

What are AS and A-Levels?

[AS and A-Levels](#) are the next stage of learning after GCSEs. They're studied over one or two years and can open doors - to further education and to future career. Colleges of further education have taken on the role previously occupied by secondary schools.

A-Levels (Advanced Levels) are the next big exams after GCSEs. How well students do in their A-Levels determines their educational future, with degree courses and future careers depending on them. But what exactly do A-Levels entail, and what about AS-Levels? This guide will tell you everything you need to know about both of these qualifications.

What is KS5?

Children and young people's education is divided into key stages. Key Stages 1 and 2 are taught in primary schools and Key Stages 3 and 4 in secondary schools. Key Stage 5, or KS5, is taught in Years 12 and 13 to students aged 16 to 18. In the past, almost all secondary schools had 'sixth-forms' which catered for KS5 students. Nowadays sixth forms are less common and colleges of further education have taken on their role.

Colleges of further education offer a variety of courses, many of them resulting in vocational qualifications, such as:

- BTEC - Business and Technology Education Council qualification in vocational subjects like childcare or business studies. There are 7 levels, with levels 1-2 being the equivalent of a GCSE and levels 6-7 equal to a university degree
- HNC/HND - Higher National Certificate and Higher National Diploma. The HNC is roughly equivalent to one year of university education and the HND to two years. Subjects are as varied as archaeology and interior design
- RQF - Regulated Qualifications Framework. This took the place of NVQ (National Vocational Qualifications) in 2015. The RQF has 9 levels, starting at Entry Level and going up to Level 8 - the equivalent of a PHD

BTECs, HNC/HNDs, RQFs and other vocational qualifications are aimed primarily at practical subjects. AS and A-Levels are considered more academic and it is these that this guide will focus on.

Why Should Students Do A-Levels?

Once GCSEs are over with, what comes next? There are a few options for further education - apprenticeships, for those who want to learn whilst working; vocational qualifications for a mix of hands-on and academic education; or the third pathway - A-Levels. For students who enjoy school, A-Levels are probably the best option - so long as they have the required grades in GCSE.

A-Levels are the first step to many different careers and a gateway to university. Many universities insist that potential students have taken A-Levels if they want to enrol on certain courses - medicine or veterinary science for example.

Even for those who don't plan on going to university or who have not yet decided on a career, A-Levels are still a good option. They are valued by employers and buy 16-year-olds time in which to decide what to do after they've left college.

My advice - if you know exactly what career you want to pursue, find out what qualifications are needed. If it's a practical subject, then vocational qualifications could be the best option. If you will need a degree then find out which A-Levels (or other qualifications) you need in order to enrol. If you don't know what job you want, then I'd recommend choosing a mix of A-Level subjects - and, most importantly, make them ones you'll enjoy.

What GCSE Grades Do I Need To Take A-Levels?

In order to take A-Levels you need to meet the course's entry criteria. These vary between colleges but, in all cases, they depend on your GCSE results. These are the only clue to how well you'll do in A-Levels, so colleges look closely at them. Some will accept 4 subjects at grade 4 (C), whilst the most selective insist on 6 subjects at grade 7 or higher (A-A*).

So, how well you did in your GCSEs affects which college you can go to and may prevent you from taking A-Levels at all. But what can you do if you haven't come up to scratch? Well, resits may be possible. You can study GCSEs at college, although this may delay your A-Level studies by a year. If you only just missed out on the results you wanted then this would be worthwhile. However, if you fell short by a long way then a vocational qualification would probably be a better option.

What Subjects Can I Do A-Levels In?

There are a vast array of subjects which can be studied at A-Level. Colleges will list the ones they teach in their prospectuses but, to give you a general idea of what's available, here's a list of the most common:

- Accounting
- Ancient History
- Archaeology
- Art and Design
- Biology
- Business Studies
- Chemistry
- Communication Studies
- Computing
- Critical Thinking
- D&T - Food Technology
- D&T - Product Design
- D&T - Systems and Control
- Drama and Theatre Studies
- Economics
- Electronics
- English Language
- English Language and Literature

- English Literature
- Environmental Science
- Foreign languages (many subjects, from Arabic to Urdu)
- General Studies
- Geography
- Geology
- Government and Politics
- Graphic Design
- Health and Social Care
- History
- History of Art
- Home Economics
- Human Biology
- ICT
- Law
- Mathematics
- Marine Science
- Media Studies
- Music
- Music Technology
- Performing Arts
- Philosophy
- Photography
- Physics
- Religious Studies
- Sociology
- Sport and Physical Education
- Textiles
- Three-Dimensional Design

In addition, there are a few subjects which can be studied at AS-Level (Advanced Subsidiary) but not A-Level. Here are some examples:

- European Studies
- Science for Public Understanding
- Citizenship
- Use of Mathematics
- American History

Certain, more practical subjects, such as business, travel and tourism, or health and social care, can be studied as Applied A-Levels. These are similar to vocational qualifications in that they are a mixture of academic and hands-on learning.

