



THE STUDY COACH

Tom Vorselen — Evidence-Based Study Recommendations

A comprehensive guide to his framework, learning pyramid, and study method tier ranking system

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Source: YouTube channel "The Study Coach" by Tom Vorselen (60K+ subscribers) · "I Ranked Every Study Method (Most Students Use the Worst One)" (Dec 2025) · <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0G1j7bU3w2A>

1. Who Is Tom Vorselen?

Tom Vorselen is a Dutch study coach with 60,000+ YouTube subscribers on his channel **The Study Coach**. He helps students from medicine, engineering, law, and business — as well as working adults — study more effectively using methods grounded in cognitive science and real exam outcomes. His central message is that *most students waste enormous time on methods that feel productive but deliver almost nothing*. He does not care what feels nice; he cares about what actually produces results in real exams.

His content covers: study method rankings, active recall techniques, the Feynman Technique, spaced repetition, pre-studying strategies (SQ3R), mock exam protocols, focus and Pomodoro timing, and the science of why passive methods fail.

2. Detailed Study Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn directly from Tom Vorselen's video content, organised by theme.

2.1 Stop Passive Methods Immediately

Vorselen's most forceful message is that the two most common study habits — **re-reading** and **highlighting** — are in his F tier (failing grade methods). Research he cites shows that three student groups (those who highlighted, those who read others' highlights, and those who neither read nor highlighted) all scored approximately the same on exams. Highlighting creates a comfortable illusion of familiarity without building any real memory.

Method	Why It Fails	Tier
Re-reading notes/textbook	Brain recognises text but does not retrieve it — no durable memory formed	F
Highlighting	Creates familiarity illusion; zero retrieval practice	F
Watching lecture videos passively	Passive consumption; brain does not have to work	D
Studying with music (lyrics)	Lyrics compete with text; splits attention; reduces accuracy	D

2.2 Pre-Studying — Where Learning Actually Starts

Vorselen places **pre-studying (priming)** in A tier because learning begins *before* the class or lecture, not during it. The brain has a limitation he calls "rejection" — if it has never encountered information, new input is lost almost immediately because no neural pathway exists yet. Pre-studying creates the scaffold that lets class time reinforce rather than introduce.

His recommended pre-study method is **SQ3R**:

Survey: Skim headings, diagrams, and summary — build a mental map (2–3 min per topic)

Question: Convert every heading into a question: "What is X? Why does Y happen?"

Read: Read actively with those questions in mind — not passively

Recite: Close the material and recall the answers from memory (key step)

Review: Check answers, identify gaps, mark for spaced repetition

2.3 Active Recall — The Core Engine

Active recall is Vorselen's A-tier cornerstone. He defines it as any technique where you force your brain to retrieve information from memory without looking at it. Students who used retrieval practice consistently score 50% higher on delayed tests compared to students who re-studied the same material.

Practical active recall formats he recommends:

- Close your book/notes and write everything you remember on a blank page
- Pause every 3–4 minutes during a video and ask: "If the exam started now, what would they ask?"

- Convert summaries into question banks — then answer them without looking
- Use past papers and previous year questions as primary revision tool
- Brain dump before each study session (what do I already know about today's topic?)

KEY

The difficulty you feel during active recall is the feeling of memory being built. If studying feels comfortable, your brain is not working hard enough.

2.4 The Feynman Technique

The Feynman Technique is A tier in Vorselen's ranking because it forces the deepest level of active recall — teaching. The process:

- Choose a concept you have just studied
- Explain it out loud as if you are teaching a 5-year-old — in simple language, no jargon
- Identify where you stumble, get vague, or cannot continue — these are your knowledge gaps
- Go back and re-study only those gaps using active recall or mnemonics
- Teach it again until you can do it fluently without reference

This method is especially powerful for conceptual subjects (reasoning, science, economics) where understanding relationships matters more than rote memorisation.

