

Revision and Exam Technique

Introduction

In this short guide I'm going to suggest some tips on how to prepare for the political theory paper, but most of what I say will be relevant to all your revision. I offer this only as advice, intended to help you get the most out of yourselves; if you find that some alternative revision method works best for you, then you should continue with that. Undoubtedly the simple practice of reflecting on your technique will enable you to improve it considerably.

How you perform in the exam is a factor of at least these factors: genius; knowledge; technique; and conditioning. By genius I simply mean innate ability; knowledge obviously is how well you know the material; technique relates to both essay-writing and revision technique, and conditioning relates to your physical and mental condition. Obviously innate ability is not something that can be taught; knowledge is something you'll largely have to acquire on your own—I can lead you to water, as it were, but can't make you drink. But I can definitely help you with technique, and remind you to help yourselves as far as conditioning goes. These are also probably the areas that you want to concentrate on most: your innate ability is already there, and by now you know about 95% of the information you're going to be able to use in the exam (you could still cram a little more in, but the core is all there already). But you can learn aspects of technique in the next few weeks that could make a big difference to your results; and if you don't keep yourselves in good condition you obviously risk all your hard work going to waste.

So this guide is going to tell you about conditioning and technique, and will be divided up into the following sections: conditioning; core revision; exam paper review; thematic reorganisation; essay plans; and exam technique.

Conditioning

The general themes here are to look after yourselves in all the ways that students normally don't, and to develop a system that suits you, which enables you to work well when you're working, and relax well when you're relaxing. How you structure your day is very important: think about it, when a boxer has a fight coming up at 2 in the morning, for the US audience, he structures his day so that his peak awareness time comes at 2, so he gets up at four in the afternoon every day, say, and goes to bed early in the morning. That way his brain and body are all switched on when it matters. Finals exams are at regular times, you want to make sure that every day you're at your most alert from 0930-1230, and 1430-1730 (is that the time of the afternoon ones?). These are my more specific suggestions:

1. Eat properly—get those five a day down you! Eat healthily at regular times.
2. Sleep properly—this is really crucial. Work out what counts as a good night's sleep for you, probably about 7 to 8 hours. Make sure you get this every night. If there's something that's keeping you awake, cut it out. Get into an exam-period timetable as early as possible: make sure you're up and at your brightest from 0900, as that's when your exams will be.
3. Exercise—this will help you sleep, and generally has obvious benefits.
4. Take planned and regular breaks. This is really important. The worst thing when you're revising is how sometimes you feel like you can never really relax, because you feel guilty for not working, and sometimes you feel like you can't really concentrate, but force

yourself to press on because you feel too guilty to work. So you're not able to relax properly when you relax, and you can't work properly when you're working. This sucks. The best way to avoid it is to plan days off, give yourself a treat, do something nice, that you can look forward to. And on work days, try to stick to a clear routine which gives you something like a five minute break every hour, and a longer break every couple of hours. Remember that it's not about how much you work, but how well you work.

5. Be prepared—get practicalities sorted out early (things like making sure you've still got your old mortarboard etc.). You don't want to be messing around with this stuff at the last minute.

Core Revision

Revision is a reflexive process where you oscillate between working out what interests you most, and working out what will prepare you best for the exam. To this end you need to have printed copies of all the past papers. When you start thinking about revision, first look back over your notes and work out which five or six topics you found most interesting, and have most material on. Then look through the exam papers, work out whether you've picked a turkey that never comes up, or whether you're well covered. You should be able to identify at least four questions on any given paper that fall within your chosen topics.

You've now chosen your five or six revision topics, and you need to build up your core knowledge. This means knowing who said what about the topic, what the major positions are, who has critiqued whom etc., and of course what your most interesting thoughts on the matter are. To get there you need to go back over your old notes, re-read anything you didn't note well enough, and also it's a good idea to do a little of your own research. If someone mentions an article that interests you, chase it up and have a think about it.

How well do you need to know the literature? This is an area that depends on the discipline. In analytical political theory, we're interested in arguments, not name-dropping. The fact that x said y is only important insofar as attribution is necessary to avoid plagiarism. But what matters much more is understanding the arguments. Here it is important to know your stuff, especially if you're criticising someone else's position: you have to make sure that you're not just building up a straw man to knock down. If the object of your critique would not recognise the position you attribute to him, you're in trouble.

So, for example, if you're doing liberty, then you absolutely need to know that Joseph Raz has a tripartite conception of freedom, incorporating sufficient rationality, independence from manipulation and coercion, and an adequate range of options to choose from. But you don't need to know every intricate detail of his theory, for example his novel interpretation of the harm principle, unless you're specifically interested in using them. It's about extracting the logical core of each position, and relating it to the topic, rather than about slavishly noting down what a philosopher said.

