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GCSEs

the official student guide to the system



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**in the
know**



GCSEs

Are you thinking about which subjects you would like to take GCSEs in? Are you about to sit your final exams? Do you want to know what happens to your exam paper after you hand it in? If so, read on – this booklet is for you.

GCSE stands for General Certificate of Secondary Education. GCSEs are normally sat by 15- to 18-year-olds in schools and colleges across the country, but they are available to anyone who would like to gain a qualification in a subject in which they are interested. Although there are other qualifications out there, most 15- to 16-year-olds take GCSEs in some subjects.

GCSEs are available in over 45 subjects, from English and maths to economics and psychology. There are eight GCSEs in vocational subjects that relate to work in a particular vocational area, such as health

and social care or engineering. So, the good news is that there are almost certainly subjects you will find exciting and interesting.

You can study GCSEs alongside other qualifications such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), other vocational qualifications, key skills and various information and communication technology (ICT) qualifications.

GCSEs are highly valued by schools, colleges and employers, so they will be useful whatever you are planning to do when you finish your course.

**There are currently over
45 GCSE subjects**



the low-down on GCSEs

Did you know that when you sit your exams will depend on which subjects you take? Or that some GCSE courses lead to the equivalent of two GCSEs, while others earn you half a GCSE?

It's your choice!

Choosing your subjects is a big decision. It's OK, no one expects you to know exactly what you want to do in the future. You will be encouraged to take a wide range of subjects so that you can keep your options open.

Your school will give you information about exactly which GCSEs are offered and how you can fit together different courses in your timetable.

There are some subjects that you have to study – like English, maths, science, religious education (RE), physical education (PE), citizenship studies, information and communication technology (ICT) (in England) and Welsh (in Wales).

It would be worth taking a GCSE or a short course GCSE in these subjects so that you have something valuable at the end of your two years of study.

When you are deciding what other subjects to study, think about which subjects you are best at, which you enjoy and which might help you in the future. There may be some subjects, like psychology or economics, that you haven't studied before. Make sure that you look at all the options so that you make the decision that is right for you. Your teachers and parents or guardians can advise you on the subjects you should study. Advice is also available from other places, such as

Connexions. Take a look at some of the websites listed on page 17 for more information.

Some subjects can be taken in different ways. You will need to check the information that your school provides to find out what options are available to you. For example, there are four ways to take GCSE science qualifications:

- ▶ Three separate GCSEs: one in biology, one in chemistry and one in physics
- ▶ A double award in science, which covers all three subjects and is worth two GCSEs
- ▶ A single award in science, which covers all three subjects and is worth one GCSE
- ▶ A double award in applied science, which is worth two GCSEs.



choices



One size doesn't fit all

Most GCSE courses lead to one GCSE, although double award and short courses are an option.

Some GCSEs, like 'double award science' and the GCSEs in vocational subjects, have more topics to learn about, so they are worth the equivalent of two GCSEs.

Certain GCSEs, like citizenship studies, are only available in 'short courses', which are worth half a GCSE. Short course GCSEs are helpful if you want to study a subject but don't have time to do a whole GCSE, or if you want to get qualifications in compulsory subjects like RE and PE. They are available in a range of subjects, including design and technology, geography, history, art and design, business studies and Welsh second language – so, if you are interested in studying one of them, check with

your school to see which ones they offer. Remember that taking a short course is still hard work!

Spreading the workload

GCSEs normally take two years to complete. In those two years you will do 'coursework', which will count towards your final grade. Coursework may include projects, fieldwork, artwork, experiments or investigations. You will also have to sit exams. Some subjects, like art and design, design and technology and GCSEs in vocational subjects have more coursework and fewer exams.

Some subjects, such as science and maths, have 'modular' options. A modular course is split into different units, with an exam at the end of each unit. This means that you will sit exams

throughout your course instead of doing all the exams at the end of the two years. Some subjects, like geography and history, don't have modules, this means that you sit all the exams at the end of the course. Your school will decide whether or not to offer modular courses, so ask your teachers for more information.

If you take a modular exam and don't do as well as you expected, then you can resit the exam to try to improve your grade. The better mark out of the two attempts will count towards your final GCSE grade. Resitting exams is no easy option, so it is definitely best to work as hard as you can for your first attempt. You would need to speak to your teachers about the options available for resitting modules, because these depend on the course you are studying.

