



Learning in England ∞ Choosing GCSEs

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The General Certificate in Secondary Education examination[s] are studied in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, through KS4, when pupils are in Years 10 and 11/fourth and fifth form.

Each GCSE course leads to an academic examination, taken in a school which is an Examination Centre, in a number of subjects, at the end of Year 11/ fifth form.

Examinations are marked by subject specialist teachers, employed by the Examinations Board. They cannot mark the papers of their own pupils. Each GCSE qualification is in a particular subject, and stands alone, but a group of examinations [between 8 and 14] are sat at the age of 16.

The highest mark is 9; and the lowest mark, to pass is 5, [formerly A*-C]

Most schools require pupils to achieve a minimum of 5 examinations at grades 9-5 [A*-C] in order to continue with A Level studies; and to have achieved 9-7 [A*-B] in the actual subjects they chose to study at A Level. Paths to Learning has an Information Document on a Typical Timetable for a KS4 pupil.

“I want to go to university to study Engineering. I will have to do well in Sciences and Maths, so I can go on to do A Levels in the subjects required for Engineering.

I must do English Language and Literature, and a Modern Foreign Language, so I chose German. Then I could choose three Options. Art and Computer Science seemed a good fit with my interests and skills and I love PE. I like doing things I enjoy and was pleased I could give up the things I think I am no good at.”¹

¹ Tom, Year 10 GCSE pupil.

How do we choose which subjects to do for GCSEs?

Pupils attend an evening presentation, at school, with their parents sometime between October and March, during Year 9. They are usually given a booklet with a page of information for each subject setting out details of the subject content and how that content will be assessed. Pupils usually choose the option subjects they are good at and enjoy. They are discouraged from choosing subjects taught by a favourite teacher or with particular friends.

These subjects **must** be offered by every school, following the examination specification: English Language and Literature, Mathematics and Science [Double or Triple which will include Biology, Chemistry and Physics].

Physical Education and Religious Studies must be offered to all pupils, but **need** not be examined.

For timetabling purposes, the other subjects are put into Option Columns. Pupils choose one subject from each column. [Popular subjects may appear in more than one column.]

Schools devise their own Option Columns, but they may look like this:

- a Humanity subject and Physical Education: Geography, History, Religious Studies
- an Art subject: Art, Music, Drama
- a Technology subject: Food, Textiles, Computer Science
- a Language: French, Spanish, German, Latin

When pupils have chosen which subjects are to be done, it is very difficult to change. They may be able to change a subject within a Column, but not after the October half term. It may be important to choose specific subjects which are continued at A Level; and must be done for University entrance.



The time is allocated in the sort of ratio shown below, for each subject through Key Stage 4, in Years 10 and 11, when pupils are aged 14-16.

Subject	Number of hours over two weeks/fortnight. [Five one hour lessons a day = 25 hours per week]	Subject descriptors from the National Curriculum
English	8	Language and Literature
Maths	8	Core curriculum
Science [Double or Triple]	9	Biology, Chemistry and Physics
Physical Education: this is not examined unless chosen as an Option	2	Foundation subject
Religious Studies: this is not examined unless chosen as an Option	3	Basic Curriculum
Option Column A	5	Geography, History, Religious Studies or PE
Option Column B	5	Art , Music, Drama
Option Column C	5	Food, Textiles, Computer Science
Option Column D	5	MFL: French, Spanish, German , Latin
TOTAL	50	

Pupils will usually take between 5 and 12 GCSEs. They will be expected to undertake a significant amount of homework. Some schools are prescriptive and say, for example, the same number of hours are to be spent in private study or homework, as are spent with the teacher. So, if you are spending 5 hours with a teacher on Geography, then it may be expected to do 5 hours homework over each two-week period. Few subjects have Coursework or Projects undertaken by pupils.

Pupils will be assessed in the public examinations, at their school, in May and June, at the end of the second year of their studies, in Year 11. The Examination Boards, AQA, EdExcel, Eduqas, OCR and the WJEC, who set the papers will arrange for them to be marked. The top grade is a 9. A *strong* pass grade is between 5 and 9, while a *standard* pass grade is a 4.

Pupils can do re-sits in Maths and English in November and other subjects the following June. Results usually come out on the third Thursday of August.

Q

My daughter wanted to do French, but after half a term she finds she can't get on with the teacher. What should we do?

A

Is she doing well in the subject? If so, then keep going!

If not, then talk to the Head of the Department and see if there is anything the teacher can do differently. If problems persist, then private tuition may help to get her through. After half a term, the school is unlikely to be willing to make any changes.