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Ultimate Guide to Exam Season: Metacognition and Study Mindset



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For students in the midst of exam season, revision can become a way of life. In our first guide, [Revision Strategies and Memory Hacks](#), we focused on how to build an effective plan — breaking subjects into clear chunks, creating a timetable that works, and using proven methods like spaced retrieval to make learning stick. In this second guide, we're turning the spotlight inward: how do you know if your revision is actually working? How do you stay motivated when the days blur together? This guide is all about mindset and self-awareness — helping you track your progress, adjust your approach, and stay positive through the ups and downs of exam season.

1. How Do You Know If You're Actually Learning?

So you're revising — great. But are you doing it well? That's where metacognition comes in. Metacognition means “thinking about your thinking”¹. It's the skill of knowing how you learn best, spotting when you're not making progress, and adjusting your strategy accordingly. It's what turns a study session from “I've been here for an hour” to “I've actually learned something.”

Nelson & Narens' Model

Researchers Nelson and Narens break it down into two levels^{2,3}:



- **Object-Level (Doing):**

This is where you do the actual learning — reading, solving, memorising.



- **Meta-Level (Thinking About It):**

This is where you monitor and guide the learning — checking in, asking “Is this working?” and deciding what to do next.

Both levels are vital. You can't just do — you need to reflect, too. Without the meta-level, your revision becomes a guessing game. With it, you gain the ability to make smarter, more productive study choices.

2. Judgements of Learning: When Your Gut Feeling Is Wrong

Even if you've never heard the term before, you're already using Judgements of Learning — or JOLs — every time you revise. They're the little decisions you make like: "Yeah, I know this", or "That bit still feels shaky."



Why Your Self-Judgments Matter

Metacognitive monitoring - in other words, knowing how well your revision is going - relies heavily on self-judgments - the way students assess their own learning and memory⁴. Psychologists group these instinctive calls into three types:

- **Judgments of Learning (JOLs):**

Your belief about whether you'll remember something later⁵.

- **Feelings of Knowing (FOK):**

When you can't recall something now, but feel sure you'd recognise it if you saw it⁶.

- **Confidence Judgments:**

Your belief, often in test settings, about whether your answer is correct⁷.

These judgments guide what we study⁶, but they're not always reliable — especially when we're tired, rushed, or revising something that feels familiar.

What Is a JOL?

Metacognition researcher Janet Metcalfe puts it like this:

“Students use their Judgments of Learning to decide what to study next — even when those judgments are poorly calibrated to actual memory performance.”

Metcalfe & Finn, 2008

Why We Often Get It Wrong

There are two big pitfalls:

- **Overconfidence and Underconfidence:**

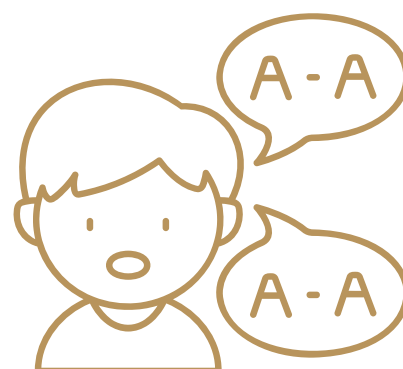
Sometimes we think we know more (or less) than we actually do.

- **The Fluency Illusion:**

Just because something feels easy to read or understand doesn't mean it's stored in memory. You might remember reading the page it was on — but not the content.

That's why it's so important to test yourself, reflect regularly, and use real evidence — not just vibes — to steer your revision.

3. Don't Be Fooled by the Fluency Illusion



Ever read through your notes and think, "Yeah, I totally get this!" only to blank out when you try to answer a question about it later? That's the fluency illusion in action!

What's the Fluency Illusion?

The fluency illusion is when something feels easy to understand just because you're familiar with it. Reading something again and again makes it feel like you know it, but it doesn't necessarily mean the information is actually stored in your brain in a way you can use it.

