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# Starting GCSEs

Your guide to exam success

Tony Breslin and Mike Moores

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A Cambridge University Press Transition Guide





Beginning your GCSE courses represents a key landmark in your secondary education. Many of you will sit in the same classrooms and, sometimes, you'll be taught by the same teachers, but, make no mistake: studying for GCSEs will place new demands on you and you'll need to develop new skills and strategies. In short, you'll need to begin the move, or 'transition', from pupil to student.

With this in mind, this Cambridge University Press Transition Guide is designed to help you to do five things:

1. Understand the nature of GCSE exams, whatever set of subjects you are studying.
2. Prepare for your exams.
3. Prepare you for any differences in examination style between the different subjects you are studying.
4. Begin to develop a set of effective study skills to meet the challenges coming your way – especially those skills that will help you to study by yourself and with confidence.
5. Be better prepared to make an informed decision about what you intend to do at the end of Year 11.

This guide complements the *Cambridge University Press Transition Guide: Starting A Levels: your guide to exam success*. Both guides conclude with a quick reference section that summarises the key issues that we believe underpin examination success.

We advise that you share this guide with your parents or carers. We want to give them the confidence to give you all of the support that you'll need, not just at examination time but also as you work through your GCSE courses.

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“Beginning your GCSE courses represents a key landmark in your secondary education.”

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About the authors

Learn more about our resources at [www.cambridge.org/ukschools](http://www.cambridge.org/ukschools)

## Part 1: The nature of the GCSE examination

In this opening section, we address ten questions you might have about the GCSE courses that you are studying (or are planning to study):

1. What does GCSE stand for and what kind of examination is it?
2. Does everybody sit the same examination paper(s) in a particular subject?
3. What is an IGCSE?
4. Is everything down to what happens in the written exam?
5. What happens if something outside my control is likely to affect my exam performance?
6. Why should I be concerned about my GCSE grades?
7. Who else is concerned about my GCSE grades?
8. Are some GCSEs more important than others?
9. How are GCSEs graded?
10. How are GCSE examination papers produced?

Understanding the answers to these questions will enable you to navigate the rest of this guide and, we hope, gain an understanding of what GCSEs are about and how they work.

### 1. What does GCSE stand for and what kind of examination is it?

GCSE stands for the **General Certificate of Secondary Education**.

What you need to cover in a GCSE course is set out in something called the exam specification or syllabus. If the subject is one that you have to study as part of the National Curriculum, the GCSE course usually addresses all of the content set out in the curriculum.

A GCSE is a public examination. This means that it is taken by students (or 'candidates') across the country on the same date and at the same time. As you begin your GCSE exam in English or geography or mathematics, tens of thousands of others will be doing the same thing. As you hand in your paper at the end of the examination, they will be doing likewise.

The examination paper usually lasts between one and three hours, and is sat in 'controlled' conditions – typically, this means working in silence at a single desk in a hall or another room especially set up for the exam. The examiners are keen to test what you 'know, understand and can do' in a set time and without help from others.

“The examiners are keen to test what you 'know, understand and can do' in a set time and without help from others.”

Most subjects taught in secondary school in Years 10 and 11 lead to a GCSE examination. The examination consists of one or two papers that you sit at the end of the course, usually at the end of Year 11, but sometimes a year earlier, especially if you have started the course at the beginning of Year 9.

Some schools offer GCSE short courses in certain subjects, such as Religious Education (RE) and Citizenship Studies. These are graded in the same way as a GCSE but are worth half a GCSE and are given less teaching time on the timetable.



Students sitting a GCSE exam.

## 2. Does everybody sit the same examination paper(s) in a particular subject?

In most subjects, yes; however, in English language and mathematics, it's common for students to be entered for tiered papers, usually described as Higher or Foundation papers.

A student is entered for a particular paper because this is seen as a reflection of their ability in the subject. Those entered for a Higher paper undertake the kind of tougher questions seen as necessary for those seeking the top grades. It's still possible to get a good grade by being entered for the Foundation paper, just not the top grades.

Make sure that you are clear about whether you are being entered for a particular tier and how this decision has been reached. It's a decision that might be taken right at the start of a GCSE course as a result of your progress in the subject in earlier years, or it might be taken part of the way through the course – after a particular test for instance.

### 3. What is an IGCSE?

You might find that you are doing something called an IGCSE in one or more subjects. IGCSE stands for **I**nternational **G**eneral **C**ertificate of **S**econdary **E**ducation and was originally developed in the UK for students studying in schools overseas.

The IGCSE is slightly different in style to GCSE but, essentially, the guidance in this booklet works for both types of examination. Some schools and some teachers prefer the IGCSE in certain subjects. Employers regard it just as highly as the GCSE.

If you are following one or more IGCSE courses, your teacher will provide you with any special information that you need to succeed.

### 4. Is everything down to what happens in the written exam?

Yes, most subjects are assessed mainly or entirely on the written exam. We'll talk about how you can prepare effectively for examinations later in this guide. However, in certain subjects, aspects of your performance have to be assessed in different settings and, in some subjects, you may also complete something called a 'controlled assessment' or 'coursework'.

These are pieces of work that you do as you go through the course. Usually, you only undertake coursework if that activity cannot be assessed through a written exam paper. In drama, for instance, the performance of an individual student may have to be assessed in the context of a performance involving others; likewise, in art, students have to be able to show their artistic talent through producing pieces of work that can't practically be undertaken in normal exam conditions.

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#### Activity 1: Key information about your GCSE courses

List your GCSE subjects on a grid along with the exam board and find out how many examination papers there are in each subject. Add a fourth column for additional notes about each course, for instance:

- The titles and length of the different papers.
- Whether there is any coursework you need to complete.
- Whether the course is a short or full GCSE.
- Whether the papers are tiered.

We've provided an example of the kind of table that we'd like you to produce opposite/overleaf.