How Can I Choose My A-Level Subjects?

Deciding which A-Levels to take is a big decision which can have a great influence on your future. The first thing to decide is how many you will take. Most universities require you to have a

minimum of three A-Levels and some want more. Be aware though that A-Levels are a lot harder than GCSEs, so don't overstretch yourself.

The next decision is which combination of subjects to pick. If you already know which degree you want to study then choose the A-Levels you'll need to enrol on that course. If you don't know, then choose a combination which varies in content – economics and business studies overlap a good deal so are not a good choice to take together. Some subjects complement each other so make for a good mixture - biology and chemistry, for example, or physics and maths.

It has to be said that some A-Level subjects, like critical thinking or general studies, are frowned upon by certain universities. However, good grades in virtually any A-Level subjects should be enough to get you admitted to the less selective ones. If there is a subject you really enjoy, even though it's not relevant to your chosen career, I would recommend studying it at A-Level, unless of course, it means you can't study other subjects you need.

What Are AS-Levels?

Prior to 2015, A-Level courses were split into two parts - the first year was called AS-Level (and this was a qualification in itself) and the second year (A2) completed the course. However, reforms have been made which mean that AS-Levels are now standalone courses studied over one year. Students can opt to take an AS-Level alongside their A-Levels.

How Are A-Levels Assessed?

A-Levels used to be modular courses - that meant that coursework was assessed and exams taken halfway through the course, as well as at its end. However, in an attempt to make A-Levels harder, they have been changed from modular to linear.

As linear courses, A-Levels are now mainly assessed through exams taken in June at the end of the two year course. The amount of coursework that counts towards the final grade has been reduced drastically and is only included skills essential to the course are to be assessed.

There are 6 pass grades given for A-Levels:

- A* – The highest mark, achieved by about 8% of students
- A – A high pass. Approximately 26% of candidates achieve an A* or A
- B – A good pass. Just over half of A-Level students scored a B or higher in 2017
- C – Considered a decent pass. Almost 80% of students get Cs or higher
- D – A poor pass. 15% of candidates are awarded Ds
- E – The lowest pass grade, given to an average of 6% of students each year
- U – Ungraded. About 2% of A-Levels receive this mark

Despite the recent government reforms, the number of students receiving each grade has remained consistent with previous years.

What A-level Grades Do I Need For University?

The grades you get in your A-Levels affect which universities will accept you. Each university is different and some are more selective than others. Generally, the better your grades, the better your choice of university.

One way to see where your grades will get you is to check out the UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) points system (also called the UCAS Tariff). This gives each grade a numerical value and about a third of universities use this system to evaluate their applicants. Even if the university you want to go to doesn't use UCAS points, you can still use them to get a rough idea of how valuable your grades are.

Here's how many UCAS points AS and A-Level grades are worth:

AS-Level Grade	A-Level Grade	UCAS Points
-	A*	56
-	A	48
-	B	40
-	C	32
-	D	24
A	-	20
B	E	16
C	-	12
D	-	10
E	-	6

The number of UCAS points required for different courses at different universities varies wildly. Just 32 points may be enough for some courses but 144 are required for others, so be sure to check exactly how many points you need.

What Are The Options After A-Levels?

So, you've had your A-Level results - now, what can you do with them? The grades you got will affect your options but, so long as you passed, there are several possibilities:

- Higher education – For most 18-year-olds, university is the next step after A-Levels. The higher your grades, the better your choice of university. But even armed with two E grades, there should be opportunities available
- Work – A-Levels are highly regarded by employers so getting a job is something you might consider. However, the higher your level of qualifications, the better it is for your career. While having A-Levels will improve your prospects, those with degrees will most likely fare better on the career ladder
- Work and study – Some employers will let you study for a degree while you work and may even pay for this or other training. Degree apprenticeships, higher apprenticeships or advanced apprenticeships are all worth considering if the cost of university education is putting you off

- Part time study – If you can't find an employer who is willing to pay for your education, then evening classes might be worth considering. You can work during the day to earn money, and then study at your local college or with the Open University. Part time courses will take longer to complete but they do bring the desired qualifications eventually
- Gap year – If you fancy a break from formal learning then you could take a year out. Gap years need not be a blot on your CV – you can use them to gain experience, perhaps by doing some volunteer work. Universities will not discriminate against students who've taken a gap year, although what you do during this time may have positive or negative effects, so consider how you spend your year away from education carefully

So, what are AS and A-Levels? They're the next stage of learning after GCSEs. They're studied over one or two years and can open many doors to further education - and in your choice of future career. I hope that the information in this guide will help you decide whether A-Levels are right for you. Whatever pathway you want to pursue - good luck!