Interviews with A-Level Students Who Turned Their D’s/E’s into A’s/A*s

Interviewers:  
*Shreena Jogia/Minesh Karia*

Interviewees:  
1. Anshul Raja  
2. James Hume  
3. Sarah Simons
Anshul Raja

Anshul is the co-author of How to Ace Your A-Levels. He always struggled with exams from a young age and this continued on to AS levels where the site of his dismal grades pushed him to turn things around. He created a detailed plan on how he could turn his D’s into A’s and executed it during his A2 year. After retaking most of his AS modules alongside his A2s he left results day with AAAA in his hand. Anshul then went on to University College London where he achieved First Class Honours and a certificate of academic excellence for obtaining a degree score in the top 5 percent of his year group. Anshul is now a director at a hedge fund in Dubai and is a derivatives trader at a proprietary trading firm in London. This is my interview with him...

**Me**
Anshul. Why didn’t you just get it right the first time round during AS?

**Anshul**
Hahaha. It’s in my nature to always do it the hard way. But the truth is I just didn’t know what I was doing. No one really sat down with me and said “look if you continue on this path you’re going to screw up your A-levels/future”. This is the main reason why I got together with Minesh and wrote How to Ace Your A-Levels.

**Me**
Your reasons for writing the book was going to be my next question!

**Anshul**
Sorry...beat you to it! The reason was exactly that. (We wrote it to) just give a heads up to students starting A-Levels and to those currently doing them on what they REALLY need to do to achieve top grades. Early in my education I
made a lot of poor assumptions on what it takes to do well in exams and I wasn’t alone. We found that many students also make these incorrect assumptions, and if they are left unquestioned result in bad habits that stick around for a long time. Our book addresses these assumptions and shows students exactly how to approach studying/revision at A-levels.

Me
This book sounds great. I wish I had something like that when I did my A levels. Let’s continue with your time at college. When did you realise that you were not going to achieve the grades you wanted?

Anshul
During the June exams in AS year. I found the exams tougher than I expected. I remember not being able to answer a lot of questions either because I couldn’t remember what to do or I hadn’t covered it in my revision.

Me
What happened on results day?

Anshul
I picked up my results from college and was obviously very disappointed and angry. I was angry at my teachers. Angry at my parents. Angry at everyone.

Me
Did you think about quitting college?

Anshul
For a bit but eventually I changed my mind and wanted to prove to myself and to others that I could do it.

Me
Your book mentioned that shortly after receiving your results you did research and made a plan on how you could turn your low grades into A’s. What made you do this?

Anshul
At this point I was filled with bitterness about my grades. I just had enough of all the sympathy my family and friends were giving me – “Never mind. All that matters is you tried your best” – “Don’t worry it’s not the end of the world”. I just kept thinking in my head “Shut up!!”. I didn’t want to speak to anyone. I
just wanted a solution and the only way was to sit down, identify the reasons why I did so badly and make a plan of action.

**Me**
Wasn’t the solution to just work harder?

**Anshul**
That was only part of the solution. This was something I realised during my A2 year. In my opinion achieving good grades is 60% ‘working hard’ and 40% learning technique.

Also what exactly is ‘working hard’? One person’s hard work is another person’s dosing around. How much is enough? I needed to learn how to get myself to work hard. I needed to figure out how to get myself to the table and stay on it every single day. That’s exactly what I did eventually figure out and is what students will discover in our book.

**Me**
Would you say you had a change of attitude?

**Anshul**
Yes, definitely. That’s partly because of the kick up the ass I got once I had received my AS grades. Also, from researching self motivation, I understood what it took to develop a good work ethic. This was an important realisation and one that permanently changed my attitude.

**Me**
Wasn’t that tough?

**Anshul**
Yes, it was, but everything worth getting is usually a struggle right? Otherwise it wouldn’t be worth fighting for or working towards.

