How to Use Active Recall and Spaced Repetition to Remember

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Turn your notes into single-fact questions, review them at gaps that keep growing, and sit timed past papers until the exam feels like a repeat.

Things you will need

- 3-by-5 index cards, at least 200
- Shoebox or five envelope dividers for Leitner zones
- Fine-liner pens in two colors for gaps and corrections
- Index card ruler or punched divider for one fact per card
- Phone or laptop with Anki installed
- Free AnkiWeb account so decks sync between devices
- Printed past papers from your exam board or university
- Mark schemes for the same papers
- Notebook reserved for the error log
- Kitchen timer or phone timer for 20-minute sessions
- Scissors and glue stick for diagram cards
- Printer for label-covered diagrams and paper tests
- Sticky tabs for marking rewritten or suspended cards
- Weekly planner for five review slots and one mock

Week 1: Replace Rereading With Retrieval

1. **Audit How You Actually Study Now**
   For three days, log what you do in each study hour: minutes rereading notes, minutes highlighting, and minutes writing something from memory with the book closed.
2. **Take a Blank-Page Test Before You Study**
   Set a timer for 10 minutes, close everything, and write down every fact you can pull out of one topic: names, dates, formulas, definitions, the order of steps.
3. **Read the Evidence Once, Then Trust It**
   In 2013 a team of psychologists reviewed decades of experimental research on ten popular study techniques for Psychological Science in the Public Interest, rating each one by whether the gains survived a delay and transferred to new problems.
4. **Pick Three Topics and Cap the Card Count**
   Choose three topics that will genuinely appear on your exam rather than the whole syllabus, and aim at 40 to 60 cards per topic, so about 150 cards to begin with.
5. **Block Five Short Sessions Every Week**
   Put five 20-minute review sessions and two 40-minute card-building sessions into your calendar as fixed appointments, with the reviews at the same hour each day if you can manage it.

Write Cards That Test One Thing at a Time

6. **Turn Each Note Line Into a Question**
   Work down your notes and convert every claim into something a stranger could answer.

7. Split Any Card That Holds Two Facts

If the back of a card holds a definition plus a date plus an example, you will fail it for the wrong reason and your schedule will punish the whole card for one slip.

8. Use Cloze Cards for Definitions and Dates

Cloze deletion hides one word inside a sentence you already understand, which keeps the context intact while still forcing a retrieval.

9. Cover the Labels on a Diagram

Visual material resists plain text cards: a cycle diagram, a muscle map, a circuit, or a leaf cross-section asks you to point rather than to describe.

10. Retire Cards That Test Nothing

Three card types quietly waste your whole schedule: a card whose answer gives the question away, a card with two acceptable answers, and a card you can only pass by remembering its exact wording.

Set a Repetition Schedule You Can Keep

11. Build a Paper Leitner Box Set

Cut three or five equal zones inside a shoebox and mark them one through five.

12. Set Daily Limits Before Adding Cards

The number that decides whether this survives a busy month is how many new cards a day you allow.

13. Choose a Retention Target and Hold It

Decide in advance what success is going to cost you in minutes.

14. Lengthen Each Gap as the Exam Recedes

A meta-analysis of 317 experiments on distributed practice, published in Psychological Bulletin in 2006, found that the interval producing the best final recall grew longer as the length of time students needed to remember the material grew longer.

15. Recover a Missed Week Without Restarting

Miss three days and you return to a pile of overdue cards.

Test Like the Exam and Fix What Breaks

16. Sit a Timed Past Paper Before You Feel Ready

In week two, sit one whole past paper under real conditions: printed question, timer on, no notes, no phone, and the same time of day as the exam itself.

17. Do a Blank-Page Recall Pass After Every Topic

After each study block, take a fresh page and write the topic from memory for 10 minutes: the structure first, then the facts inside it, then anything your cards have never asked about.

18. Interleave Topics Instead of Doing One a Day

Blocking one subject until it feels finished trains you to recognize a topic; mixing three topics in one session trains you to choose a method, which is what an exam actually asks.

19. Keep an Error Log With Causes, Not Scores

Give every lost mark one line and one cause from a fixed list: never learned it, misread the question, knew it but blanked under time, or ran out of time.

20. Fold It All Into One Weekly Plan

A working week looks like five 20-minute review sessions, one 40-minute session that turns that week's lectures into cards, one 60-to-90-minute practice test on paper, and one 10-minute error-log review — roughly four hours in total.

Sources

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