



# GCSEs

The official student guide to the system



# GCSEs

- Are you thinking about which GCSE subjects you would like to take?
- Are you about to sit your exams and need some revision tips?
- Have you just got your results and are not sure what to do next?

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 that they are interested in.

Although there are other qualifications out there, like National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and the Diploma, most 15- to 16-year-olds take GCSEs in some subjects.

GCSEs are available in over 50 subjects, from English and maths to economics and health and social care. 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 NVQs, other vocational qualifications, various information and communication technology (ICT) qualifications, or as part of a Diploma.

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

# 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?**

There are some subjects that you have to study until you are 16 – like English, maths, science, ICT, citizenship, religious education (RE) and physical education (PE). You could take 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 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, which 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 carers can also give you help and guidance. Organisations such as Connexions may also be able to offer you advice.

Take a look at some of the websites listed on page 21 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 a number of ways to take GCSE science qualifications:

- ➔ GCSE science, which is worth one GCSE
- ➔ GCSE science plus additional science, which covers all three science subjects and is worth two GCSEs
- ➔ three separate GCSEs: one in biology, one in chemistry and one in physics.



## It's your choice

Choosing your subjects is a big decision, but don't worry – 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 teachers will give you information about exactly which GCSEs are offered at your school and how you can fit together different courses in your timetable.

## One size doesn't fit all

Most GCSE courses lead to one GCSE, although there are GCSE courses that can be worth half, and others that can be worth two GCSEs.

Certain GCSEs, like citizenship studies, are also available in 'short courses', which are half the size of a full 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 subjects like RE and PE, which you have to study

until you are 16. They are available in a range of subjects, including design and technology, geography, history, art and design, and business studies – 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!

Some other GCSEs, including applied art and design, applied business, engineering, and health and social care, have more topics to learn about so it is also possible to study a 'double award' GCSE in these subjects. Your teachers will be able to tell you which GCSEs your school offers.

## Spreading the workload

GCSEs normally take two years to complete. In those two years you may do controlled assessment, which used to be known as coursework, in some subjects. Controlled assessments count towards your final grade and may include projects, fieldwork, artwork, experiments or investigations. You will also have to sit exams.

Many GCSEs are now unitised, which means that the course is split into different units, with an exam at the end of each unit. This means that you can sit exams throughout your course instead of doing lots of exams at the end of your two years of study. Your school will be able to tell you more about which of your GCSEs are examined in this way.



If you take a unit exam and don't do as well as you expected, then you can resit the unit to try to improve your grade. Only your best mark for this unit will count towards your final GCSE grade. Resitting exams is no easy option, and takes a lot of extra time and work, 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 units, because these depend on the GCSE course you are studying.

# Tiers and grades

→ Why are there different tiers that I can enter?

→ What's it all about?



When you take GCSEs you can achieve pass grades from A\* to G. If you don't achieve the minimum pass mark to get a grade G, then a U grade is awarded, which means 'unclassified'.

Different subjects are organised in slightly different ways. In some subjects, such as history, music, and art and design, everybody studying the subject sits exactly the same exam paper. In some subjects, like English, science, most modern foreign languages and maths, you have a choice of two tiers. Each of the tiers has a different target range of grades. If you take the higher tier, you will be able to get an A\*, A, B, C or D grade. If you take the foundation tier, you will be able to get a C, D, E, F or G grade.

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

If you have any questions or worries 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 exam paper

→ You've studied for two years, handed in your controlled assessment 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