Subject	Exam Board	Number of papers	Notes
English Language	AQA	3	Not tiered Paper 1: 1 hour 45 minutes (50% of marks) Paper 2: 1 hour 45 minutes (50% of marks) Plus speaking and listening activities that I have to do to get my GCSE certificate but which do not influence the final grade. Good spelling, punctuation and grammar is important and will account for 20% of the final grade received.
English Literature	AQA	2	Not tiered Must study: One 19th century novel and one Shakespeare play for Paper 1: 1 hour and 45 minutes (40% of marks). A selection of poetry since 1789 and British fiction or drama since 1914 for Paper 2: 2 hours and 15 minutes (60% of marks).
Mathematics	Edexcel	2	Tiered (whole group entered for Higher tier) Must study: number, algebra, ratio, geometry and statistics. Three papers, each scored out of 80 marks and each lasting an 1 hour and 30 minutes, with different topics tested on different papers. Paper 1 is a non-calculator paper. Calculators can be used in Papers 2 and 3.
Citizenship Studies	OCR	1	Short course One controlled assessment worth 60% of the marks: a school based campaign. One written paper, lasting an hour and worth 40% of the marks: identity, democracy and justice.

Table 1: An example table for Activity 1.

## 5. What happens if something outside my control is likely to affect my exam performance?

If you have a condition that might impact on how well you do in your exams you may be eligible for extra time to finish them. Similarly, if your exam preparations are affected by something outside your control, for instance a serious illness or a change in your family circumstances in the run-up to your exams, you may qualify for 'special consideration', whereby your final grade is adjusted to reflect these difficulties.

Your teacher will be able to give you more information about this. Examiners are not unsympathetic to genuine appeals for extra time and special consideration but you need to make sure that your teachers are aware of your situation and of any medical conditions that you might have before the examination.

## 6. Why should I be concerned about my GCSE grades?

GCSEs are designed to provide an indication of how well you have done during the years of compulsory schooling.

Employers and others take these grades into account when deciding to give opportunities to young people. Your GCSE grades are likely to decide:

- the employment opportunities that are open to you
- the training opportunities that are open to you
- whether you are able to progress to AS and A level study or other post-16 courses.

And the courses that you choose – and that you do your best in – may have a longer-term impact on your prospects. For example, if you want to be a teacher, you'll need to have a good GCSE grade in English and in mathematics (as well as in any subject that you might want to teach, such as geography or history). If you want to go into medicine or the sciences, you'll need good GCSE grades in the right kind of science courses; and if you're thinking of a financial career, then mathematics is important. Finally, if you'd like to study languages at university, it might be wise to study more than one language at GCSE to demonstrate your ability in this area.

## 7. Who else is concerned about my GCSE grades?

Your success at GCSE will also matter to not only your parents or carers, but to your school and teachers.

Your teachers will have worked hard to support you throughout your studies, and if you are planning to continue studying certain subjects at A level or beyond, your teachers will want you to do as well in those subjects as possible.

Admissions tutors at sixth form or further education colleges will also look at your GCSE grades when offering places, as will possible in these subjects.

## 8. Are some GCSEs more important than others?

Every subject is important in its own right and it's important to gain a broad range of GCSE grades. This shows that you are a rounded person with a wide range of knowledge, skills and talent.

Nonetheless, most teachers would concede that English and mathematics are of special importance. A good grasp of written English will help you do well across the range of subjects that you study; and possessing good mathematical skills will help you in your study of science, business studies and economics, for example.

In 2011, the idea of the English Baccalaureate (Ebacc) was introduced. This isn't an examination or qualification in itself. Instead, students are said to have achieved the Baccalaureate if they have achieved 'good' grades in English and mathematics together with three other subjects, including:

- science, or any of the separate sciences (biology, chemistry, physics) or computer science
- geography or history
- a foreign language.

Because the 'Ebacc' encourages a certain mix of subjects many schools now require students to study these subjects.

As we have said earlier, if you have a particular career or degree course in mind, or you have an idea about going to a certain university, the mix of GCSEs you take can be important. If you're not sure about anything in this respect, and you're just at the beginning of your GCSE courses, it might not be too late to make a change. Talk to a teacher or careers adviser for further guidance.

“Your success at GCSE will also matter to not only your parents or carers, but to your school and teachers.”

“If you have a particular career or degree course in mind, or you have an idea about going to a certain university, the mix of GCSEs you take can be important.”

## Activity 2: Making the right choices at GCSE

If you have a particular career or degree course in mind, talk to your teachers or use the internet to find out which subjects will help you get there.

### 9. How are GCSEs graded?

The way that GCSEs are graded is changing. Traditionally, GCSEs have been graded on an A–G scale, with a special A\* grade, designed to reward the most successful students in each subject. Most of the GCSEs that you take will be graded in this way. However, the GCSEs that you are now embarking on in English language, English literature and mathematics will be graded on a new scale running from 9 (the highest grade) to 1 (the lowest grade).

However, over the next few years all GCSEs will switch over to the new 9–1 scale.

The table below sets out how the new GCSE grades compare with the old ones.

NEW GCSE GRADING STRUCTURE		CURRENT GCSE GRADING STRUCTURE
9		A*
8		
7		A
6	5 and above = top of C and above	B
5		
4	4 and above = bottom of C and above	C
<hr style="border-top: 1px dashed #ccc;"/>		
3		D
2		E
		F
1		G
U		U

The way GCSEs are being graded is changing (Source: adapted from Ofqual).

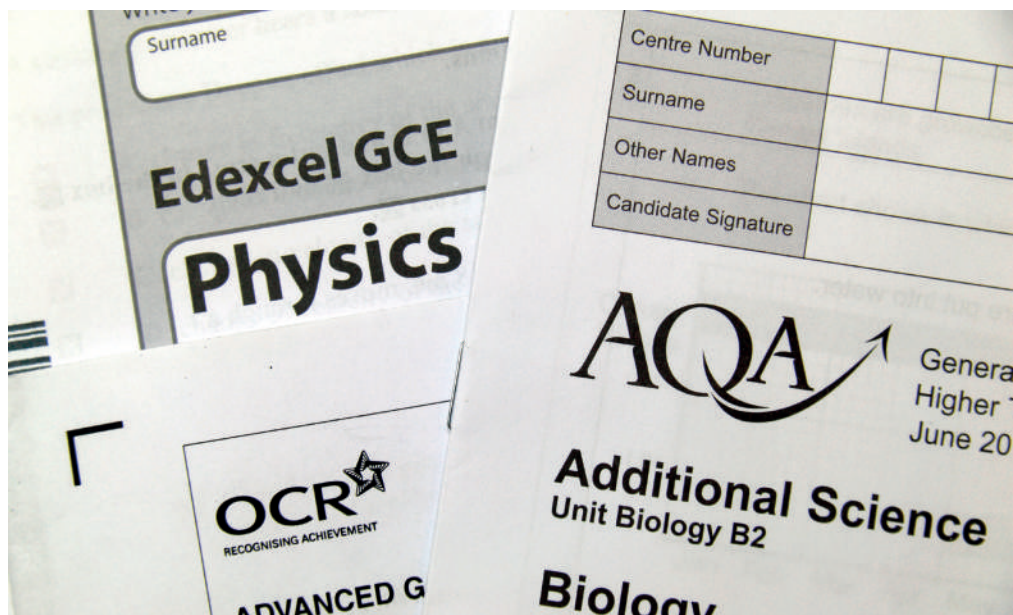
Your exam paper is not simply 'given' a grade. All papers are marked out of a numerical total. Examiners then decide which scores are worthy of which grades. In a particular subject and a particular year they might want to award an A\* grade or a 9 to scripts in which candidates gain, for example, 84 marks out of 100. The following year they might decide to award an A\* grade or a 9 for candidates who gain 82 marks out of 100.