Note that this is slightly different when you're studying ideologies, where it is a good idea to know what people said in more detail. The study of ideologies is an interpretative, descriptive discipline, so you need to be sure you have good evidence. Philosophical argument on its own is all a paper on normative political theory needs (though it can use more). Papers on ideology need to know more about the specific representatives of that ideology.

The practical objective of this stage is a folder with all your essays and notes in it, for each of your topics.

Thematic Reorganisation

Right, now you've got your folders, each with all your essays and notes on a particular topic in it. Now you need to start organising that material. You can do this in two ways (you're likely to use both). The first simply involves thinking about the topic, and working out off your own bat what the most important issues are. The second is also very important: you should go back through those past papers, and work out the whole range of different questions that have been asked about your particular topic. Take those questions and work out what their underlying themes are, then, again, separate out those themes.

Once you've parsed the material, it's important to implement that parsing. You should have a list something like this:

1. Liberty.
 - 1.1. Negative vs. positive liberty.
 - 1.1.1. Internal vs. external constraints.
 - 1.1.2. Importance of range of options.
 - 1.2. Value of liberty.
 - 1.2.1. Understood as positive component of well-being.
 - 1.2.2. Liberty as a right, not a value.
 - 1.2.3. Rawlsian conception of the self and liberty.
 - 1.2.4. Marxian critique of liberty.

The next stage is to go through your notes, and cut and paste so you've got all your notes and arguments about each theme together. As you do this, you'll notice that you start seeing connections, you start understanding things you didn't quite understand before, and you'll start having your own ideas. The method of analytical philosophy is to break things down into their component parts, and then rebuild them. That's what you're doing here: you're breaking things down into their component parts, the specific modules of each argument that relate to each specific subtopic. And as you do that you're bound to start seeing arguments and holes in arguments that you didn't know were there before. So you go through all your notes, work out what each writer said about each topic, what you think about that, what other ideas you think have been missed etc. And you organise all this under these different headings. I've attached an example, from my M.Phil. revision. Obviously this is M.Phil. stuff, so *much* longer and more depth than you'll be doing, but the basic principle is the same. N.b. good use of subheadings can make a big difference here, as does using the document map feature in word to navigate round the page (I assume there's something similar in other software packages).

Then once you've got all your notes organised by subtopic, work out what you think about each one. Sometimes you'll have a lot to say, sometimes it will just be a matter of 'I think Steiner was right, and Taylor wrong', say. But try to make it clear, at least to yourself, where you stand on each of these debates.

End product: your notes organised by theme, with your thoughts on each subtopic clarified.

Essay Plans

The next stage again involves returning to the exam papers, this time to cull specific questions. Then you do as many short essay plans as you can manage: work out what you'd say for every different question relating to your topic (or as many as you have time for). The essay plans should be handwritten (it's important to get your handwriting going again) and shouldn't really take up more than a side. Each should feature an introduction, suggesting your interpretation/analysis of the question, then an argument consisting of

four or five stages, and a short conclusion. You should be able to summarise what you're going to do in each paragraph in a couple of lines.

How should you structure the essays? Refer back to my guide to writing essays, everything said there goes double for exams.

The big issue with exam papers is this: how do you strike a balance between answering the question directly, and getting your best ideas across? (assuming you don't get asked the exact question you most want to answer). This is something you have to work out for yourselves, but in order to counterbalance the tendency among undergrads just to learn essays and then trot them out whatever the question, I recommend you throw a few random ones into your practice essay plans. Every year there will be one or two questions that you'd have to be either crazy or brilliant to answer: when doing your essay plans, see how you manage to deal with a few of these. It's even worth trying some really silly ones, just to test your analytical skills. Here are some example questions, some just curveballs, some plain silly. (* indicates real past paper question):

What is the justification, and what are the limits, of parental authority?

'The *sine qua non* of a good roast is a good gravy.' Discuss.

'Thou shalt not kill.' Discuss.

'Liberalism for liberals, cannibalism for cannibals.' Discuss.*

Why should we care what food is served in our schools?

'Since we have a right to dispose of our property as we wish, subsequent generations could not charge us with injustice if we were to consume whatever we could in our own lifetimes.' Do you agree?*

'The goodness or badness of anything derives ultimately from its contribution, actual or possible, to human life and its quality.' Do you agree?*

Is the case for democracy that political power should be shared fairly?*

Was the second Iraq war justified?

Are femininity and autonomy consistent?*

Can groups have rights over and above the rights of their individual members?*

Can political theory be of any use to a practising politician?*

Should claims to social assistance be conditional on claimants' willingness to work?*

'Free markets, open borders, free people.' Discuss.

