



‘The GCSE to A-level Transition’

Preparation booklet

Whilst you are away from school, we would like to prepare you for the transition from being a GCSE student, to an A-level student. This is a big jump!

The purpose of this booklet is to provide you with a range of optional tasks to complete. These link to the tutor programme that you will be following throughout Year 12 and 13. They focus on your mindset and habits, which are a key part of success at A Level.

Please take a look at the tasks below. There are a range of activities provided that will get you thinking of key ways to prepare for your 6th Form journey.

When you enter a mindset, you enter a new world. In one world – the world of fixed traits – success is about proving you’re smart or talented. Validating yourself.

In the other – the world of changing qualities – it’s about stretching yourself to learn something new. Developing yourself.

Dweck (2007), p.14

Introduction

There isn't a direct link between success at the end of Year 11 and success at A level.

You might think that students who succeed at the end of Year 11 continue this pathway and succeed again at the end of Year 13. But instead something else happens: some students make giant strides between 16 and 18, leaping up from pretty modest results in Year 11 to outstanding results in Year 13. Others go from great performance at 16 to modest grades at the end of their A level courses. Some students hit ceilings, others make sudden breakthroughs.

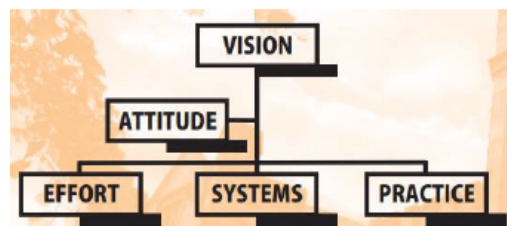
We've spent years studying what it is about 'ceiling students' that stops them progressing, and what it is about 'breakthrough students' that makes them suddenly improve. Here's the outcome: there isn't a link between GCSE performance and being a breakthrough students or, indeed, a ceiling student. *Past performance doesn't guarantee future performance.* Whatever happened to you in your GCSEs doesn't define what you'll achieve in your A Levels.

Instead, the factors which determine students' A level success are their habits, routines, attitude and approaches to study. Paul Tough summarises it pretty nearly in the following observation. It is your behaviours not your intelligence that will determine your results. 'Economists refer to these as non-cognitive skills, psychologists call them personality traits, and the rest of us sometimes think of them as character' (Tough, 2013, p.5).

VESPA

Our work suggests that students who are successful, score highly in the following characteristic qualities:

- **VISION** – they know what they want to achieve.
- **EFFORT** – they put in many hours of proactive independent study.
- **SYSTEMS** – they organise their learning resources and their time.
- **PRACTICE** – they practise and develop their skills.
- **ATTITUDE** – they respond constructively to setbacks.



Vision Activity 1: Getting Dreams Done

There is a big difference between a dream and a goal. A dream is something you imagine happening; a goal is something you take actions towards. Often, when we meet with students to discuss their vision they list their dreams, not their goals. Here is a good way of distinguishing between them.

Make a list of your hopes for the future and then put them into one of the following categories:

<p>Pure fantasy and pipe dreams</p> <p>List here the things you would one day like to be or do but that you've never ever talked about. It's never been verbalised at all – it's just in your head.</p>	<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p>Daydreams and conversations</p> <p>List here the things you would one day like to be or do that you've talked about with a friend. You've admitted them and started exploring and discussing them.</p>	<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>
<p>Goals</p> <p>List here the things you would like to do that you've taken action about. What was the action? When did you take it? What did you do when things got difficult?</p>	<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>

When your list is complete, answer the following questions:

1. What percentage of your daydreams or pipe dreams have you acted on? What is the chance of these hopes becoming reality?

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2. How much action have you taken to turn daydreams into reality? Has it been repeated, determined action? Or has it been action taken some time ago?

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3. Which daydreams are the most important to you? What further actions could you take? What could you do turn pure fantasy and pipe dreams into goals?