This approach to grading ensures that where there are minor differences between the standard of question papers from year-to-year, the candidate is not disadvantaged. Comparisons are also made between subjects so as to see that the GCSE examinations set in each subject are of broadly the same standard.

Whatever you may have read or heard, there are no 'easy' or 'soft' options at GCSE, just different types of subjects that sometimes need to be examined in different kinds of way.

## 10. How are GCSE examination papers produced?

GCSE exams sat by candidates in England have usually been set by one of three examination boards: AQA, Edexcel or OCR. In Wales, and sometimes in England, candidates will sit examinations set by WJEC (the Welsh Joint Examinations Council). In Northern Ireland, candidates usually sit examinations set by CCEA, the Northern Irish Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, while in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland students sit a completely different set of examinations.



A number of different examination boards set exam papers (GCSE and A Level) across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Your teachers will decide the exams and the examination boards for the subjects you take. A GCSE examination issued by one board may be different in style from another but it isn't likely to be any harder or easier, and all GCSEs in a particular subject have to cover the same basic content. All examination boards are guided by tough standards about how examinations are set, what level they are set at, and what form they take.

Your GCSE question paper has been on a long journey before it reaches you. Typically, it will have been written between a year and 18 months before you sit it and checked by a range of teachers and other experts to ensure that it's clearly written and fair.

The examiner who has written the paper will also have written a marking scheme. This sets down exactly what those marking the scripts can and can't award marks for. It's designed to ensure that examination scripts, including yours, are marked fairly and consistently.

Most of those involved in writing or checking GCSE or A level papers are (or have been) teachers and they want you to succeed, something we'll say much more about later in this guide.

## Part 2: How and why GCSEs vary in style across different subjects

In this second section we address three questions about the differences in style and content between the various GCSE courses that you are studying (or planning to study):

1. What are the new GCSEs in English language, English literature and mathematics like?
2. Why have these changes been made?
3. What are the key differences and similarities across other GCSE subject areas?

Understanding the answers to these questions will enable you to understand the particular challenges that you'll face on your different GCSE courses. Later on in this guide we will explore the kind of skills and strategies that will bring you success, both during the course and in the examination hall.

### 1. What are the new GCSEs in English Language, English Literature and Mathematics like?

The GCSE papers that you'll sit in English Language, English Literature and Mathematics in May and June 2017 are a new style of examination.

Over the next few years similar changes will be made to GCSEs in other subjects but we will see them first in the English Language, English Literature and Mathematics papers that you sit.

So, what's changing?

1. The new GCSE papers will be graded on a new scale of 9 to 1, where 9 is the highest grade and 1 the lowest.
2. Broadly, a grade 4 or 5 will be seen as equivalent to a grade C, the grade that employers have traditionally taken as an indication of a 'good' pass.
3. The new papers will ask you about things that might not have featured on the old papers.
4. There will be some changes in question style.
5. There will be a focus on 'deeper learning' – developing a wider body of 'core' knowledge.

Although you won't be able to get past papers in these new GCSE courses, the exam boards have produced 'specimen' papers and questions and your teachers will guide you through these.

In English Language, the main changes are:

- A stronger focus on reading and writing, with a particular concentration on extended writing.
- A wider variety of writing skills – for instance, you will be expected to narrate, describe, explain, write for impact, produce reports and summarise through bullet points.
- An increase in the percentage of the marks allocated for spelling, punctuation and grammar, up from 12% to 20%.
- A new focus on 'unseen' texts – pieces of writing that you have not seen before the examination – from the 19th, 20th and/or 21st centuries.
- A stronger focus on analysing, evaluating and comparing texts in terms of grammar, vocabulary, structure and purpose.
- A separate assessment of formal speaking skills, so that your performance in formal speaking no longer forms a part of your overall GCSE grade but is reported on.

In English Literature, the main changes are:

- A stronger focus on British authors, including a detailed study of at least one play by Shakespeare and at least one 19th century novel.
- The removal of so-called digital texts, such as blogs and e-mail conversations.
- A stronger focus on the analysis of 'unseen' texts in the examination room.
- A stronger focus on the quality of writing produced by the candidate in their exam paper.

In Mathematics, the main changes are:

- A move away from single-step questions and towards multi-step mathematical problems.
- An increased focus on the use of mathematical methods and techniques in specific 'real world' contexts.
- An increased focus on mathematical 'mastery' – your ability to use mathematical reasoning and mathematical techniques to come to conclusions.
- The inclusion of algebra-based questions, which have not always featured on GCSE maths papers in the past.



## 2. Why have these changes been made?

It's been argued that students should be able to produce longer pieces of extended writing and solve more challenging mathematical problems, and that being able to do so will help them across a range of GCSE subjects and later at AS and A level, in the workplace and at university. To meet these aims, GCSE exams and specifications have been revised to help students develop these skills.

To get the best grades in these new GCSEs you'll need to be able to demonstrate that you have grasped what some experts call 'mastery' –the 'deeper learning' at the heart of these subjects. Being sure of your knowledge in English and Mathematics will help your performance across the range of existing 'old' style GCSEs that you will sit in other subjects. It will also help you to prepare for AS and A levels, which are undergoing similar changes, with confidence.

We discuss these changes to AS and A levels in our complementary Cambridge University Press Transition Guide produced for those about to begin these courses in the sixth form or at college:  
*Starting A levels: your guide to exam success.*

## 3. What are the key differences and similarities across other subject areas?

To assess different types of knowledge and skill, examiners need to ask different styles of question. Therefore, you'll find that the style of examination question varies across different types of subject.

