

The IB Survival Handbook

A practical study guide for current and future IB students

*“A must read for any high school student
with ambitions to attend a top university”*

Professor Christopher Coker

Head of International Relations Department
London School of Economics and Political Science

Alex Ostrouch, Ari Helgason & Yordan Agov

For use with the IB diploma programme

©2009 Alex Ostrouch, Ari Helgason, and Yordan Agov. All Rights Reserved.

This book is copyright 2009, with all rights reserved. It is illegal to copy, distribute, or create derivative works from this book in whole or in part, or to contribute to the copying, distribution, or creation of derivative works of this book. If you try to copy, steal, or distribute all or any part of this book without permission, we will take legal action against you.

We hereby relinquish responsibility for any actions taken by the reader as a result of information contained herein. The reader is responsible for his/her own actions, and none of the recommendations contained in this book should be considered as proper legal, medical, or personal advice.

The information contained in this book has been developed independently of the International Baccalaureate Organisation, and is in no way endorsed by it.

Table of contents

Introduction	4
Mindsets Section	10
Don't take the IB too seriously	11
Be sceptical	17
Life skills section	24
Exercise	25
Eating	30
Friends	37
Sleep	42
Study skills section	49
Time management	50
Speed reading	57
Memory	64
Essay writing	71
Test taking	79
Conclusion	85



What makes this book different from all the other study guides?

This book isn't just another Oxford Revision Guide.

(Which, by the way, you can order at – <http://www.osc-ib.com/ib-revision-guides/> – we endorse them strongly. If you find yourself falling into a black hole a month before your exams, these are a great place to start. Seriously.)

It's different from other study guides you may have come across for two main reasons:

A holistic approach

First, our approach is a **holistic** one. This means that rather than just answering the same old questions for you, we equip you to find those answers yourselves. When we were in high school everyone would always ask – ‘what do I need to know about World War I for tomorrow...what is that biology test on...what is a nebula?’

Does this sound familiar? Have you ever taken a step back and asked yourself – **how** do I learn effectively? Chances are you’ve been too busy with all those **whats** to pay attention to the more important question of **how**!

Rather than boiling down the content of this or that IB course into bite-sized portions, we address the **how**. We’re going to show you **how** you’ll get yourself out of that black hole and back on track, quickly, and keep it that way. Rest assured that we’re not as concerned with the metaphysical (read: Theory of Knowledge) sense of the word as the practical sense. We’re not asking it in the sense of ‘how do we know what we know?’ Instead, it’s how in the sense of ‘how do I tie my shoe so that I stop tripping over the laces?’ That’s a bit of an exaggeration, but you get the point. This is a practical guide to get you where you want to be as easily as possible.

Other **how** questions include ‘how can I write these two essays in 24 hours? How can I make time for extracurricular activities when I have so much work? How will I remember all this material? How can I get through all this reading?’ And the list goes on. By answering some of these **how** questions we hope to make your life much easier when it comes to the **what**. Not only will you survive the IB, but you’ll probably thrive in it. Do we have your attention now?

Written by recent students

The IB is probably a big deal for you.

We know this because we (the authors) count among us an ex-IB student, and we’re only a little older than you. This is the second unique thing about our book. Being recent students ourselves, we have a very different type of insight into your current situation than prominent Oxbridge scholars or IB teachers with years of experience. We were very recently in your shoes, and remember how scary the IB can be...

Even if you haven’t yet started the IB programme, chances are your life already seems inevitably headed towards it. Your teachers prepare you (allegedly) with the necessary arsenal of ‘skills’ and information you need. Your parents are probably encouraging you to take one of the most respected diploma programmes around (‘remember, dear, that universities **like** the IB’) and your friends are all talking about it.

Meanwhile, you wonder if it’s right for you (you usually conclude that it is, especially if you have no real alternatives!). You’re not sure about which subjects to choose, you’re

anxious about the workload, the Extended Essay, CAS, and so on. Indeed, the IB is already a big part of your life before you have started!

These concerns are multiplied exponentially when the (metaphorical) sledgehammer of reality comes crashing down upon you with great wrath and furious vengeance come 11th and 12th grade. Your life seems to have been redefined in terms of an endless series of essay deadlines, test dates, CAS projects, discussing (read: plea bargaining) your predicted grades with your teachers, etc.

On top of this, you're trying to figure out what you want to do afterwards, what you'd like to study at university, and whether you'll even make it to university. Wondering if you'll even make it mostly comes down to 'will I get the IB scores I need?' You learn about narrative theory in English A1, while the narrative of your life is now indivisible from the ever-present spectre of IB.

Some existential reflections

The good news is that you **will** survive the IB!

This is the main thing we wish we'd known in high school.

We've recently graduated from university. Regardless of how angry / frustrated / upset / stressed / overwhelmed / scared / anxious you may feel now, in a few years' time you will not care very much about IB exams. There's more to life than exams; really realising this – and living according to it – feels great, you'll see!

Since leaving high school we've realised some things we wish we'd known back then. These existential reflections, philosophical musings, or whatever you choose to call them, are what inspired us to write this book. We're doing fine now, but it would've been nice if someone had told us, back then, how to ace the IB. This book is our attempt to give you the tools you need to do this. So, take a deep breath, open your mind, and see for yourself just how deep the rabbit hole goes...

While the IB is certainly important, with ramifications for your future, you shouldn't let it define you as a person.

If you catch yourself thinking about success and failure in your life in terms of IB scores, you should take a step back. We know it's difficult to distance yourself when you're so caught up in them, but give it your best shot. Why? Because, to quote the philosopher Van Wilder, 'if you treat every situation as a life-and-death matter you'll die a lot of times.'

In the grand scheme of things, the IB is **not** such a big deal. As British economist John Maynard Keynes reminds us 'in the long run we're all dead.' But most of us don't have much time for the grand scheme of things. The point is that even in the not-so-grand scheme of things

(read: 3-4 years from now), your IB results will be largely irrelevant to your life. In this not so distant future your happiness as a person will have nothing to do with your final IB score.

Pick your worst-case scenario (e.g. you fail the IB); in a few years' time you'll have moved on, made something of your life (or not), and forgotten all about it. You may be utterly depressed or living happily-ever-after. But whatever happens these feelings will probably not derive directly from the IB.

It works the other way around too. Imagine you achieve your most lofty goals (e.g. you graduate with a 45, get a place at Harvard, Oxbridge, etc.). In five years' time, on any given day, your contentment as a person will be somewhere between suicidal and ecstatic. But there's virtually no strong link between these feelings and the IB.

Life just doesn't work that way.

How you do in the IB will certainly affect your options for the future. But that's about it. It's up to you to make something of the options that come your way. In the words of Charles Swindoll 'life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it.' Even with all of your doors wide open, you may still end up lost. However, when all your doors have slammed shut you may just stumble upon a hole in the wall and find your way in.

