

# Preparing for & Taking Postgraduate Medical Exams



## Examination support e-learning module

There is an Exam Support e-learning module at:

<https://london.hee.nhs.uk/examination-support-home>

This package of slides is intended to complement that resource.

## Structure of the module

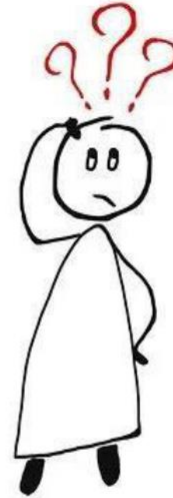
- The exam
- When to sit
- College website
- Revision planning
- Revision strategies
- Exam technique
- Preparing yourself
- On the day



**When do YOU  
plan to sit the  
Exam & WHY?**

## When to take the exam

- Preparing for the exam helps keep a focus on learning knowledge
- Taking it early = more opportunities for retakes
- If you don't pass it will at least help you work out your weaker areas and inform your preparation for another attempt
- Taking it when others are taking it helps with preparation
- Taking it later you will have more clinical experience
- Leaving it late and failing can be a high-risk strategy
- Taking it once is cheaper than taking it twice!



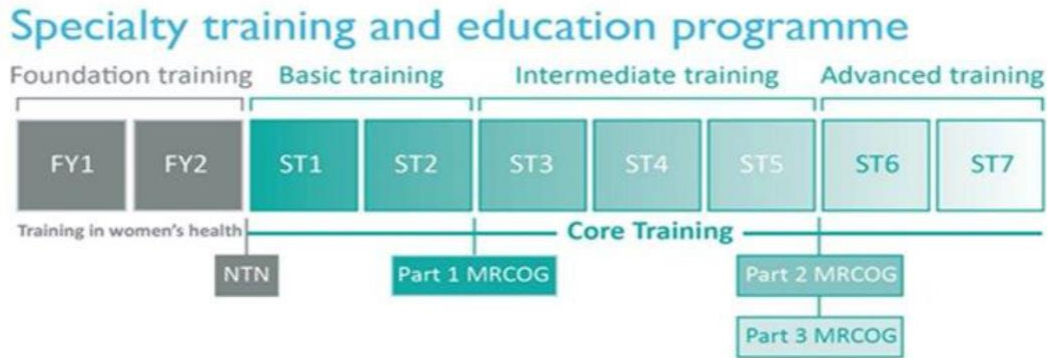
## Tips 1

- Tell your College Tutor and Training Programme Director when you intend to take the exam and of your outcome
- They can put you in touch with colleagues who are also revising
- Look at your rota as far in advance as possible (6 months) to plan leave and make any shift swaps needed



## Tips 2

- Each set of specialty exams will have a latest time in your training by which you must have passed the exam. Below is an example timeline for Obs & Gynae training.
- You need to consult your college website to check when those dates are
- In order to progress you will need to have taken the exam and have the result.
- Don't leave it to the last minute!



## Fit to sit

- If you attend and sit the exam you are deemed to be 'fit'
- So, if you feel unwell or there are extenuating circumstances...  
.....do not sit the exam



- You will need to check the correct process on your specialty Royal College website for extenuating circumstances policy.



# How to prepare?



## Study planning

- Plan well ahead (allow at least 3-6 months).  
Some people like to make a timetable
- Familiarise yourself with the syllabus
- Learn from your clinical experience –  
check the guidelines and references of cases you come across  
in your everyday work.
- Look at the exam website for sample material
- Include rest periods and recovery days in your plan
- Make time for exercise, eating healthily, social contact and sleep



## Check list 1

Book promptly for:

- the exam (applications are often oversubscribed)
- study leave
- leave for the day of the exam
- holiday
- revision courses (ask colleagues to recommend)



## Check list 2

- Discuss your rota with the coordinator to avoid nights ahead of exam.

NB: if you have a study group who all take the exam at the same time, the rota coordinator needs to ensure the service is covered.

