Expert tips for State exam students studying at home‘ Keep calm, stay focused’

Despite Coronavirus school closures, students should assume there will be exams

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Teachers say it is crucial students remain positive, focused and work on the assumption that there will be exams as normal.

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How can Junior or Leaving Cert students keep their heads when the world - and their exams - is in turmoil?

Most teachers and exam coaches agree that while we are facing unprecedented times, it is crucial students remain positive, focused and work on the assumption that there will be exams as normal.

“Outside of following health officials’ protocols, the best thing that students can do for their exams is to look at the school closures as an extended study break rather than a complete holiday,” says Dr David Cosgrave, an exam coach with [gradeleader.com](http://www.gradeleader.com/). “You will have to do some form of exam. Whenever it happens, it’s better to be ready.”

John Gavin, an Irish teacher and pioneer in online learning since 2001, agrees. “It is important to stay calm and focused. You will be examined at some point. The mechanism by which it happens will not be normal, but it will happen,” he says.

Clive Byrne, head of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, says another key thing anxious students should remember is that everyone else is in the same boat.

“Whatever solution is found to the timing of the State exams, students will not be disadvantaged compared to others,” he says.

In the meantime, here are some of the experts’ top tips on preparing for the exams from home.

**Planning**

Gavin says now is a good time to put a plan in place for the work you need to do over the remainder of the academic year.

“Your day might not follow the school timetable. It may suit you better, for example, to do Irish in the morning or maths in the afternoon. Look at what you haven’t completed in the curriculum and develop a plan, with your teacher, to finish it,” says Gavin, founder of [Leavingcertirish.com](http://leavingcertirish.com/).

He also says it is a good time for students to let their parents know what their needs are, whether it’s technology or access to subscriptions.

“There’s no point in doing this in six weeks’ time - now is the time to get all that in place.”

**Quality not quantity**

Most students need not spend every minute of the normal school day locked in their rooms looking at books - quite the opposite, says Dr Cosgrave.

“I am recommending that students set aside up to two hours per day for important study, preferably in the morning after breakfast, outside of any tasks that you will be asked to complete by teachers or professors,” he says.

The focus, he says, should be on quality of study and not time.

“For example, two hours on Instagram is no good. There are a few reasons for this recommendation. One is that school closure increases the likelihood that some students will do no study unless forced to do so. Being forced to study is often counterproductive. This limited time slot focuses students mindset on priority tasks,” says Dr Cosgrave,

“Shorter study time periods like this are also more beneficial in terms of maintaining concentration. Bite-size study chunks on a regular basis will compound your efforts rather than focusing on one big block of study immediately before the exams. Exams are a marathon, not a sprint!”

**Self-directed learning**

The fact that schools are closed and classes are being online given either in live lessons or assignments places is going to place more responsibility on the shoulders of students.

“Students need to have faith in themselves,” says Johnnie Bell, a A-student and co-founder of Examlearn.ie.

“A lot of the stuff learned in school is not particularly complicated, and in most cases, students would be well capable of reading ahead and covering topics alone”.

**Dedicated work space**

In a busy home where many family members are milling about, Dr Cosgrave says it important to try and find a quiet space

“Avoid the kitchen table if possible, as you will most likely be eating here multiple times a day. If you are constantly at the table you will start to hate it.

“Similarly, you will probably need to move your notes and books regularly. This can get annoying and disrupt your momentum. It increases the likelihood that once the books are put away, you will stop studying completely.”

**Use e-resources**

Gavin says there is a wealth of online resources for students available for free, in most cases. For example, [the education publisher Edco has made its eBooks and digital resources available for free online](https://twitter.com/edco_ie?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Eembeddedtimeline%7Ctwterm%5Eprofile%3Aedco_ie&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.edco.ie%2F). Gavin himself is doing daily webinars free of charge on[Leavingcertirish.com](http://leavingcertirish.com/), while other study websites are also providing resources without charge.

Dr Cosgrave advocates familiarising yourself with the online tools and resources that are being used by your school.

“All instruction, assignments and test will be conducted here in the immediate future,” he says.

**Regular contact**

“Don’t isolate yourself,” says Gavin. “Work in pairs or small groups over Skype like you would have done before this crisis.”

Dr Cosgrave says keeping in regular contact with your teacher is important Contact them for recommendations on resources and feedback on your work.

“For most of us educators, this is a new situation too. We are here to help as much as possible and are eager to make sure that students get as positive a learning experience as possible in this difficult time,” he says.

**Exam practice**

As with normal exam practice, Dr Cosgrave says use this time to get to know the formats and marking schemes of the exams you are due to take like the back of your hand.

Understanding a marking scheme is crucial, he says, as this is how the marks will be allocated for the different questions on your exam paper. All exam questions have a marking scheme.

“Ask your teacher or professor for help with this. Understanding this gives you a clear focus in preparation. Once you understand how these marks are allocated you should practice answering past exam questions.”

He says ask your teacher to provide feedback and try to simulate the exam conditions answering past questions if possible.

“You don’t show up on the day of your driving test without ever having driven the car. So why would you do it for an exam? Practice makes perfect.”