GCSEs in vocational subjects

Interested in learning about subjects directly related to the world of work? Want to take a practical subject? Then GCSEs in vocational subjects might be the qualifications for you!

GCSEs in vocational subjects, introduced in 2002, are qualifications that:

- ▶ relate to work in a particular vocational area, such as business, ICT or engineering
- ▶ are practical and give you a chance to learn by doing
- ▶ can be mixed and matched with other GCSEs and a variety of different courses
- ▶ are mainly assessed by coursework.

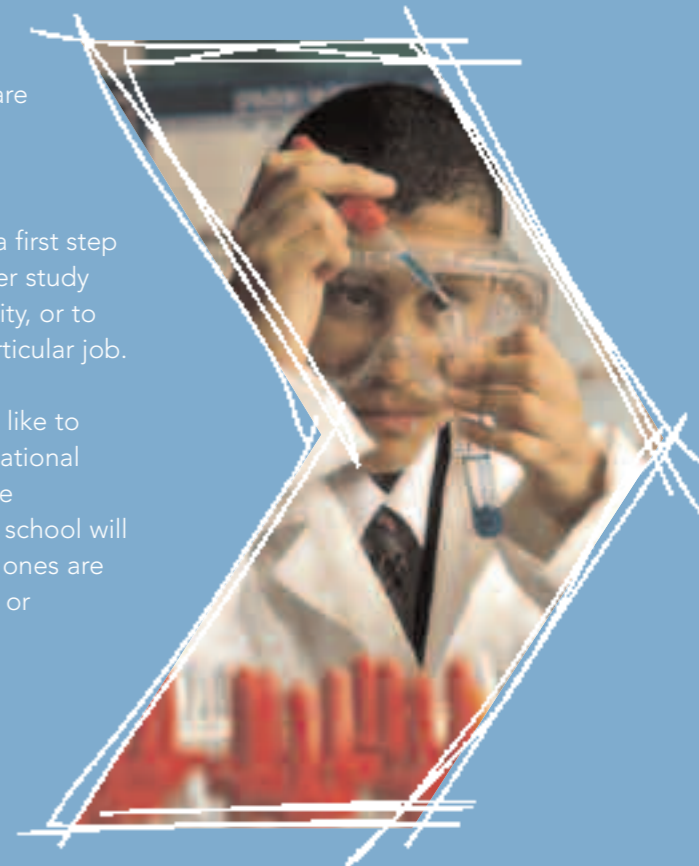
There are eight GCSEs in vocational subjects:

- ▶ applied art and design
- ▶ applied business
- ▶ applied ICT
- ▶ applied science
- ▶ engineering
- ▶ health and social care
- ▶ leisure and tourism
- ▶ manufacturing.

These GCSEs can be a first step on the ladder to further study at college and university, or to qualifications for a particular job.

If you think you would like to study a GCSE in a vocational subject, then check the information pack your school will give you to see which ones are offered at your school or local college.

There are eight GCSEs in vocational subjects and others are currently being developed



tiers and grades

Why are there different tiers that I can enter?
What's it all about?

You and your teachers will decide which tier you should enter for some of your GCSE subjects. Different subjects are organised in slightly different ways. In some subjects, such as history, RE, music and art and design, everybody studying the subject sits exactly the same exam paper. In subjects like English, science and most modern languages, you have a choice of two different tiers. Each of the tiers has a different target range of grades. The foundation tier assesses grades G to C and the higher tier assesses grades D to A*. Maths is the only subject that has three tiers – the foundation tier assesses grades G to D, the

intermediate tier assesses grades E to B and the higher tier assesses grades C to A*.

The exams are structured like this to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to show what they are capable of without being thrown off course by questions that are too hard or too easy.

If you have any questions or concerns about which tier you should be entered for, then speak to your teachers. They will be able to give you help and guidance.



life cycle of an examination paper

You've studied for two years, submitted your coursework and are ready to sit your exam. But who writes the exam questions? How do they mark and grade your exam? Here is some information on what happens in the life cycle of an examination paper.

Before the exam day

Five awarding bodies, also known as exam boards, cover England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The exam boards set out what topics you will cover in your course (this is known as a syllabus or specification), write the exam questions, check your coursework and mark all your exam papers.

Your school chooses a syllabus from one of the exam boards for each subject. This means that you could be using different exam boards for different subjects, but the most important thing is that you know what work

you will be covering in your particular syllabus. Your teacher will make sure of this, or you can find it on the relevant exam board website.

