

Interleaving

Mix topics to learn deeper · Study Skills

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Study Skills

16 entries

Interleaving means mixing different topics and question types in one session instead of blocking them. It feels harder, and that is exactly why it works.

The idea

What interleaving is	You shuffle related topics together in one sitting rather than spending the whole hour on a single one. A maths session might jump between fractions, ratio and percentages instead of doing twenty fraction questions in a row.
The opposite of blocking	Blocking is the usual habit: finish all of topic A, then all of topic B, then all of topic C. Interleaving keeps switching, so your brain never settles into autopilot on one type of question.
Why it feels worse	Switching is slower and you make more mistakes at first, so it feels like you are learning less. That uncomfortable feeling is the work happening. Smooth and easy usually means you are just reminding yourself, not learning.

Blocking vs interleaving

A blocked session	Twenty questions on quadratics back to back. By question five you have spotted the method and you are repeating it on muscle memory. You feel fluent, but you have only practised running the method, not choosing it.
An interleaved session	Five quadratics, five on straight line graphs, five on simultaneous equations, then a mix of all three in a random order. Every question forces you to ask what type this is before you start.
The hidden skill	Exams never tell you which method to use. Interleaving trains the part that blocking skips: reading a question cold and deciding which tool it needs. That is usually where marks are lost.

Why it works

It builds discrimination	Mixing similar topics makes you notice the small differences between them. You learn what makes a question a ratio problem rather than a fractions problem, so you stop picking the wrong method under pressure.
It strengthens recall	Each switch makes you pull a method back out of memory from scratch instead of leaving it open on the desk. Retrieving something repeatedly is what fixes it in your long term memory.
It matches the real test	A real paper jumps between topics with no warning. Practising in that mixed format means the exam feels familiar rather than like a format you have never rehearsed. It also spreads your practice out over time, which on its own is one of the strongest ways to remember anything.

How to do it

Group topics that get confused	Interleave things that are easy to mix up, like mean and median, or the three energy stores, or affect and effect. Putting confusable ideas side by side is where the method pays off most.
Shuffle past paper questions	Print questions from across the whole spec, cut them up and pull them in a random order. You will not know the topic in advance, which is exactly the condition you want.

Keep blocks small	Do three or four questions on a topic, then move on. Long enough to get into it, short enough that you never coast on autopilot.
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Always identify before solving	For each question, say out loud what topic it is and which method it needs before you write anything. Naming the type is the habit that interleaving is really building.
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Common mistakes

Quitting because it feels hard	More errors and slower work are normal early on and do not mean it is failing. Judge it by a later test, not by how the session felt at the time.
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Mixing totally unrelated topics	Jumping from Spanish verbs to trigonometry to Macbeth is just chaos. Interleave topics from the same subject or theme so your brain has a fair choice to make between them.
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Going back to blocking when stuck	If a topic is shaky, it is tempting to drill it alone until it sticks, then never mix it back in. Learn the basics blocked if you must, then return it to the mix so you can practise choosing it.
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