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Final Thoughts

- Most people have pipe dreams or daydreams they never act on. That's OK, as long as you aren't frustrated or unhappy by not pursuing your dreams. Look over your three lists again, and try to answer this question honestly:

If you could turn one of these dreams into reality, which one would it be, and what would you have to do?

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Vision Activity 2: The Perfect Day

Every primary school child in the country will be able to tell you what they want to be. Why? Because at that age teachers encourage children to express their hopes and dreams in writing activities with titles like “When I grow up.....” Look in your old school books and you will find you’ve done this too.

But no one asks teenagers to write about what they want to be. It’s as if, by this age, we’re embarrassed to have hopes and dreams. We shouldn’t be. *Having hopes and dreams is more important at this age than at any other time of life.*

So, put your headphones in, get some music on and write about shame. It will be like the old days! Here are some questions to help get you thinking. Your task is to have a go at describing your perfect day at work to help you develop a long-term vision.

- Are you working indoors or outdoors?

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- Do you work at home or away from home?

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- Who are you with?

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- Are you leading a team? Part of a team? Alone?

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- When do you start or finish your day?

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➤ What are you wearing to work?

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➤ What is your workspace like?

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Your answers to these questions might not tell you precisely what kind of job you should be aiming for, but they will help establish what interesting work looks like for you. Look over your answers.

If you had to pick one of the above as a non-negotiable – in other words, something you would need in your work to be truly happy – which one would it be?

Final Thoughts

We've found the following topics tend to emerge as important factors in student responses. Do any apply to you? Ideas about travel, being outdoors, working in teams, celebrating successes, helping others, playing challenging games, creating fictional worlds. Responding artistically to something, exercise and physical activity, companionship and leadership.

Effort Activity 1: Recognising Your Blockers

A 'blocker' is a psychological barrier that stops you working. It might be a pattern of thinking or a habit you've established that you can't break. All of us have blockers – thoughts and feelings that stop us doing the thing we know we really need to.

To put in the effort for A-level success you have to recognise your blockers and break down those patterns of thought. This four stage model is useful for recognising the behaviours and thought patterns that are a sign of blockers.

1 Initial Lack of Motivation

Everyone feels discouraged at some point – the feeling that they don't want to complete a piece of work, finish an essay or put in a couple of hours on a tricky piece of coursework. The difference is what you tend to do next.....

2 Bypassing Conscience

Most people will feel guilty when they don't work ("I should be finishing that essay....."), but sometimes we find ways of bypassing our conscience. We deliberately rethink the situation until we feel better about it. Some other patterns you might have include:

- Student A hasn't done it either, so I'm not that bad.
- At other school/colleges they don't even do this piece, so why should I?
- The instructions were unclear, so I've got an excuse. I'm telling myself I didn't really understand.
- I rushed a piece last time and the grade was OK. I'll do that again.
- I deserve a break. I've always really loved this TV programme – I'll watch it instead.
- I'm going to do something else that has some 'educational value'.

3 Creating An Opportunity

Next, there needs to be something nearby that can distract you. Some students work near others and tell themselves this is beneficial because they can ask for help if they need it. What they might actually be doing is hoping for a distraction to occur. The same goes for workspaces. Do you work near or next to your phone, laptop, tablet, PS4 console or TV, secretly hoping for something to take you away from your work? If this is you, then you are subconsciously (or maybe deliberately!) creating the opportunity for blocks to occur.

4 Getting Away With It

Finally for the pattern to continue, you need to feel that you have got away with it. The though pattern here often goes, 'Nobody said anything, so it must be alright' or 'I didn't get told off, so I'll do it again.'

This activity might help you recognise your own tendency to self-sabotage. Don't worry, everyone does it to a certain extent – really productive people have learned to fight the feeling!

Once you've noticed the ways in which your blockers get in the way, try the following:

- Think about a piece of work you never completed. How did you justify the non-completion to yourself? Which task on your list at the moment are you least likely to do? Why?

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- Take a task that has been on your to-do list for a while because you've been putting it off. Why is it there? Is there an action you can take right away which will make the task suddenly achievable?