In the humanities and the social sciences, the focus tends to be on being able to use your writing skills effectively in the exam hall to demonstrate that you have an understanding of the themes and issues set out in the exam specification and that you can analyse and draw conclusions from data in text, tables, graphs or diagrams to illustrate your grasp of the subject, whether this be Geography, History, Economics, Citizenship Studies, Sociology or Business Studies. In short, the emphasis is on subject knowledge and the ability to use a range of skills to interpret and assess this knowledge.

In the sciences, such as Biology, Chemistry and Physics, there is likely to be a focus on key scientific concepts and formulae and as strong a focus on your ability to use mathematical skills as written ones.

“ It's been argued that students should be able to produce longer pieces of extended writing and solve more challenging mathematical problems, and that being able to do so will help them across a range of GCSE subjects.

“ Being sure of your knowledge in English and Mathematics will help your performance across the range of existing 'old' style GCSEs that you will sit in other subjects. It will also help you to prepare for AS and A levels, which are undergoing similar changes, with confidence.

In those subjects where you cannot hope to display all of your knowledge within the confines of a written paper in the examination hall - such as Art, Technology, Drama, Languages, Physical Education (PE) and Science – there is sometimes an assessed practical component, a so-called ‘controlled assessment’ (or coursework) that usually sits alongside a traditional examination and which accounts for a certain percentage of the marks.

This practical component might take various forms – producing a particular piece of art, making something as part of a GCSE technology course, taking part in a drama production, undertaking an oral examination in a foreign language, illustrating a certain skill in PE, or carrying out a particular experiment in science and drawing conclusions from it. In each case you are likely to be required to work under controlled conditions, sometimes, necessarily, in a group. In each case, the rules set down by the examiners, just as in the exam, have to be followed meticulously; breaking these rules is likely to lead to your removal from the ‘controlled’ setting and your disqualification from the exam.

Remember that the examiners across all GCSE courses are passionate about their subject and are often teachers themselves (or have been). They are keen that you should be able to demonstrate that you have the skills and knowledge required to gain a good grade and are looking to reward success rather than punish failure.

As we always remind our students, you don’t start an examination with 100 marks and progressively lose them, you start an examination – like everybody else – with no marks and progressively win them by responding correctly and in appropriate detail to the questions set.

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### Activity 3: The controlled assessments that you will need to complete

Find out which of your GCSEs include a controlled assessment element. Then find out as much information as you can about this assessment – including when, where and how you are expected to do it – and make a note of this information in the notes column of the grid that you created for Activity 1.

“Examiners across all GCSE courses are passionate about their subject and are often teachers themselves (or have been). They are keen that you should be able to demonstrate that you have the skills and knowledge required to gain a good grade and are looking to reward success rather than punish failure.”

## Part 3: Developing your capacity to succeed as a GCSE student

In this section, we will help you to develop the kind of attitudes and skills that will enable you to succeed at GCSE. These include, amongst many others, your attitude to homework and to studying when you are not at school, your ability to manage your time and your approach to revision. Over the pages that follow, we shall be asking you to reflect on the following questions:

1. What are the qualities of a successful GCSE student and how do I become one?
2. How can I best plan my GCSE studies?
3. How and where do I learn best?
4. How should I organise my revision?
5. What about examination practice?

Working through the answers to these questions will help you to start making really important changes in how you learn.

### 1. What are the qualities of a successful GCSE student and how do I become one?

A successful GCSE student is an independent learner. Our intention is that, as you get closer to your exams, you'll become more independent, confident and self-starting as a learner. This won't just prepare you for your GCSEs – it will prepare you for life at sixth form or the workplace, both settings in which you'll be given far more freedom to manage your own learning.

So, what kind of qualities does an independent learner or successful student have? To tackle your GCSEs, you'll need to:

- Know the precise structure of each examination – including how many papers you'll sit, how much time you'll have to answer the paper, and what kind of format it will take.
- Be familiar with the examination specification in each subject.
- Have the ability and motivation to go and find things out.
- Be able to organise your time well.
- Work out what methods of filing and organising your notes work best for you.

And the good news is that one of the key aspects of being an independent learner, searching for knowledge – or finding things out – is far easier than it has ever been; think Google, Wikipedia and the websites of tens of thousands of organisations and businesses – knowledge that might once have meant a bus journey to a library or a day out at a museum is now just a click or two away, although you should, of course, think carefully about information that you gain from the internet. Just like information in newspapers or in books or information provided through advertisements, you should always be seeking not just to accept that information found on the net is true but also to check that it is.

#### Activity 4: Learning to study by yourself – becoming an independent learner

Divide a piece of A4 paper into two columns and place the heading 'Dependent learner' at the top of one and 'Independent learner' at the top of the other, listing the characteristics of each in each column. We've made a start for you.

Dependent learner	Independent learner
Relies on the teacher to guide them every step of the way.	Has the confidence to 'have a go' at questions and assignments and the maturity to ask for the teacher's help when it is needed.
Tends to just do the work set – and often the minimum required.	Undertakes additional study to find out more about a particular issue or topic.
Uses sources such as the internet as a place to 'copy' facts from.	Uses sources such as the internet to find out about new things and to extend their knowledge.
Only completes assignments when really pushed to do so by teachers, parents and others, and usually at the last minute.	Completes assignments without being pushed to do so by teachers, parents or others and in good time.

## 2. How can I best plan my GCSE studies?

In each subject your teacher will have a plan to cover all of the things in the exam specification. They will understand it fully, and where the specification has been in use for a number of years, they will have particular strategies to make sure that you are as well prepared as you can be.

But this does not mean that they do all the planning and you do none. To be successful in your exams, you should take control of your own learning. Your teacher is responsible for ensuring that you are guided through the key topics and that you are pointed towards the main things that you can expect to be examined on. Your job is to build on this guidance; this involves working out a plan that means that you'll be able to hand work in on time, ensuring it is to a good standard, and that you'll be able to manage the demands of doing a range of GCSE courses at once.

And you'll need to ensure that this plan fits with the rest of your life – with your hobbies, your responsibilities at home, seeing your friends, and any part time job that you might have. That's why we recommend three things.