Think of it like this: imagine listening to a song on repeat. You can sing along perfectly whilst it's playing, but unless you've tested yourself or really studied the lyrics, you probably don't actually remember it by heart.

Why It Tricks You (and How to Avoid It)

The problem is, your brain is lazy. It likes things that feel easy. So, when you reread your notes, your brain says, "Hey, this is familiar! We must know this stuff!" But really, you're just recognising the words on the page, not actively retrieving the information from your memory.

The Solution: Recall-Based Methods

So, how do you break free from the fluency illusion? By using recall-based methods! These are study techniques that force you to actively retrieve information from your memory, instead of passively rereading it.

In the next section, we'll cover how to use recall methods to track your confidence in a meaningful way.

[Need ideas for recall methods? Check out Revision Strategies & Memory Hacks Guide, Section 5.](#)

4. How to Track Your Progress in a Meaningful Way

In the last section, we talked about how fluency can trick you — just because something feels easy doesn't mean you've learned it. So, how do you really know what's sticking?

This is where recall meets reflection. In other words: don't just test yourself — track how confident you feel about what you recall, and use that data to guide your next steps.

"I'm 30% sure about this."

"Pretty confident —
maybe 80%?"

"I've got this. 100%."

Try Confidence-Rated Flashcards

Instead of just flipping a card and checking if you got it "right" or "wrong," try rating your confidence before checking the answer. For example:

Sort the cards into three piles, and use this to shape your next free revision slot. Dive in on the "Pretty confident" pile first to make the most out of the Region of Proximal Learning (see the Memory & Revision Guide, Section 4), and then dedicate some time to the weaker areas.

Weekly Reflection Prompts

Once a week, stop and ask yourself:

What's actually improving?

What still feels shaky?

What have I been avoiding?

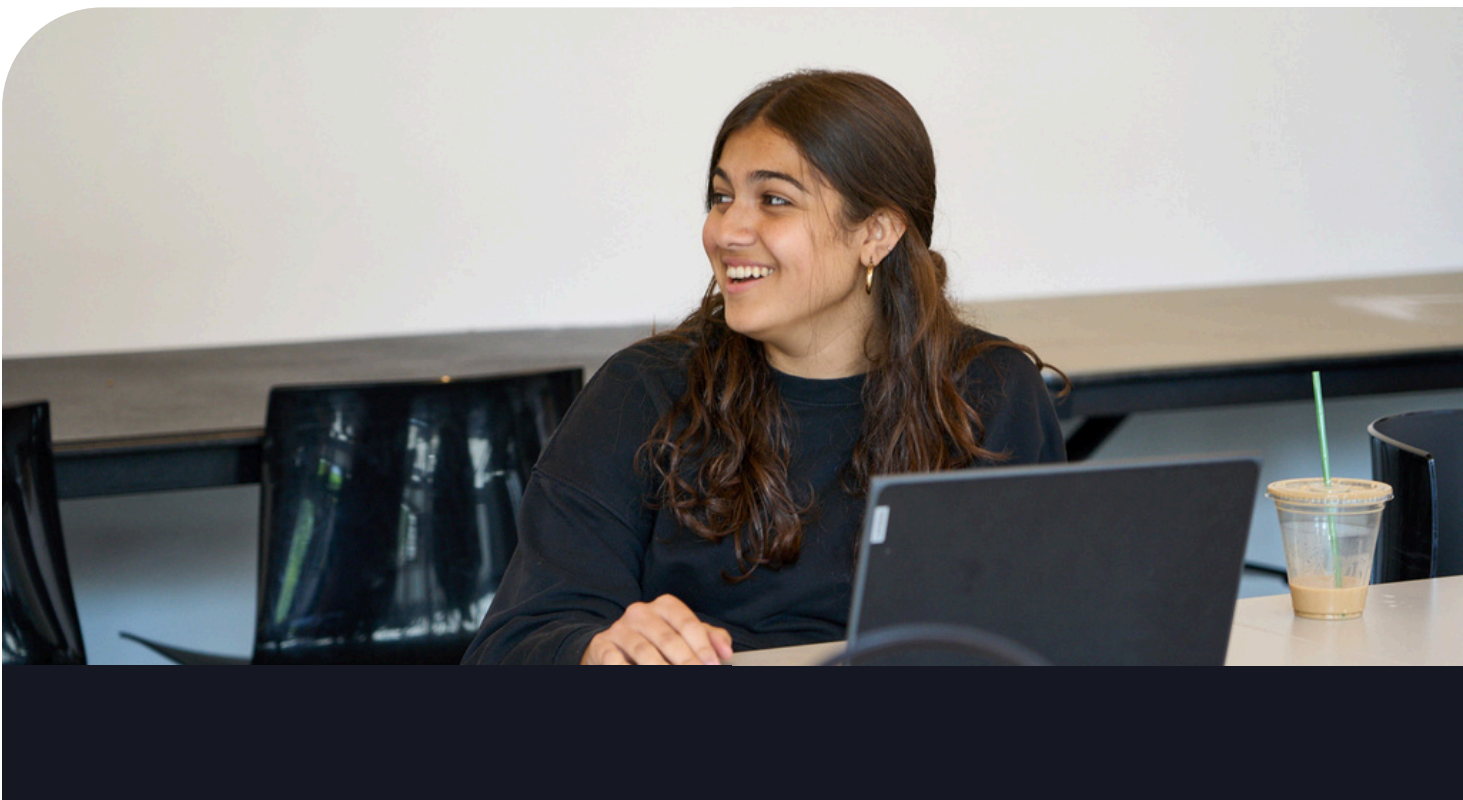
Is my confidence based on recall — or just recognition?