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- Next time you put a task off, ask yourself why. Are you simply sequencing tasks and saving it for later? Or is this an act of self-sabotage?

Now that you've recognised some of your own blockers, make a plan for overcoming them. Record your observations and ideas here:

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Final Thoughts

Everyone has blockers – and everyone occasionally sabotages their own progress. The key is to recognise you're doing it, and to fight it! If you feel self-sabotage coming on, move location. Get yourself to a quiet room, a study area or the library. Start the task. You don't even have to finish it – work for thirty minutes or so – but get it started. You're less likely to sabotage a project that is already underway!

Effort Activity 2: The Ten Minute Rule

If you are in a position where you are regularly putting up barriers to work, the Ten Minute Rule is a good way of breaking them down. What do we mean by 'barriers'? Many students will avoid A-level classwork or homework because it is hard. Instead they will:

- Do something more comfortable but less useful. They might copy out some notes or make a mind-map when they know they should be doing the exam paper their teacher has set them under timed conditions.
- Claim that homework or independent work 'isn't realistic' as a way of avoiding it. ('This is pointless. The real exam will be totally different so why bother?')
- Get into a deep discussions about something related so they feel like they are working.
- Look for someone else who isn't doing it. Or in extreme cases, tell themselves that no one is doing it.

You may recognise these behaviours in yourself and others – putting up barriers to independent work to avoid it.

If this is you, the Ten Minute Rule is a good way to break through barriers. It's very simple:

- 1 Tell yourself you are going to do ten minutes of intense work. That's all.
- 2 Decide what work the ten minutes is going to be spent on.
- 3 Clear a space and sit down with the right materials to hand.
- 4 Start.

You can, of course, stop after ten minutes. Even if you do, you've done ten minutes more work than you would have done. But what often happens is that ten minutes becomes twenty. Sometimes even half an hour or longer.

Final Thoughts

What do we learn from this experiment? Hopefully, you will realise that the thought of the work is often much worse than the work itself. Try using the Ten Minute Rule with a task you are dreading.

Which task is currently the least pleasant on your to-do-list? Plan to tackle it today. Use the Ten Minute Rule. Set yourself up somewhere quiet where you won't be disturbed, and go for it! Make your plans here:

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Systems Activity 1: The Energy Line

Many students feel overwhelmed by the amount of work they have to do. Some keep lists – scribbling down jobs and crossing them off when they’re done. And lists are good – they help you keep on top of what it is you’ve got to do.

The drawback of a list is that it doesn’t tell you what to do first. A better tool to use for prioritising tasks is an Energy Line – it beats a to-do list any day of the week. Scott Belsky suggests this technique in his book *Making Ideas Happen* (2011). We love it! It helps you put things in order according to how much effort you need to give them.

- **Step 1** - You start by listing all the tasks that you’ve got to do in the space below. Just empty your head of every task you can think of. Don’t move onto step 2 until you are confident you’ve included everything.

List All the Tasks in the Box Below

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- **Step 2** – This is where you prioritise the tasks. Put things on the left-hand side – high or extreme – if you need to work like mad on them. Put them on the right if you can kick back and leave it for a bit. Attach dates for submission and you’re really getting there. You’ll notice that there are a maximum number of tasks that you can include at the bottom of each column. For example, you can only have two tasks in the extreme column. It might be useful to use small sticky notes for each tasks, so that you can pull them off when you’ve completed.

Prioritise Your Tasks on the Table

Extreme	High	Medium	Low	Idle
Max: 2 tasks	Max: 4 tasks	Max: 8 tasks	Max: 4 tasks	Max: 2 tasks
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Final Thoughts

Project management is the activity of planning and organising yourself and the resources you have in order to achieve long-term goals. The basic principles of project management aren't difficult and can be easily taught. You might not have thought about it like this, but A levels are like planning four (or maybe more) projects.

How has this helped you think about how you prioritise your tasks?