1. During the first half term of the course and at the beginning of each term after that, you should get a list of the key dates and deadlines for each GCSE course – your subject teachers will help you to do this.
2. You should work out a rough home-study timetable that allows you to complete work or revision in each subject on a regular basis – one that fits with your subject timetable, your life at school and your life outside school.
3. You should work out your strengths and weaknesses in different subjects, so that you can give extra time to those areas that you feel that you need to improve on.

No plan is set in stone, but taking responsibility for your own learning is part of becoming an independent learner. By regularly reviewing and adjusting your plans, you can ensure that you remain on track for success. In doing so, you'll be successfully completing the transition from pupil to student.

### 3. How and where do I learn best?

Everybody has a unique style of learning, a style of learning that works for them, and everybody learns best in a setting in which they are comfortable. There is now a huge amount of research on how different people learn. We would suggest that you think about:

- How you prefer to learn about something new – for instance, in class, from a book, through talking with others (on or offline), through an interactive software programme, or by doing it and learning from the experience.

“  
Take control of your  
own learning.  
”

“  
By regularly  
reviewing and  
adjusting your plans,  
you can ensure that  
you remain on track  
for success.  
”

- How you prefer to revise or remember a subject or a topic – for instance, by marking text with a highlighter pen, by making notes, by discussing it in a small group, or by drawing various kinds of diagrams, including spider diagrams and learning maps.
- Whether you prefer to work alone and in silence, or with music or television on in the background.



Different people revise in different ways.

As an independent student you'll need to begin to think about these things. As you work through your GCSEs, you'll be responsible for more and more of your own learning, and you'll need to make sure that you can approach this responsibility in a way that works for you. There are various tests that you can take to work out what your learning style is, or what your preferred learning style is likely to be, some of them available online, but we suggest that considering the issues above is a good starting point.

The other thing that you'll need to think about is where you prefer to study. If it's an option, it's good to have a place at home where you can work, but not everybody is in that position. Try to explore how well you can work in various school settings, such as the school library, or (if there is one) a school homework club. Remember, with or without music in your ear or others around you, you'll need to be able to concentrate; some people can do that in fairly crowded settings while others work best when they cut themselves off from others around them. In the early months of your GCSE studies, try to work out what works best for you, and find out what others are doing too. Even if you do not wish to study alongside your friends, find out what works for them – sometimes, they will discover things that could work for you as well.

#### 4. How should I organise my revision?

Most GCSE courses are now assessed mainly or completely on a final exam in controlled conditions at the end of a two-year course.

But what sits at the heart of an effective revision strategy? We'd suggest the following ten steps:

1. Revise from the beginning of the course, building in time for private study, topic-by-topic, as you work through the course. This means you'll need to plan your revision from day one rather than leaving everything to the last minute.
2. Devise an approach to note taking that works for you and allows you to summarise what you have covered in each topic of study.
3. If there are other students in your class or amongst your friends that you work especially well with, think about forming a revision group to share ideas and knowledge.
4. Make use of social networking by joining online revision groups, taking all the precautions that you normally would when joining online communities.
5. In the sciences, mathematics, economics and other subjects that feature formulas, revisit and practise these regularly.
6. Consider buying or borrowing the revision guides available for most subjects, checking with your teachers what they recommend, but do this early in the course rather than just before the exam.
7. Make full use of the range of subject-focused websites that support revision at GCSE.
8. As a rough formula, for every hour you spend studying new material, spend 20 min revising.
9. Take regular breaks – a 10 min break in every hour or so can help to refresh you, and provides a natural pause between different subjects or assignments.
10. Start modestly – you'll be doing more revision later in your course than you are at the beginning and, for this reason, you should start gradually and build up. Studying for GCSEs is like running a marathon rather than a sprint – you need to 'train' for the examinations accordingly.

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Think about forming  
a revision group  
to share ideas and  
knowledge.”



## 5. What about exam practice?

When you learn to drive, you won't get into a car for the first time on the day of your driving test, and you won't look at the Highway Code for the first time an hour before you arrive at the testing centre.

In the same way, you should be familiar with the kind of examination papers that you will sit in each subject long before you sit your exams.

For this reason you should practise on 'real' exam questions and real exam papers from the start of your course. We'll say more about this in the next section, but for now we'd advise that you begin to collect recent examination papers in each of your subjects – these are usually available on the internet – and familiarise yourself with:

- The way in which the papers are laid out.
- The style of the questions.
- The themes and types of question in each section of the paper.
- The time allocated to each section.
- The number of marks allocated to each question.
- The sorts of theme or question that seem to come up frequently.

Don't expect to be able to answer the questions right at the beginning of the course, but try them out as you come to the end of certain topics in the classroom.

And remember that examination papers are written in a certain 'language' with key 'trigger' words (like 'assess', 'discuss' and 'describe') that indicate what you need to do to get the marks available. Getting familiar with this language is the route to GCSE success, and safe in the knowledge that you get 'examiner speak', you can begin to really enjoy your GCSE courses and the subjects that you are studying.

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### Activity 5: Starting your collection of past examination papers

Set yourself the target of getting hold of two or three past papers for each GCSE course that you are studying (apart from English Language, English Literature and Mathematics, where the courses are new) by the end of the first term of Year 10 (or Year 9, if you've started your GCSEs early).

Familiarise yourself with the style of the paper and do the questions on the areas you have covered. Check with your teacher the precise details of the specification and the paper(s) in each subject required and ask for their guidance on the new GCSEs where there are no 'past' papers.

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You should be familiar with the kind of examination papers that you will sit in each subject long before you sit your exams.





## Part 4: The skills and strategies that you'll need for success in the exam room

We've designed this guide to be read at the beginning of your GCSE courses, but you might want to re-read this section as you get closer to your exams. However, as we've said earlier, GCSE courses are a marathon rather than a sprint and it's a good idea to have a sense of what the finishing line looks like at the start.

For this reason, consider these three questions right at the start of your GCSE studies:

1. As my GCSE exams approach, what will I need to do to make sure that I'm 'exam-ready'?
2. What should I do, and not do, in the exam hall?
3. How do I best handle the challenge of having a lot of exams in a short period of time?

And remember, if you've taken the advice on revision that we've set out in the previous section and if you've attended classes, followed your teachers' guidance, completed the assignments set in each subject and practised answering 'real' examination questions, you've got very little to worry about.