**Me**
What would you say to students who don’t know what subjects to take for their A Levels?

**Anshul**
In the book we’ve categorised the most common A Level subjects into three areas; memory, method and written prose. Generally the exams for memory
subjects, like Biology, have short-answer questions. This means the mark scheme for these questions have definitive answers that are clearly defined. It’s not down to the opinion of the examiner for example in English where the exam is open to interpretation. Subjects like Biology therefore have less variables and room for error. My advice would be to have a bias for these type of subjects when selecting your A-Levels.

However, after GCSEs everyone has a good idea of where their strengths are. If you know you’re good at writing, written prose and essays, then by all means choose that subject. If you have a passion for history or psychology etc, then take it. But I’d say look at the format of the final exams. If you love the subject but hate for example coursework and the exam is 60% coursework based, then don’t take the subject, as you’re not giving yourself the best possible chance of success.

Me
What is the main reason in your opinion that most students underachieve?

Anshul
I think it’s the assumption that there’s no point revising too early because you’ll forget everything before the exam. This is completely incorrect. The more times you study something, the more likely you are to remember it.

It’s important to understand how memory works. Think of your memory as a virtual filing cabinet. When you learn something thoroughly, parts of that information is filed into place. Over time the information in that filing cabinet becomes mixed around and unorganised. When you re-learn everything again you add more information and reorganise it. Each time you relearn it the more information you add and the longer it stays organised for.

The module’s I did best in were the ones I completed the first repetition 2/3 months in advance. Because of time pressure, I was only able to complete a second repetition maybe a week before the exam and still achieved marks close to 100%. This is the power of combining good learning technique with repetition.

Me
What would you say to students who say they are not good at exams because they have a bad memory?
Anshul
Well, my girlfriend used to say that same thing. She would say to me “I can’t do it, I have no memory, I can’t be bothered” etc. I just used to say stop making excuses. We are all human, if you put your mind to something, sit in the right environment (good table, lighting, minimal distractions) and really try and concentrate, you can do it. It took her a while to get on board, she was quite the sceptic but eventually she followed my memory methods, and found the most appropriate one for her and guess what, it worked!

Me
What is your advice to people who just want to give up?

Anshul
Hmm, my advice would be to hang in there, talk to others who have been through it before and read How to Ace Your A-Levels! Also, challenge yourself and ignore all the other people being negative around you. Ask yourself, who are they to say you can’t do it? Even if your teachers predict you a C, there is nothing stopping you from getting an A or A*. Don’t let anyone benchmark you.
James Hume

James was a guy I met at uni who had a unique story. He was an average lad who went to a state school. However he had an explosive temper which often resulted in violence. For years he got away with fights and scuffles here and there – up until college. Here he got into a fight with another student which cost him his place at the sixth form. To add insult to injury he achieved 1B 2C’s and an E in his AS levels. After enrolling at a new college and getting his act together he boosted his grades to AAAA. He then took a gap year, studied Maths at UCL and landed a job at a prestigious investment bank. This is my interview with him...

Me
James. How on earth did you bounce back from being expelled and practically failing your AS levels.

James
HaHa. Not the proudest moment but it was a blessing in disguise because it got me to fix up and start doing what I should have done a long time ago.

Me
As crazy as your story is I want to know more about the changes you made in order to turn BCCD to AAAA. Let’s start by getting your view on why you didn’t get the grades you wanted at AS levels.

James
I think it was an attitude thing. I liked being the joker in class and was starting to go out more after college. The work ethic just wasn’t there.

Me
To get BCCE you must have done some work. When and how did you revise for exams?
James
I only really started revising during study leave. I bought some revision guides, read through my text books and made notes. Closer to exam time I did past papers.

Me
What was your learning technique?

James
That was pretty much it. I just sat down read through and tried to understand the material.

Me
That seems like what most students do. Did you cover the material thoroughly?

James
Well... Apparently not!

Me
OK I get the picture. Let’s focus on your attitude and learning style during your A2 year and discuss how that differed from your AS year. Can you talk a bit about that?

