to use them effectively. One reason for teachers' limited knowledge can be traced back to the textbooks used to educate teachers – recent surveys in the United States and in the Netherlands indicate that the majority of these textbooks do not even mention these techniques!

To help spread the great news, Jake provides a user's guide to some of the most effective techniques, and he does so in a humorous and engaging manner that will be accessible to any interested reader. So, if you want to gain insight into how to improve your students' learning (or even your own), then read on – this book will no doubt become an invaluable resource for you and anyone who embraces lifelong learning in school and beyond.

# Acknowledgements

When I started thinking about writing this book I came up with the title, 'Exam Literacy: How to Beat the Exam'. Are you cringing as much as I am? I am extremely grateful to David Bowman at Crown House not only for his constant support but also for his gentle rejection of that title.

I began by writing a guide for the steps students could follow, including how to download exam papers, specifications, mark schemes and examiner reports. Oh, and how to right-click and make a folder for each set of documents. Initially, it hurt a bit when the more I read, the more I realised I didn't know, and how writing a guide about how to organise exam material into folders and build up a store of tips and tricks from examiner reports didn't feel particularly relevant any more.

I am also grateful to all those involved in education – the teaching community, the teacher-bloggers and tweeters – including, of course, those who have been so helpful and supportive in allowing me to refer to their work; in particular, Dr Yana Weinstein from the Learning Scientists, Professor John Sweller, David Didau and, of course, Professor John Dunlosky. All of them have acted as my unwitting psychologists in helping to rein in my levels of bias to more tolerable levels. That is my own view though, and I'm sticking to it.

I am not wrong either to say a huge *merci*, *danke* and *gracias* to the Crown House Publishing team, my brilliant editor, Emma Tuck, and my family – former head teacher Mum, Debbie; deputy head teacher brother, Jude (@judehunton); his wife and MFL teacher, Mariana (@srahunton); my Dad, Colin, and his wife, Gill; my wife, Emily, and, of course, my wonderful son, Tristan.

Thank you also to the four wonderful schools – and their fantastic, hard-working staff and students – in which I have had the pleasure of working and training: the Grove School in Market Drayton, Alsager School in Cheshire, Arthur Terry School in Sutton Coldfield and Heart of England School in the West Midlands.

# Contents

# Introduction

In 1997, at Easter, I copied out new notes while looking at my old notes from my GCSE business studies textbook.

In 1999, I stared at the notes I had made in class for A level geography.

In March 2003, I sat on a train rereading notes from a lecture on Spanish morphology.

In April 2005, I highlighted passages from a book on psychometric testing.

This was all in preparation for exams at which I might have done better.

I sat these exams not knowing that there might be more effective ways of studying when away from the classroom, ways which might help to make studying more effortful yet rewarding.

I didn't know how much I didn't know when revising or restudying.

A three-hour block of time copying out of the textbook felt like good, old-fashioned, solid revision which should serve me well. There was a tangible product to my revision which meant I felt like I was going to do very well in the exam because, of course, how couldn't I, what with all that observable product at the end of my studying?

The strategy of copying out the notes and looking at the notes made it feel as if I was doing something productive. I would judge how well I had studied by the length of time I had dedicated to doing it.

I'm not sure what I expected from staring at the notes I had made in A level geography – perhaps that the key terms and definitions would evaporate off the page, go through a process of condensation and fall as precipitation, percolating into my long-term memory.

Rereading lulled me into a nice, fuzzy sense of comfortable cognitive ease. I confused familiarity with my notes with checking whether I actually knew the material when they weren't there.

Highlighting passages from a book on psychometric testing also lulled me into thinking that I knew the material much better than I did.

None of these study strategies were as effective as they might have been had I known more about techniques that could have told me what I knew, or didn't know, and perhaps helped to better embed what I wanted to embed in my long-term memory.

In 2007, I taught some lessons where I limited teacher-talk time to no more than 20 minutes.

In 2008, I managed to finish teaching my GCSE language course by Easter to allow some time at the end to revise. The course was based on the textbook and taught in a blocked order of topics.

In 2009, I gave the students plenty of past papers to do at home plus vocabulary to learn, but I didn't think to teach them any strategies on how they could study away from the classroom.

As both student and teacher, I didn't know what I didn't know – and some of what I did know was based on fragments of what I had been told was right, so there were a few urban myths among my thinking (the excellent *Urban Myths about Learning and Education* hadn't been written back then.[1])

When I first started thinking about writing this book three years ago, I admit that, as well as an analysis of potentially more effective study skills, I also began to consider ways that I could be more creative with exam materials. How about a card sort to match up comments from examiner reports with questions on the exam papers? How about designing a PowerPoint with the exam paper question, the mark scheme and the examiner report? How about students designing their own exam paper at an early stage in the course? How about cutting up sample answers and then giving the students a time limit to match the answers with the grades? How about teaching students how to use an online exam paper generator and setting a homework in which they create a question for their friend to complete? And so on.