Believe us when we say that there are many lost and deeply unhappy people at some of the world's best universities. In fact, for all the talk about achieving goals, success, and being a winner, you often learn more from losing. You are bound to 'lose' sometimes in your life. It's best to learn how to make the most of the opportunities that it can open up right now.

By 'losing' we mean an outcome that disappoints you, for example not achieving the IB scores for your 1st choice of university.

Losing is great.

It forces you to be flexible, to adapt to changing circumstances, to think outside the proverbial box. It teaches you how to 'satisfice'. Satisficing is a decision-making theory that assumes that we very rarely have 'optimal outcomes' (e.g. 45 points, all universities want me, are willing to pay for me, etc.). Life is all about picking (and embracing) the best option out of a series of less-than-perfect ones. Often we must choose 'the least worst' option. This is one of the most important skills you'll ever learn. And you'll never learn it if you 'win' all the time.

Don't get us wrong. 'Winning' – achieving your optimal, or most desired, outcome – is great and you should aim high. But most people worry far more about losing than winning!

We're not encouraging you to give up on your dreams and ambitions now in favour of 'losing'. You should always aim high – 'aim for the stars and you might hit the moon' as the old saying goes. In fact, this book is here to help you achieve your academic goals! Just keep

in mind that, as the philosopher Mick Jagger once put it, ‘you can’t always get what you want.’ Not getting what you want is usually not the end of the world. At best it opens up a new opportunity you hadn’t thought of before. At worst it’s a cloud with a silver lining.

So what will I read about in this book?

We hope that the above thoughts are liberating. We hope we’ll help you see your life as an IB student in a different light. We firmly believe that your future happiness and success has little to do with the IB. We believe that your biggest worries associated with the IB (‘losing’) aren’t necessarily so bad.

This book is full of practical suggestions intended to make your time with the IB more bearable – even pleasant. That’s a word you don’t often associate with the IB. The book is divided into three main sections, all of which relate to our guiding theme – how do I learn effectively?

Section 1

is about mindsets. Your mindset, or ‘mentality towards learning’, is important. You’ll learn about:

- What a mindset is, and why having the right mindset can help you with the IB.
- How to take the IB a little **less** seriously, and why this will make you a more effective learner.
- The benefits of being sceptical, and how to become better at it.

Section 2

explores life skills. These may seem a long way away from the world of exams, projects, and learning. We show you why they’re relevant. You’ll read about:

- Why exercise is important; is there any truth in the tired old saying ‘sound body, sound mind’?
- How to eat well, and why this is important for you as an IB-student.
- The importance of your friends; we emphasise the benefits of switching off and socialising as a way to get your mind off studying, and give you practical advice on sharing your workload with friends.
- How to sleep well, wake up easily in the morning, and be less sleepy during the day.

Section 3

deals with study skills. We explore how a few small changes in your approach to studying can make a big difference. You’ll read about:

- How effective time management can help you spend less time studying, while getting more done.
- How to increase your reading speed and take more effective notes.
- How to sharpen your memory and stop worrying about forgetting things.
- The nuts and bolts of writing great essays.
- The ins and outs of test taking and how a few key skills will make your exam experience much more bearable.

How to use this book

(HIGHLY RECOMMENDED) **Read it from cover to cover** – if you find our prose pleasing simply read the whole thing. It won't take you more than an hour or so. You'll be surprised at how much you'll learn.

Speed read it – begin by looking at the study skills chapter on speed reading techniques and use those to get through the book in half an hour!

Hop around – if you feel you need to work a lot on your memory, but are quite confident about your life skills, then just jump straight to the relevant chapter.

Read the conclusion – the conclusion summarises the main points in each chapter.

Having the right mindset is crucial to becoming an effective learner

Before you get the wrong impression, we're not just another bunch of self-righteous self-proclaimed self-help gurus telling you that your attitude is 'bad' and needs improvement. We were certainly all told, at times, that we had a 'bad' attitude. We usually found this either amusing or enigmatic. Having a 'bad' attitude isn't necessarily a bad thing. It certainly can be – taking a call from your personal trainer during class is usually not OK; the point is that you're never quite sure of what a 'good' attitude is.

This is endemic in our education system. Success is strictly defined in terms of good grades, university acceptance, etc. Meanwhile, little attention is paid to the process by which we reach these goals (the [how](#), remember?). By process we don't just mean 'studying'. Studying is a part of it, but there's much more to it than that! Everything from eating and sleeping right, to getting enough exercise and reading effectively is part of the process. All these things have a place in this book. The elusive 'mindset', 'attitude', or whatever else you want to call it is where it all begins.

What is a mindset? Essentially, it's the mentality with which you approach learning. You're never really taught this in school. You're told that you have a 'good' or 'bad' attitude. This usually boils down to your behaviour in class and whether your teacher likes you or not. This is not good enough. We need to think about what makes a useful approach to learning.

We've come up with two 'mindsets' (we use this term because it seems less loaded than 'attitude') that have helped us over the years. They may work for you. They might not work for you. At the very least, they will encourage you to think about how you approach learning, which is something you may not have done before.



Don't take the IB too seriously

What?

- Stop taking the IB too seriously
- Focus on the here and now rather than the future
- Putting IB work in perspective

So what?

- Become more effective at learning by taking it less seriously
- Stay relaxed despite the IB workload
- Enjoy life more and forget about stress

'You shouldn't take life too seriously. You'll never get out alive.' – Van Wilder

Most of you take the IB very seriously.

It's virtually impossible not to do so considering the hype surrounding it! The IB is often



Be Sceptical

What?

- Take a 'just right' sceptical approach to learning
- Stop relying on others and take responsibility yourself
- Curiosity turns work into play

So what?

- Sharpen your arguments
- Enjoy your work more
- Improve your writing through a critical approach

'Large scepticism leads to large understanding. Small scepticism leads to small understanding. No scepticism leads to no understanding.' – Xi Zhi (Chinese neo-Confucian philosopher)

'Critical thinking' is a catch phrase you see almost everywhere, from the IB website to the recruitment flyers of big companies.

This skill, it seems, is the key to anything you might want to do. In fact, you're probably always being encouraged by your teachers to be more critical! But what does 'thinking critically' or 'being sceptical' (as we call it here) really mean? More specifically, have you ever thought critically about critical thinking?

Being sceptical about scepticism

Being sceptical is a useful approach to learning. But being sceptical isn't a question of **either** being sceptical **or** not being sceptical. There are varying degrees of scepticism. Some are useful, and some are not.

At one extreme you can be too sceptical. If you question everything so much that you come to the conclusion that you can't 'know' anything for sure, your scepticism has stopped being **practically** useful. Some people would have you believe that any position (argument) is just as good as next. This is absurd.