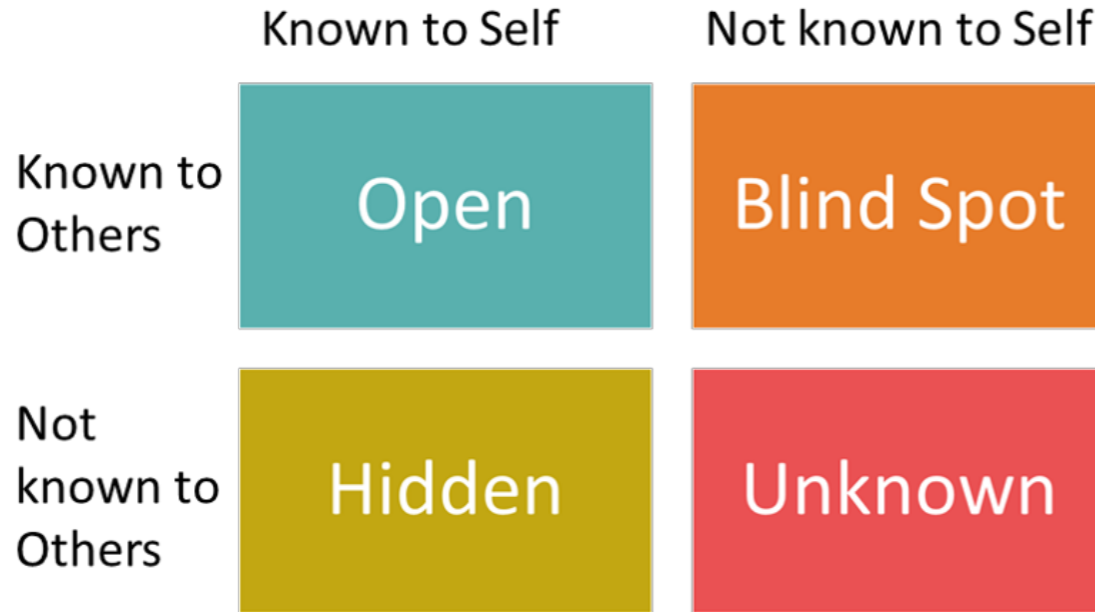


- Submit expenses and leave requests to ES/CT for signature

**An important question**  
**How do you know**  
**what you don't know?**

# JOHARI WINDOW

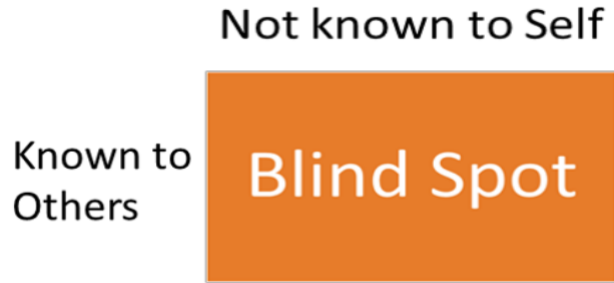
(Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham 1955)



## Address the gaps in your knowledge



# Ask for feedback



Ask:

- Colleagues
- Supervisors

Reflect on:

- Recent RTD feedback
- Patient encounters
- Practice test results



Be honest with yourself – no bull\*\*\*\*

Known to Self

Not  
known to  
Others



Hidden

## Look for your gaps

Not  
known to  
Others

Not known to Self



- Question banks
- Reading
- Tutorials
- Patient management

## How to revise

- Plan your preparation
- To cover the syllabus while also working will take most doctors at least 3-4 months
- Make sure you allow enough time to cover everything properly
- Link clinical cases to Specialty Guidelines and patient information leaflets at every clinical encounter
- Listen to webinars on the way to and from work
- Remember the boring stuff!!

# Revision planning

Some self-coaching questions  
(or you might use these with a colleague):

1. What is your revision plan between now and the exam?
2. What might get in the way/what are the barriers?
3. How will you overcome these barriers?
4. What resources could help (e.g. self, other people, tools etc.)?