2.5 Spaced Repetition — Beating the Forgetting Curve

Vorselen rates spaced repetition as A tier *when applied with active recall*. Used with only flashcards (passive reading of cards), it stays in B tier. His recommended revision spacing schedule:

Repetition	When to Revisit
1st	Same day — 1–2 hours after studying (while in working memory)
2nd	Next day
3rd	1 week later
4th	4 weeks later
Ongoing	Each time you get it wrong, restart the spacing from day 1

2.6 Mock Exams — The S-Tier Non-Negotiable

Mock exams are Vorselen's single highest-rated method — S tier, 90–100%. His rationale: there is nothing that replicates the cognitive demand of a real exam except a real-condition practice exam. Mock tests simultaneously serve as the most powerful retrieval practice *and* diagnostic tool.

- Start full-length mock exams **1–2 weeks before the actual exam** — not the day before
- Always simulate real conditions: same time of day, no phone, timer running, no pausing
- After each mock: identify which questions you got wrong and **categorise the reason** (concept gap / careless / time pressure)
- Revisit only the gap areas using A-tier methods (active recall, Feynman)
- AI tools (ChatGPT, Claude) can generate custom practice questions from your notes in seconds

2.7 The Pomodoro Technique — A Complete Guide

The Pomodoro Technique is a time-management method created by Francesco Cirillo in the 1980s. He used a tomato-shaped kitchen timer (*pomodoro* = tomato in Italian) — hence the name. The core idea: break study into timed blocks, separated by short rests. Vorselen covers it extensively because most students either skip it entirely or use the wrong version.

Origin	Created by Francesco Cirillo (Italy, 1980s). Used widely in medicine, law, engineering, and competitive exam preparation worldwide. Backed by cognitive science research on attention span and mental fatigue.
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How the Standard Pomodoro Works (25/5)

1.	Choose one task — e.g., "Solve equations from Chapter 5"
2.	Set a timer for 25 minutes
3.	Work on that single task with full focus — phone off, notifications silenced
4.	When the timer rings → stop, take a 5-minute break (stand up, drink water, look outside)
5.	Repeat steps 1–4 four times
6.	After four cycles → take a 15–30 minute long break

Why It Works

The human brain cannot sustain high-quality focus indefinitely. After 25–45 minutes of intense mental work, attention degrades, errors increase, and retention drops. Pomodoro works because:

- **Short goal reduces resistance:** "Just 25 minutes" feels manageable — the brain stops procrastinating and starts
- **Urgency sharpens focus:** the running timer creates mild time pressure that eliminates off-task behaviour
- **Breaks allow memory consolidation:** the brain uses rest periods to transfer information from working memory into long-term memory
- **Prevents mental fatigue:** regular breaks sustain performance across a full day of study

Vorselen's Fix	The standard 25/5 version is rated B tier by Vorselen. His reason: research shows the brain's "warm-up" to deep focus takes 23–25 minutes. With the standard timer, you break just as concentration peaks. His modified version uses longer blocks:
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Version	Study Block	Break	Best For	Tier
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Standard Pomodoro	25 min	5 min	Simple tasks, beginners	B
Vorselen Extended	50 min	10 min	Deep study, single subject	A
Vorselen Long Block	60 min	15 min	Maths, science, complex analysis	A

Rules for Effective Breaks

- **Walk or stretch** — physical movement accelerates memory consolidation
- **Look out a window** — resting your eyes on a distant point reduces visual fatigue
- **Drink water** — mild dehydration degrades concentration by up to 15%
- **No social media** — scrolling activates the same cognitive pathways used for studying; it does not let the brain rest
- **No starting the next topic** — let the just-studied material settle
- **Never interrupt mid-flow** — if you are in deep focus and the timer rings, finish the thought or paragraph before stopping

Practical Implementation for Competitive Exam Students

For students preparing for UPSC, SSC, NEET, JEE, or state-level exams, the recommended daily Pomodoro schedule is:

Time Slot	Activity	Duration
Morning session	Most difficult subject (Maths / Science / GS)	2–3 Pomodoros
Mid-morning	Active recall / revision of previous day	1 Pomodoro
Afternoon session	Medium difficulty subject	2 Pomodoros
Evening session	Current affairs / reading / mock test analysis	1–2 Pomodoros
Night	Brain dump + spaced repetition flashcards only	1 Pomodoro max

Key Point

The difficulty you feel during a Pomodoro block — the urge to check your phone, the temptation to switch tasks — is the brain's resistance to deep work. Pushing through it is where the real learning happens. Each time you resist distraction during a block, you are also training your attention span, not just learning the subject.

