

Time Management Under Pressure

Strategic pacing and psychological resilience for high-stakes mathematics papers.

The Mark-to-Minute Ratio

A standard GCSE Mathematics paper is 80 marks to be completed in 90 minutes. Mathematically, this gives you **1.125 minutes per mark**. However, cognitive load theory shows that the human brain slows down under sustained stress. Your actual working pace should be planned at exactly **1 minute per mark**.

- A 2-mark question? Finish it in 2 minutes.
- A 5-mark question? Finish it in 5 minutes.
- This leaves you with a critical 10-minute buffer at the end of the exam for checking and tackling skipped problems.

The "Three-Pass" Strategy

Do not complete the exam chronologically from page 1 to page 24. This often results in students burning 15 minutes on a difficult 3-mark question in the middle of the paper, meaning they run out of time for the easy 2-mark questions at the very back. Instead, pass through the paper three times:

Pass 1: The Quick Wins (First 20 Minutes)

Flip through the entire paper. Answer every question you instantly know how to do (usually basic arithmetic, solving simple linear equations, reading graphs). Skip immediately if you have to stop and think for more than 10 seconds. You are banking guaranteed marks and building psychological momentum.

Pass 2: The Core Work (Next 50 Minutes)

Return to the start. Attack the standard multi-step problems (e.g., trigonometry, ratio sharing, quadratic factorisation). Stick strictly to the 1-minute-per-mark rule. If you hit a wall, write down the formula you think is relevant (to pick up an M1 mark) and move on.

Pass 3: The Deep Problem Solving (Final 20 Minutes)

Now, with 70-80% of the paper's marks safely banked, return to the brutal 5 and 6-mark unstructured questions at the back. Because your baseline marks are secure, your cognitive load is lower, reducing panic and allowing the creative problem-solving areas of your brain to function effectively.

Avoiding the Sunk Cost Fallacy

If you have spent 5 minutes on a 3-mark algebra question, your brain will tell you: "Just one more minute, I almost have it." This is a trap. You must be ruthless. Cut your losses, draw a line under your working (the examiner will still mark it), and turn the page.