Clearly some arguments are more convincing than others. Thus, being too sceptical isn't a very useful mindset to have when it comes to learning.

The opposite extreme is not being sceptical enough. When you unquestioningly believe everything you hear or read, your lack of scepticism is not very useful at all. Thinking like a robot (insofar as robots can think!) is not conducive to effective learning.

We make intellectual progress (be it in the natural or social sciences) by questioning 'established wisdom' and endeavouring to improve it. By the same token, simply regurgitating information only gets you so far. At some point you have to come up with your own ideas! This is only possible if you have some degree of scepticism about what you already know.

Between the two extremes is the 'just right' amount of scepticism. This is a very useful approach to learning. The key is to find the right balance between questioning everything and not questioning anything. If you question too much you become too negative. If you question too little you become boring (and bored). Question just the right amount, and you're well on your way to being a very effective learner and having fun learning.

Why is being sceptical a good mindset to adopt?

For all the talk about 'critical thinking' or 'being sceptical', it's rare that someone spells out exactly why it's so important! Here are some reasons why we believe it to be such a useful mentality towards learning:

I. Stop relying on others and take responsibility for your learning

Remember when you were 6 and everything your teacher said seemed wise beyond comprehension? Since then you've probably realised that teachers don't know everything. In fact, some of them don't know very much at all. They're more likely to BS their way out of tricky questions than admit that they don't know something.

On the other hand, many teachers are very knowledgeable about their chosen subject and will readily admit when they don't know something. The best teachers are usually those who think of themselves as students just as much as they think of their students as students. They are genuinely interested in their subject and love learning more (alongside you) about it.

What does this have to do with being sceptical? Let's think of it in terms of the two extremes. On the one hand, if you're too sceptical about what your teachers tell you ('they don't know what they're talking about...they are full of cr*p...') you won't get much out of their class. Even if you really dislike a certain teacher, you can still learn something from them, and it's up to you to make the best out of a bad situation.

On the other hand, if you assume your teachers are always right, and have all the answers, you'll never learn to take responsibility for your own learning and will always be reliant on someone else.

With just the right amount of scepticism you'll realise that, ultimately, you are responsible for your own learning. While it's easy to blame your failings on other people ('I did really badly in IB chemistry, our teacher was awful'), in the end nobody really cares.

The world doesn't owe you anything. This may sound harsh, but it's something you should face early on. The sooner you realise it, the sooner you'll learn to learn from others **while** taking responsibility yourself. This is crucial. If your teacher is amazing, then that's great! If not, then stop complaining, take matters into your own hands and trust yourself!

II. Curiosity turns work into play

A sceptical mind is a curious mind. And curiosity has an uncanny ability to turn work into play.

Unfortunately, schools systematically discourage curiosity.

Think about it. Do you remember how curious you were as a kid? You wanted to know more about everything, and asked '**why?**' at random to try to satisfy an insatiable desire to understand the world around you.

Fast-forward ten years and learning has become something you **force** yourself to do,

rather than something you **enjoy** doing. What has changed? Why has your curiosity dried up? You haven't found **all** the answers, have you?

This is the real tragedy of Western education. Instead of being encouraged to ask interesting and creative questions, schools teach children how to answer questions on exam papers. After all, you can't get anything done if kids are always asking **why** about everything, can you?

We recommend you listen to Sir Ken Robinson's great speech called 'Do schools kill creativity?' Find it on YouTube. It's a real eye-opener.

Reclaim your curiosity. Curiosity allows you to enjoy your work a little more, and dread doing it a little less. Dreading it drains your energy and starts a downward spiral of 'I hate math, I can't do this...' However, if you really enjoy yourself, then you'll be far more receptive to new information. This may sound strange. We know that most of you probably have one, or several, subjects that you really hate. But actively hating them, while fun at times, is ultimately counter-productive.

Being sceptical about concrete problems (not necessarily about **everything** like kids) is one of the best ways to regain your curiosity, and to start enjoying learning again.

III. Sharpen your arguments

Being sceptical greatly improves your ability to make convincing arguments. Making convincing arguments will serve you well, not just during the IB but throughout life.

Let's take an example question – why did the US invade Iraq in 2003?

If you've read a lot of Noam Chomsky lately (or even better, Michael Moore), you might choose to answer this question with the following argument - the US invaded Iraq in 2003 to satisfy its demand for oil. You rattle on about US dependency on foreign oil, Iraqi oil reserves, and so on. (We choose this particular argument because it's a commonly held belief.)

The problem with this approach is that it lacks nuance. Wars are inherently complex phenomena, and decisions to go to war – like most political decisions in history – usually aren't reducible to single causes (e.g. oil). A sceptical approach is one that recognises this complexity. A more effective answer might begin by questioning the above argument, while pointing out other possible explanations.

Wars are extremely unpredictable. Why then would the US risk jeopardising the steady flow of oil from the Middle East that existed before 2003? Arguably, it would have been more convenient for the US to buy oil from a stable dictatorship than it was to invade a country (after all, Saddam Hussein was always happy to sell oil!).

Perhaps other explanations are more convincing? Was it concern for human rights that motivated the US? After all, the US has a long history of championing individual freedoms, and Saddam had brutally repressed his people for years. Or maybe the key decision-makers at the time genuinely believed intelligence reports that Saddam was on the verge of developing Weapons of Mass Destruction and were thus compelled to act to prevent this from happening? Or perhaps the Bush administration felt the need to satisfy a perceived domestic demand for retribution in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks?

The above are merely a few possible explanations. The point is that none of them, alone, explains **everything**. Thus, there's usually no such thing as a right or wrong argument. There are, however, better or worse arguments. The better ones recognise (1) that phenomena are complex and possibly have multiple explanations and (2) there is usually **tension** between different explanations, as opposed to one being 'right' and the other 'wrong'.

This doesn't mean your argument should be – there are many reasons why the US invaded Iraq; they are as follows...

Rather, it might take the following form – there are many possible explanations for the US invasion of Iraq; I will focus on a and b, highlighting how they are more convincing than x and y.

How to be sceptical

As we mentioned earlier, there is no 'quick fix' when it comes to adopting mindsets. But fortunately mindsets are a bit like habits. When you get used to them you use them automatically, without even trying. Here are a few things you can do to practise scepticism:

1. Read more good books

This may seem self-evident, but you have to read good books. You also have to stop believing everything you read without thinking critically about it. It's amazing how many people blindly trust their textbooks.

The fact is many books are bad. Nearly all textbooks are bad. Even university textbooks are bad! With a few great exceptions, Paul Graham points out, university textbooks are not written by leading academics in the field they describe. Writing university textbooks is unpleasant work, done mostly by people who need the money. It's unpleasant because the publishers exert so much control, and there are few things worse than close supervision by someone who doesn't understand what you're doing. This phenomenon is perhaps even worse in the production of high school textbooks.³

³ Paul Graham, 'What you'll wish you'd known', <http://www.paulgraham.com/hs.html>

So don't assume a subject is best learned from whatever book happens to be closest! You have to search actively for the really great books. This is one of the biggest steps towards taking responsibility for your own learning. Instead of waiting to be taught, go out and learn. Rediscover the excitement of asking 'why?' and finding answers yourself. Stop relying on being spoon-fed at school.