This kind of honest check-in helps you spot patterns and adjust before it's too late. And here's why it works: it's a delayed self-judgement. Instead of relying on how confident you felt immediately after revising, you're stepping back after time has passed. That delay means you're not just testing short-term memory — you're getting a clearer picture of what's actually been learned.

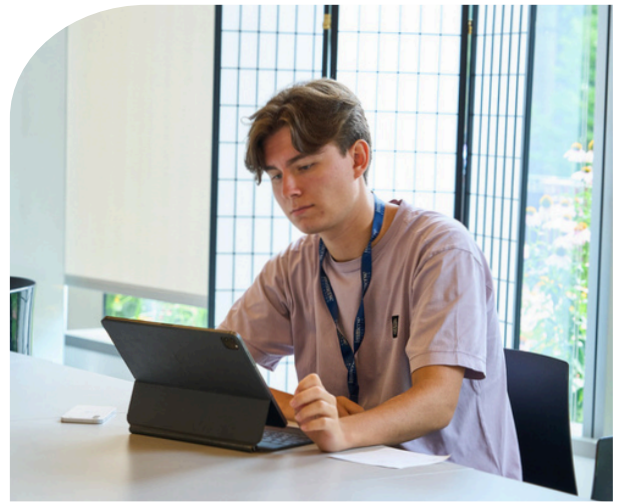
Use what you discover during all this to adjust your plan in real time. Don't wait for things to go wrong to pivot. If something's not working, shift your schedule, spacing, or technique. That's exactly the approach we mapped out in the [Revision Strategies & Memory Hacks Guide](#) — especially in Sections 3, 5, and 6, where we talk in detail about planning your revision timetable, testing yourself, and tackling topics you are feeling shaky about.

These exercises build metacognitive accuracy — the ability to judge how well you're really learning. And it's not just about feelings: research shows that confidence improves with evidence, not just time⁸. So by showing yourself how much progress you're making, you'll boost your confidence, which will boost your attainment.

[Use what you learn through reflection to adjust your plan in real time. See the Revision Strategies & Memory Hacks Guide for how to structure your timetable to include these tweaks \(especially Sections 3 and 5\).](#)



5. Why Your Past Experiences (and Mood) Might Be Lying to You



Ever had a test where you totally bombed, and then felt like everything was hopeless? Or aced a quiz and thought you were suddenly a genius? Your past experiences (and even your current mood) can seriously mess with how you see your progress.