Should all school children receive lessons in 'good citizenship'?*

'All socialists must be feminists, and all feminists must be socialists.' Discuss.*

Can the Pope be wrong on matters of Catholic doctrine?

Should voting be compulsory?

Does a deep ecological commitment to biodiversity involve valuing the HI Virus as much as we value dolphins?

'The best way from London to Oxford is by bus.' Discuss.

And here's an example plan:

Example.

'The *sine qua non* of a good roast is a good gravy.' Discuss.

1. Set context: *de gustibus non est disputandum*, nonetheless certain intersubjective standards can be posited. On these standards, is it possible to have a good roast without a good gravy, and if not, why not? I'm going to present the arguments for thinking that gravy is indeed the *sine qua non* of a good roast, on both holistic and intrinsic grounds. After that I'll consider two objections. First, however, I'm going to show that while a good gravy may be necessary for a good roast, it is not sufficient.

2. The other ingredients of a good roast: good quality meat, not overcooked; roast potatoes; peas; a selection of vegetables from broccoli, cauliflower, kale, parsnips, carrots etc.
3. Why should we think the gravy so important? First set of reasons: holistic.
 - 3.1. A. The gravy is poured all over the rest of the food, and if it tastes bad it's impossible to get it off, especially from vegetables like broccoli, which hold the gravy. It's not such a problem on beef. However
 - 3.2. B. You don't want to be scraping the gravy off because it is crucial for keeping the rest of the food hot—especially beef, which has a very high surface area, so cools down very fast. Furthermore
 - 3.3. C. The gravy binds together small vegetables, like peas.
4. Why should we think the gravy so important? Second set of reasons: intrinsic.
 - 4.1. Gravy is extremely tasty in its own right, especially when made properly, using the juices of the meat.
 - 4.2. Gravy maintains the balance between the dry and the wet, crucial to a good dinner (see also the importance of baked beans or fried tomatoes to a good fry up, and the importance of naan or rice as a counterbalance to a wet curry).
5. Objection 1: What if the roast is served on a hot plate, in a warm room, without any gravy at all. Surely that could still be a good roast, if all the other elements described above were all on really top form? I don't think this is a serious objection: without the balance between wet and dry it's always going to be a disappointment.
6. Objection 2: What about bread sauce? That is not a gravy, but provides the relevant wetness, binding, and heating functions. Although personally I don't like bread sauce, I can see why some people do, and I agree that it can play the role of gravy as described.
7. Conclusion. So, a good gravy is not the *sine qua non* of a good roast, but only because some other sauces can play the same role. We could expand the point, then, to say that some genus of sauce, of which gravies and bread sauces are two species, is a *sine qua non* of a good roast.

Obviously this is ridiculous, but it just shows that analytical philosophy is about method, not subject matter: you can be analytical about anything. Don't spend too long on these oddball questions, but do practice a couple of them, just to prepare yourself for the eventuality that you only get curveball questions on your chosen topics.

Exam Technique

Obviously the first thing you do is work out which of the questions are on your topics. Then you have to select which you're going to answer, and then which you're going to do first. Work out what works for you. I often found that I'd leave the easiest one to last, and do the hardest one first, but people have different opinions on this. Essay style is the same as with ordinary essays, only more concise, and the conclusion is less important, provided you've set out a good argument. Make sure that you plan each essay, and manage your time appropriately. When you write your four to six point plan, quickly divide up the time appropriately. So it's 0910, I've read through the paper and decided on my first essay, and written my plan. I've got five points, so I write down by each para 0920, 0930, 0940, 0950, 1000. I make sure that I stick to my schedule, wrapping things up in time to move onto the next. It is vital that you distribute your efforts and time evenly among your papers: you can lose much more by stuffing one up than you can gain by devoting extra time to another.

How much can you twist the question to suit you? I wouldn't risk this too much. It might work for some of the less analytical subjects, but if you're doing analytical

political philosophy you're likely to get burned if you do this too much. But you still want to make sure you get your best ideas across: really that should be your goal. If you find yourself regurgitating an essay, then odds are you're on the wrong path. But if you've got something you really want to say, and you slightly crowbar it into the argument, you can get away with that. Better still, build the argument so as to be both relevant to the question, and give you space to make your interesting point.

How much should you refer to other authors? Attribute their positions and describe them accurately, but you shouldn't really be doing 'he said, she said' type stuff. Much better to take something specific, say Taylor's conception of liberty, and directly engage with that, perhaps referring to a couple of Taylor's critics, but basically focusing on the issues, rather than the debate. Again papers on ideologies are different here.

Stay calm! It's really not that bad, and it will be over before you know it.

Any more questions, let me know: this guide is a work in progress, so please do suggest anything you think I've missed out.