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Systems Activity 2: The Breakfast Club

In *Sex Sleep Eat Drink Dream A Day in the Life of Your Body*, Jennifer Ackerman (2008) shares some research which suggests that for most people, the brain is at its sharpest in the first four hours after waking. Not straightaway – it needs time to get up to speed. But then it hits a sweet spot when it's really firing. Brain efficiency can vary, she says, but in the morning it can be up to 30% more active and sharp than it is at other times.

Here's something else to consider: the longer the day goes on, the more self-control problems you will have. If you're trying to give up chocolate, for example, you will rarely crack at 10am but by 4.30pm, when you're feeling tired, your self-control slips. It's the same with work. If you tell yourself you will start a big project at 3pm or 6pm, the chances of that happening are low. If you set aside some 'breakfast club' time – sweet spot time in the morning – you're much more likely to clear the job.

And yet we often see students using a morning study period to ease themselves into the day. They waste their moments of high brain energy on social media and gaming, then turn their attention to work later on when they're not as productive.

The Morning Routine

With all this in mind, look at your morning routine. Make some notes under the following headings:

- What time do you wake up?

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- What do you do with your first hour?

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- What are your habits and rituals, your repeated behaviours?

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- Are they positive? Do they set you up for a good day?

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- How long to they take? Are they worth it?

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Scheduling

Now look at the work you have to do this week. Use the Energy Line to figure out what's coming up in terms of deadlines, then:

- Take your highest priority tasks (or your hardest or trickiest tasks) and schedule them in morning slots for the whole week.
- Commit to clearing them early in the day. Record your plans below:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
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Final Thoughts

What went well and what needs adjusting as a result of attending the 'breakfast club'?

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Systems Activity 3: My Fulston Schedule

A key part of being an A Level student is being able to organise your time. You will have a lot of time OUTSIDE of class that needs to be used productively for study. You will also be required to study at home. In order to succeed, past student results have shown you need to study for at least 10-12 hours per week. On the study schedule below, please do the following:

1. Place your three chosen subjects into your Independent Study periods (the grey boxes!); deciding which ones you will do on certain periods (these are your 'pretend' Independent Study Periods for the purpose of this task- not your actual ones...you will get your timetable in September!)
2. You then need to decide from 3.15pm onwards, when you will do homework/further study. The aim across the week is to split the time equally between your subjects. Write this into the schedule state whether you will do this at home or remain in school (open until 5pm).
3. Place onto the schedule when you may have non-school activities in the evenings/at the weekend i.e. football or music club, babysitting, part-time job shifts, dinner, see friends etc.

Sixth Form Study Schedule



	<u>Monday</u>	<u>Tuesday</u>	<u>Wednesday</u>	<u>Thursday</u>	<u>Friday</u>	<u>Saturday</u>	<u>Sur.</u>
8.45-9.10	Tutor Time	Tutor Time	Tutor Time	Tutor Time	Tutor Time		
10.10-11.10	Lesson	Lesson		Lesson			
11.30-13.05	Lesson		Lesson		Lesson		
12.30-13.30	Lesson	Lesson		Lesson			
13.30-14.10			Lesson	Lesson	Lesson		
14.15-15.15		Lesson	Lesson		Lesson		
16.00-18.00							
18.00-20.00							
20.00-22.00							

Practice Activity 1: The Revision Questionnaire

We've found there is a strong link between the kind of revision someone does and the outcomes they get. So, which student will do better in an exam?

- Student 1 does fifteen hours' revision – all of it reading through class notes.
- Student 2 only does ten hours' revision – two hours making mind-maps, two hours creating flash cards of key terms, three hours writing timed essays, two hours working through past papers and looking for patterns in the questions asked, and half an hour doing the hardest question they could find, followed by half an hour talking it through with their teacher. Then they spend five hours shopping with their friends and watching TV.

The second student will perform better, despite revising for fewer hours! You too can make less mean more. Try this questionnaire:

Subjects:.....