### 1. As my GCSE exams approach, what will I need to do to make sure that I'm 'exam-ready'?

In the run-up to your GCSE exams, remember that you should feel relaxed and confident for five reasons:

1. You've worked hard for nearly two years.
2. You're confident about the subject knowledge that you'll need in each examination.
3. You're familiar with the style of each examination.
4. You've got a clear plan for the two or three weeks over which the examinations will take place, and you've built in time for work, rest and hobbies during this period.
5. You've discussed this plan with your teachers and your family and they're all on your side.

The strategies that we suggest here might help you to secure the best grades that you can achieve. In this period just before your GCSE exams start, your focus should be on what we call being 'exam-ready'. In ensuring that you are 'exam-ready', you'll need to be certain of three things:

1. Have a final revision plan for each subject that enables you to feel really confident about the knowledge and skills that you'll be assessed on.
2. Know the subject, time, date and venue for each paper, and the equipment that you'll need and are allowed to use – remember, there are rules about the use of set texts, dictionaries and calculators, and make sure that you understand these rules well in advance of each exam.
3. Know the precise structure, timing and content of each paper.

So, you've studied hard for nearly two years and you've revised virtually from day one. Now we turn our attention to the final hurdle – the exam itself.

## 2. What should I do, and not do, in the exam room?

With regard to each examination, we make six key recommendations:

1. Make sure that you enter the exam room with the correct equipment for the specific exam concerned, including a spare pen, and any items that you are allowed to have such as a dictionary, copies of set texts or a calculator.
2. Read the instructions (or rubric) on the front of the paper carefully (and slowly) so that you are absolutely certain about how many questions to answer in each section, how long you should spend on each section, and the total time available to complete the paper.
3. Read each question on the paper at least twice, checking precisely what the question is asking you to do and how many marks are available for doing so.
4. Read any stimulus material or passages of writing at least twice, underlining key points and annotating the text to make sure that you fully understand it and haven't missed any key points.
5. Stick to your timing plan for working through each GCSE paper. You should be guided in the time that you spend on any one question by the marks available for that question and leave perhaps 10 min at the end to read through and check your answers.

“Read each question on the paper at least twice, checking precisely what the question is asking you to do and how many marks are available for doing so.”

6. Use clear English throughout, as marks are given for this and it helps the marker to understand your answer. Put a line through any planning or working out that you don't want the person marking your paper to read or give credit for.

And here are some things we'd advise against doing. Don't:

1. Rush into answering a question before you have read and re-read it, thoroughly, making special note of 'trigger' words and any related 'stimulus' material such as a piece of writing, a graph or a table of statistics.
2. Ignore the importance of planning your response in terms of the marks available – this is especially important where an extended response is required and a lot of marks are available.
3. Finish the exam significantly earlier than you are required to – if the examiners have given you two hours to complete an examination paper, you need two hours to complete it; if you've finished it in one hour, you almost certainly haven't written enough, even if you've answered every question.
4. Stray from your timing plan for the paper – if you spend too long on one question, you cannot hope to make up that time on another question, and your grade will suffer.
5. Answer fewer than the number of questions that you are required to – some candidates think that they can make up the marks they are missing out on by answering fewer questions in greater detail; they're wrong, you can't.
6. Provide long and detailed answers when only a few marks are available – if only 2 marks are available, you can't gain 4 marks by writing twice the amount required – or short answers where there are lots of marks available – if 25 marks are available, you can't get full marks for a very short answer, no matter how 'correct' your response is.

These things may seem obvious, but experienced senior examiners and teachers will tell you that thousands of students ignore this kind of advice every year. We don't want you to make the same errors.

### 3. How do I best handle the challenge of having a lot of exams in a short period of time?

How you handle the two or three weeks in which your GCSE examinations take place will play a key role in how well you do across your examinations. Remember, if you've taken the advice set out in this guide, you'll have completed virtually all of your studying and revision before the exams start. It's now about how you manage the examination period itself.

To be successful during this time, it is a good idea to:

- Make sure that you get a good night's sleep every night.
- Leave enough time to relax and recuperate after each exam, or at least after every full day of examinations.
- Make sure that you eat and exercise as you normally would – this is not a time to introduce new approaches to food or fitness.
- Avoid long, last-minute revision sessions that might risk sapping your energy and which could increase your anxiety and stress levels.
- Check (and double-check) that you've got the venue and time right for each examination, that you have all the necessary equipment, and that you arrive in good time for the start of the exam – we'd suggest about 15 min early.
- Make sure that your parents or carers also have all of the details about the exam times and venues – it is easy to get these mixed up when you are sitting a lot of papers in a short period.
- Reflect on the next exam, not the one you have just sat.

You'll have lots of support during the exam period, and it's important to remember that your teachers are experienced in supporting students through this time, year after year, and that almost every one of your friends will be feeling the same. Talk to your friends during the course of your exams; you'll appreciate each other's support and you'll realise that you're not the only one with concerns.

“Avoid long, last-minute revision sessions that might risk sapping your energy and which could increase your anxiety and stress levels.”

## Part 5: Beyond GCSEs: your options in terms of employment, training and study

If you're reading this guide at the beginning of your GCSE studies, you could be forgiven for thinking that it's a bit early to be thinking beyond GCSEs. Certainly, you might want to re-read this section in 18 months' time, but there is no harm in understanding your options at this point. It's always useful to have an idea of your possible destinations at the start of a journey, even if you don't know where you might end up. Consider those destinations here. Broadly they will involve one, or perhaps a mix, of the following:

- Taking up employment, without a training component.
- Taking up employment, with a training component or an apprenticeship.
- Beginning AS and/or A level study in the sixth form or at a Sixth Form or Further Education college, possibly with a view to progressing to university at 18 or 19.
- Beginning some other kind of course, probably one of a professional or vocational nature, either at school or college, or with a training provider.

In coming to a decision about which direction you wish to go in, ask yourself the following three questions:

1. Do I have any idea about the kind of career I'm interested in when I complete my education and do I know what the possible routes into this career might be?
2. If I'm unsure about my future career destination, do I have a sense as to whether I want to start working or go to university?
3. Where can I get the advice and guidance to help me make the right decisions about life beyond GCSEs, and about the worlds of work and Higher Education?

**1. Do I have any idea about the kind of career I'm interested in when I complete my education and do I know what the possible routes into this career might be?**

If you do have an idea about the kind of career, or even the specific career, that you would like to follow, you may well have found out a good deal about it. In any case, think about three things:

1. Whether you are required to pass any specific GCSEs at particular grades (for example, you'll need at least a grade 4 or 5 in English Language and Mathematics if you want to be a teacher).
2. If the career concerned requires you to have certain post GCSE qualifications (for instance, A levels or a degree, perhaps in a certain subject).
3. Whether over-focusing on a particular career at this stage means that you risk 'closing down' other options.

