

Revising for Finals – German linguistics and literature. Ten Tips.

The following summarizes the points I have made in tutorials and classes, mainly with reference to preparing for the Oxford Finals paper in German linguistics (V/ii). It reflects my personal view on how to approach the Finals examinations, and how I once approached them myself as a candidate. As such, this is merely a suggestive document. Take, modify or leave these tips as you wish. And viel Erfolg!

1. The golden rule: learning by doing, or: cast aside your essays!

‘Learning by doing’ is a cliché, but you could do far worse when choosing a mantra for your revision. Examiners consistently lament that candidates do not answer the question set, but instead peg a pre-prepared answer onto a question. Students know that they should not do this, but under pressure they do so anyway – year on year. Why? I think the problem lies in the way some students conceive their weekly essays, which leads to a particular (and in my opinion flawed) way of revising.

You might, with considerable justification, see the weekly essay as the finished product of your – at best substantial, at worse cursory – reading about a topic. It might seem legitimate, then, that you take this work, which was at least in part praised by me or another tutor, as your template. Under such a conception of the essay, you might revise from your model work, making mind maps from it, flash cards, or whatever. Because you are conscientious, you would no doubt learn your facts and the arguments well. But you would learn them with respect to a specific, previously set question. Hence when you reconstruct your mind maps, flash cards etc. in the examination, there is the significant risk that you then simply reconstruct your old essay for a new question – and your diligent work goes to waste.

Why not see your essays not as the product, but as the process of your thought? Jean Paul Richter called his early literary works not polished pieces but rather ‘Übungen im Denken’. You might also read Kleist’s entertaining *Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden*, which is about how we can think aloud, forming our thought by speaking. It is a piece that in some senses, I think, approximates the aims of my tutorials. If you accept that the act of writing is the primary formative process that constructs thought on the page, you would revise for this paper by constantly attempting past and imagined questions, thereby improving your knowledge of the problems inherent in certain received arguments about your topics. At the same time, you would hone your skills at structuring your thought itself: if you revise by writing essays as your thought process, you will have to begin by writing out, rather than assuming, the basic facts. This means that you would be more likely to present your topic clearly and talk your reader through your analysis step by step, from your background assumptions onwards. Moreover, conceiving writing as a thought process entails that you would practice questions from the very beginning of your revision, not as the final step (practice essays which are first penned in the run up to the exam or Collection are too late...) You would practice essays not in an effort to hit the First bracket by some formulation, but instead in order to help assess your current thinking and to drive it forward – thus making it more likely that you attain higher marks because of the sophistication of your analysis.

The word ‘Finals’ encourages a conception of the essay as an end product: you might not study the subject again thereafter, and even if you do, well, David Lodge jokes about an academic career after the undergraduate degree in his satire *Changing Places*. He writes that the end of the Bachelor is something:

called Finals, the very name of which suggests that nothing of importance can happen after it. The British postgraduate student is a lonely, forlorn soul, uncertain of what he is doing or whom he is trying to please – you may recognize him in the tea-shops around the Bodleian or British Museum by the glazed look in his eyes, the vacant stare of the shell-shocked veteran for whom nothing has been real since the Big Push. As long as he manages to land his first job, this is no great handicap in the short run since tenure is virtually automatic in British universities, and everyone is paid on the same scale. But at a certain age, the age when promotions and Chairs begin to occupy a man's thoughts, he may look back with wistful nostalgia to the days when his wits ran fresh and clear, directed to a single, positive goal.

Lodge is talking here about the fictional character Philip Swallow, and the funny fact is that – even though this character obtained a top First from Oxford – he actually turns out to be a very mediocre academic. Perhaps this is precisely because Swallow was so focussed on those few examination essays that his ideas weren't as fresh as he thought; perhaps he was so directed that, though good, his few prepared slants on topics became well-worn. Finals are not the end of your rigorous thought, and they are not the beginning of your career – they are just another stage along the path. So my point is this: even your Finals essays should be workings out of high-quality, well-trained thought, not hackneyed ideas. The thought demanded by Finals is spontaneous yet well-founded, time-pressured and yet the result of years of preparation. The thesis you promote in a Finals essay might amount to a standpoint that later, on reflection, you would revise – and that's OK. The best way to prepare for this task, then, is to constantly rehearse the *task* from new perspectives, not to constantly rehearse the same *material*.