Throughout your GCSE, you will complete coursework. When you do your coursework is up to your teachers. They will choose a time that suits your class and fits in with the course you are studying. Coursework marks count towards your final grade, so it is important to take your coursework seriously and do it as well as you can. The best advice is not to leave it until the last minute!



Setting the exam questions

Almost as soon as you begin your GCSE course, examiners are thinking about what questions will be in your final exam papers. Each subject's exam paper takes about 18 months to prepare.



Over 740,000 students take GCSE maths

A principal examiner, appointed by the exam board, writes the exam paper and creates a detailed explanation of how the paper should be marked. At every stage along the way, experts check that:

- ▶ the paper is clear
- ▶ there are no trick questions or nasty surprises
- ▶ the standard is similar to the previous year's paper
- ▶ the paper can be completed in the time allowed.

Special arrangements

The awarding bodies aim to give all students a fair deal. They know that for some students the usual exam arrangements aren't suitable. For example, some students who have a disability or an injury like a broken arm, a learning difficulty such as dyslexia, or who speak English as a second language may need help. If you think the exam

arrangements need to be adjusted for you, speak to your teachers well in advance of the exam. They'll be able to tell you more about the special arrangements offered by the exam board and advise you.

Exam day!

Once the papers have been delivered to schools, it is time for you to put your knowledge, understanding and skills to the test.

If you are ready to sit your exam, but on the day something outside your control affects your performance (such as a family crisis), you may be able to apply for special consideration after the examiners mark your paper. If you think this applies to you, speak to your teacher as soon as possible before or after the exam.

If you are ill on the day of your exam, you must notify your school immediately and they will tell you what to do. You may be able to apply for special consideration, but you must speak to your teachers as soon as possible so that they know that you won't be at the exam and can advise you on what to do next.



After the exam day

Marking the papers

It is compulsory for examiners and senior examiners to attend a meeting to understand exactly how to mark the exam. They mark a number of exam papers so that their marking can be checked to make sure that it is correct.

If the marking is not up to standard, the examiner has further training or is not kept on by the exam board. If this happens, the papers are given to another examiner. Further checks throughout the marking process ensure that you get the marks your work deserves.

After all the exam papers are marked and returned to the exam board, more checks are carried out. Individual exam papers are checked to ensure

that all the questions have been marked and the marks have been added up correctly.

Setting the grades

Once all the marking is complete, an awarding meeting takes place. The awarding meeting is when the exam board decides the number of marks needed for each grade (called setting the grade boundaries) and ensures that the standard is the same as in previous years.

After the awarding meeting, the accountable officer (a very senior person in each exam board) considers the grade boundaries. Usually he or she accepts the grade boundaries. If an accountable officer wishes to change the grade boundaries, there must be sufficient evidence for this decision and the senior examiner has to agree to the change. If the accountable officer

and senior examiner disagree, this must be reported and explained to the regulator. (For more information on what the regulators do, see page 16.)

Results!

This is the day you've been waiting for! You'll be able to go to your school to collect your results or they will be posted to you.

You'll receive your results from each exam board on a separate slip. Each slip will list the subjects you studied and the grade you achieved for each one. If you have taken modular exams then your results slip may have a 'UMS' (Uniform Mark Scale) mark. UMS is the system that exam boards use to combine different modular marks to get your overall GCSE grade. If you would like to know more about the UMS system, then ask your teacher or exam officer for more information.

If you and your teachers aren't happy with your results and feel that something may have been done incorrectly, you can take action. You need to discuss your concerns with your school immediately. Your school can make a request for your paper to be re-marked or have the marks added up again. They can also request your exam papers from the exam board so that you can see how your papers have been marked. But don't expect comments telling you where you went wrong!

If you are still unhappy and think that the exam board didn't follow the correct procedures, then your school can appeal to the exam board. Once all other routes have been followed, your school can take your appeal to the independent Examinations Appeals Board.

What next?

Perhaps you've already decided that after finishing your GCSEs you would like to find a job, apply for an apprenticeship or study for more qualifications. There is a whole range to choose from – AS levels, A levels, NVQs, BTECs, OCR Nationals or other vocational courses. No matter what you have decided to do, GCSEs will be valuable to you in the future.

If you haven't done as well as you'd hoped, don't lose heart – there are lots of options open to you. Check the 'where to go for help' section in this booklet for some ideas on sources of help and advice.



examine the examiner

Ever wondered what examiners are looking for when they mark your paper? We've tracked down an examiner to answer all your burning questions.

