brightstudy

FREE RESOURCE — GUIDE

Past Paper Strategy Guide

How to get the most out of every past paper: when to do them, how to mark like an examiner, and how to turn lost marks into a revision list.

3	12	20+	1
WAYS TO USE A PAPER	PAPER LOG ROWS	COMMAND WORDS	LOST-MARKS LIST

TIMED PRACTICE · MARK SCHEMES · COMMAND WORDS · LOST MARKS

PREPARED BY	CATEGORY	EDITION	LATEST VERSION
BrightStudy	Exam preparation	2026, A4 PDF	brightstudy.ai/resources/past-paper-strategy-guide

What is inside

Past papers are the best revision tool there is, and most students use them badly: too early, untimed, marked generously and never looked at again. This guide sets out a method. It explains the three ways to use a paper (by topic, by question type, and as a full timed rehearsal), how to mark against a scheme the way an examiner does, how to read command words, and how to turn every lost mark into an entry on a list that drives the next week's revision. A paper log and a command-word reference are included.

SECTIONS

1 Three ways to use a paper
2 Marking like an examiner
3 Paper log
4 Lost-marks list

WHO IT IS FOR

GCSE and A level students and undergraduates with access to past papers and mark schemes, in the last two months before an exam.

WHAT IS INCLUDED

- Three ways to use a past paper and when each is right
- Marking like an examiner: scheme conventions, levels of response, common deductions
- Command-word reference with what each one requires
- Paper log for twelve papers with score, time and the three biggest losses
- Lost-marks list that turns results into next week's revision

01

Three ways to use a paper

METHOD	WHEN	HOW	WHAT IT TELLS YOU
By topic	As soon as a topic is covered	Collect every question on the topic from several papers. Notes open. Mark each one.	Whether you understand the topic well enough to answer exam questions on it.
By question type	Mid-revision	Do every 6-mark "explain" question, or every extended essay, across papers.	Whether you can produce the structure examiners reward for that type.
Full timed paper	Last 4-6 weeks	Exam conditions. No notes. Timer. Marked the same day.	Your real score, your timing, and your three biggest losses.

RUNNING A FULL TIMED PAPER

1. Clear the desk, print the paper, set a timer for the real length.
2. Follow the first-five-minutes procedure: read everything, plan time per question.
3. No notes, no phone, no pausing the timer.
4. Mark the same day with the official scheme, strictly.
5. Log the score, time used, and the three biggest losses on the paper log.
6. Add every lost mark to the lost-marks list with its cause.

02
Marking like an examiner

- Points-based schemes: a mark needs the specific point, in any wording that clearly means the same thing. "Something to do with energy" is not the point.
- Levels of response (essays, extended answers): find the level descriptor that best matches the whole answer, then the mark within the level. Read the indicative content, but it is not a checklist.
- Calculations: usually method marks and answer marks. Working that is wrong but shown can still earn method marks; a bare right answer may lose them.
- Common deductions: missing units, no justification for a "justify" or "explain" question, describing when asked to evaluate, no conclusion in an evaluate question.
- Examiner reports (published with the scheme) tell you exactly where last year's candidates lost marks. Read them.

COMMAND WORDS

WORD	WHAT IT REQUIRES
State / give / name	A short answer, no explanation
Describe	Say what happens or what something is like; no reasons needed
Explain	Give reasons; use "because" and link cause to effect
Compare	Similarities and differences, both sides, point by point
Contrast	Differences only
Evaluate / assess	Weigh up strengths and weaknesses and reach a judgement
Justify	Give evidence or reasoning that supports a case
Discuss	Present different viewpoints and consider them
Calculate / determine	Working, units, answer to the right precision
Suggest	Apply knowledge to an unfamiliar situation; a reasonable idea earns marks
Outline / summarise	Main points only, briefly
To what extent	Make a judgement about degree, supported by evidence on both sides

03

Paper log

One row per full paper. The three biggest losses are the questions or types that cost the most marks.

DATE	SUBJECT AND PAPER	SCORE / TOTAL	TIME USED	BIGGEST LOSS 1	BIGGEST LOSS 2	BIGGEST LOSS 3

04

Lost-marks list

Every lost mark, with its cause. K = knowledge gap, C = command word misread, M = method or working, T = time, R = careless. Tick "fixed" when you have retested it.

PAPER	QUESTION	MARKS LOST	CAUSE	WHAT I WILL DO	FIXED

Keep going

BRIGHTSTUDY

This resource covers the part of studying that happens away from a screen. BrightStudy does the rest: upload your notes, slides or recordings and it turns them into Study Docs, flashcards and exam-style questions, then schedules your reviews with spaced repetition. There is a free plan to get started.

PAIRS WELL WITH EXAM PREPARATION

FEATURE	WHAT IT DOES	LINK
MCQs	Exam-style questions with answer explanations.	brightstudy.ai/features/mcqs
Progress Analytics	Track your study activity and performance.	brightstudy.ai/features/progress
Topic Analysis	Find stronger topics and areas that need attention.	brightstudy.ai/features/topic-analysis
AI Tutors	Ask questions and explore difficult concepts.	brightstudy.ai/features/ai-tutors

RELATED RESOURCES

RESOURCE	LINK
Exam Day Checklist	brightstudy.ai/resources/pre-exam-day-checklist
Essay Plan Framework	brightstudy.ai/resources/essay-plan-framework
Exam Error Log	brightstudy.ai/resources/exam-error-log



brightstudy

Your whole degree. One learning system.

support@brightstudy.ai

brightstudy.ai