



# A levels

The official student guide to the system



# A levels

- ➔ **Are you thinking about studying for A levels?**
- ➔ **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.**

A level stands for Advanced Level. A levels are usually sat by 16- 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.

A levels are available in over 45 subjects, from English and maths to psychology and business studies. You can study A levels as part of a Diploma or alongside other qualifications such as an extended project, NVQs or other vocational qualifications.

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



# The low-down on A levels

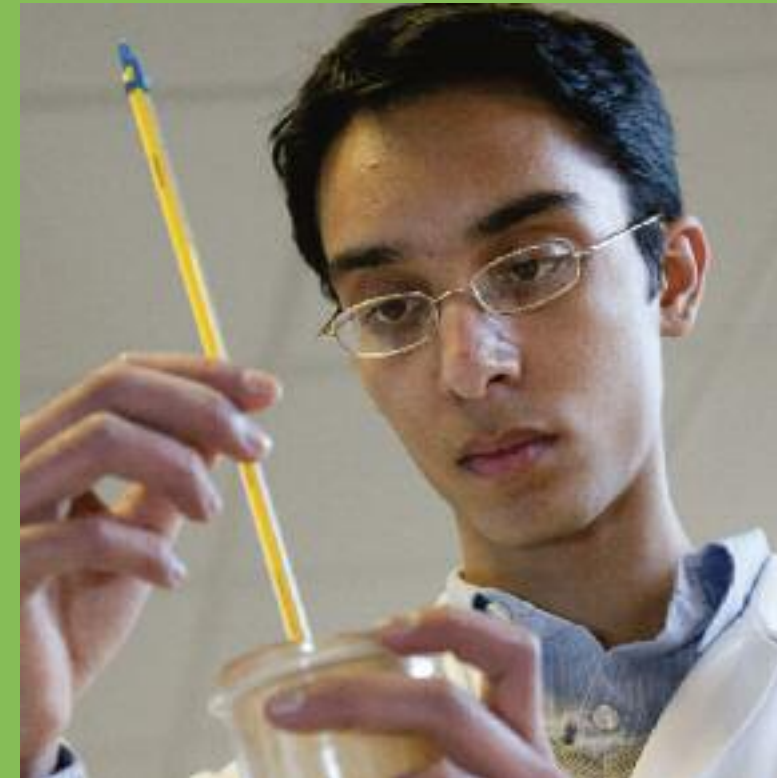
## It's your choice

An A level is made up of AS (advanced subsidiary) and A2 units. An AS level is half the size of a full A level. In your first year (usually year 12), you can normally choose to study up to four A level subjects and sit AS level exams. At the end of your first year you have two options for each subject. You can:

- ➔ take an AS level only and gain a recognised qualification
- ➔ continue for a second year studying the A2 units and go for the full A level.

Either way, the good news is that:

- ➔ AS levels allow you to mix a number of subjects – and you can keep your options open a bit longer
- ➔ if you're worried about your future after the first year – maybe you want a job or a year out, you can't face more exams or you think a different type of qualification is the way forward for you – you have something to show for your work, rather than feeling you've wasted a year
- ➔ if you stay on into your second year, you have control over the subjects you study – you can pay more attention to the subjects that you enjoy and need for the future.



**If you started your A levels in 2008 or after, you will have the opportunity to get an A\* grade for your final A level result. These are designed to reward exceptional performance. A\* grades are not awarded for AS levels. More information about this can be found in the 'How do marks become grades?' section on page 12.**

# Who's who in A levels?

- Five awarding bodies, better known as exam boards, offer A levels in England.
- Your school, college or sixth-form centre chooses a syllabus from one of the exam boards for each subject.



## 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 A levels 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)**

## Exam boards

### AQA

(Assessment and Qualifications Alliance)  
**[www.aqa.org.uk](http://www.aqa.org.uk)**

### CCEA

(Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments)  
**[www.ccea.org.uk](http://www.ccea.org.uk)**

### Edexcel

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

### OCR

(Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations)  
**[www.ocr.org.uk](http://www.ocr.org.uk)**

### WJEC

(Welsh Joint Education Committee)  
**[www.wjec.co.uk](http://www.wjec.co.uk)**



# Life cycle of an exam paper

- ➔ **Each year thousands of students, with the support of their teachers, work hard towards their AS and A level qualifications.**
- ➔ **The exam boards and Ofqual take great care to ensure that high standards are maintained from year to year so that students get a fair deal and the grades they deserve.**
- ➔ **So, what happens when?**

## Before the exam day

### The syllabus

AS and A levels, like other qualifications, have clear guidelines (known as criteria) that define how the qualification should be set up, what students need to learn and what skills they need to develop. Exam boards must make sure that the syllabus they design for each subject meets the rules set by the regulators. The syllabus must be approved by the regulators before schools and colleges can offer it to their students.