2.8 Mnemonics and Flashcards — Useful but Limited

Both are B tier — useful for large chunks of memorisation (especially in medicine, law, or engineering with complex formulas), but insufficient on their own for exams that test application, analysis, and evaluation. Flashcards that only ask for definitions keep you at surface recall; you also need higher-order practice questions that mirror the actual exam format.

3. The Pyramid of Study Effectiveness

Vorselen's channel references the **Learning Pyramid** (National Training Laboratories, Bethel, Maine), which maps average retention rates to different learning activities. It underpins his entire framework — the pyramid explains *why* passive methods fail and why active methods succeed.

METHOD	RETENTION	TYPE
Lecture / Passive Listening	5%	PASSIVE
Reading	10%	PASSIVE
Audio-Visual (videos, diagrams)	20%	PASSIVE
Demonstration / Worked Examples	30%	PASSIVE
Discussion Group / Study Group	50%	ACTIVE
Practice by Doing (Past Papers, Mock Exams)	75%	ACTIVE
Teaching Others (Feynman Technique)	90%	ACTIVE

Source: National Training Laboratories (NTL), Bethel, Maine. Figures are indicative averages; exact percentages vary by study and meta-analysis.

What the Pyramid Means for Exam Aspirants

PASSIVE ZONE (5–30%)	Lecture, reading, and video-watching — where most students spend 70–80% of their time. These feel like studying but produce minimal long-term retention. The brain consumes information but does not retrieve it, so no durable memory is formed.
TRANSITION ZONE (50%)	Discussion groups and study partner sessions begin to engage active processing. Arguing a concept with a peer, or explaining it in your own words, forces retrieval. Even once-weekly group mock analysis sessions produce measurable improvement.
ACTIVE ZONE (75–90%)	Practice by doing (past papers, mock tests, problem sets) and teaching others (Feynman Technique) produce the highest retention. These are uncomfortable — they expose gaps and feel harder — but that discomfort is the learning signal.
INSIGHT	<i>Vorselen's tier list is essentially the pyramid in disguise: F and D tiers are the passive zone; C and B are transition; A and S are the active zone. Competitive exam success requires moving 70% of your study time into the active zone.</i>

4. Study Method Grading System — The Tier List

In his video *"I Ranked Every Study Method (Most Students Use the Worst One)"* (December 2025, 7,300+ views), Vorselen assigns every common study method to a tier based on two criteria: **(1)** how students typically use it, and **(2)** how good it can be when used correctly. The tier grades correspond to the exam score a student is likely to achieve if they rely primarily on that method:

S (90–100%)	A (80–90%)	B (70–80%)	C (60–70%)	D (50–60%)	F (Avoid)
MUST-USE	VERY STRONG	DECENT	OKAY	WEAK	STOP NOW

Tier S — MUST-USE (90–100%)

Methods:	• Mock Exams / Full-length practice tests (1–2 weeks before the exam) • Active Recall with higher-order questions — applying, analysing, evaluating (not just remembering)
How to use:	Take a full mock at exact exam conditions. After: categorise every error (concept/careless/time). Revisit gaps with A-tier methods. Repeat.
Why it works:	Builds real exam muscle under pressure. Combines retrieval practice (90% retention zone) with time management and pattern recognition.
How to upgrade:	Increase difficulty of questions progressively — from "what is X?" to "evaluate X in the context of Y".

Tier A — VERY STRONG (80–90%)

Methods:	• Pre-studying / Priming using the SQ3R method • Active Recall (retrieval practice at any level) • Feynman Technique (teach a concept as if to a 5-year-old) • Spaced Repetition combined with active recall (not just flashcard reading)
How to use:	Pre-study before class. Do active recall after every session. Apply Feynman to weak concepts. Space revisions: same day → next day → 1 week → 4 weeks.
Why it works:	These methods engage the brain at retrieval level — forcing it to produce knowledge, not just recognise it. Consistently outperforms passive peers by 80–90%.
How to upgrade:	Combine all four methods into a single workflow: pre-study → class → same-day recall → Feynman on gaps → spaced revision → mock.

