



What the new GCSEs mean

A guide for parents and carers

About this guide

This year, year 11s sitting GCSEs in the summer term 2017 were the first group to sit the new GCSEs in English language, English literature, and maths. This guide is intended to help make sense of the changes for these students' parents, carers and families.

We are SSAT, the Schools, Students and Teachers network, and your child's school is a member of our network. We exist to help improve outcomes for all young people. As a membership organisation of schools and academies across the UK and internationally, we work with leaders, teachers and students to drive school improvement and innovation, and celebrate their successes. We believe in a truly school-led system, with schools working in partnership across and beyond the education sector.

What were the changes?

In 2013, the government announced that it was making major changes to the national curriculum, primary school SATs, GCSEs and AS and A-levels; as well as changes to the way that schools are measured and judged.

This year's year 11 were the first group to sit any of the new GCSEs, studying for the new qualifications in English literature, English language and maths – but sat old GCSEs in all other subjects.

The main three changes to the new GCSEs are:

- 'harder' and more rigorous content, in line with the best education systems globally
- a change of grading scale from A*-G to 9-1 (with 9 the highest)
- less coursework, controlled assessment and modular (mid-course) exams, with more focus on end-of-course exams.

What does this mean?

This year, students will receive a number grade from 9-1 in English language, English literature and maths; and a letter grade for all other subjects. This is the same across the country, and all year 11 students will receive the same mixed set of results. This change is the same across all exam boards.

The new GCSEs cannot be easily compared to the old ones – while we're able to draw some broad comparisons between the old and new grading systems, the new GCSEs are fundamentally different qualifications.

The government are working with schools, colleges, universities and businesses to help explain the changes – so don't worry that this will affect your child's future chances. Again, all students nationally are in the same position.

What does 9-1 mean?

The new GCSEs are ranked from grades 9-1 with a grade 9 the highest and grade 1 the lowest – with an ungraded GCSE still being a U.

The government have made it clear that a 'pass' grade for students is a 4 – and should be viewed in the same way as the old C grade. However, it's important to remember that the new exams are harder and so grades 1-3 will also demonstrate individual success for some students.

Only about half the number of students nationally that used to achieve an A* will achieve a new grade 9.

The table opposite shows how the old grading system relates to the new one.

The achievement of all young people is incredibly important and well deserved, and of course GCSE grades represent only a small amount of your child's experiences at school.

NEW GRADING STRUCTURE	OLD GRADING STRUCTURE
9	A*
8	
7	A
6	B
5	
4	C
3	D
2	E
1	F
	G
U	U

Source: Ofqual

If the new GCSEs are harder, are the results fair?

Although the actual content of the new GCSEs is harder, the way this year's results have been calculated means that no student will lose out.

The exam boards and the exams regulator Ofqual do this by setting the grade boundaries after the exams have been marked, meaning that students won't be unfairly punished by the harder qualifications.

Nationally, roughly the same proportion of students will achieve the new grade 4 or higher as used to achieve the old grade C and higher.

Likewise, roughly the same proportion of students will achieve the new grade 7 or higher as used to achieve the old grade A or higher.

Although we are able to broadly compare the old and new grades in this way, it's important to remember that the new GCSEs are considerably different from the old qualifications.

Is my child a guinea pig?

This is the first year of the new exams, with more new GCSEs being phased in in other subjects until 2019. Schools have been working hard over the last few years to prepare for these changes, and the changes apply to all students nationally.

Because of the way the new grading is worked out (see page 3), this doesn't mean that your child has been disadvantaged at all by being in the first cohort to take the new exams.

What if the results are not what your child expected?

Results day is often a difficult time for all young people, and some students may find themselves disappointed by the grades they receive. Remember that while exams are important, they do not represent everything about your child or everything they can do.

If you're concerned about the results, your child should talk to somebody they trust in school (a form tutor, subject teacher, head of year or house). They will be able to reassure them, and will also work hard with you together to think about their future options for future study or work.

What will happen in 2018 and 2019?

In summer 2018, more subjects will be examined by the new GCSEs – so students may still receive a mixture of letter grades and number grades.

However, by 2019, all subjects will be examined by the new GCSEs, so students will receive only number-grades.

It is worth remembering that when students sit only new GCSEs in 2019, only a very, very small number of students nationally will achieve a grade 9 in every subject. This reflects the change in the GCSEs and means that high-ability students should not expect to receive the top grades in every subject.

How does this affect how my child's school is measured?

Up until last year, schools were judged by the percentage of students who achieved five GCSEs graded C or above, including English and maths.

Since 2016, all secondary schools are now measured in a new way. The main measurement is Progress 8 – which measures the average progress of students from their primary school SATs to GCSEs in eight subjects. This is a comparative measure to other schools nationally.

A Progress 8 score of '0' means the school adds nationally-average progress to students across the year group. Anything above 0 means the school adds more than national average, and anything below means the school adds less than national average progress.

A Progress 8 score of 1 or higher is exceptional and means that, on average, the school adds a whole GCSE grade higher than the national average. **A vast majority of schools will have Progress 8 scores of between -0.5 and 0.5.**

Progress 8 scores are not confirmed until January, so unlike the old system, we don't know schools' headline measurements on results day, due to the need to compare all students' progress nationally.

Any more questions?

If you have questions, or need further information about these changes, speak to a member of staff in your school or visit the SSAT website at ssatuk.co.uk.

More information is also available from the exams regulator Ofqual.
gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual

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