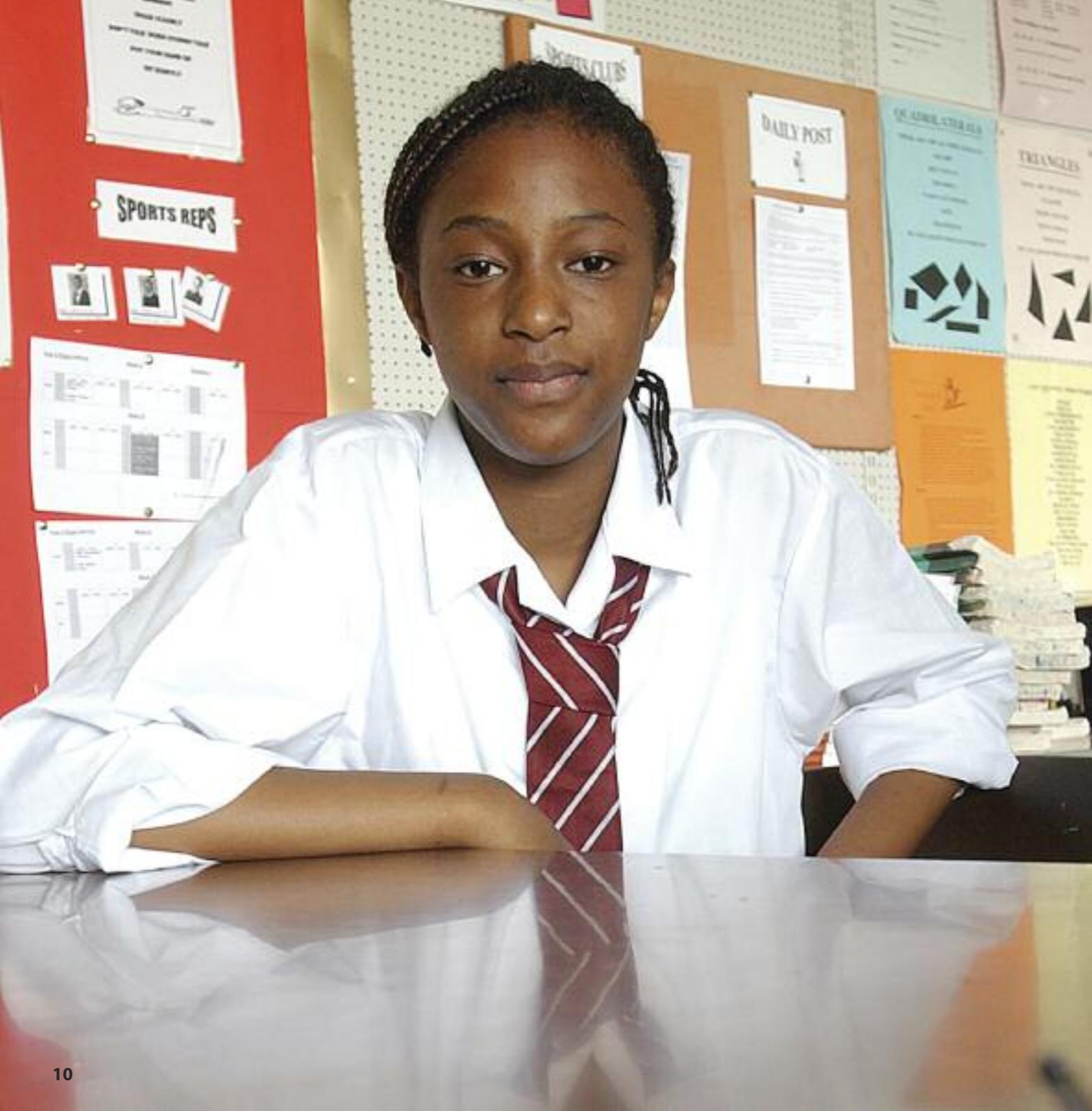
Five exam boards provide GCSEs in England. The exam boards set out what topics you will cover in your course (this is known as a syllabus or specification), write the exam questions, check your coursework and controlled assessments and mark all your exam papers.

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 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 may have to complete controlled assessments. It is up to your teachers when you do your controlled assessments. They will choose a time that suits your class and fits in with the course you are studying. Controlled assessment marks count towards your final grade, so it is important to take it seriously and do it as well as you can.

Almost as soon as you begin your GCSE course, exam boards are thinking about what questions will be in your exam papers.





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

- ➔ the exam papers are clear
- ➔ there are no trick questions or nasty surprises
- ➔ the standard is the same as the previous year's papers
- ➔ the questions can be completed in the time allowed.

#### **Access arrangements**

The exam boards 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 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 access arrangements offered by the exam board and advise you.

## **Exam day!**

Once the exam 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 people who mark exams to attend a training meeting to understand exactly how to mark your papers. 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 allowed to mark any more papers. If this happens, the papers are given to another examiner to mark. Further checks throughout the marking process ensure that you get the marks your work deserves.

After all the exam papers are marked, more checks are carried out. Papers are checked to make sure 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. At the meeting the exam board decides on 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 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 regulator does, see page 19).

### 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 or emailed 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 will have a Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) mark. UMS is the system that exam boards use to combine different unit 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. It 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!

# Moving on

→ **Study.**

→ **Apprenticeships.**

→ **Work.**

**There are many routes available to you after you have finished your GCSEs.**

## 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 of qualifications to choose from – AS levels, A levels, NVQs, the Diploma, BTECs, OCR Nationals or other vocational courses. 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 Ofqual website at [www.ofqual.gov.uk/alevelguide](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/alevelguide).

You may decide 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 decide to take, GCSEs will stand you in good stead for your future study or employment.



**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.**

# Hints and tips from the Exams Doctor

➔ **George Turnbull is Ofqual's Exams Doctor. With many years' experience in the exams system, George has plenty of advice to offer to students studying for their GCSEs.**

## Before the exam – revise and devise

Getting started is the most difficult bit. So get real and use the '10-minute rule' whenever you get stuck.