Here's the deal:

Research by Fleming et al. shows that we use our past experiences – whether they were good or bad – to judge how we're doing right now⁹.

Why is this a problem?

- One bad mock or one easy win can distort your study choices. If you ace a practice test on Topic A, you might think you're good to go and never look at it again. But what if that test was just unusually easy? Or if you bomb a practice essay, you might get discouraged and avoid that topic altogether.
- Your mood matters, too! If you're feeling tired, stressed, or just plain grumpy, you're more likely to be critical of yourself and underestimate how much you know.

Don't let one revision session – or mood – define your whole strategy.

Instead:

- ✓ Track your progress over time. Don't just rely on how you feel after one study session. Keep a record of your scores on practice tests, quizzes, and blurring exercises. This will give you a more accurate picture of your strengths and weaknesses.
- ✓ Be aware of your mood. If you're feeling particularly down on yourself, take a break! Do something you enjoy, and come back to studying with a fresh perspective.
- ✓ Challenge your assumptions. Just because something felt easy or hard doesn't mean you actually know it or don't know it. Always test yourself to confirm.

6. Mindset for the Long Game

Exam season is a marathon, not a sprint. You're going to have good days and bad days, moments of inspiration and moments of total brain fog. That's why it's so important to cultivate the right mindset.

Here's the secret:

According to Ais et al. (2016), confidence varies with personality¹⁰ – and optimistic students often do better in exams.

But that doesn't mean you need to be a ray of sunshine 24/7.

- Don't aim to feel 100% confident all the time. Aim to be curious, open, and reflective. It's okay to feel confused or frustrated sometimes. The key is to stay curious, be willing to try new approaches, and reflect on what's working and what's not. And definitely celebrate your wins!
- Progress isn't linear. Your job is to show up and adjust. You're not always going to see improvement every single day. Some days you'll feel like you're going backwards. The important thing is to keep showing up, keep putting in the effort, and keep adjusting your approach as needed.

Top Tips:

- Focus on the process, not just the outcome. Instead of obsessing over your grades, focus on developing good study habits and a love of learning. The grades will follow.
- Celebrate small wins. Did you finally understand a tricky concept? Ace a practice quiz? Give yourself a pat on the back! Recognising your progress will help you stay motivated.
- Practice self-compassion. Be kind to yourself when you make mistakes. Everyone does it! The important thing is to learn from them and keep going.



7. Final Thoughts: Memory, Motivation, and Mastery

Okay, you've made it to the end! Let's recap the key takeaways:

Memory is Malleable

- Everyone can improve with the right strategies. No matter how "bad" you think you are at remembering things, you can get better with practice and the right techniques.

The Goal Isn't Perfection, It's Progress

- Embrace mistakes, value self-reflection, and keep adjusting. Don't be afraid to make mistakes – they're a natural part of the learning process. The key is to learn from them, reflect on what went wrong, and adjust your approach next time. The fact you made a mistake is a step in the right direction - it means that (a) you're taking the time to review the material, (b) you're doing so in a thoughtful, active way - noticing your progress, and (c) you have the opportunity to use our tips to supercharge your knowledge in this area.

Final tips:

- Find what works for you. There's no one-size-fits-all approach to studying. Experiment with different techniques and find what works best for your learning style and personality.
- Be patient. Building strong memories and mastering new skills takes time and effort. Don't get discouraged if you don't see results overnight. Just keep showing up, keep practicing, and keep learning.
- Believe in yourself. You are capable of amazing things! With the right mindset and strategies, you can achieve your goals and succeed in your exams.



Contributing Editor



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Now a Programme Consultant at Immerse Education, Alexandra helps students identify the most suitable programmes for their goals, drawing on her academic expertise and commitment to personalised learning pathways.

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