

New GCSE Reform - A Parent's Guide

1. Introduction

As you are probably aware the government has introduced radical new changes to the structure and assessment of GCSEs. We have moved away from the familiar system of A*-G grades to a system of grading with numbers 9-, with 9 being the highest grade.

There will be new, more demanding content, which has been developed by government and the exam boards.

In addition to the changes to the structure of GCSEs, the government is also raising a 'good pass' from a C to a new grade 5, where a 5 represents the top third of a C and the bottom third of a B.

New GCSE content will be more challenging. This is to align the UK with the best education systems in the world.

From September 2015 new reformed GCSEs will be taught in English language, English literature and maths, with the first results issued in August 2017. Further subjects will see new GCSEs introduced over the following two years. During this transition, students will receive a mixture of letter and number grades.

2. New GCSE Grading Scheme - Key Points

- A new grading scale of 9 to 1 will be used, with 9 being the top grade. Fewer grade 9s will be awarded than A*s. This will allow greater differentiation between students.
- Assessment will be mainly by exam, with other types of assessment used only where they are needed to test essential skills.
- Courses will be designed for two years of study - they will no longer be divided into different modules and students will take all their exams in one period at the end of their course.
- Exams can only be split into 'foundation tier' and 'higher tier' if one exam paper does not give all students the opportunity to show their knowledge and abilities
- Resit opportunities will only be available each November in English Language and Maths

- The new 9-1 grading system will mean that it will be clear to employers and colleges or universities whether students have taken the unreformed GCSEs or the reformed, more challenging ones.
- The new grade scale will not be directly equivalent to the existing one, and in the first year the following points can be made:
 - broadly the same proportion of students will achieve a grade 4 and above as currently achieve a grade C and above
 - broadly the same proportion of students will achieve a grade 7 and above as currently achieve an A and above
 - for each exam, the top 20 per cent of those who get grade 7 or above will get a grade 9 - the very highest performers
 - the bottom of grade 1 will be aligned with the bottom of grade G
 - grade 5 will be positioned in the top third of the marks for a current grade C and bottom third of the marks for a current grade B. This will mean it will be of greater demand than the present grade C, and broadly in line with what the best available evidence tells us is the average PISA* performance in countries such as Finland, Canada, the Netherlands and Switzerland
 - the new maths GCSE will be tiered, with grades 4 and 5 available through both tiers

* The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a triennial international survey which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students

		GCSE Grade	Numerical equivalent(approx.)	
	TOP	A*	9	
	MIDDLE	A*	9	
	LOW	A*	8	
	TOP	A	8	
	MIDDLE	A	7	
	LOW	A	7	
	TOP	B	6	
	MIDDLE	B	6	
	LOW	B	5	Higher
	TOP	C	5	
	MIDDLE	C	4	Foundation
	LOW	C	4	
	TOP	D	4	
	MIDDLE	D	3	
	LOW	D	3	
	TOP	E	2	

	MIDDLE	E	2	
	LOW	E	2	
	TOP	F	2	
	MIDDLE	F	1	
	LOW	F	1	
	TOP	G	1	
	MIDDLE	G	1	
	LOW	G	1	

3. What are the changes for each subject?

The English language GCSE will require better reading skills and good written English

The English literature GCSE will encourage students to read, write and think critically; it will assess students on challenging and substantial whole texts and on shorter unseen texts

The mathematics GCSE will provide greater coverage of areas such as ratio, proportion and rates of change; it will require all students to master the basics, and will be more challenging for those aiming to achieve top grades

Science GCSEs will cover new content, including the human genome, life cycle analysis and space physics, and they will be more mathematically challenging

The history GCSE will require students to study more historical periods; it will cover three eras - medieval, early modern and modern - and will concentrate more on British history

The geography GCSE will require students to use maths and statistics, and will concentrate more on UK geography; it will also require students to carry out at least two pieces of fieldwork

Languages GCSEs will be more demanding and most exam questions in modern languages will be asked in the respective foreign language

The Art and Design GCSE will emphasise creativity and drawing; the DfE will remove the concept of 'endorsed' and 'unendorsed' courses and replace it with a series of separate art and design titles

The Computer Science GCSE will require students to understand mathematical principles and concepts such as data representation, Boolean logic and different data types; students will also have to understand the components of computer systems, and write and refine programs

The Music GCSE will require students to read and write staff notation, understand chord symbols and analyse unfamiliar music

The physical education (PE) GCSE will emphasise the use of data to evaluate physical activity; students will be assessed in 3 different activities, including at least one team sport

The food preparation and nutrition GCSE will teach students about the scientific and nutritional properties of ingredients - this knowledge will help them prepare and cook healthy meals