The more good books you read, the more sceptical your outlook becomes. This is because the more you read, the more you realise that you don't know very much about a given subject. In fact, university is all about making you aware of what you **don't know**. This is really much better than **not** knowing what you don't know or thinking that you know it all. If you don't believe us, then take Socrates' word for it! ⁴

II. Find a way to enjoy your work

Do you think Shakespeare gritted his teeth while diligently trying to write great plays? Of course not. He was having fun. That's why he's so good.

Similarly, Paul Graham writes, relativity for Einstein wasn't a book full of hard stuff he had to learn for an exam. It was a mystery he was trying to solve. It probably felt like less work to him to discover it than it seems to someone learning it in a class today! ⁵

Finding ways to enjoy your work will really make you a much more effective learner. Next time you're depressed about having to write a paper for school, look for ways to make your task **interesting**. Notice odd details. Instead of thinking about answering a question correctly, think up your own questions (related to the question at hand). This is a good way to start exploring an issue.

Pretend you enjoy something even when you think you don't. Try it! Log on to YouTube and type in 'set theory' or 'geography' and actively be **curious** about your nightmare subject. You might just surprise yourself.

III. Think 'complexity' and 'tensions'

These words sound scary but they're not. And once you begin looking at the world through these prisms, you'll be well on your way to becoming sceptical.

Excepting the hard sciences (at least at high school level), many questions you come across in the IB are complex. They have no clear right or wrong answer. Rather, examiners look for better or worse responses. Essay questions are almost always complex. Thus, your answer could follow any number of paths.

⁴ Socrates said: 'All I know, is that I know nothing'

⁵ Paul Graham, 'What you'll wish you'd known', <http://www.paulgraham.com/hs.html>

Appreciating this complexity is really important. There are usually either many possible interpretations (e.g. of novels) or many possible explanations (e.g. of historical events). But identifying some of these interpretations or explanations is not enough.

What's really important is exploring the tensions between them. How do they relate? Are they contradictory? Are they complementary? Is it difficult to tell how / if they are related? Which is more convincing, and why?

Get into the habit of looking at questions through the prism of 'complexity' and 'tensions'. Your work will begin to stand out (in a good way)!

Apply it now!

- 1. Read a good book!**
- 2. Find a way to make your homework more interesting.**
- 3. Think about an issue through the prisms of 'complexity' and 'tensions'.**

Our approach in this book is a holistic one

Our aim is to inspire you to live a more enjoyable and productive life. We believe that there's no trade-off between 'having a life' and studying effectively. Thus, our starting point is that a healthy lifestyle leads to more effective study habits.

This section looks at the big picture, what we've decided to call **life skills**. We want to put studying in its proper context – the context of your life. The happier you are in your life, the easier it is to study well.

We look at four key areas of our lives that have a large impact on how we perform in our daily tasks.

The first is exercise. 'Sound body, sound mind' might be a cliché, but there's much truth in it. Exercise is a great way to get rid of stress and a good way to break up the day.

Closely related is the issue of eating. Small changes to what you eat can have a big impact on how you feel and how you work.

Then, we look at where your friends fit into the larger scheme of things. We'll show you how having an active social life is as important as ever during stressful times. We also give you concrete tips about how you can share your workload with friends.

Finally, we explore sleep. Many people spend a third of their lives asleep, so it makes sense to examine how to do it well. The better rested you are, the more focused and relaxed you'll be.

You don't need to follow all of the advice we give here. As always, be sceptical. Figure out what fits into your life, and make the changes that you think will have the biggest positive impact on your life. We're sure that there's something helpful in here for everyone. Enjoy!

Mental performance is inextricably linked with the rest of the body. When we're in a bad mood we become physically weaker. A physically ill person is likely to recover faster if they're happy. This chapter explores the link between mind and body. We'll see why exercise is **crucial** for a positive IB experience.

How exercise affects the mind

Tons of research all points in the same direction – physical activity is crucial in maintaining mental well-being. A recent study of around 5000 young adults found a direct link between a decrease in physical activity and an increase in negative moods.⁶

Simply put, **what your muscles don't drain, burdens your brain**. IB students often report negative moods, mood swings, and related problems. These may lead to emotional exhaustion (lack of energy, stress, and the like). On the biological level this means that the brain lacks norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin. These neurotransmitting chemicals help elevate your mood. The less you have of them, the more exhausted you're likely to feel.

How do you combat this? Exercise is one answer. Exercise boosts the blood-flow to your brain. In turn, all three neurotransmitting chemicals are produced. It also increases the level of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF). This substance enhances your mood and strengthens your cognitive abilities. Moreover, exercise stimulates the release of mood-enhancing chemicals known as endorphins. These can also help put you in a positive frame of mind, ready to tackle those chemistry problem sets.

We intuitively consider ourselves to be healthier when we exercise

In a study of 600 adolescents, Professor Bettina Piko, a leading paediatrician in the psychology of teenagers, confirmed that *self-perceived* fitness (a result of how much exercise we do) is the strongest predictor of your health perception. Also, poor academic results appeared closely related with poor or average perceptions of health. The message is simple. Exercise improves fitness. Fitness, in turn, may improve academic performance.⁷

The motivation factor

Sometimes it's difficult to find motivation to exercise. It's not quite as difficult as finding motivation for schoolwork, but almost! See it as a motivational ladder – it's easier (and possibly more fun) to exercise. After just 20 minutes' exercise you'll find it easier to sit

⁶ Study conducted by P.W. Motl, Professor of kinesiology and health at the University of Illinois in Motl, R.W., Birnbaum A.S., Kubik, M.Y., Dishman, R.K., *Psycho Med.*, Vol.66, 2004, pp. 336-342

⁷ Piko, B.F., Keresztes, N., 'Self-perceived health among early adolescents: Role of psychosocial factors', *Pediatrics International* (2007), Vol. 49, pp. 577–583

down and concentrate on your studies. Exercise leads to higher energy levels. Higher energy levels lead to better concentration.

Just make sure that the exercise you do is fun. This is the easy bit – you have dozens of different activities to choose from. Keep reading for more detailed tips.

Finally, exercise can be combined with socialising. Exercising with a friend is a great way to stay motivated. It really helps, for example, to have someone to talk to while you jog or work out in the gym. Not to mention that playing badminton alone quickly gets boring!