James
Sure. Being expelled affected me quite severely. I started thinking more about uni and how if I don’t get my s*** together things could go horribly wrong. I thought a lot about quitting all together and becoming a plumber or something but over time my family convinced me to try again.

I started at another college which I had to pay for myself. I think paying for it pushed me to work harder and try to get the best grades I could. During class I would concentrate more. Also when I came home I sat down and worked for 2/3 hours religiously.

Me
That’s what I really want to hear about. Run me through specifically what you would do when you got home and how it differed from your first year?

James
Well the first difference was I actually sat down and worked almost every day which I rarely did in AS. During AS year I would usually come home and watch TV. Secondly when I started working through my text books I actually got stuck in and tried to memorise and understand the material. During AS I would just glaze over the pages and not take much in.

_Me_
In our book “How to ACE your A-Levels” we talk about the three most common revision techniques. These are...
1. Revising mainly from notes taken in class
2. Learning directly from the text book
3. Learning from revision guides.
Did you use one or a combination of these methods? If so which one(s)?

_James_
Number 2 and a bit of 3 as well. My notes were messy and most text books cover all the material anyway.

_Me_
Did you ever take notes from the text book?

_James_
Sometimes but I wouldn’t really use them again.

_Me_
Did you ever have the urge to procrastinate? If so how did you tackle it.

_James_
Ye all the time. I just made sure I took breaks every 15-20 mins and also told my whole family to shout at me if I messing around. HaHa! Also because of my change in attitude I felt a lot guiltier for not working. I didn’t want to go to sleep or go out thinking I didn’t finish my to do list.

_Me_
In our book we talk about good runs and bad runs when it comes to studying and revising on a day to day basis. Did you ever have days where you just couldn’t concentrate when you needed to?

_James_
Ye all the time. It’s mentally exhausting and sometimes other personal things get in the way. There was a point before Jan exams where I was having
problems with my girlfriend and we went on a break. I didn’t study properly for at least a week. The pressure was on and I felt really s*** about how much time I wasted.

*Me*
How did you get back into the swing of things?

*James*
It took some help from my friends. Also my parents noticed my change in behaviour and pretty much said “you can’t waste all your hard work over a girl”. From then on I tried really hard to study for at least 20 mins a day and gradually increased to an hour and more.

*Me*
Another thing we mention in our book is the importance of building momentum when studying and making the most of a ‘good run’. Did you ever do this?

*James*
100% agree with that. I did exactly that in my A2 year. Sometimes you just get those days where you only have to read over something once to understand it. I think you need to take advantage of those periods.

*Me*
In your A2 year when did you start revising for exams?

*James*
For June exams?

*Me*
Yes

*James*
I had been covering material throughout the year but I properly started as soon as study leave started.

*Me*
How did you plan your revision during this time?

*James*
I did it in a weird way. I did a little bit of every subject each day. 2 hours of maths. 2 hours of Biology and so on...
Me
How many repetitions did you do for each subject?

James
It depends on how well I understood a section. In Maths for example if I struggled to understand certain topics I’d do more questions/repetitions.

Me
For maths did you just do the textbook questions?

James
Yea. There was no need to look at anything else. For each section the practice questions would get harder further down the list. So question 20 would be harder than question 10. I would do question 1 to warm up. If it was easy then I’d skip to 4/5. If they were OK then I’d skip a few more until I get to one which I found hard. After having a go at it if I still couldn’t do it then I’d go back 1 or 2 questions and revisit the harder one later.

Me
That’s the detail I like to hear! Were there any cases where you had to do all the questions on a topic?

James
Rarely. Only if I really didn’t understand something. Usually I would just go through questions like I mentioned or do all the even questions or all the odd questions.

Me
Did your teachers help with maths? Were classroom sessions helpful?

James
In my first college – yes. In the second one I only had 3 hours a week and the teacher didn’t cover the syllabus in time for exams. I remember she left out 5 chapters for one particular module.