I knew that exams were important when I started teaching, but I'm shocked to recall how little else I knew about them. I didn't know they were the source of so much debate and controversy. I didn't realise that an educational fault line runs right down the exam room and through wobbly, graffiti-daubed desks. Exams good, exams bad; exams too much, exams not enough. It took me a long time to see the political debate around exams. And to be honest, I'm not sure that I fully engage with it now.

The focus has changed a little since I started writing this book, so while there are a few references here and there to summative testing, it is more of a discussion about learning strategies which *might* work more effectively versus those that *might* not, with an overlap between the classroom and possible transfer to outside the classroom. I stress *might*: they are learning strategies which have shown promise versus the ones that have shown less promise.

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1   See Pedro De Bruyckere, Paul A. Kirschner and Casper D. Hulshof, *Urban Myths about Learning and Education* (London: Academic Press, 2015).

The book is written from the point of view of a teacher who wants to know more about effective learning strategies and how (or if) they transfer away from the classroom. Some of the areas covered include:

■ Outsourcing study skills versus teachers teaching them within their subject domain.

■ Study skills/learning strategies which have been identified as those which might be less effective than others.

■ Study skills/learning strategies which have been identified as those which might be more effective than others.

■ Potential examples of how the techniques which might be more effective could look.

■ The overlap between learning strategies in the classroom and away from the classroom.

I'm grateful to all the researchers and bloggers out there while I have been researching this book. There is always so much to read and so much to learn that even when you feel you are finally satisfied something new comes along – another study, another blog, another way to challenge your thinking – that you question what you believed in and start rethinking and rewriting again. My own bias and I have disagreed a number of times throughout.

I hope you enjoy the debate.

Part 1
# The Debate

# Chapter 1

# Testing and Revising:
# The Evidence

There are no magic potions to reach for when exam season approaches. There is no Asterix and Obelix 'Getanexamfix' druid. Unfortunately, as far as I know, there are no magic exam beans either. The next new initiative might not be a panacea but, in fact, another way to foster an atmosphere of pernicious accountability and 'support' a teacher out of the profession.

Nor are there any silver bullets to ensuring student academic success. Sometimes, though, the talk of exam success and students getting excellent grades can conjure up images of exam factories – huge, cold, industrial complexes where students are drilled in Victorian-style classrooms, writing out arithmetic on slate grey iPads.

When I started teaching I had no real understanding of how the memory works and even less of a clue about cognitive science. I thought that pace in the classroom was key (partly through received wisdom and partly through my own vanity: 'If you want to see great pace in lessons then go to Jake's classroom!').

This was both comical and sad, as I really did think that doing things quickly would impress observers and keep the students engaged. It did impress observers, but I don't know if it actually helped to engage the students.[1] I fear it didn't because when I started working at a new school, I began teaching lessons at such a brisk pace that the students complained they couldn't understand as I was speaking and doing things too quickly. Fears of account-ability fuelled my hyperactivity and led to little or no time for the students to understand the material or process it properly.

Pace became a 'tick-box' item in lesson observations, added to the list of 'things we must see in a lesson observation', such as differentiation. This sometimes led to three different sets of worksheets for clearly identifiable groups of students who, no matter how much stealth you could put into surreptitiously organising the class into 'higher ability', 'middle ability' and 'lower ability', the students would always know. In the end, both the students

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1   See, for example, ch. 11 of Ruth Colvin Clark and Richard E. Mayer's *E-Learning and the Science of Instruction: Proven Guidelines for Consumers and Designers of Multimedia Learning*, Kindle edn (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2016), loc. 4526–4883.

and I became embarrassed by the whole thing. I now know that my own understanding of differentiation was rather ill-founded and not based on 'responsive teaching'.[2]

I also conducted mini-plenaries (perhaps it's just the terminology that's a problem, since if they were considered as 'retrieval practice' then mini-plenaries might be thought of more positively) and peer assessment without any awareness of the potential for the Dunning–Kruger effect – that is, the cognitive bias in which individuals who are unskilled at a task mistakenly believe themselves to possess greater ability than they do. An alternative, perhaps somewhat cruder, definition is that you're too incompetent to know that you are incompetent.

