

GCSEs and A-levels: how they are changing

Essential information for parents



Department
for Education

Why are GCSEs and A levels changing?

The new qualifications will:

1. provide a stronger foundation for further study and employment, keeping pace with the demands of universities and employers.
2. support students in developing the knowledge, skills and values they need for life in modern Britain.
3. match the standards of the best education systems in the world.



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GCSEs: the main changes

The new GCSEs will:

- make more demands of students, to help them achieve as much as students in countries with the best education systems.
- be taken by the same range of students who take GCSEs currently, across a range of abilities.
- be awarded in grades from 1 up to 9, with grade 9 being the highest grade.



GCSEs: the main changes

- Where possible students will be assessed by exam, with other forms of assessment only for particular subject skills (e.g. in art and design or physical education).
- All exams will be at the end of a two year course of study.
- In *most* subjects, students will not be grouped in different ability *tiers* for the purposes of assessment – only maths, sciences and languages will have different papers for different groups of students.
- Although students can improve their grades through re-takes, only their first result will count in performance tables.



GCSE reforms timetable

September 2015 (first exams 2017)

- New GCSEs - English language, English literature and mathematics.

September 2016 (first exams 2018)

- New GCSEs – history, science, geography, languages, art and design, citizenship, computer science, dance, drama, music, physical education, food preparation and nutrition, religious studies.

September 2017 (first exams 2019)

- New GCSEs – other subjects which Ofqual decide will be developed as reformed GCSEs.



GCSE reforms timetable

Summer 2016

- Last exams in old GCSEs – English, English language, English literature and mathematics.

November 2016

- Final resit in old GCSEs - English, English language, English literature and mathematics.

Summer 2017

- Last exams in old GCSEs – history, science, geography, languages, art and design, citizenship, computer science, dance, drama, music, physical education, food technology and religious studies.



2015 English and mathematics GCSEs

The new maths GCSE

- More content to study, and more stretching maths at the higher grades.
- Supports a deeper and broader understanding of the subject.

The new English language GCSE

- Robust foundation in reading, and writing good English.
- 20% of marks for spelling, punctuation and grammar.

The new English literature GCSE

- Encourages students to read, write and think critically.
- Range of challenging and substantial whole texts, and unseen texts.



2016 GCSE subject content changes

- **Science:** includes new, up to date content such as the human genome, life cycle analysis and space physics; includes more challenging maths.
- **Geography:** use of maths and statistics; more on UK geography; at least two pieces of fieldwork.
- **History:** more historical periods, over three eras - medieval, early modern and modern – and more on British history.
- **Modern foreign languages :** more demanding, and most exam questions in modern languages will be in the foreign language.



2016 GCSE subject content changes

- **Computer Science:** includes key mathematical principles; the key components of computer systems; and program writing.
- **Music:** more critical appreciation; writing staff notation; chord symbols and analysing unfamiliar music.
- **Art and Design:** more focus on creativity and drawing.
- **Dance:** more critical appreciation.
- **Drama:** more on performance texts and their historical, social and cultural context.



2016 GCSE subject content changes

- **Citizenship:** more focus on knowledge of key citizenship concepts; includes an in-depth investigation.
- **Food Preparation and Nutrition:** replaces existing range of subjects related to food. Strong food science and practical content.
- **Physical Education:** more theoretical content. Students assessed in three activities.
- **Religious Studies:** greater understanding of religion itself, with students assessed on at least two religions.



A levels

Equipping students to progress to success at university and in their careers.

- More involvement from universities in the development of A levels to make sure that students are well prepared for higher education.
- No change to level of demand or grading structure.
- The AS will be separate from the A level, so that the AS marks do not count towards the A level grade.



AS qualifications

- Students taking an AS can be taught in the same lessons as students who are working towards the A level in the same subject but not doing the AS.
- Students can take an AS in an extra subject for breadth, alongside A levels in their main subject choices.
- Students can still complete the AS and use their results to help decide which subjects to continue to A level.
- Universities publish their own admissions statements.



A level reform timetable

September 2015 (first exams 2017)

- English language, English literature, English language and literature, history, biology, chemistry, physics, psychology, art and design, economics, sociology, business, computer science.

September 2016 (first exams 2018)

- Modern foreign languages (French, German and Spanish), ancient languages, geography, dance, drama, music, physical education and religious studies.

September 2017 (first exams 2019)

- Mathematics, further mathematics, design and technology, and other remaining A level subjects.



2015 A levels – key features

- **Mathematical and quantitative content** – strengthened in relevant subjects : science, computing, economics and business.
- **Science** - increased emphasis on practical skills and experiences, including the use of key techniques and apparatus.
- **English literature** - an ‘unseen text’ in the exam, and more in-depth study of a fewer number of texts overall, with three pre-1900 works.
- **English language** – only minor changes.



2016 A levels – key features

- **Modern Foreign Languages** – more critical and analytical thinking, engagement with the culture and literature of foreign countries, and more accurate use of the language in speech and writing.
- **Ancient Languages** – the current A level is fit for purpose, and only very minor changes have been made.
- **Geography** – more emphasis on the knowledge and skills needed for degree-level study, with a better balance between physical and human geography, and fieldwork built-in to the core content.
- **History** - increased breadth, with a new requirement to study topics across a range of 200 years.



2015 A levels – key features

- **Computer science** – a thorough overhaul and updating of content, with more programming and algorithms, and clearer links from key stages 1 to 4.
- **Art and design** – a new emphasis on drawing skills.
- **Economics** - more real world and financial economics.
- **Dance** - more critical evaluation and reflective analysis, with a wider range of styles and contexts.



2016 A levels – key features

- **Drama and theatre:** study of two influential practitioners or companies (increase from one), and more detail on practical skills
- **Music:** builds on GCSE and allows students to specialise in either performing or composing.
- **Physical Education:** includes requirement for theoretical understanding.
- **Religious Studies:** study at least one religion in depth, through three of: the systematic study of religion; textual studies; philosophy of religion; religious ethics.



Web links for more information

- A timetable of the main changes:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/timeline-of-changes-to-gcses-as-and-a-levels>
- Information on the new grading structure:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/grade-descriptors-for-gcses-graded-9-to-1>
- Detail on reformed GCSE subject content :
<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/reforming-qualifications-and-the-curriculum-to-better-prepare-pupils-for-life-after-school/supporting-pages/gcse-reform>



Web links for more information

- The Association of Colleges guidance document on the new A levels and AS qualifications:
<https://www.aoc.co.uk/teaching-and-learning/study-programmes-central/qualifications/and-levels>
- Detail on reformed A level subject content:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/reforming-qualifications-and-the-curriculum-to-better-prepare-pupils-for-life-after-school/supporting-pages/a-and-as-level-reform>
- A list of accredited specifications:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-gcses-as-and-a-levels-accredited-to-be-taught-from-2015>