Exercise and self-discipline

Exercising regularly requires self-discipline. Developing a strong sense of self-discipline is not only useful for the IB, but it will serve you well throughout your life. Studies conducted by Walter Mischel, a psychologist at Columbia University, have shown that from a very early age of consciousness (babies), self-control is crucial to developing a strong willpower necessary for a long and happy life.⁸

Exercise and the long happy life

The New Scientist, a popular science magazine, wrote that there are essentially 9 things we ought to do to happily live longer.

Four of these points have to do with exercise

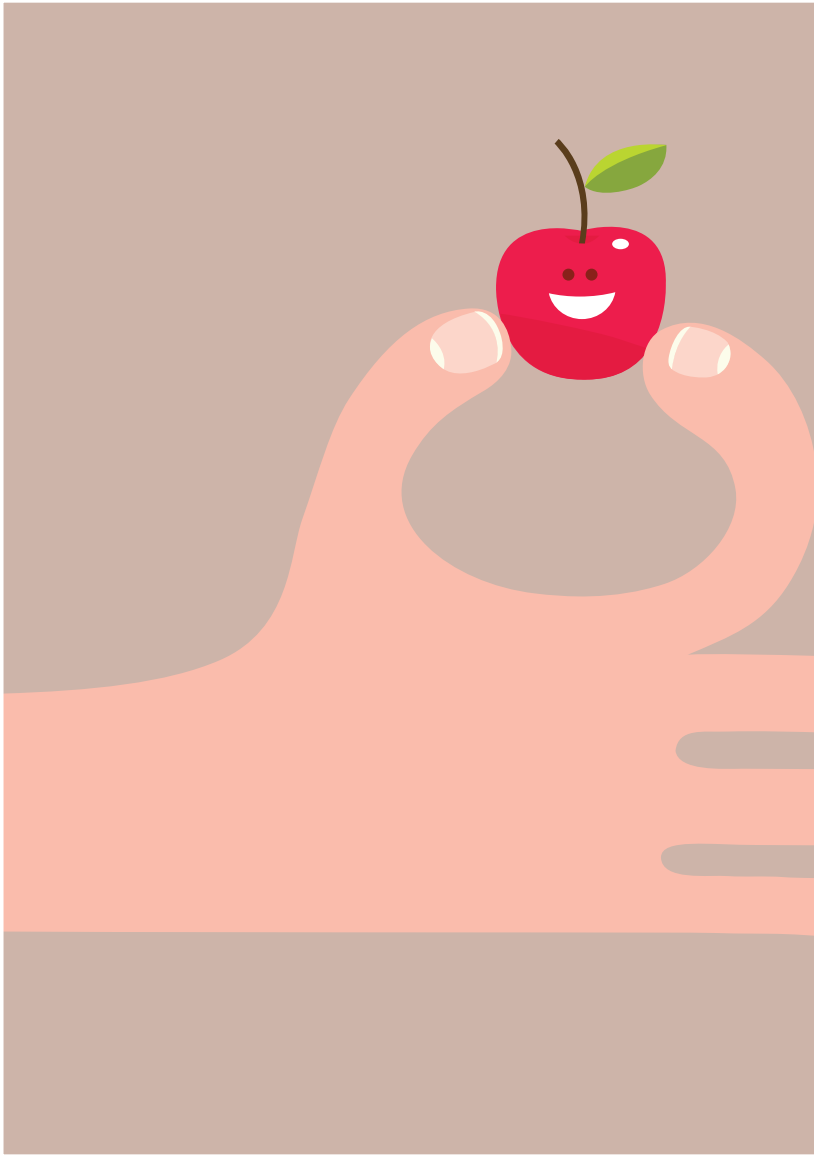
1. 'Not being a loner' – you can socialise through sports.
2. 'Make a virtue out of a vice' – sport can replace lazing around.
3. 'Smile' – exercise can make you feel happier.
4. 'Get a life' – sport can help ensure that you're always doing something with yourself.

You're probably curious about the other five

5. 'Go for the burn' – don't deny yourself the pleasures of life.
6. 'Consider relocation' – (not the most relevant one in our eyes!)
7. 'Exercise your mind' – dealing with the IB pretty much covers this!
8. 'Nurture your inner hypochondriac' – don't shy away from seeing the doctor if you think you need to.
9. 'Watch what you eat' – check out our eating chapter for this one!⁹

⁸ Mischel, W., and Ayduk, O., 'Self-Regulation in a Cognitive–Affective Personality System: Attentional Control in the Service of the Self' *Self and Identity* (2002), pp. 113-120

⁹ Lawton, G., et al. 'How to live to 100...and enjoy it' in *The New Scientist* (2006), Issue 2554, pp. 35-40



Eating

What?

- Enjoying food is important
- Your brain's energy depends on food!
- Vitamins and minerals boost thinking power

So what?

- Both studying and meals can be more enjoyable
- You'll feel healthier
- Your work will flow more easily

'Bear in mind that you should conduct yourself in life as at a feast. Preach not to others what they should eat, but eat as becomes you, and be silent.' – Epictetus

We need a few essentials to live. Air, water, and food spring to mind. Someone, long before we were born, once asked himself: 'is it possible that a variation of my food, the

stuff that keeps me alive, can affect me and my thinking?’ The answer is a resounding yes! What we eat affects us in many ways. But what does this have to do with studying?

Let’s start with some common experiences. Have you ever felt exhausted despite not really doing anything all day? Are you ever very motivated to work, but suddenly get distracted when you sit down to work? These are couple of examples of what we call **concentration-spasms**.

Concentration-spasms are partially caused by not eating the right food. This problem is easily solved. By eating the right stuff, you not only improve your ability to concentrate and your capacity for problem solving, but you also stay in a good mood for longer! The trick is to achieve this naturally...

A positive outlook on food

When it comes to food, Epictetus holds the title of Dude-Grande in our eyes. Do conduct yourself as at a feast and do enjoy your food! Don’t preach to others about what they should or should not eat. After all eating is perhaps our most vital activity after breathing and drinking. It **should** be enjoyable!

