Tips for Sitting Maths Exams

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**1. Whatever you do, don’t stay up all night revising the night before your exam.** Your brain actually needs processing time to sort out all the information you have bundled into it during your revision, and sleep and relaxation are the best way to achieve that. Lat minute cramming only makes you stressed and tired and makes it harder to access all the information at the back of your brain. Finish revising at about 6pm, have a really nice meal, and then take the night off. Nothing will disappear out of your brain, and all the information you need will be much easier to find in the morning.  
  
**2. Before you leave the house, make sure you have got all your equipment**. The most important is your calculator as that is like an extra part of your brain which only you know how to use. Other important pieces of equipment are: pen, pencil, ruler, compass, and angle measurer.  
  
**3. Be careful who you talk to before the exam!** When I was at uni I had this friend who was lovely most of the time but when it came to exams she was – how shall I say this?... – and absolute nightmare! She was always stressed and panicking, and after talking to her, you were stressed and panicking too! I know it is hard to do, but maybe try and keep to yourself before an exam and just be confident that you have done everything you needed to do.  
  
**4. When you get into the exam and you find your seat, it is probably going to be a good ten minutes before the exam starts**. Spend the time wisely. Don’t just look around and pull faces at your friends. Read the instructions on the front of the exam paper. Not only will this get your mind focused, it might just also tell you something important. One of my best students once messed up an exam because he didn’t read that sentence on the front of the paper that said “Question 12 is on the last page”. Question 12 ended up being worth over one quarter of the total marks, and my student didn’t see it!  
 **5. A lot of people struggle with the timing of exams.** They either go too quickly and end up with about forty painful minutes left at the end with nothing to do, or they go so slowly that they don’t get chance to finish. If you want you can see how many marks are available on the exam (it will tell you this on the front of the paper), and divide the total length of the exam by this number. This will tell you how many minutes you have per mark, and will then be a pretty good guide of how long you are supposed to spend on each question.  
 **6. If you get stuck on a question, move on!** This especially tends to happen at the start of exams when you are still a little nervous and your brain hasn’t had a chance to warm up. Some people like to flick through the exam paper and find a question on their favourite topic, do that one first, and then go back to Question 1. Whatever works for you, but please don’t waste a load of time on a weird question that is only worth 2 marks.  
  
**7. Read the questions carefully!** I know everyone always says this, but there is a reason. Maths questions, more than in any other subject, contain words which, if you don’t spot them, can send you down the completely wrong path. Imagine if you didn’t see the “not” in this question: Which of the following shapes are not regular polygons? Goodbye marks!  
  
**8. Show your working.** Again, I know everyone says it, but it is just so crucial! This is especially important the older you get. In SATs just under half the total marks are for working out, but in GCSE it can be over three-quarters. And the beauty of working out is that even if you make a couple of daft mistakes, you are still picking up lots and lots of marks.  
  
**9. Check your answers at the end.** I used to hate doing this in exams. You have put all that work in actually doing the exam, you have fifteen minutes left, surely you deserve a break? But if you find one of two daft mistakes (and everyone makes them), that could make the difference between a grade or a level, and those painful fifteen minutes will pass a lot quicker if you are checking answer than if you are just staring blankly in front of you.  
  
**10. Use the beauty of algebra.** A lot of people hate algebra, but in exams it is brilliant because you can easily tell whether you have got the question right or wrong. If you are solving an equation, just substitute the answer back into the question and see if it makes sense. If you are factorising, then expand your answer and see if you get the question. It’s like having the answers in front of you!  
  
**11. After you walk out of the exam, don’t listen too much to what others are saying**. You always have the people who come up to you and say (usually in a manic high-pitched voice) “what did you get for question 7c?... I got 2.35776, but I think I should be 2.35775… what do you think?... what do you think?”. That is not what you need. Then there are the people who say they have done rubbish and messed it up, when you know very well they have probably got 99%. Again, don’t worry about others. Take a bit of time on your own, and then when you talk to your friends, get them talking about something else apart from maths!