### Setting the questions

Almost as soon as you begin your A level course, examiners are thinking about what questions will be in your exam papers. A principal examiner, appointed by the awarding body, writes the exam papers and creates detailed explanations of how the papers should be marked. These are passed to a reviser, then to an evaluation committee, and finally to an assessor.

At every stage along the way, experts check that the papers are clear, that there are no trick questions or nasty surprises, that they are of the same standard as the previous year's papers, and that they can be completed in the time allowed.



### Access arrangements

For some students, the exam arrangements may not be suitable. For example, some students who have a disability, a learning difficulty or English as a second language may need help. If you don't think the exam arrangements are suitable for you, speak to your teachers. They'll be able to tell you more about access arrangements and advise you.

## Exam day!

Once the papers have been delivered to schools, it's time for you to put your knowledge, understanding and skills to the test.

If you are ready to sit an exam, but on the day something outside your control affects your performance, such as a recent illness or the death of someone close to you, you may be able to ask for special consideration after the examiners have marked your paper. If you think this applies to you, speak to your teacher as soon as possible after the exam.

### Sticking to the rules

It is important that all students get a fair deal and get the results their work deserves. Because of this, the exam boards have clear penalties for those who cheat. This ensures that no one has an unfair advantage. These penalties range from losing marks to being disqualified from the whole qualification.

If you are unclear about what you can and can't do in exams, speak to one of your teachers.

## After the exam day

### Marking the papers

It is compulsory for examiners who mark the exam papers and senior examiners who check the marking process to be trained, so they know exactly how to mark each question. To do this, all examiners have to attend what is known as a 'standardisation meeting'. At this meeting, they are also required to mark a number of exam papers, so that their marking can be checked for accuracy and consistency.

After the standardisation meeting, examiners mark another set of exam papers. These are also checked. If the marking is not up to standard, the examiner undergoes further training or is not allowed to mark any more papers. If this happens, the papers are given to another examiner. Further checks throughout the marking process ensure that your work gets the grade it deserves. Examiners are not allowed to have any connection with the school, college or students whose exam papers they are marking.

### Setting the grades

Once all the marking is complete, an 'awarding meeting' takes place. This is when the marks needed for each grade are decided, which is known as 'setting the grade boundaries'. This is also when awarding bodies ensure that standards have been and will be maintained. Guidelines set by the



regulators are carefully followed when making each decision. Exam papers from previous years and papers from the current year, as well as expert judgement and technical and statistical information, are used to judge where the grade boundaries should be set.

If you want to find out more about how A level marks relate to grades, see the 'How do marks become grades?' section on page 12.

## Results

This is the day you've been waiting for!

UCAS and the universities get the results a few days before schools. This gives them enough time to make arrangements for those who are able to take up offers of a place at university. Perhaps you've decided that after finishing your A levels you would like to find a job or travel. If you've decided that university is not for you, then having A level qualifications will be an advantage in your future career. They are highly valued by employers.

### What next?

If you and your teachers aren't happy with your results and feel that something may have been done incorrectly, don't worry – you can take action. You need to contact your school or college immediately. It can request your exam papers from the awarding body so that you can see how your papers have been marked. But don't expect comments telling you where you went wrong! Your school or college can also ask for the marking to be checked or for the marks to be added up again. If you are still unhappy and think that the awarding body hasn't followed the correct procedures, then your school or college can appeal to the awarding body. Once all other routes have been exhausted, your school or college can take your appeal to Ofqual or to the independent Examinations Appeals Board.

## Resits

It is possible to resit each AS and A2 unit, but it is worth remembering that not all units are available to take in January. If you decide to resit a unit, the awarding body will automatically use the highest mark from all your attempts to count towards your final grade. Resitting units takes time away from studying and preparing for assessments in other units, so it is no easy option!

### Cashing in

'Cashing in' is the process of turning your unit marks into final AS or A level grades by letting the exam board know that you are happy with your results. If you applied to cash in when you entered the exam and you are happy with your results, you don't need to do anything at all, as you will receive your certificate for that grade. If you are happy with your results but didn't apply to cash in when you entered the exam, don't worry – you can still cash in. September is when you normally need to apply to cash in, but speak to your teacher to find out the exact deadline. If you aren't happy with your results and you applied to cash in when you entered the exam, you can try to improve your grade by resitting one or more units and reapplying to cash in. The new grade will be based on the best results for the individual units.

If you are unsure about what to do, speak to your teachers – they will be able to help you.

# 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 A levels.**

## 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 find out more' section on page 16.



# How do marks become grades?



## Uniform Mark Scale and unit grades

Some A levels contain four units and others contain six units. Ofqual makes sure that all A levels are of the same standard, regardless of the number of units they contain. The number of units that make up your A levels will depend on the subjects that you chose to study. Your teachers will be able to tell you more about the make-up of your courses.

Each exam paper is unique and so the difficulty of the exam may vary slightly from year to year. Senior examiners in each subject judge the difficulty of each paper by looking at a sample of candidates' work and exam papers from the current year and from previous years, examiners' reports and statistical data.