Me
Were you worried about this? What did other people in your class do?

James
Na not really. The Edexcel text books were good enough to learn yourself. Some others in the class were oblivious of the fact we hadn’t covered the last 5 chapters until I told them. Unfortunately it was too late by then.

Me
You just highlighted something we discovered in our research. Students often underperform because of being unaware of the syllabus. Question is...are the students at fault for being too lazy to find out or the teacher for not emphasising it enough?

James
More often than not I think it’s the students fault. However there must be other teachers like my maths teacher who don’t let the students know.

Me
OK let’s move on. Chemistry - how did you study for that?

James
I did AQA and the text books weren’t very good. They weren’t user friendly and were outdated. I used a combination of classroom notes and the text book.

Me
When did you realise that you couldn’t use the textbook on its own?

James
A few weeks into college. I became quite frustrated with the text book. It was very blocky and had a feeling that it contained a lot more than I needed. I decided to check a few exam papers and realised I couldn’t solely use the text book as there were some questions that were not covered. Because of this I focused a bit harder in class and made sure I had a decent set of notes.

During study leave I used a combination of these classroom notes and the text book.

Me
Physics?

James
I remember my physics teacher kept going off on tangents during class. I guess he was very passionate about the subject but it didn’t help with revision! My classroom notes went out the window.
Me
Did you quickly realise that the information provided in class was irrelevant? Did others realise this too?

James
Yes. Again, I went to the past papers and checked what the questions were like. They had nothing to do with what was being taught in class. Realising this early was a game changer as it forced me to look at the syllabus and find out what I really needed to know. If I only had to give one piece of advice to anyone starting A-levels it would be this – look at past papers and your syllabus within the first few weeks of college especially if you feel the classroom sessions are useless.

Many others in class didn’t realise this. They coasted through the first months of college and had a useless set of notes.

Me
If you couldn’t use classroom notes how did you revise?

James
To be honest the past papers helped the most. I kind of learnt from doing the past papers and understanding topics using text books.

Me
OK last subject - Biology?

James
During class I would try and understand what was going on and did the homeworks. I used the chunky text books. If there was anything missing in class I would look at the text book.

Me
In our book we show students how to tailor their revision to the type of subject they are taking. We do this by categorising subjects into 3 areas – method & understanding, memorisation and written prose. Biology was unique in that it was purely memorisation. How did you go about memorising such large volumes of information?

James
Before starting each homework, I would read through the classroom notes/text book and try to understand what was going on. Then I’d summarise it in my head before starting the homework.

*Me*
When did you start past papers for all your subjects?

*James*
Around 4 or 5 days before the exams.

*Me*
How did you use the past papers? Did you work through them question by question or do mock exams for yourself?

*James*
I worked through them question by question. If I got a question wrong I would go back to the textbook and do an hour or so that topic.

*Me*
Ok I’ve grilled you enough! I appreciate you lending us your time and am sure this interview will help hundreds of students.

What would you say to any AS level student who hasn’t achieved the grades they wanted this year?

*James*
Just to try your best to take it on the chin. Through retakes and hard work you can do what I did and get the grades you want.
Sarah was a hard working student who had a good set of GCSE’s. Like many other students she had her eyes set on a good university and possibly a career in journalism/writing. Being naturally studious she felt that achieving a good set of AS results wasn’t impossible. However, she underestimated the jump from GCSE to A-level and fell short of her desired grades. She didn’t give up. During her A2 year she drastically changed her work technique to turn her ADC into AAA*. She is now at university studying English. This is my interview with her...

**Me**
Sarah. Why did you choose those subjects?

**Sarah**
I got A*s in English Language and Literature at GCSE so I felt I could hit the ground running at AS levels. Politics and economics just seemed interesting and essay based. General studies was compulsory.