1 How many hours of independent work do you do on your subjects outside of class? Please state the time spent on each subject.

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2 What sort of activities do you do? Use the table below, ticking in the column which best describes your revision and preparation:

		Always	Sometimes	Never
Reading through class notes	C			
Using resources on the School's VLE	C			
Using course textbooks	C			
Mind-maps/diagrams	C			
Making/remaking class notes	C			
Highlighting/colour coding	C			
Flash cards	C			
Using a revision wall to display your learning	C			
Writing exam answers under timed conditions	S			
Reading model answers	S			
Using past exam questions and planning answers	S			
Marking your own work to a mark scheme	F			
Studying mark schemes or examiners' reports	F			
Working with other students in groups/pairs	F			
Comparing model answers against your own work	F			
Creating your own exam questions	F			
Handing in extra exam work for marking	F			
One-to-one discussions with teacher/tutors	F			

3 Additional activities not mentioned above:

4 Write a brief account of what you do if you can't understand something (e.g try again, read textbooks, check the school's VLE, see teachers, see other students).

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Now check over your answers. You will notice some activities in the table have a 'C' next to them – these are the *content* techniques. Some activities have an 'S' next to them – these are the *skills* techniques. Others have an 'F' next to them – these are the *feedback* techniques.

Notice in our example that student 1 only does content revision, while student 2 does all three stages and then takes some time off. In our experience, student 2 will pretty much always get a better grade than student 1. And they put in fewer hours.

Make sure you do some revision for each of C, S and F! Aim for three of each; nine methods in total. Make a note of your current scores here:

➤ C score:

➤ S Score:

➤ F score:

Final Thoughts

We've found that students who get the best grades at A level practise in a wider variety of ways. Our top performers had over ten ticks in the always column, and these were pretty evenly spread across C, S and F.

However, students who got grades D, E or U had far fewer ticks in the always column – often only four or five. They were very restricted in the way they practised, often spending hours repeating the same limited range of activities.

Aim to increase the ticks in your always column to ten.

List three activities that you currently don't do, that you could add to your repertoire:

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Attitude Activity 1: There and Back

This activity has been used successfully with adults experiencing difficulties in their work or personal life. It's a balancing exercise that frees up the mind and lets you make sense of hundreds of competing thoughts, ideas, worries and fears. So, if you're in a muddle, if you're struggling to feel positive or if you're feeling gloomy, this one might work for you.

The human brain works more effectively with good blood flow, so walking is essential to this activity. After your walk, you will need half an hour to collect your thoughts, jotting things down and making notes. Alternatively, you can use the voice recorder on a mobile phone to record your thoughts and ideas as you go. For this activity to work, you need to be disciplined and follow these rules to the letter!

Block out an hour of your time. You must be alone and undisturbed for this hour. Choose a destination that is about twenty minutes' walk away. While you walk there, you can only think positive thoughts. Your topic is: things I am good at and things I am thankful for. Nothing else can enter your mind. Bully yourself into staying on these two topics. Record your thoughts or list them quickly on a notepad.

Then turn around and return to your start point. While you walk back, you can address the problems you think you have, but here is the rule – your topic is: things I can do to solve my problems. Be strong with yourself. This is the only thing you can think about. When you arrive back, take a few minutes alone and make a note of your thoughts and ideas.

A final thought: worry is a call to action. If you're worrying, make a list of actions and then act on what you have listed. If you don't change things, things don't change.

Some people repeat this activity a couple of times a month to help them refocus. One person we know has the top of a hill as their destination – they say that walking down it helps them to relax after the hard slog of getting to the top, and they always come up with actions they can take to solve problems on the way down.

"Walking There" (Things I am good at; things I am thankful for)	"Walking Back" (things I can do to solve my problems)
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Final Thoughts

This is a very satisfying activity if you finish it with an action – something you’ve listed in the right-hand column – which you do as soon as you get back.

Repeat the activity even if your lists remain the same. The recording of positives on the left, and plans on the right, is very inspiring!