## 'Vise' before you revise

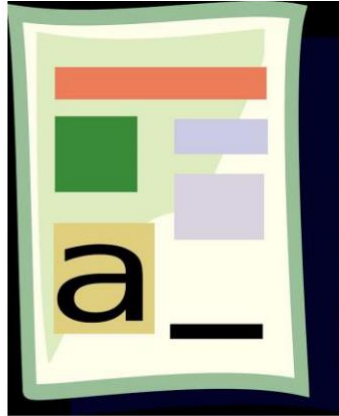


What works best for you:

- notes
  - flash cards
  - spider diagrams/mind maps •
- writing questions

## Make notes

- Make bullet points
- Use colour (different colours for different topics/key words)
- Include mini pictures/diagrams



## Flash cards

- Make your own flash cards – to promote unique neural pathways (NB don't waste time making them too neat/pretty)
- Mix up pictures with the words
- Use mnemonic devices to create associations
- One question or fact per card
- Beware of the 'illusion of competence' –  
*do you KNOW the answer or just RECOGNISE the answer?*

Watch

How to Study Effectively with Flash Cards by College Info Geek - Thomas Frank

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzCEJVtED0U>

## Question writing

Put yourself in the examiner's shoes

- The question setters are your consultant colleagues
- They draw on a bank of questions to compile the exam
- The exam is set 4-6 months prior to each sitting

When revising and reading articles, guidelines etc. think:

- *What exam question can I make of this material?*

Look at some sample questions. Many college websites in the exam section will have sample questions.



Know what works for you and use different learning methods



## Tips3

Study should ....

- Be active not passive
- Involve reading and writing
- Address 'the structure' of what you are learning
- Link 'theory' and 'practice' (principles & examples)
- Include short breaks
- Be a planned activity (and revise your plans!)

## Tips 4

- Integrate revision with your daily job
- Take a systematic approach
- Review NICE and specialty guidelines for each clinical case
- Offer to give a tutorial on areas you find more challenging



## Tips 5



Break your revision into bite sized chunks

- After about 40 minutes, your concentration & recall drop dramatically
- So you will retain more by revising in multiple short sessions with breaks in between rather than long sessions

Focus on your weak areas

- Doctors often enjoy attempting questions on topics they are good at, as they feel good when they get a high score
- You should avoid this and spend more time in areas that you are NOT so confident in.

**Q: How do you eat  
an elephant?**



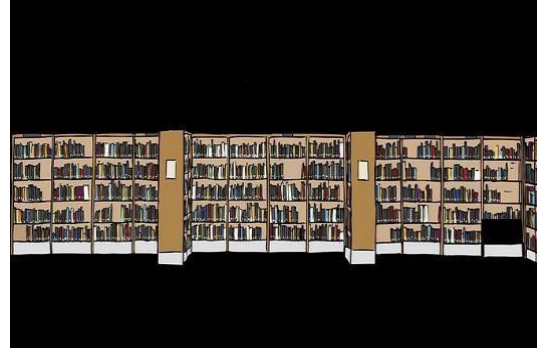
**A: In little bites**

## Tips 6

Think of your brain like a library

Libraries have two functions:

1. To store information
2. To help you gain access to that information



Mix reading with practice:  
a good way to cement your learning and be sure that you can apply what you have read is to do a mixture of reading around core topics & practice sample questions



## Tips 7

Take good care of your mind and your body

Are you:

- eating and drinking healthily?
- sleeping enough?
- ensuring time for relaxation and social contact?

You can find:

- Videos, Webinars and Podcasts
- Apps e.g. Sleepio, Headspace, Virtual Support groups
- Exercises
- Links to more resources here:

<https://london.hee.nhs.uk/covid-19-hub/online-well-being-resources>



# Professional Development and Support

Be the best you can!

The team welcome you to make contact:

<https://london.hee.nhs.uk/professional-development>



Make an appointment to discuss how best to support your professional and personal development.

- Careers advice
- Coaching
- Individual support
- Communications skills



# The night before

Check:

- location of the exam
- start time
- how long it will take to get there
- any predicted transport delays?

Prepare:

- bottle of water
- ID documents
- any other essential items you will need (face mask, paracetamol, reading glasses)
- food/snacks for the interval between papers

Have a meal that you enjoy (avoid alcohol)

Do an activity that helps you to relax: exercise, TV, mindfulness, talk to a friend

Go to bed at a reasonable time (do you need to set an alarm for the morning?)