2. (Linguistics) Revise terms and theoretical concepts

In your first tutorial, you were asked to define key terms: treat this not as a past assignment, but as an ongoing exercise. It is important to discuss linguistic topics using the correct vocabulary, so a dictionary of linguistic terms should always be to hand and should be full of finger marks! Like everything else, getting to grips with terminology requires practice, i.e. if you come across concepts in your readings of which you have no or only vague recollection, you should look them up and then write a practice answer explaining and exemplifying them in your own words.

In addition, each field has its own set of guiding assumptions. Linguistics, and the different sub-fields of linguistics, all have theirs. Reading general books in your spare time when on a train or waiting for the doctor, for example, can refresh your sense of the subject as a whole while also being an enjoyable break from more 'hardcore' revision. If you haven't read Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct*, I recommend it to start – and recent years have seen many similar books come onto the market.

3. Provide examples (linguistics) or quotations (literature)

Every substantial point you make requires exemplification. Thus, every paragraph should have at least one example. For an examination in German linguistics, you should be in command of German data. I like to find my own data, and I am interested in dialectology. Your summaries of German non-standard varieties provide you with material for a question directly on the topic of describing a non-standard variety, but they also provide you with examples of all kinds of linguistic phenomena. If you have worked on a dialect, look back over your examples and see how they relate to general topics, such as your morphology work,

or phonetics, for example. You may prefer to get your examples from secondary material – and that’s fine. Many scholars still illustrate the difference between grammaticality and acceptability with the standard ‘colorless, green ideas’ example from *Syntactic Structures*. The important thing is that actually you have, discuss and problematize examples. This local-level work is easy to forget when a linguistics question seems vague (so make it specific!) or especially theoretical, on some sort of ‘meta’ level. Remember: theory is based on data, and data helps problematize theory.

For literary essays, quotation should drive your argument forward and, if done well, it will add subtlety to your analysis. Every time you offer a quotation from a literary author or critic, derive your points out of his or her words. Analyse the way the quotation is constructed, the imagery used, or logical fallacies.

4. Be interactive

An obvious place to turn for examples is your language work: prescriptive grammars of German (both *Hammer* and especially the orange *Duden Grammatik* are good resources for this paper), vocabulary lists, translation exercises, etc. Do not see your Finals as rigidly compartmentalized: you cannot do well on morphological analysis or on a discussion of Goethe’s style, say, if your German is shoddy, and you can improve your translation skills by thinking theoretically about correspondences in English and German linguistic structures.

However you divide your time when conceiving your revision schedule, allow for some amount of permeability. Making a habit out of making connections will mean that you are more likely to stay alert. And staying awake is half the battle ... You will also likely find the revision more interesting. And both of these advantages lead to you retaining more information.

5. First make sure you have a grasp of the subject’s principles, before you select your topics.

It is sensible for you to reduce your eight tutorial topics (if it was an eight week course) down to a set that you will focus on for the examination. However, do not reduce your scope too soon. Since all linguistic levels, most literary topics or works of an author’s oeuvre are inevitably somehow interconnected, and since your examples given in an essay on Luxembourgish might help your morphological analysis questions, for example, allow yourself time to refresh your overview of a particular paper and to think about the many ways in which the topics interrelate. Only then should you reduce your material down to something that is more manageable for the late revision period.

6. Further reading

Once you have decided to specialise on certain areas, you should go back to the extended readings on the syllabus and those mentioned in discussions. You can also use your own research in the libraries and bona fide internet resources to extend your knowledge. I am not advocating that you read to excess or that you even make actual use of further reading (a couple of extra articles will suffice) in the examinations. Rather, this exercise is meant to liven your mind and help you think through various angles that we will have discussed in the tutorials or about which you will have heard in lectures. You need to keep your interest in the topics over an extended period of time (no easy task if you find a subject dry at the best of

times), and you need to keep that interest active, revisiting it in different ways rather than learning it by rote.