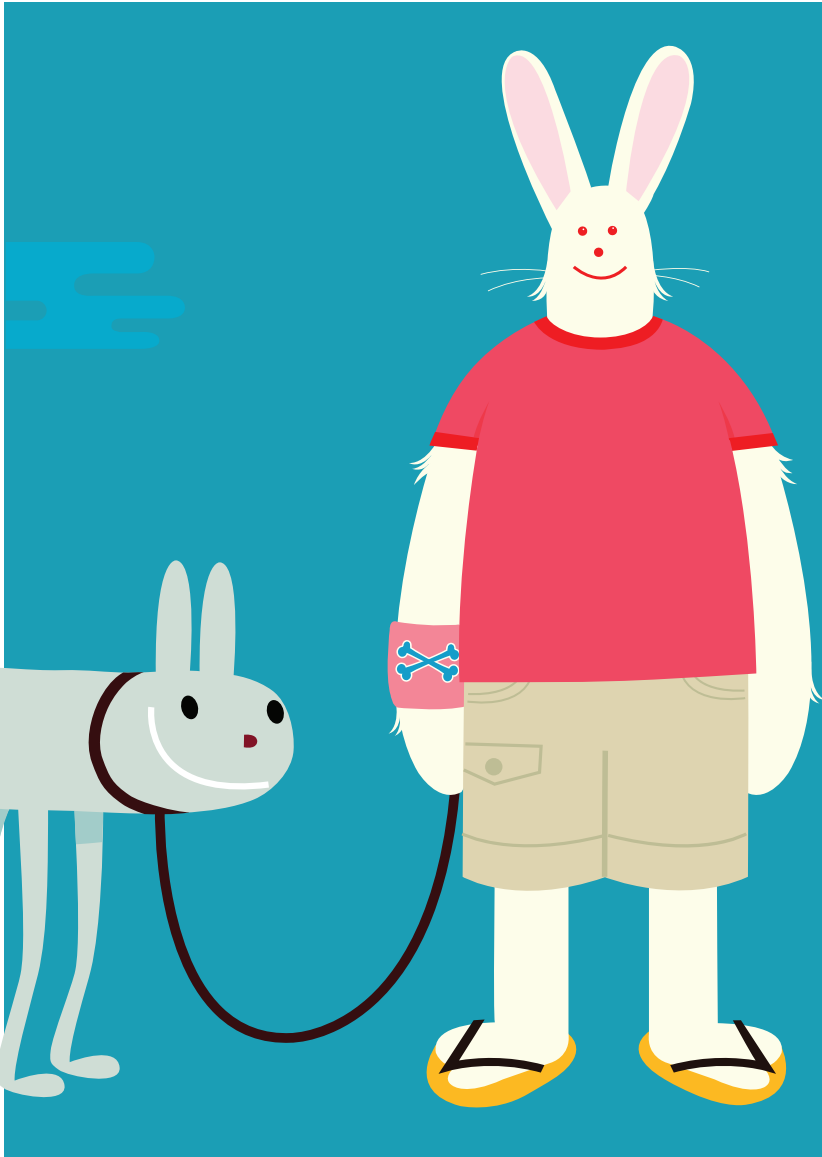
So don’t be constrained by your food.

Satisfaction is essential when eating. Just because we tell you which foods are particularly good for concentration and staying healthy, doesn’t mean you should see eating as a chore or stop having the food you enjoy.

Our purpose is to show you how to avoid concentration-spasms. By expanding our taste in food and understanding why certain foods are healthy, a healthy diet becomes much easier to stick to.

A most mysterious thing – the human brain

Believe it or not, the brain is only about 2% of your body mass, but it consumes 20% of the energy you take in. When we concentrate the brain uses 200 kilocalories per hour – about 10% of your daily food intake. Your brain needs a steady supply of nutrients, which mainly come from food. Make no mistake about it: our *brains are selective*.



Friends

What?

- Exams are temporary, your friends are here to stay
- Get your mind off exams
- A social approach to studying will help you...a lot.

So what?

- Choose both friends and studying
- Socialise better
- Make studying more enjoyable

'Man by nature is a social animal' – Aristotle, Politics Book 1

Why is there a chapter on friends in a book about preparing for the IB? Friends are an important part of our lives. During stressful periods such as exam time, they can be a great source of support. In high school we were very sceptical about the way we were



Sleep

What?

- Sleep less **and** be more alert
- Sharpen your concentration through naps
- Improve your memory by sleeping

So what?

- Enjoy your days (and nights) more
- Study better and quicker
- Never be tired again!

'Sleeping is no mean art: for its sake one must stay awake all day.' – Friedrich Nietzsche

What does sleep have to do with preparing for the IB? Sleep is an important part of your life. If you get an average of eight hours' sleep every night, you end up spending about

a third of your life asleep.²² That's a lot of time. Just that should be reason enough to give it some thought.

You probably think about how to get the most out of the time that you're awake. Keep in mind that the roughly 1/3 of your life that you spend sleeping has a strong influence on how you feel the rest of the time. If you feel drowsy, you get less out of your day. This chapter explores how you can sleep better, spend less time sleeping, and be more awake at the same time.

Basics of sleep

Sleep is divided into various stages called sleep cycles. Through the night you go through these cycles, each of which lasts around 90 minutes. Each cycle consists of a different type of sleep. The most important types are deep sleep and REM (Rapid Eye Movement sleep, where most dreams occur).

This is where it becomes interesting. If you sleep less, you're likely to get less light sleep – which is less important – and a similar amount of deep sleep and REM, which is the type of sleep that makes you more awake. So even if you sleep less you can wake up equally refreshed.

Understanding tiredness

Why do we become tired? The short answer is melatonin – sometimes known as the 'Dracula hormone'. The body produces it when it's dark around you. High melatonin levels make us sleepy. Bright light has the opposite effect, and produces hormones that make us feel awake. First of all, make sure you get enough sunlight. Artificial light doesn't keep you awake in the same way as sunlight does.

Using this knowledge it's possible to come up with tips you can apply straight away to feel more awake during the day: ²³

- Sleep without blinds so that you wake up to sunlight in the morning (only do this if there isn't too much light during the night – remember you also need melatonin to sleep!)
- Open your blinds first thing in the morning, even if it's painful at first to let in the bright sunlight.
- Either study near a window where you get sunlight coming in, or buy a lamp which simulates daylight to place on your desk if there isn't enough light. This is especially useful during the winter or if you live in a windowless dungeon or equally dark place.
- Don't wear sunglasses unless you really need to. Prepare to be drowsy if you block out the sunlight!

²² Eight hours is not a magic number, just a plausible average of how much people sleep.

²³ Hagen, T. and Novak, P., *End Tiredness Program*, (<http://www.end-tiredness-program.com>)

Introduction

Schools don't spend nearly enough time teaching effective study skills. In high school, you're expected to crack on with your assignments; it almost feels silly to ask [how](#) they should be done. If you do ask, a common response you hear is 'you should know that by now.'

The truth is, the majority of people (including your teachers) are so caught up with getting things done, that they don't stop to think if there's an easier way. You should always look for easier ways. It's not lazy, it's smart. Because life is full of more exciting things than IB multiple-choice tests.

This section deals with study skills. Effective study skills are crucial for effective learning. We believe that a few small changes in your approach to studying can make the world of difference.

First, we look at time management. The IB workload is a bit like an avalanche. Despite your best efforts, it's easy to get snowed under with work. Follow our time management advice, and you'll discover that there's more time in your day than you think. Plenty for both work and play.

Next, we explore speed reading. It's daunting to have seven books on your desk that you have to get through. It's even more daunting when each is 400-pages long. With a little practice, you'll be able to read tons of text quickly, [and](#) find the information you need.