**Me**
These subjects would be categorised as “Written Prose” subjects by us. This means the exams usually require long essay type answers and some of the marks come from the examiners opinion. Were you concerned that your grades were dependent on the interpretation of an examiner rather than a clearly defined mark scheme?

**Sarah**
It did cross my mind when deciding but I wasn’t interested or good at those maths and science type subjects so I just had to go for what I was comfortable with.

**Me**
Did you have a target in your mind for what grades you wanted?

Sarah
The universities I wanted to go to were asking for 3A’s so that was my target.

Me
Sorry for being blunt but what happened in your AS levels?

Sarah
Haha. Don’t waste much time do you!? Well...I think the sheer volume of information I had to memorise was overwhelming. I didn’t remember enough in the exam and ended up blagging far too much. I thought I was good at blagging but it didn’t help for A-Level exams.

Me
Would you say you worked hard during AS levels?

Sarah
Throughout the year?

Me
Yea.

Sarah
Yes I did work hard. I wasn’t one to slack or copy people’s homework. I would have a good routine and get my homeworks done during free periods.

Me
When we spoke on the phone you mentioned that your work technique also contributed to your underachievement at AS levels. Can you expand on this?

Sarah
Yes it definitely did. During study leave I did a lot of reading for my subjects and felt that would be enough to achieve a decent set of grades. But it wasn’t the right way of learning. I couldn’t remember much in the exam.

Me
What did you read?

Sarah
My classroom notes, textbooks and stuff online. I thought by reading lots I could piece together the information into an essay but there was too much information to remember.

*Me*
Did you make any more notes using your text books and online material?

*Sarah*
No and that was the mistake. During my A2 year I made a concise set of notes for each module using a combination of classroom notes and textbooks.

*Me*
Is that change in work technique you mentioned?

*Sarah*
Yes. I also used mind maps to organise the information and before the exam I would only use the mind map to revise.

*Me*
How did you use the mind maps?

*Sarah*
I would sit down with only the mind map, pen and a pad. Then look at each branch and try and write as much as I could remember about that particular branch. I would then check my notes to see if I missed anything.

Before the exam I would just take the mind map with me and run through the information in my head to keep the information fresh.

*Me*
In contrast to your revision methods during AS study leave, it seems like you made a real effort to memorise and learn material in your A2 year using mind maps. How many times would you go through this process of reviewing your mind maps?

*Sarah*
I would write them out 2 or 3 times. But I would run through them in my head many more times. I would often take the mind maps with me on the train or if I was going on a long drive somewhere.

*Me*
Along with changing your work technique, did you actually work harder in your A2 year?

**Sarah**
Yes because all of my retakes.

**Me**
What I’m referring to is the time/effort per module. Did you spend more time per module than you did during AS?

**Sarah**
Umm...

Yes because the change in work technique required more time. But to be honest it wasn’t that much more. Basically changing the work technique did the trick.

**Me**
When writing How to ACE your A-levels the co-author and I had a debate about what’s more important work ethic or work technique. What do you think is more important?

**Sarah**
Definitely work technique. It’s important to use organised ways of learning. I underestimated this during AS because at GCSE you can get away with just doing homework and reading before an exam. It’s quite the contrary during A levels.

Of course you still need to be able to work hard to even get round to use your work technique.

**Me**
Did you use past papers before the exam? If so how did you use them?

**Sarah**
Yes I did this in AS and A2. However during my A2 year I would give myself mock exams and mark myself harshly after. Had I done this in AS I would have realised I didn’t know enough. I guess part of me didn’t want to find out!
Sarah
Sarah I appreciate your time and am sure this interview will help many students. If you had to give one piece of critical advice to students doing A-Levels what would it be?

Me
Firstly, DO NOT underestimate the jump from GCSE’s to A-levels! Secondly, start revising early and use the correct work technique. Everyone at 6th form goes on about revision technique and you may think “blah blah blah it can’t be that hard” but don’t underestimate how important it is! Lastly, don’t just write notes for the sake of it – make them concise and use things like mind maps to keep things organised.