I'm not necessarily saying that pace was, and is, a bad thing; just that because I had picked up that it impressed people, it became one of the things I would do when being observed, and also something to look out for when I was required to do lesson observations. Seeking to confirm a prejudiced view was a skew that I never even knew I had.

It felt strange, nonetheless, that in my observed lessons where I limited teacher-talk time and ensured my pace was good, I was given mostly outstanding; yet I always felt that the students learned more from me standing at the front and teaching in a slower and more didactic manner, followed up by some guided practice. This was the style I reverted back to when teaching *sans* observer, especially when the exam season loomed large.

Giving students summative tasks to improve a summative outcome was also something I believed would help them to learn better over time: if I test them on the big thing in the way they are tested in exams, they will definitely get better at that big thing. This approach influenced the thinking behind a card sort I devised which involved matching up examiner reports and mark schemes.

As a language teacher, I also used listening tasks from textbooks and past papers to try to improve students' listening skills on a later summative listening test. It felt like I was doing my job, primarily because that was how I understood it *should* work from my teacher training. The fact that students' working memories were being overloaded because the listening exercises were too complex and the skill had not been broken down did not occur to me. (One of the advantages of deliberate practice – where a skill is broken down into smaller tasks – is that there is less of a load on working memory.)

By designing writing tasks which were summative assessments and then expecting students to improve on their next summative assessment, I was confusing learning and performance. Daisy Christodoulou (@daisychristo) notes that learning is about storing

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2    For more on this see David Didau's (@DavidDidau) blog on differentiation: 'What Do Teachers Think Differentiation Is?', *The Learning Spy* [blog] (24 April 2017). Available at: http://www.learningspy.co.uk/research/teachers-think-differentiation/.

detailed knowledge in long-term memory whereas performance is about using that learning in a specific situation.[3] The two have very different purposes.

In a blog post on enhancing students' chances at succeeding at listening, Gianfranco Conti (@gianfrancocont9) raises the following issues:

Teachers do not teach listening skills, they quiz students through listening comprehensions, which are tests through and through;

They usually do not train students in the mastery of bottom-up processing skills (decoding, parsing, etc.).[4]

Rather than focusing on breaking down the skill of listening to ensure the students had mastered bottom-up processing skills, I instead played them extract after extract of a listening comprehension from a textbook. I wasn't aware that breaking down the skill would have been effective in building the students' listening skills because the practice looks different from the final skill. It's similar to using past papers to improve students' grades – it doesn't necessarily work.[5]

Maths teacher David Thomas (@dmthomas90) describes how over-focusing on exams can take the joy out of learning in the classroom. He observes that were it possible to teach assessment objectives directly then it would make sense for every piece of work to be a 'mini-GCSE exam', but this isn't possible as they are focused on generic skills, and these skills 'can only be acquired indirectly: by learning the component parts that build up to make the whole such as pieces of contextual knowledge, rules of grammar, or fluency in procedures'. Furthermore, 'these components look very different to the skill being sought – just as doing drills in football practice looks very different to playing a football match, and playing scales on a violin looks very different to giving a recital'.[6]

3   Daisy Christodoulou, *Making Good Progress? The Future of Assessment for Learning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 42–43.

4   Gianfranco Conti, 'How to Enhance Your Students' Chances of Succeeding at Listening (Part 1)', *The Language Gym* [blog] (3 October 2016). Available at: https://gianfrancoconti.wordpress.com/2016/10/03/how-to-enhance-your-students-chances-of-succeeding-at-listening-part-1/. See also Steven Smith and Gianfranco Conti, *The Language Teacher Toolkit* (n.p.: CreateSpace, 2016).

5   There's a cracking Alex Quigley (@HuntingEnglish) blog post on the problem with past papers which he refers to as practising 'the big game': 'The Problem with Past Exam Papers', *The Confident Teacher* [blog] (8 April 2017). Available at: http://www.theconfidentteacher.com/2017/04/the-problem-with-past-exam-papers/.

6   David Thomas, 'How Exams Took the Joy, and the Learning, Out of Our Classrooms', *David Thomas' Blog* [blog] (29 May 2017). Available at: http://davidthomasblog.com/2017/05/how-exams-took-the-joy-and-the-learning-out-of-our-classrooms/.

The idea of being 'exam literate' might sound superficial (e.g. knowing key parts of the mark scheme or building up a store of key points from the examiner report), but in fact it is about spending time adopting some of the tenets of deliberate practice and building up mental models in each domain.

