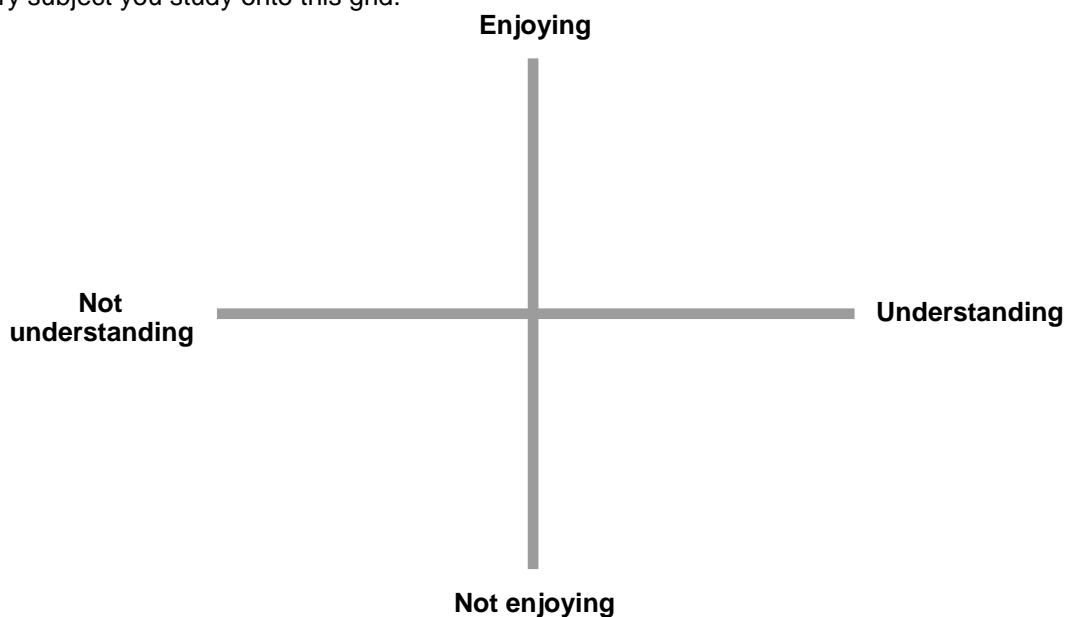


## . The Bottom Left

Sometimes the number of jobs you have to do can be overwhelming. Teachers are making demands from all angles and it's difficult to know where to start. The trouble with listing jobs is that a list doesn't allow you to see the bigger picture; you can't assess the progress of whole projects, you can only pick off small individual tasks.

Using a matrix or a grid helps you to assess the status of entire subjects. And once you've got a good sense of how an entire subject is going, you can use your time much more effectively, targeting your energy where it's most needed.

Put every subject you study onto this grid:



Once you've made these decisions and placed these projects as dots or crosses on the grid, make notes under each dot explaining the reasons why you've positioned it there. Then have a look at the projects in the bottom left of the grid.

### The Terror of the Bottom Left!

Many pupils will subconsciously avoid the subjects in the bottom left because even the thought of them feels uncomfortable. They might lower the standards they expect of themselves in those subjects, work less hard at them or try to ignore them altogether. But they're not going to go away. By spending some time on them now you could avoid a real crisis later on in the year.

Let's examine the subjects closest to – or in – the bottom left quadrant. We've given you enough space here to deal with three or four problem subjects! For each of your bottom left subjects make a note of:

» One task you could do that will push the dot further to the right.

.....

.....

.....

.....

» One task you could do that will push the dot further upwards.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

It might be speaking to a teacher, borrowing some missing work, speaking to a pupil who's better at it than you, finishing reading a textbook or redoing a rushed piece of homework.

Good prioritisation means knowing *why you're doing what you're doing* This task will help you to focus on your weaknesses.

## Final Thoughts

Here's the problem with to-do lists. No matter how you prioritise your list, all the tasks there still take up the same amount of physical space (a line of A4 paper), and so end up taking the same amount of mental space.

But not all tasks are equally important.

Any associated with subjects that are currently in the top right quadrant, where you're understanding and enjoying the work, are a little less important than the tasks associated with the bottom left.

Have a look at the tasks you've got for subjects in the top right quadrant. Is there any way you can complete these tasks more quickly and efficiently? Any small corners you can cut? Any favours you can call in or people you can ask for help? Your aim is to buy yourself some time by working super-efficiently in the subjects that are currently going well.

Scribble some possible ideas here:

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Now you've potentially saved yourself some time, which task in the bottom left quadrant needs the most work?

.....

Use this saved time to get started on it now!

## The Power of If ... Then Thinking

Professor Peter Gollwitzer of New York University says that many people who want to put their efforts into achieving great things, but don't, are derailed by seemingly small problems like these:

- » They want to finish a task to a high standard, but a phone call disrupts them.
- » They want to complete a coursework piece, but the weekend is just too busy.
- » They want to do some serious revision, but some friends disturb them and the work is abandoned.

In their book *The Psychology of Action* (1996), Peter Gollwitzer and John Bargh argue that if this happens to you, it's because you have low 'implementation intention' – you sort of want to put in the effort, but you will be easily put off if one thing goes wrong.

The solution? Successful students anticipate these problems and plan for how they will respond to them with maximum effort. You sequence actions that anticipate obstacles and build in pre-prepared solutions – you effectively beat self-sabotage before it even happens.

Consider these examples:

Student 1: 'I'll get started on this first thing in the morning.' This is a really common internal dialogue you might experience as a student – lots do it! And with one small disruption the whole plan comes to a standstill.

Student 2: 'I'll get started on this first thing in the morning. And ...

- » *If I wake up late by accident, then I'll use my morning break to start it instead and ...'*
- » *If I feel really demotivated, then I'll get two coffees from the canteen and drink them quickly to give me a boost and ...'*
- » *If I get disturbed by friends, then I'll make an excuse and go to the library and ...'*
- » *If the internet is down, then I'll start by using my class notes and save the research work until later.'*

It's easy to see which student might be the one most likely to succeed. Student 2 has listed a series of potential problems and has recognised their tendency to self-sabotage when small things go wrong. By planning a change in action when those small obstacles come along, they are much more likely to keep pushing forward.

List all the usual blockers you use to prevent high levels of effort and for each one commit to a solution. Think them all through in your head and make notes. What you are doing is strengthening your implementation intention. You *will* put the effort in, even if small things crop up to stop you.

Use the following table to plan your response to self-sabotage:

If ... ..... .....	Then ... ..... .....
If ... ..... .....	Then ... ..... .....
If ... ..... .....	Then ... ..... .....
If ... ..... .....	Then ... ..... .....
If ... ..... .....	Then ... ..... .....

**Final Thoughts**

If ... then planning often starts quite deliberately, with students using a grid like the one above to record their intentions. This keeps them firmly in mind when obstacles come.

But after a little while, you'll become good at internalising this kind of planning. You won't have to write it all down – you'll start doing it more instinctively. That's a great place to be.