Finally, if you have a certain career in mind, try to speak to people who already work in this field. Whether it is accountancy, hairdressing, law, medicine or plumbing, there is nothing quite like speaking to somebody who already does that job, especially somebody who is young and recently qualified.

2. If I'm less clear about my future career destination, do I have a sense as to whether I want to start working or go to university?

The decision to either seek employment or go to university is an important one. If you opt not go to university, one option might be to seek employment that includes high quality on-going training, such as an apprenticeship programme. This will mean that you continue your education and 'earn while you learn'. It will also mean that you are well qualified for future career moves, or even career changes. In the course of your working life it is quite possible that you'll have more than one career, and you need to be well prepared for this. Ten years from now, new careers will have emerged that simply do not exist now. You need to be as well prepared for tomorrow's careers as you are for today's.

If you're interested in an apprenticeship, it's worth noting that such a programme:

- involves a mix of classroom learning and on-the-job training.
- must be at least 12 months in length and can take up to four years to complete, depending on the industry and skill concerned.
- leads to a nationally recognised qualification in the industry concerned.
- may, in some cases, lead on to university or to degree-equivalent qualifications.

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If you have a certain career in mind, try to speak to people who already work in this field.

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Ten years from now, new careers will have emerged that simply do not exist now. You need to be as well prepared for tomorrow's careers as you are for today's.

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- can be accessed at all ages, not simply when you've completed your GCSEs – there are a growing number of Higher Apprenticeships that you can access after A levels as an alternative to university.

To secure an apprenticeship place, you'll usually be required to have at least a grade 4 or 5 in English Language and Mathematics at GCSE, and employers will want to see evidence of a good general education.

If you're thinking about going to university but worried about the cost, you should remember that:

- You only pay any tuition fees after you have completed your degree, and you only start paying when your income rises above a certain level (this tends to change annually, so check-out the latest figure online).
- You are exempt from tuition fees if your family income is below a certain level (again this figure tends to change, so check-out the latest figure online), although maintenance grants for those from lower income backgrounds were set to be withdrawn as this guide goes to press.
- University graduates (those who have completed what is usually a three-year degree course) tend to enjoy what is called a 'lifetime earnings premium', meaning that they earn significantly more than non-graduates over the course of their working lives.

In addition, if you're thinking about university but don't yet have a particular career in mind, it is worth remembering that:

- Some degrees are required for some careers – for example, you'll need to have degree in medicine if you want to be a doctor, but you don't have to have a law degree to become a solicitor or barrister.
- Other degrees – such as a degree in any established subject or in an area like business studies – can keep a wider range of options open.
- As noted previously, some universities and some degree courses are held in higher esteem than others, but be wary of stereotyping certain subjects and universities – we take the view that there is no such thing as a 'bad' degree, not least because they all come with that great learning experience: university life.

“There are a growing number of Higher Apprenticeships that you can access after A levels as an alternative to university.”

We say much more about the university entrance process and about post-18 employment and training options in our Cambridge University Press Transition Guide for AS and A level students: *Starting A Levels: your guide to exam success*.

3. Where can I get the advice and guidance to help me make the right decisions about life beyond GCSEs, and about the worlds of work and Further and Higher Education in particular, especially if I'm not clear about my response to either of the above questions?

Keeping your options open is always wise, but this should not be confused with a failure to think about your future. Luckily, help is available in this respect.

Schools have a responsibility to provide the careers education and guidance that you need, but every school does this in its own way. Make sure you know about how your school organises such guidance for GCSE students, whether there are any careers talks, careers interviews, mock interviews with local employers, work shadowing or work experience programmes, or local careers events, and which members of staff are responsible for these activities.

If you are thinking about going to university, find out which teacher is responsible for university applications (an exercise called the UCAS process) and have a conversation with them; if you're unsure about whether to continue your studies beyond 16 speak to the Head of Sixth Form and attend any open evenings staged by local Sixth Form or Further Education colleges.

Exploring your future possibilities in this way is another sign that you're making the switch from pupil to student – and taking responsibility for your own learning and your own destiny.

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#### Activity 6: Finding out what careers guidance is available at your school

Find out who is responsible for careers education and guidance and who organises the university application (or UCAS) process at your school.



## Part 6: Success at GCSE: a quick reference guide

### 1. GCSE as a qualification

#### a. When are GCSEs usually sat?

Usually at the end of Year 11, although sometimes you sit some courses a year early, after one year of study or after two if you have started the course in Year 9.

#### b. Why are they so important?

They are seen as a summary of what you have learnt and achieved during your time at school.

#### c. Are all GCSEs of the same value?

Yes, but often employers will put an emphasis on certain subjects such as English and Mathematics, and some are of special importance if you want to study a certain subject at AS or A level or if you want to follow a certain career.

### 2. Variations between different GCSEs

#### a. Are there any major differences between the GCSEs issued by different exam boards?

No, the differences are mainly in style – there are no ‘easy’ or ‘hard’ GCSEs. Historically, there were lots of exam boards, but now there are four main ones: AQA, Edexcel, OCR and WJEC.

#### b. Are all GCSEs graded in the same way?

Traditionally, GCSEs have been graded A\*–G but from 2017 English Language, English Literature and Mathematics will be graded on a scale from 9 to 1, where 9 is the best grade.

#### c. How are the ‘new’ GCSEs different to the old ones?

They’ll use the new numerical grading scale and they’re likely to require more of you in terms of, for instance, extended writing and ‘core’ knowledge than the ones that they replace, but all young people will face the same challenges.

### 3. Strategies for successful revision

#### a. What are the characteristics of a successful revision strategy?

Hard work and regular revision in each subject; teachers can sometimes recommend good revision guides, which are on sale in bookshops and online, or which can sometimes be borrowed from the library.

#### b. How important is it to practise ‘real’ examination questions?

It’s very important to practise on real questions and real papers.

c. How can I get hold of old examination papers?

Teachers may have stocks of these and they are also usually available from the examination board websites, but make sure you are practising on the right ones drawn from the GCSE or IGCSE course that you are following.

#### 4. Prospering in the examination room

a. What information should I have about my examinations?