» Will I know the examiner who marks my paper?

No. Many examiners are full-time teachers as well, but they are not allowed to have any links to the school for which they mark exam papers. So there is absolutely no chance that you will know the people who eventually mark your exam papers.

» Are examiners there to catch you out?

No, quite the opposite. We are trained to make sure that everyone gets the marks that they deserve.

» Do the exam boards only give out a set number of C grades?

No, there are no set numbers for any grades at GCSE. Students are awarded the grades that they have earned.

» What about handwriting? Mine gets a bit dodgy when I rush ...


We try to read what we can, but if we can't read the answer then that may affect your mark. But you should know that we are after good answers, not long ones.

» Sometimes my spelling isn't very good. Will this matter?

Good spelling, grammar and punctuation will improve your chances of getting a higher grade – some marks depend on them. So, leave yourself some time to read through your paper at the end of the exam to check for any spelling errors.

» What if my paper gets lost?

It's very rare that papers get lost. If your paper does get lost, then the exam board will work very hard to try and find the paper, because they know how much effort and hard work you put into completing it. If they don't manage to locate it, then they have a procedure to follow that is designed to enable you to get the grade you have earned.

A young woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a white school shirt and a dark tie, is smiling broadly while looking down at a notebook. She is holding a green pen in her right hand and appears to be in the middle of writing. The background is slightly blurred, showing what looks like a classroom or study area.

Around 55,000 examiners are needed to mark the 26 million exam scripts and pieces of coursework submitted by students each year

moving on

Study. Apprenticeships. Work. There are many routes available to you after you have finished your GCSEs.

You may have decided that you wish to go on to study A levels or vocational qualifications. If you think that A levels might be the thing for you, then you can find out more in *AS and A levels: the official student guide to the system*, which is available on the QCA website at www.qca.org.uk/alevel/.

You may have decided that the world of work is for you and are now looking for a job. You will find details of organisations that can give you careers advice and guidance in the 'Where to go for help' section of this booklet.

Whichever route you have decided to take, GCSEs will stand you in good stead for your future study or employment.



the next
move



who's who in the GCSE world

Exam boards

There are five exam boards that offer GCSE qualifications:

AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance)
www.aqa.org.uk

CCEA (Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments)
www.ccea.org.uk

Edexcel
www.examzone.co.uk and
www.edexcel.org.uk

OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations)
www.ocr.org.uk

WJEC/CBAC (Welsh Joint Education Committee)
www.wjec.co.uk

Regulatory authorities

There are three regulatory authorities that oversee what exam boards do.

As regulators, it's their job to monitor standards and make sure that GCSEs don't get harder or easier each year, so that you get a fair deal.

In England:
OCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority)
www.qca.org.uk

In Wales:
ACCAC (Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales)
www.accac.org.uk

In Northern Ireland:
CCEA (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments)
www.ccea.org.uk



where to go for help

There is no need to worry on your own. Support and advice are always available, so why not take advantage of them?

Your teachers will be able to give you advice on a whole range of issues, from syllabus information, study tips and revision techniques to subject or career choices.

Lots of organisations offer help and support. Information and advice is available from websites and helplines. These are some of the official ones.

www.connexions.gov.uk
Free advice and counselling for 13- to 19-year-olds on everything from revision tips and how to deal with stress to what different GCSE subjects involve and how to choose which subjects you study. Call their helpline on 080 800 13219 or text 07766 413 219.

www.qca.org.uk
Everything you need to know about qualifications and the exam system; includes an online version of this guide and a guide to the AS and A level system.

www.qca.org.uk/14-19/
Lots of information on different qualifications.

www.dfes.gov.uk/qualifications
Information on qualifications.

www.need2know.co.uk
Information and advice from the Department for Education and Skills on everything from qualifications to jobs, and loads more.

www.learndirect.co.uk
Help in finding the right courses. Call them free on 0800 100 900.

www.apprenticeships.org.uk
All your questions answered about apprenticeships, which allow you to earn while you learn.

www.careerswales.com
Provides lots of information and advice for students in Wales on everything from careers and CVs to the different qualifications available.

www.jcq.org.uk
Visit this site for the special arrangements booklet and the post-results service booklet (this includes information on the exams appeals process).

www.theeab.org.uk
Information about what to do if you are not happy with the outcome of your exam appeal.

And don't forget there are also the exam board websites listed on page 16.