Just as adopting a deliberate practice model does not look like the final task, so exam literacy does not look like the final exam. I remember thinking that I was quite clever to come up with a homework task early on in a Year 12 Spanish course which got the students to design their own exam papers, and another time when I designed practice tasks which mirrored the exact style of the questions the students would face in their writing exam (even mimicking the dotted style of the lines on which students would write their answers!). I mistakenly thought that if they were familiar with the format of the paper then there would be no surprises in the exam.

The relative merits of different approaches has been a common topic of debate on Twitter and in the edublogosphere over the last few years. For example, there is a great chapter by Olivia Dyer (@oliviaparisdyer) on drill and didactic teaching in Katharine Birbalsingh's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers*,[7] and plenty of wonderful blog posts setting out common-sense approaches combined with aspects of cognitive science, as well as how to best plan a curriculum. A great place to start might be to have a look at any one of the Learning Scientists' blog posts.[8]

The education debate seems to have been shifting towards questioning what was once generally accepted about how best to teach in the classroom and, more pertinently for this book, learning strategies that are backed up by evidence about how students can learn more effectively. Things also seem to be moving towards not so much *how* to teach but *what* to teach.

It's tempting to think that everyone has moved on from learning styles and the like when you listen to the Twitterati, but myths masquerading as sound evidence may still be prevalent.[9] (Incidentally, Dylan Wiliam, writing on the Deans for Impact blog with reference to learning styles, says: 'it could be that the whole idea of learning-styles research is misguided because its basic assumption – that the purpose of instructional design is to make learning easy – may just be incorrect'.[10]) The idea that learning strategies which are designed to make it easier for the learner may actually be inhibiting learning, as well as the

7   Olivia Dyer, 'Drill and Didactic Teaching Work Best'. In Katharine Birbalsingh (ed.), *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers: The Michaela Way* (Woodbridge: John Catt Educational, 2016), pp. 28–39.

8   See http://www.learningscientists.org/blog/.

9   See, for example, David Didau's blog, 'What Do Teachers Believe?', *The Learning Spy* [blog] (16 March 2017). Available at: http://www.learningspy.co.uk/research/what-do-teachers-believe/.

10  Dylan Wiliam, 'Learning Styles: What Does the Research Say?', *Deans for Impact* [blog] (28 April 2016). Available at: https://deansforimpact.org/learning-styles-what-does-the-research-say/.

idea that making certain conditions more demanding for learners could help their learning, feature a number of times in this book.

The first exam results that I had with a class were good, solid results: a set of meat-and-potato results that I had spent two years cooking up using a mix of trial and error, received wisdom and slavishly following the textbook (the scheme of work). Learning and performance were quite often confused using my own brand of end-of-the-lesson-pseudo-football-manager-encouragement-speak, with 'Great performance in today's lesson, guys!' featuring quite prominently.

The fact that after the exam some students came to speak to me about the paper – telling me some of the words they could remember but asking me what many other words that *I knew I had taught them* meant – forced me to question why curriculum coverage had been paramount. I *had* to finish that textbook chapter on transport before the students' study leave could begin (what happens if *gare routière* comes up on the exam?). Revision could not, and should not, take place before I had covered all of the topics in the textbook.

Tired of feeling like I hadn't done my job if the students couldn't recall or recognise words in their exams, I dared to abandon the textbook and do a little basic research on the vocabulary that had come up consistently in previous exams. Alongside teaching the topics, I started to practise and test language that I thought would be beneficial to the students, and practised and tested this content no matter what topic they were studying. (This took a simple form – projecting the list onto a whiteboard, covering up the meanings of words and phrases and then calling out the Spanish and waiting for the students to shout out the English, whole-class retrieval-style.)

When the students found that they could actually recall things in assessments and mini low stakes tests that they couldn't do before, I felt a little more emboldened. I didn't share this strategy with anyone other than the teachers in my family and, of course, the students themselves. The results for this class were excellent. The class had frighteningly high predicted grades but the final results made the local papers![11] I include this not to boast, but to demonstrate the impact of choosing to reject a dogmatic mentality about having to finish the textbook at all costs and instead ensuring the students had actually learned something.

OK, I admit that the proxy for that improvement was the exam, but what was going on in the lessons in the lead-up to the exam did not reflect the exam task. (Dare I be so bold as to claim that it was a sort of stumbled upon crude version of deliberate practice?) For example, rather than setting more and more past reading papers to try to improve the

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11  See Rhiannon Hilton, Alsager School GCSE Results, *Crewe Chronicle* (31 August 2011). Available at: http://www.crewechronicle.co.uk/news/local-news/alsager-school-gcse-results-5607224.

students' reading paper marks, what became the norm was practising and testing short phrases and vocabulary (which I had identified as enabling the students to achieve a sort of semi-automaticity with their reading comprehension) at spaced intervals across the course.