7. Subtle arguments – but arguments nonetheless

Essays in linguistics should be driven forward by a stance adopted in relation to the question, a stance that you present in your introduction and problematize throughout the essay. The watchword is subtlety: I'd be concerned if you think you can come up with and explicate a valid new approach to child language acquisition within sixty minutes; but questioning a received idea in a nuanced way, with close reading of examples and reference to other linguistic concepts will likely be highly rewarded.

For literary essays, it can seem tough to think of an original argument under pressure. According to ancient rhetorical theory, an argument is thought to be 'found' in commonplaces (topoi), which are widespread assumptions, popular ideas, etc. When answering a question that has been set for you, the commonplaces are already given. Look at the way a question is phrased, taking note of keywords as well as any lexical or grammatical ambiguities. You might begin your planning process by brainstorming. On a sheet of paper, jot down the keywords inside individual boxes or circles. Make use of connotation – write down all the concepts that you associate with those words. Search for as many connections as you can, and then choose the ones that you think are the most productive. You can use your keywords to structure your whole essay, so give them a lot of thought. They will help you answer the specific terms of the question and, through negotiating the ways in which they interrelate, you might well find your line of argument through this exercise.

Your argument should develop from one central idea that itself emerges from the terms of the question. For a Prelims exam answer, a weekly tutorial essay, or even an undergraduate dissertation, your core idea can be conceptually complex but should be concisely formulated (a maxim I still struggle to adhere to!) Before you begin writing, it will help if you construct a jargon-free sentence of, say, no more than two lines summarising your argument (this is often called a 'thesis statement'). Ensure that the terms you employ derive from your keywords. Place your statement where you can see it while you continue to plan and write your essay, and make sure that each paragraph somehow relates to it.

8. Essays as shapes: the inverse funnel

I find it helpful to think of essay structures as shapes. You might conceive different shapes and decide which one you like best. Different shapes might suit different types of question. For example, an answer for an essay question in German linguistics might work well if it begins as an upright funnel (Y) and leads to an upside-down funnel. By that I mean that you might begin with a broad theoretical problem of linguistics, which needs brief definition and discussion. You might then follow this up with a specific set of German examples that relate to that problem, showing an eye for detail and subtle analysis. (This is the narrow part of this admittedly strained funnel metaphor!) In your conclusion, you might widen your discussion again to a consideration of the broader theoretical significance of the narrow examples you examined earlier.

9. A simple style

You should aim to write clearly so as to be understood by an ordinary intelligent person. The creativity of your answer should emerge from the connections you make, not from the language you use. Even or perhaps especially complex points can be convincingly expressed in a straightforward way (again, something I continue to work on...). There are many guides to writing essays and on style on the market, and Blackwell usually has a good selection in stock. If you haven't consulted any before, you might want to do so now. This is not meant to be patronising – I've used many, and benefited from them. You might have a browse one day if you have time; or call up some titles at the Bodleian. A book that I have used myself, and can recommend, is:

Frank L. Cioffi, *The Imaginative Argument* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2005)

A large number of such writing guides, including Cioffi's, are aimed at an American audience. This is because composition classes often form a compulsory part of undergraduate programmes across the Atlantic. From my experience, these classes can be very useful to students.

10. (Linguistics) A note on morphological analysis

The morphological analysis exercises are easy if you know how. So don't treat them as an emergency or easy topic that requires little revision: the key is lots of practice, repeated tree diagrams and ideally a good knowledge of German's nightmare morphological examples (comprehensively discussed in, among other places, the *Duden Grammatik*). Once you get the hang of this type of exercise, then the questions can be a good way to gain marks. Note, however, that they demand the same skills as other answers: the ability to manipulate good German (if you don't understand what a word means, DON'T attempt its decomposition!), apply proper linguistic terms and concepts, spot ambiguities or subtle problems in theory, compare to your own examples, etc.

And if you panic in the examination...

If you are prone to panic, you are not alone. Perhaps the following strategy might help. For the first minute of every examination, I used to have what I called my 'f**k' time. On a blank part of the examination paper (the part I'd take home!), I would repeatedly write expletives (normally 'I'm f***ed!') for exactly sixty seconds. I found it quite cathartic, and in fact it did rid me of my panic. I then got on with answering the paper.

However you cope with nerves, try to rise to – even enjoy – the challenge of Finals. You've got solid tutorial essays as precedent – though not revision material – behind you. Now go have fun with them! Gutes Gelingen!