Tier B — DECENT (70–80%)

Methods:	• Mnemonics and acronyms (e.g., VIBGYOR, BODMAS) • Flashcards (for definitions and high-volume memorisation) • Extended Pomodoro (50 min work / 10 min break) • Brain dump (blurt out everything from memory on a blank page)
How to use:	Use mnemonics for complex terminology. Convert flashcards to include application questions, not just definitions. Brain dump at the start of each session.
Why it works:	Good stepping stones — especially for memory-heavy subjects. However, they cannot on their own produce critical thinking and exam-level analysis. Must be combined with A-tier methods.
How to upgrade:	After memorising with flashcards/mnemonics, immediately apply them in practice questions (mock style) to move into A tier.

Tier C — OKAY (60–70%)

Methods:	• Summarising (from memory — not copying from the textbook) • Brain dump as an early-stage exercise • Video lectures watched with active processing (pause every 3–4 min and self-quiz)
How to use:	Write a summary only after you have already read — from memory, not by copying. Convert video sessions into question banks as you watch.
Why it works:	These methods have some active component but are still close to passive. Useful for early-stage orientation, not for final exam revision.
How to upgrade:	Convert your summary into a question bank (every statement becomes a question). Then answer the questions from memory.

Tier D — WEAK (50–60%)

Methods:	• Watching lecture videos without active processing (1x or 2x speed, taking notes passively) • Studying with music that has lyrics
How to use:	N/A — these methods should be modified or replaced, not optimised.
Why it works:	Passive consumption and split attention. Lyrics compete cognitively with text processing. Research shows equal or worse performance with background music vs. silence on complex tasks.
How to upgrade:	Swap music with silence or binaural beats. Pause videos every 3–4 minutes and recall/quiz before proceeding.

Tier F — STOP NOW (AVOID)

Methods:	• Re-reading notes or textbook chapters • Highlighting as a primary study method
How to use:	These should be eliminated as primary methods.
Why it works:	Research cited by Vorselen: three groups (highlighters, readers of others' highlights, and non-highlighters) all scored approximately the same — highlighting adds no measurable memory benefit. Re-reading builds familiarity, not retrieval.
How to upgrade:	Replace with active recall immediately. Close the book and write what you remember on a blank page.

Quick-Reference Comparison Table

Method	Tier	Score Range	Verdict
Mock Exams (1-2 wks before)	S	90–100%	Non-negotiable
Active Recall (higher-order Qs)	S	90–100%	Non-negotiable
Pre-studying / SQ3R	A	80–90%	Do this first
Active Recall (basic)	A	80–90%	Do this always
Feynman Technique	A	80–90%	For weak topics
Spaced Repetition + Active Recall	A	80–90%	Revision backbone
Mnemonics / Acronyms	B	70–80%	For heavy memorisation
Flashcards	B	70–80%	Not standalone
Extended Pomodoro (50/10)	B	70–80%	Upgrade from 25/5
Brain Dump	B/C	60–80%	Use early stages
Summarising from memory	C	60–70%	Only from memory
Video lectures (active)	C	60–70%	Must pause & quiz
Video lectures (passive)	D	50–60%	Replace with recall
Music with lyrics	D	50–60%	Switch to silence
Re-reading	F	Avoid	Stop immediately
Highlighting	F	Avoid	Stop immediately

TAKE AWAY

The hardest-feeling methods are the most effective. If your study session feels comfortable, you are probably in D or F tier. The discomfort of blank-page recall, failed mock attempts, and Feynman stumbles is not failure — it is the sensation of memory being built. Embrace it.

Source: *"I Ranked Every Study Method (Most Students Use the Worst One)" — The Study Coach, Tom Vorselen · YouTube · December 2025 · <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0G1j7bU3w2A>*