## On the day (1)

Be prepared:

- Have something to eat and drink – your brain needs fuel
- It's normal to feel anxious. If the anxiety is not overwhelming it can increase your performance
- Leave plenty of time to get to the test centre

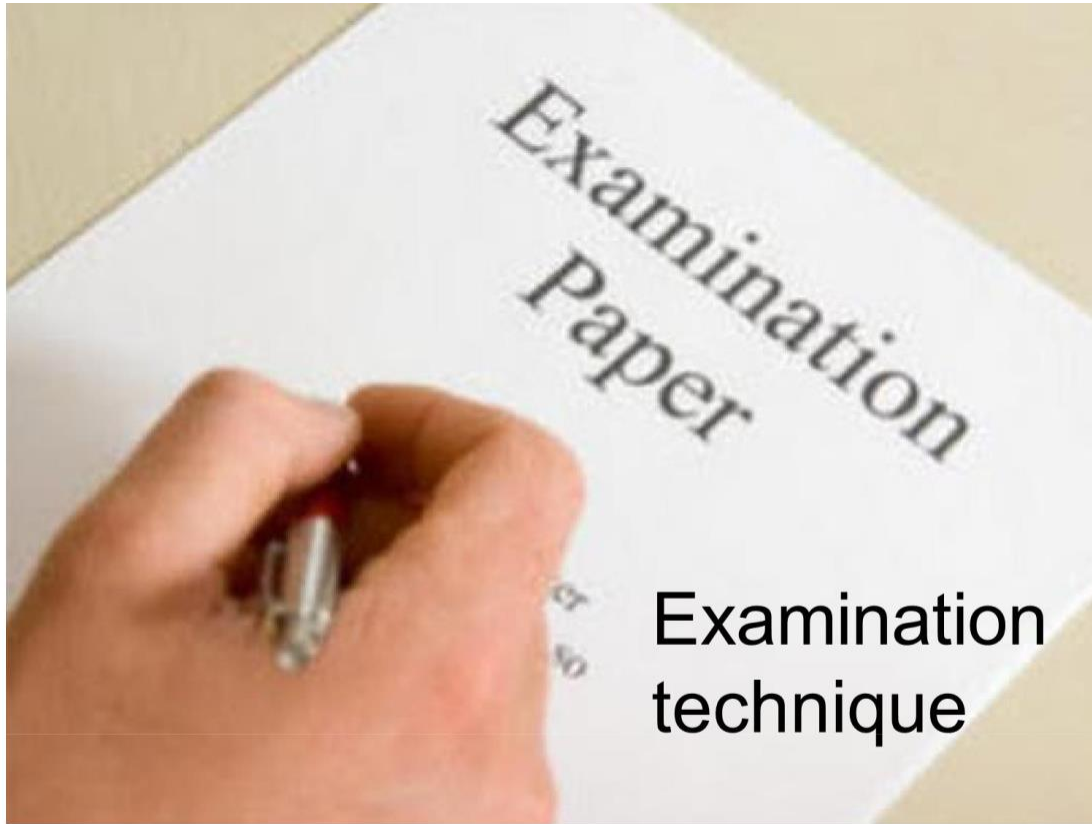
## On the day (2)

Stay focused

Switch off your mobile phone for the whole day if you can  
(news can distract you for the second paper)

Between papers:

- use the bathroom and freshen up
- have something to eat and drink
- don't be distracted by what your colleagues answered or thought



Examination  
technique

## The exams: Membership or Fellowship Written Paper

- Check on your college exam website to remind yourself of the structure of the exams number of papers and duration of each paper
- Types and number of questions e.g. Multiple choice or Single best answer or Extended Matching
- Check how long is recommended to spend on each question
- Answer every question!

## The Clinical exams

A clinical assessment face-to-face or virtually live.

There may be one or two examiners.

