

- For teachers who set practice questions or revision tasks

RETRIEVAL PRACTICE AND REVISION

Does it matter if the book stays open during practice questions?

Evidence from a German university psychology course, translated for school classrooms.

Not just answering questions, but answering them without the notes open, seems to be the useful part: university learners banned from checking their materials during weekly practice questions scored higher a week later (45% against 37%) and on the module exam two months later (61% against 48%) than classmates who could keep the book open, but this is one field experiment of 59 learners in two seminars, the same teacher taught both groups knowing who was who, and the researchers themselves cannot rule out that the closed-book group simply studied harder afterwards.

● ● ● Evidence: Promising

Blinded, independently taught UK classroom replications with balanced quiz attendance, home-study measures and confidence intervals.



WHAT HAPPENED

Closing the book beat keeping it open, twice

Two university seminars ran the same short practice questions at the end of each lesson for seven weeks. Half the learners could check their notes and slides while answering; the other half could not. A week later, on a surprise quiz, the closed-book group scored 45% against the open-book group's 37%. Eight weeks after that, on the module exam, the closed-book group still led, 61% against 48%.

One week later (surprise quiz)



Eight weeks after that (module exam)



Percentage of questions answered correctly. On exam questions covering content neither group had specifically practised, the two groups scored about the same (63% against 58%), so the gap wasn't just one group being stronger overall.

The moves in the study

1

Ask for it weekly, not just once

Short practice questions at the end of each lesson, on that lesson's own content, seven weeks running.

2

Notes away, not notes out

Half the class had to answer from memory, with no notes or slides in front of them.

3

Leave the marking for later

No answers were given back on the spot; learners kept their materials and had to work out for themselves what needed more study.

Across your subjects and classes

This was one comparison in two German university psychology seminars, not a school classroom. What follows are sensible ways the same structure could work in your subject: worth trying, not proven.

Subject	How the structure could translate
History	End the lesson with 2-3 short recall questions on that lesson's content; collect exercise books before learners answer, hand them back only once questions are in.
Science / maths	Closed-book recall of a key definition or worked method before the textbook comes back out for self-checking.
English	A quick from-memory quote or plot-point check before learners are allowed to open the class reader again.
MFL	Closed-book vocabulary or verb-form recall before the vocabulary list comes back out.
Geography / humanities	A no-notes case-study fact check before learners return to their source sheet to self-mark.

Adapt it to the class in front of you

Quiet or reluctant

Start with paired closed-book recall before individual answers: less exposed, still notes-away.

Top-set, high-attaining

Push the delay further apart: ask the same closed-book question again a week later, not just at the end of the lesson.

Boisterous, talks over others

Keep it short and timed, 60 to 90 seconds; a tight closed-book task channels energy into the task, not the room.

Foundation, EAL or SEND

Keep the closed-book window brief and low-stakes; let learners self-check against the book straight after, rather than waiting a full week.

A real experiment, but one small, unrepeated study

Developing

This rates the evidence's firmness, not our endorsement of the idea. A genuine randomised field experiment with two converging results, but a small, single-site study that hasn't yet been repeated.

- 59 learners in two German university psychology seminars, not a UK school classroom: the same subject, the same age group, and the same teacher for both groups.
- The teacher running both seminars knew which group was which, and the researchers themselves say this could have tilted things toward the closed-book group they expected to win.
- Fewer closed-book learners turned up to the surprise quiz, and the researchers admit they cannot rule out that the closed-book group simply studied harder at home afterwards, not that closing the book itself did the work.

What that means for you: treat closing the book during practice questions as a promising default worth testing in your own room, not a proven fix.

TRY IT THIS WEEK

Your first small step

THIS WEEK

Next time you set practice questions, ask learners to put notes and books away before they answer, and keep them away until you go through the answers together.

Try it and watch: notice whether learners take longer over each answer, and whether they go back to check the parts they got wrong. That's your own evidence, not ours. The researchers behind this study admit they can't fully separate the effect of closing the book from the extra revision it might have prompted afterwards, so what your own learners do next is exactly the gap they left open.

Go deeper

Our retrieval practice guide · structural-learning.com/post/retrieval-practice-a-teachers-guide

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