- ➔ Ditch those four-hour sessions you planned, where only 10 minutes of actual work is done.
- ➔ Start with the 10 minutes you know you will do. Then have a 10-minute break and start again. Anyone can do that!
- ➔ When working, work and when relaxing, relax. The two don't mix.
- ➔ No texting friends, looking out of the window or playing with the cat. And your room can wait for another few years to be tidied!
- ➔ So now you have started, you've doubled the time you normally work in an evening and had a 10-minute break, all within the first half hour.
- ➔ Increase the working periods to 30 or 40 minutes and keep the breaks at 10 minutes or less.

Sorted? Well 'ish' at least. Don't think about it, just do it – now!

Congratulate yourself for having done it. You've made a start.

Whenever you have difficulty in starting something you don't want to do, staring into space won't help – but the '10-minute rule' will.

## Manage your time and plan

Ease in an extra half hour of work a day at least, by getting up earlier or taking less time over lunch. Over five days that will give you a minimum of two-and-a-half hours of quality study time. You could now have an evening out.

Cover two or three subjects in the one session. Start with the one you dislike most and then look forward to finishing with the one you like best.

Try answering some questions from past exam papers. Your teachers will probably be able to provide these, or you can look on the exam board websites.

## In the exam room

Take six deep breaths and have a sugary sweet to boost your energy – but don't crunch!

Choose questions carefully and write notes on the question paper to help you remember later. And make sure you answer the question asked. There'll be no marks if you don't.

If you run out of time, sometimes marks can be gained by completing your remaining answers in outline only. State what you would do and how to do it by outlining the main arguments you would include in an essay – without writing the essay – and by jotting down formulae in science – stating how you would complete the question – without doing the calculations.



## After the exam

Don't worry about the exam you have just taken – you can't do anything about it now. Concentrate instead on the next one, where you can make a difference.

## Don't panic

Being calm and thoughtful will help you to get the most out of your preparation. And if all else fails, remember that Churchill and Einstein didn't do too well at school. Try that one on your parents. Otherwise, good luck.

Find out more information on how the Exams Doctor could help you in the 'Where to go for help' section on page 21.



# Who's who in GCSEs

## Exam boards

There are five exam boards that offer GCSE qualifications:

**AQA**  
[www.aqa.org.uk](http://www.aqa.org.uk)

**CCEA**  
[www.ccea.org.uk](http://www.ccea.org.uk)

**Edexcel**  
[www.edexcel.org.uk](http://www.edexcel.org.uk)

**OCR**  
[www.ocr.org.uk](http://www.ocr.org.uk)

**WJEC**  
[www.wjec.co.uk](http://www.wjec.co.uk)

## The exams regulators

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:**  
Ofqual  
(Office of the Qualifications and Examinations Regulator)  
**[www.ofqual.gov.uk](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk)**

**In Wales:**  
DCELLS  
(Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills)  
**[www.wales.gov.uk](http://www.wales.gov.uk)**

**In Northern Ireland:**  
CCEA  
(Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments)  
**[www.ccea.org.uk](http://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, and information and advice is available from numerous websites and helplines. Here are some of the official ones.**



## [www.ofqual.gov.uk](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk)

Everything you need to know about qualifications and the exam system, including an online version of this guide and a guide to the AS and A level system.

## [www.ofqual.gov.uk/examsdoctor](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/examsdoctor)

The Exams Doctor is on hand to help with all your qualifications and exams questions. George Turnbull has many years' experience in the examination system and can answer queries on A levels and GCSEs, what to do when you get your results, and how to do as well as you can in your exams. Turn to page 14 to read some of his hints and tips about revising and sitting GCSEs.

## [www.connexions.gov.uk](http://www.connexions.gov.uk)

Free advice and counselling for 14- 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 to study. Call the helpline on 080 800 13219 or text 07766 413 219.

## [www.qca.org.uk/14-19/](http://www.qca.org.uk/14-19/)

Lots of information on different qualifications for 14- to 19-year-olds.

## [www.dcsf.gov.uk/qualifications](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/qualifications)

Information on qualifications from the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

## [www.learndirect.co.uk](http://www.learndirect.co.uk)

Help in finding the right courses. Call them free on 0800 101 901.

## [www.apprenticeships.org.uk](http://www.apprenticeships.org.uk)

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

## [www.jcq.org.uk](http://www.jcq.org.uk)

Visit this site for the access arrangements booklet and the post-results service booklet (includes information on the exams appeals process).

## [www.theeab.org.uk](http://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 19.

You can contact us at:

**Office of the Qualifications  
and Examinations Regulator**

Spring Place  
Coventry Business Park  
Herald Avenue  
Coventry CV5 6UB

Switchboard: 0300 303 3344  
*(Lines are open Monday to Friday, 8.00am to 5.30pm)*  
Helpline: 0300 303 3346  
*(Lines are open Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm)*  
Textphone: 0300 303 3345  
Fax: 0300 303 3348  
Email: [info@ofqual.gov.uk](mailto:info@ofqual.gov.uk)  
[www.ofqual.gov.uk](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk)

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