Examiners may assess:

- Patient safety
- Communication with patient, colleagues, relatives
- Information gathering
- Applied clinical knowledge

Check for your specialty how many stations, what is being tested at each station, the time at each station and the number of rest stations

## Exam technique



Time management is vital

Keep watching the countdown clock on the computer

Skip difficult questions rather than waste time

Electronically highlight the questions you leave  
- but don't forget to go back to them in time

Cover test for MCQs

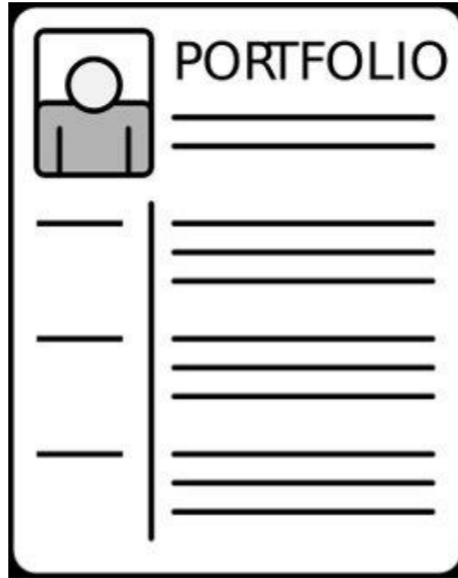
- can you answer the question with the options list covered?
- if so it's probably the correct answer

Educated guesses are worthwhile (answer all the questions)

Check for silly mistakes

## E – portfolio

Don't forget to include feedback and your certificate to show you have taken the examination

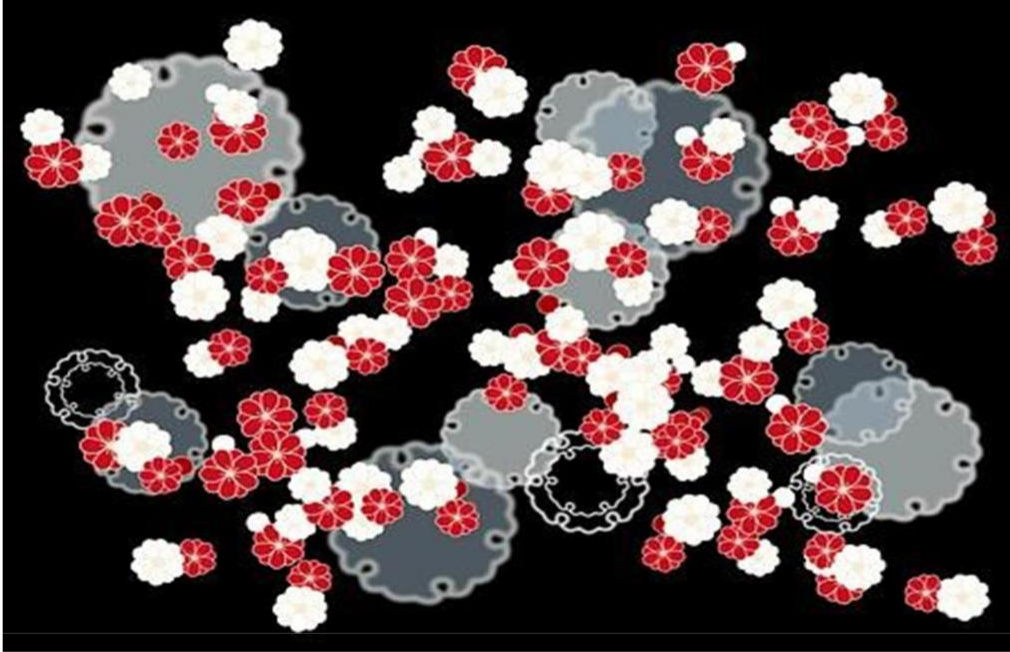




## Final tips from fellow trainees

- Allow ample time to prepare: 3-6 months
- Start with topics you enjoy to get into the flow before moving on to those you find tricky
- Make a spreadsheet of common guidelines (there are some online that can be tweaked)
- Have a guideline, question bank and your college curriculum on your phone (where available) for quick reference at work
- Make quick reference cards of all the factual information you need to remember e.g. cancer staging, VTE risk etc.
- Ask for recommendations of a good revision course
- Talk to colleagues/seniors who have already passed
- Beware of thinking you recall a question in the exam – details might be different – read carefully

# Good luck



# Acknowledgements

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