

The Common Exam Mistakes and How to fix them



Helping Your Child Avoid “Silly Mistakes” — With Kindness, Calm, and Clarity



Even the brightest students lose marks in ways that have nothing to do with ability. It's not because they're lazy, careless, or "not thinking." It's because exams are noisy places for the mind — and when pressure rises, the brain slips into shortcuts and survival mode.

This guide gathers the *15 most common* mistakes I see across **all Maths exams**, and shows how your child can gently overcome them. Everything here is simple, practical, and designed to build confidence — not pressure.

Most important of all:

Your child doesn't need perfection.
They need steadiness, reassurance, and small habits that work.

These tools help them slow down, think clearly, and feel proud of the work they produce. And if you use just a handful of them, you will see a difference — not only in marks, but also in calmness, focus, and enjoyment.

Let's dive in.

The 15 Most Common Exam Mistakes In Maths Exams

1. Misreading the Final Instruction

Many students rush into the working without noticing what the final line is actually asking.

This often leads to correct calculations but the wrong answer.

Fix:

Slow the moment down. Box the final instruction before anything else. This becomes the anchor that guides the entire question.

2. Rushing Into the First Method That Comes to Mind

Under pressure, students grab the first familiar method, even if it doesn't match what the question wants.

Fix:

A gentle 2-second pause and the question:
"What does the examiner actually want me to find?"

This instantly shifts the brain from panic to clarity.

3. Writing Before Thinking

Students often start writing immediately because of adrenaline, before they've actually understood the problem.

Fix:

One slow exhale... then:
"What is the heart of this question?"

This simple pause prevents a huge amount of avoidable error.

4. Overloading Working Memory

Trying to hold all the numbers, steps, and ideas in the head causes mental clutter and small slips.

Fix:

Lightly jot down the key information early.
Offloading frees the mind to think calmly and accurately.

5. Treating a Multi-Step Problem as One Big Job

Seeing the whole question at once can feel overwhelming, making it hard to begin.

Fix:

The First Brick Rule — read only the first sentence → do just one small step.
Confidence builds quietly and steadily from there.

6. Skimming or Guessing Mathematical Vocabulary

Words like *difference*, *integer*, *estimate*, and *perimeter* get skimmed during stress, causing misinterpretation.

Fix:

Underline the key word and restate it in simple language.
Slowing down the reading creates instant accuracy.

7. Repeating the Same Method Everywhere

Students often default to their favourite method, even when it doesn't match the topic being tested.

Fix:

Ask: *"What topic is this truly testing?"*
This reconnects the student with the intention of the question.

8. Changing an Answer Because It Looks "Weird"

Students doubt correct answers because they expect them to look neat or friendly.

Fix:

Trust the method, not the appearance.
'Ugly' answers often reflect perfectly correct reasoning.

9. Freezing Under Pressure

When stress rises, the mind blanks. Everything feels lost for a moment.

Fix — The 3-Second Reset:

- Long exhale
- Drop the shoulders
- Repeat the above
- Read only the first line again

This brings them back into themselves.

10. Forgetting to Label Calculator Answers

Students get correct numbers... but forget what each number represents.

Fix:

Immediately label results:

$x =$, Area =, Volume =, Probability =

This creates clarity and prevents last-minute confusion. Examiners like it.

11. Not Leaving Time to Check

Students finish early but don't review their answers effectively.

Fix:

Save the final 3 minutes for a calm scan of:

- units
- decimal places
- negative signs
- whether the answer truly answers the question

These quiet checks earn marks consistently.

12. Starting With Hard Questions First

Tackling the hardest question early drains confidence and mental energy.

Fix:

Start with an easy win — one safe answer to settle the mind.
Confidence rises, stress falls.

13. Being Intimidated by Letters (e.g. x, k, n)

Students often panic when they see letters, assuming the question is advanced.

Fix:

Treat the letter exactly like a normal number.
Same logic, same steps.

This dissolves the fear of algebra instantly.

14. Not Showing the Key Step the Examiner Needs

Students sometimes jump straight to the final answer and lose method marks, even when they're right.

Fix:

Show **only the step** that earns the mark.
Let the mark value guide you:

- **1 mark** → answer only
- **2 marks** → one clear step + answer
- **3-4 marks** → steady, staged working

This teaches students how exams *really* award marks — a hidden superpower.

15. Not Checking the Value of the Question Before Starting

Students spend too long on low-value questions or rush through high-value ones.

Fix:

Guide time by marks:

- **1 mark** → quick
- **2 marks** → one step + answer
- **3-4 marks** → slow, calm, structured

This one habit can transform exam timing and reduce stress immediately.

★ A Final Word

Exams don't require perfection — just steadiness.
Small, warm habits create clarity, confidence, and calm.
Your child is far more capable than they realise, and these tools help them show it.