They then use their professional judgement to decide on the grade boundaries for each paper, using what are called 'raw marks'. To make it possible to add all the unit marks together to get the final grade, your raw marks are converted onto something called the uniform mark scale (UMS).

## What is the UMS?

On the UMS, the range of marks for a particular grade is always the same (unlike the range of raw marks for each grade). The raw mark grade boundaries are converted into fixed points on the UMS. The range covered by the UMS varies between units. For a unit with a mark out of 100, the ranges of UMS marks for each grade are: **E: 40–49; D: 50–59; C: 60–69; B: 70–79; A: 80–100.**

For example, if the examiners decided that a raw mark of 90 out of 120 for a certain exam was the lowest mark needed for an A grade, then that 90 raw mark would become 80 when converted into the UMS mark out of 100. If your raw mark lies between the A and B grade boundaries, the proportion of marks you get within the range for that grade is calculated.

If the raw mark needed for a B this year was between 80 and 90 and you got 85 marks, you are halfway up that range. Your UMS mark is then halfway up the 70–80 UMS range, which gives 75 marks. (The score conversion diagram might make this clearer.) The UMS marks for individual units are then added together to give an overall UMS mark for the subject as a whole.

## Achieving an A\*

If you started your first year of a two-year A level course in 2008 or later, you will have the opportunity to get an A\* grade for your final A level result. A\* grades are not awarded for AS levels.

	Raw mark		UMS mark
Full marks	120	→	100
A grade	90	→	80
Your mark	85	→	75
B grade	80	→	70

Overall AS grade boundaries (marks out of 200) are:	
Grade A:	160 marks
Grade B:	140 marks
Grade C:	120 marks
Grade D:	100 marks
Grade E:	80 marks

Overall A level grade boundaries (marks out of 400) are:	
Grade A:	320 marks
Grade B:	280 marks
Grade C:	240 marks
Grade D:	200 marks
Grade E:	160 marks

An A\* will be awarded to students who achieve a grade A overall at A level and also achieve 90 per cent or more on the UMS across their A2 units.





## You've got your results. What next?

➔ **If you have been successful in your application to university, you will have accepted an offer on either a 'conditional' or an 'unconditional' basis. If you have offers, your next step depends upon your position in UCAS.**

You can follow the progress of your application on the UCAS website [www.ucas.com](http://www.ucas.com) through Track. You'll need your personal ID and the same username and password you used to complete your application in the 'Apply' section.

If you've forgotten your personal ID or password, the UCAS customer service unit will be able to give you the details. The website will be available on results day.

If you have conditional offers, check your results. If you meet the conditions of the offer, you are guaranteed a place. You need do nothing more. Your

university or college will automatically confirm your place. UCAS will send you a confirmation letter with a reply slip. You need to follow the instructions on the reply slip in order to confirm your place.

If you do not meet the conditions of the offer, your university or college may still accept you. Check your position on Track. If you have been accepted, you do not need to do anything. Wait for a letter from UCAS. However, if you have been turned down, you automatically become eligible for Clearing. If there is no decision, it could be worth ringing your university or college.

If you do not have offers (or fail to meet the conditions of your offers) you automatically become eligible for Clearing. You can get your Clearing entry number on Track. You can search for course vacancies in *The Independent* and *The Scotsman* newspapers and on the UCAS website. You need to telephone universities or colleges direct to try to gain a place, which will then be ratified through the Clearing process. From mid-July, if you are eligible for Clearing an 'Add Clearing Choice' link will be available on Track. If you have been made an offer that you want to accept, click on the link and enter the details for your Clearing choice.

For information on the Clearing process, go to [www.ucas.com](http://www.ucas.com). Students can also call UCAS on 0871 468 0 468 to discuss their application or get advice on Clearing. If you have hearing difficulties, you can call RNID Tynetalk Service on 18001 0870 11 22211 from within the UK or on +44 151494 1260 from outside the UK. (Information supplied by UCAS.)

# Where to go for help

**There is no need to deal with worries on your own. Support and advice are always available.**

→ **Teachers will be able to give you advice on a whole range of issues, from revision techniques to career or university choices.**

→ **Organisations are also able to offer help and support:**



## [\*\*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 and revision questions. George Turnbull has many years' experience of the examination system and can answer queries on A levels, GCSEs and other qualifications, what to do when you get your results, and how to get the best from them.

## [\*\*www.aimhigher.ac.uk\*\*](http://www.aimhigher.ac.uk)

Lots of information on university life and careers.

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

Free advice and counselling for 13- to 19-year-olds on everything from revision tips and how to deal with stress to what different A level subjects involve and how to choose which subjects you study. Call their 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.need2know.co.uk\*\*](http://www.need2know.co.uk)

Information and advice on everything from qualifications to jobs and much more.

## [\*\*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 (this 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 5.





You can contact us at:

**Office of the Qualifications  
and Examinations Regulator**

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Herald Avenue  
Coventry CV5 6UB

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