The shift was based on trial and error and a questioning of accepted practice. Following the class's excellent exam results, I couldn't explain with any evidence other than the results themselves and the students' own anecdotal comments about how they could remember more language now or why what I had done had worked better to create the right conditions for them to succeed.

When I found out that there were concepts like 'spaced practice' and 'retrieval practice' (perhaps it was a sort of bias on my part to hunt them down as a way to confirm why I was doing what I was doing), I found an evidence base for what I had been doing. I just didn't know why it was working in the context of the students' improved knowledge (and improved results). I did then, and still do somewhat, bandy the terms around a fair bit, believing I have found the answer.

An army of like-minded practitioners, the researchED-ers, are also honing in on sorting the eduwheat from the pseudochaff. David Didau tweeted the last line of Dylan Wiliam's presentation slide at researchED Washington in 2016: 'All teachers & leaders need to be critical consumers of research.'[12] When I started my PGCE, even teacher-led research could take the form of discussing learning style questionnaires with students. One shudders to think. We were all passive consumers of this 'research' and what came to us from teacher training materials, never really asking for additional evidence of impact. I don't know why I didn't feel able to be more critical at the time – perhaps the fear of appearing arrogant or overly negative in front of more experienced colleagues or a consciousness of my lack of knowledge. Probably a mix of the two. I was doubtless a victim of groupthink bias.

There is always some sort of evidence to suggest that an initiative has worked, but what evidence is the right evidence? Of course, much depends on what you think the purpose of education is as to what evidence is relevant.[13] If you believe that one of the main purposes of education is to help to make learners cleverer, then having some evidence which shows how one approach might work better than another (under certain conditions) seems an eminently sensible place to start.

12  See https://twitter.com/LearningSpy/status/792373570634743809/photo/1. See also Dylan Wiliam, 'Why Teaching Isn't – and Probably Never Will Be – a Research-Based Profession'. Presentation at researchED Washington, Columbia Heights Education Campus, Washington, DC, 29 October 2016.

13  Sue Cowley has written an interesting blog post on this: 'What Works for What?', *Freeing the Angel* [blog] (28 February 2017). Available at: https://suecowley.wordpress.com/2017/02/28/what-works-for-what/.

'Read, highlight, reread, repeat.'

If such a revision cycle sounds all too wearily familiar, you and your students need a better route to exam success.

In this wide-ranging guide to effective exam preparation, Jake Hunton casts a careful eye over the latest cognitive research into revision techniques and delivers proven strategies which actually work.

With plenty of practical suggestions and subject-specific examples, *Exam Literacy* provides teachers with user-friendly advice on how they can make the content they cover stick, and shares up-to-date, evidence-based information on:

- The nature of learning and the various types of memory.
- How to improve students' retention of knowledge and recall of content.
- Why popular revision techniques such as highlighting may not be as effective as you think.
- How revision strategies that have been identified as being more effective, such as interleaving and retrieval practice, can be embedded into your day-to-day teaching.
- How students can be encouraged to make use of these winning strategies when revising independently.

Suitable for all teachers looking to improve their students' exam results.

A real strength of *Exam Literacy* is Jake's ability to marry his understanding of the evidence with his understanding of how the exam system operates in English schools. His advice, therefore, can be taken straight off the page and applied with immediate effect in the classroom.

**Andy Tharby, English teacher, research lead and co-author of *Making Every Lesson Count***

*Exam Literacy* is an extraordinarily broad synthesis of ideas from some of the most exciting thinkers in education today, written with the insight of a teacher working hard at the chalkface to put them into action.

Jake succeeds in offering a fresh perspective and a cornucopia of practical strategies, often complemented by subject-specific examples, which any teacher can apply to their everyday practice. All classroom teachers would benefit from reading his reflections and suggestions.

**Kris Boulton, Director of Education, Up Learn**

It is refreshing to find a book that acknowledges the immense importance of *how* to revise, rather than *what* to revise. As educationalists, it is imperative to realise that all students learn in different ways and with differing levels of exam literacy. Using a common-sense approach, Jake Hunton identifies subtle barriers to learning and explores ways to ensure confident learning for success.

**Richard Gill, CEO, and Neil Warner, Executive Head Teacher, Arthur Terry Learning Partnership**

**Jake Hunton** is head of modern foreign languages at Heart of England School in Solihull and believes in combining passionate, engaging and fast-paced teaching with a focus on the highest achievement for all students. **@jakehuntonMFL**

Also by Jake Hunton:
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