

What are GCSEs?

[GCSE](#) stands for General Certificate of Secondary Education. It's the part of the National Curriculum taught to pupils aged 14 to 16 in years 10 and 11. It also includes exams, the results of which have a significant bearing on a child's future career.

GCSE - four letters that strike terror into the hearts of teenagers up and down the land! But what exactly are GCSEs? Well, in a nutshell, GCSEs are the exams children have to take at the end of Key Stage 4.

What is Key Stage 4 (KS4)?

Education is divided into 4 key stages. The last of these, Key Stage 4 (KS4), is taught to children in Years 10 and 11 at secondary school, when they are 14 to 16 years old. The courses studied in KS4 are GCSE and the all-important GCSE exams are held at the end of Year 11.

What does GCSE stand for?

The initials GCSE stand for General Certificate of Secondary Education. It's a replacement for the old O (Ordinary) Levels and CSEs (Certificate of Secondary Education) many of us had to take when we were children, long, long ago. GCSEs were first taught in 1986 and the first GCSE exams took place in 1988.

Which subjects are compulsory in GCSEs?

There is some freedom regarding which subjects are studied at GCSE level. Three core subjects, English, maths and science, are compulsory along with citizenship and PE (although there are no exams in the latter two). All other subjects taken at GCSE are optional.

What are 'entitlement areas'?

As well as the five compulsory subjects, schools must also provide access to a minimum of one course in each of four 'entitlement areas'. They must also make it possible for pupils to take one course in all four of these if they wish to do so. The four entitlement areas are:

- The arts (art and design, music, dance, drama and media arts)
- Design and technology (electronics, food technology, graphics, resistant materials, systems and control, textiles and product design)
- The humanities (geography and history)
- Modern foreign language (French, German, Spanish etc.)

Optional subjects for KS4 vary between schools. Some subjects may be restricted and others (particular languages, like German for example) may not be offered at all.

How many GCSEs must children take?

Each school determines the number of GCSEs its pupils can take, which could be as many as 12 or as few as 7. Aside from the obligatory maths, science and English, pupils select their remaining

GCSE options in Year 9. What they choose will have bearings on their future so encourage your child to pick subjects needed for any chosen career as well as ones that interest them and ones they are good at.

English, maths and science are subjects that children must take at GCSE level.

How are GCSEs graded?

In the past GCSE students were given marks between A* (the highest) and G (the lowest). Scores below a G were marked as U for 'ungraded'. However, things have changed. Grades now range from 9 (highest) to 1 (lowest). Here's how the new grades compare to the old:

- Grade 9 – The top mark is even higher than the old A*
- Grade 8 – Below an A* but above an A
- Grade 7 – Slightly below an A but only just
- Grade 6 – Slightly better than a B
- Grade 5 – Below a B but above a C. Also called a 'strong pass'
- Grade 4 – Equivalent of a C. Also called a 'standard pass'
- Grade 3 – Below a D but above an E
- Grade 2 – Between an E and an F
- Grade 1 – Between an F and a G
- Ungraded - The lowest mark possible. As in the old system, a U denotes a fail

Why was the GCSE grading system changed?

The new GCSE grading system was introduced to differentiate between the very highest performing children. Along with the change in marking, some of the questions have changed too and are now a little more challenging. The aim is to find the very brightest pupils. In 2017 only 3% of students managed to score the much sought-after Grade 9.

How important are GCSEs?

GCSEs are the most important exams students take before college or university. The results have a huge effect on pupils' futures. Many college courses require a minimum of 5 GCSEs at grade 4 or above (C or more in the old grading system) and some demand five grade 6s (A or A*).

Some college courses only accept students with grade 6 or more (A or A*) in that subject for GCSE and universities often require a minimum of grade 4 (C or above) in English, maths and at least one science before they will accept you for any course.

How well students do in their GCSEs is the only real indication colleges have of potential students' abilities. So, with further education and career in mind, GCSEs may well be the most important exams of all.

How long is a GCSE course?

GCSE exams come after two-year courses of study during which pupils will be taught everything they need to know for their exams. And it's not all necessarily about exams - in many subjects, students' coursework is assessed as part of their GCSE results.

Which GCSE subjects include coursework as part of the final grade?

In practical subjects, like art, design and technology, or music, 60% of a student's GCSE grade will be marked on their coursework. The English Literature result is also partly assessed with 40% of the final mark being based on work done in class or at home.

GCSEs are important exams and vital for those wishing to go into further education.