Critically, the time, date and venue of every examination.

b. How will I survive during the examination period?

By remembering that you have worked hard for nearly two years, by revising regularly and completing assignments on time earlier in the course, and by ensuring that you are well rested during the examination period.

c. Over what time are the examinations usually sat?

Across about three or four weeks from the middle of May, often following a couple of weeks of study leave – your school will give you details on this.

#### 5. Beyond GCSEs: work or study?

a. What are the key options for further study after GCSEs?

AS or A levels, possibly followed by university, or vocational courses such as BTECs, usually followed by work.

b. What are the key options in terms of employment and training after GCSEs?

Apprenticeship programmes, available across a range of industries – you can get more information at: <http://www.apprenticeships.gov.uk>

c. Do I need to worry about university tuition fees?

Not in the short term and not if your family income is below a specific amount – fees are charged after you've finished your degree course and only when your income reaches a certain level. Fee levels can be checked online.

**Dr Tony Breslin** is an educationalist and public policy analyst. He is Director of the consultancy Breslin Public Policy Limited, Chair of the awarding body Industry Qualifications, a Visiting Fellow in the School of Education at the University of Hertfordshire and a Trustee of Adoption UK. He is also Chair of the Academy Council at Oasis Academy Enfield, Chair of Governors at Bushey and Oxhey Infant School and an associate of the Academy Improvement Team at Oasis Community Learning. A former Chair of Human Scale Education, the Association for the Teaching of the Social Sciences, and Speakers Bank, Tony is a qualified Ofsted Inspector and has served as a Chief Examiner at GCSE and a Principal Examiner and Chair of Examiners at A level.

Between September 2001 and August 2010, Tony was Chief Executive at the Citizenship Foundation, the leading education and participation charity. Prior to this, he was General Adviser, 14–19 Education, in Enfield, North London, where he led on vocational education and cross-borough sixth form arrangements, and produced the council's first lifelong learning strategy. A teacher by profession, he has taught and held management and leadership roles, including Head of Department and Director of Sixth Form Studies, at schools in Haringey and Hertfordshire.

Tony has published and spoken widely in the UK and overseas on education, participation, poverty and inclusion, and is credited, in particular, with the development of the concept of the citizenship-rich school. He is the co-editor, with Barry Dufour, of *Developing Citizens*, published by Hodder Education (2006), co-author, with Mike Moores, of *40@40: a portrait of 40 years of educational research through 40 studies*, published by the British Educational Research Association and Breslin Public Policy (2014) and co-author (with Ian Davies and a team based at the University of York) of *Creating Citizenship Communities: education, young people and the role of schools*, published by Palgrave Macmillan (2014).  
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**Mike Moores** has extensive experience as a teacher, trainer and manager in secondary and further education in Hertfordshire and in North West London. In addition, he has worked with all of the major exam boards in various capacities, including Principal Examiner at A level, and for a range of leading educational publishers. Until August 2011, when he retired after thirty-five years in the classroom, he led on the teaching of Sociology and Politics to A level students at St. Albans Girls' School. Mike has a particular expertise in the teaching of Sociology (in which he has a national profile as a writer and speaker), in delivering CPD to teachers and in study skills and family learning. He has a special interest in equal opportunities issues, including access to Higher Education and disability awareness.

Mike was, for many years, a Vice-president of the Association for the Teaching of the Social Sciences (ATSS) and runs a consultancy that stages conferences for teachers of Sociology and Politics. For many years he organised the ATSS Annual Conference and has served as the warden of a Teachers' Centre. He is co-author, with Tony Breslin, of *40@40: a portrait of 40 years of educational research through 40 studies*, published by the British Educational Research Association and Breslin Public Policy (2014).

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### About Breslin Public Policy

**Breslin Public Policy Limited** has worked in partnership with Cambridge University Press to produce this Transition Guide, one of a series of three publications – two guides for students and one for teachers, curriculum and pastoral managers, and school and college leaders. It marks the launch of a new series of Cambridge University Press textbooks designed specifically for the revised GCSE, AS and A Level specifications launched in September 2015 and thereafter. It is published as part of Breslin's Transform Education project, a range of activities designed to inspire and support innovative, creative and transformative practice in educational settings.

**Breslin Public Policy Limited** was established in September 2010; focused on education, participation and the third sector, it works at the interface between public policy and professional practice. Current and recent clients include Adoption UK, Beyond Philanthropy, the Bridge Group, the British Educational Research Association, the British Olympic Foundation, the British Paralympic Association, Cambridge University Press, Character Scotland, CCE England, the Diana Award, East Sussex County Council, Keynote Educational, the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG), Marriotts School (Stevenage), Navigation Learning, Oasis Academy Enfield, Oasis Community Learning, the Office of the Children's Commissioner, Ofqual, the Orwell Youth Prize, the RSA, the University of York Department of Education, and vInspired.

[www.breslinpublicpolicy.com](http://www.breslinpublicpolicy.com)

# Starting GCSEs

## Your guide to exam success

*Starting GCSEs: your guide to exam success* will enable young people, and their parents and carers, to make sense of and navigate the GCSE examination courses that dominate the upper secondary school curriculum in England and Wales.

Written by qualifications and curriculum specialists, Tony Breslin and Mike Moores, the authors draw on their extensive experience as secondary and further education teachers and senior examiners, and their work in parental engagement and widening participation, to focus on six things:

1. Reassurance  
Providing young people, and their parents and carers, with reassurance about the nature of the courses that they are about to begin
2. Induction  
Ensuring that young people are appropriately and generically inducted into these courses
3. Skills and attitudes  
Giving some sense of the skills and attitudes that young people will need to succeed as they make the transition from 'pupil' to 'student', both during their courses and in the exam hall
4. Exam preparation  
Introducing young people, and their parents and carers, to tactics and strategies for revision and examination preparation
5. Career opportunities  
Outlining the opportunities in the workplace and in Further and Higher Education that success could bring
6. Reflection  
Encouraging students to continually reflect on the choices before them, enabling young people to make wise, well-informed decisions **available from Cambridge University Press**

*Starting A levels: your guide to exam success* – a guide for those embarking on AS and A level studies.

*Curriculum 2015: your guide to the new qualifications landscape* – a guide for teachers, curriculum and pastoral managers, and school and college leaders.

Cambridge University Press Transition Guides are published in partnership with Breslin Public Policy Limited as part of their Transform Education project.