Closely related is the issue of memory. What's the point in reading all those books if you can't remember anything you read when it comes to an exam? Spend a little time improving your ability to memorise, and you'll forget about forgetting.

Then, we delve into the world of essay writing. By now you've probably heard that good essays have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. That's true, but there's a little more you need to know. We show you how to write great essays.

Finally, we deal with test taking. A large part of IB assessment is exam based. Thus, it's a good idea to spend time learning how to be a good test taker. A few key skills can make the entire exam experience much more bearable for you.



Time Management

What?

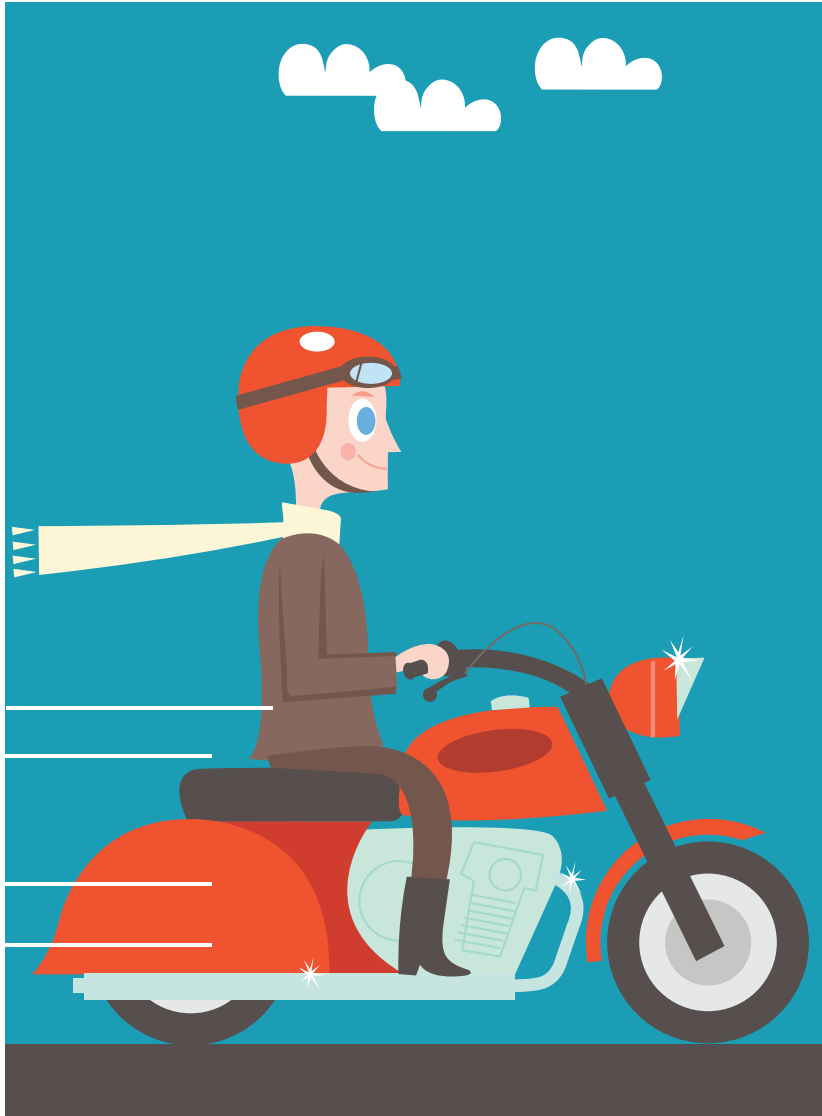
- Learn how to spend less time working while getting more done
- Work better, not harder
- Organise everything you have to do

So what?

- Spend more time having fun
- Stop getting distracted
- Worry less!

'Being successful doesn't make you manage your time well. Managing your time well makes you successful' ²⁹ – Randy Pausch

²⁹ Randy Pausch – 'Time Management' lecture November 2007, accessed online at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-5784740380335567758>



Speed reading

What?

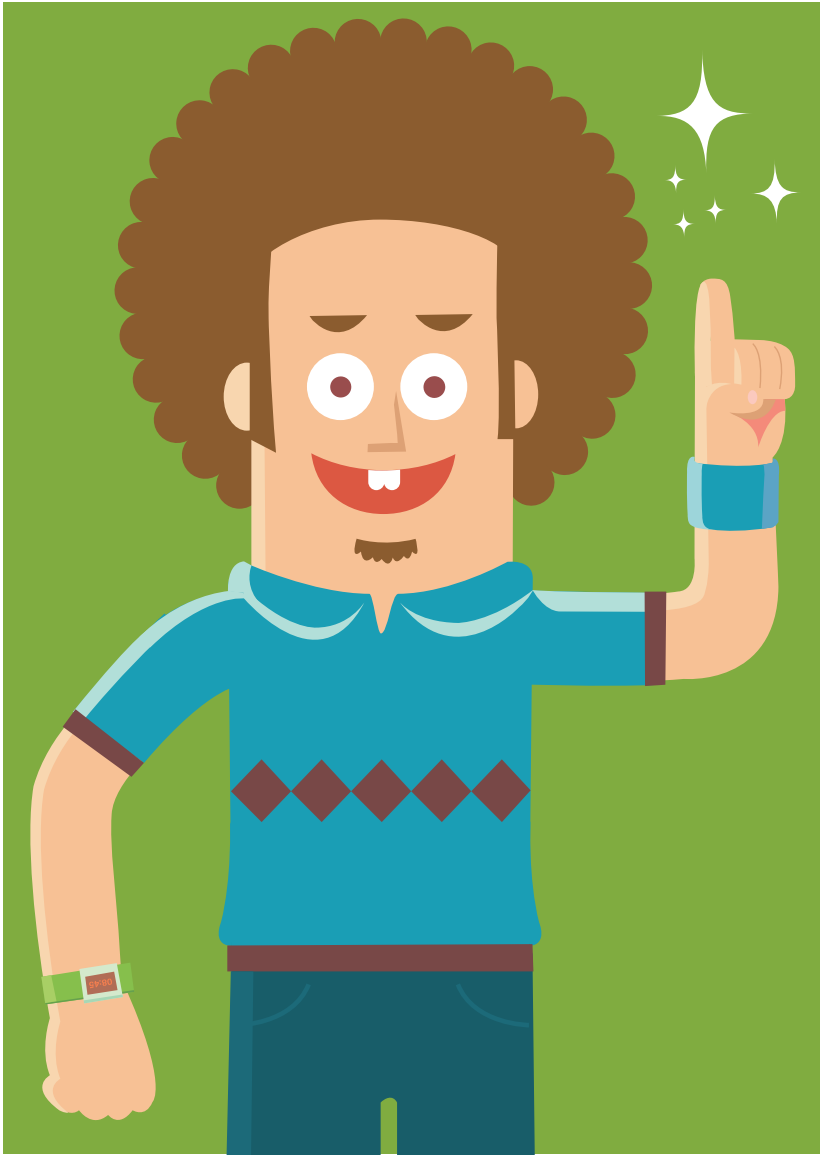
- Turbo-charge your reading speed
- Learn how to take better notes
- Improve your memory and concentration

So what?

- Spend less time reading while learning more
- Stop wasting your time writing useless notes
- Remember what you need, when you need it (in the exams!)

'I took a speed reading course and read 'War and Peace' in twenty minutes. It involves Russia.' – Woody Allen

In this chapter, you'll learn how to turbo-charge your reading, both for studying and for pleasure. How much faster will you be able to read? In theory, there is no limit! A good



Memory

What?

- What memory is
- How memory works
- How memory can be improved

So what?

- Remember what you need to know for your exams
- Enhance your thinking and save time
- Boost your creativity

'When I was younger I could remember anything, whether it happened or not.' – Mark Twain

Our memories are in constant use, but have you ever thought about what memory is? Memory is your name and language. It's your stories and experiences (whether they



Essay Writing

What?

- Learn how to write better essays
- Cut to the chase when writing exams
- Structure your thinking more clearly

So what?

- Most of what you do in the IB involves writing, get good at it
- Make extended essay writing more enjoyable
- Do better in exams!

Like it or not, the IB experience involves a whole lot of writing.

In fact, easily 60-70% of your assessment requires some form of essay writing, be it a short answer question or an Extended Essay.

We also reckon that easily 100% of you have worried about an essay assignment at one time or another. It's for these reasons that we've come up with a few essay-writing tips that we hope will be of use to you.

Nobody is born with an innate ability to write effective essays efficiently. This skill, like any other, takes practice. We know that the prospect of churning out a 1500-word World Literature paper or a 4000-word Extended Essay can seem daunting. Especially when all you have to look at is a blank sheet of paper.

We also know that the usual advice – have a clear introduction, a body, and a conclusion – only gets you so far. Below we attempt to spell out in a bit more detail what exactly will make your essays really great.

Preparation

A professor at the London School of Economics once commented that he didn't enjoy writing books nearly as much as he did doing the research for them. His books are, on the whole, excellent. The moral of this story? Better preparation makes for a better essay.

If you're doing a research paper of any kind, then you really have to put in the time and read a lot. The more you read, the more ideas will pop into your head, and the more interesting connections you will make. In fact, if you find yourself devoting more time to reading than you do to actually writing an essay, then chances are you're doing something right!

Before you even start writing, just think about how all the material you have read could fit into the essay at hand. There are, at this point, a million paths your essay could take. Explore in your head a number of these options, before rushing out on the first one that you thought of! You'll find that this sort of reflection really pays off when you do decide on a particular path.

Essays don't always work out the way we imagined they would before we started writing. Sometimes this is for the better – during the writing process new angles of argumentation can take shape, while old ones are improved – and sometimes it's for the worse. Often we are unable to transfer all those great ideas we have in our heads onto the paper. This can be avoided by devoting a lot of time to careful planning beforehand.

Having an essay plan is crucial. Make sure you devote a good amount of time mapping out how your essay will go. If the plan is clear, then the essay will follow suit. Don't forget this advice during exam time! Many people, the moment they get their hands on an exam, begin writing straight away. Very often the result is a confused, rambling essay. Spend a few moments just thinking about a question. Next jot down some ideas, and map out the direction of your essay. Finally, start writing. Even if your ideas are not that great, a well-structured clear essay will usually do quite well.



Test taking

What?

- Prepare for all the different types of exams you'll take
- How to behave once you're in the exam
- Adjust your lifestyle to perform your best

So what?

- Stop being stressed about exams
- Be confident that you've prepared as well as possible
- Feel good while you're in the exam!

After two years of toil, your time with the IB ends with just a few weeks of exams.

It's quite a thought really. But don't panic. If you find yourself breaking into a nervous sweat just thinking about the month of May, read on.

Some people don't mind taking tests too much, while others truly dread it. The fact is, test taking skills are almost as important as knowing the material you're being tested on. We've all lost points related to material that we were fully familiar with, but couldn't deliver or access on the day of a test!

This chapter suggests a few ways of avoiding this and explores how you can make your IB exam experience a more successful one.

Know your test

First, know the format of your test. You shouldn't be taking a gamble here. Familiarise yourself with the style of the test and the time that you'll have for it. Very often (especially paper 1s) a test may be aimed at determining how efficiently you can answer the questions. It's not a question of if, given enough time, you can eventually figure out the correct answers. Rather, it's a matter of how little time you require for this.

Get your hands on as many past papers as you can to get a good idea of what to expect on the real thing. This is really important. Note the peculiarities of different types of IB exams. Often, for example, you are given a large choice regarding which questions to answer in paper 2 and 3 tests. Paper 1 tests, on the other hand, rarely have optional parts. So be sure that you are aware of the optional and obligatory parts of your exams – in the heat of the moment it's easy to get confused!

Know where the meat is. Not every question on every test is worth an equal number of points. Not every section of every test is loaded with the same number of points. This is particularly important to remember on natural science and math paper 2s. It's wise to take the time to look over these tests to figure out where the point-rich questions are.

If you take 30 seconds to read over these, your brain will subconsciously crank away at them while you're doing other parts of the test. Always aim to answer all the required questions, but in case you find yourself running out of time, focus on those ones that carry the highest number of points.

Let others make the mistakes for you

This sounds more diabolical than it actually is. Try to obtain any feedback available on the performance of past test takers. If you can detect common mistakes that were committed by former students, you can avoid them yourself.

Get your hands on the general IB exam remarks. Because IB tests are standardised, the examiner remarks are sent to all schools after the marking process is complete and are usually held by the respective teachers. It's not common practice to issue these remarks to students, but if you're on good terms with your teachers, they should let you see them.

Conclusion

We hope you've learned at least one useful thing from this book. We've certainly learned a lot writing it.

If you think it was a worthwhile read, be sure to recommend it to your friends! Ultimately, our aim is to help out as many people as possible.

We'd love to hear from you! Don't hesitate to contact us at hello@ibsurvivalhandbook.com with feedback, good or bad.

Mark Twain once said: 'I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.'

We wish you the best of luck with both.

[Below you'll find a summary of every chapter in this book.](#)

Section 1 – Mindsets

Don't take the IB too seriously

Taking the IB too seriously – As an IB student, you may find yourself relying on the future as a source of meaning in your life. You think you'll be happy when you – achieve your 7, learn all of IB Physics, finish your exams, etc. If the prospect of some positive future outcome (which you associate directly with the IB) is the main thing giving meaning to your