

GCSE Grading is changing in 2017 Frequently Asked Questions for Parents

1. I have heard GCSEs are changing, what does this mean?

GCSEs will be graded on a new scale of 9 to 1 rather than A* to G as now, with 9 the highest grade, to distinguish clearly between the reformed and unreformed qualifications. The Government and Department for Education (DfE) have specified that the new GCSE syllabuses will include more challenging and knowledge-based content with exams only at the end of the course. There is less non-exam assessment too. English language, English literature and maths will be the first to be graded from 9 to 1 in 2017. Another twenty subjects will have 9 to 1 grading in 2018, with most others following in 2019. During this transition, students will receive a mixture of letter and number grades.

2. If the exams are harder, what will happen to the grades this summer ?

Although the exams will have to cover a wider, more challenging range of content, the independent exam regulator Ofqual has made it clear that students sitting these examinations for the first time will not be disadvantaged. Whilst students may come out of the exams feeling that they have done less well, Ofqual has said that broadly the same proportion of students who currently achieve a C and above, will achieve a grade 4 and above in the new GCSEs (see Q.4). The exam boards will base standards on results of 16 year olds who took previous GCSE qualifications, so that it does not disadvantage this year's year 11 students.

3. Why has this new grading system been introduced?

The introduction of the 9-1 system increases the number of higher grades than the previous A* - G system. By using 9-1, there are now six different grades from 4 to 9 rather than four (A*, A, B, C) in the old system which means individual students can be more accurately recognised in terms of their outcomes. The revised scale will also enable employers and others to easily identify which students have taken the new, more challenging GCSEs.

4. How does the new grading system match the old one?

The new grade scale will not be directly equivalent to the existing one. However, to be fair to the students and to give meaning to the new grades, Ofqual have decided that there will be some comparable points between the old grades and the approach used to awarding will ensure that in the first year of a new qualification:

- Broadly the same proportion of pupils will achieve a grade 7 and above as currently achieve a grade A and above
- Broadly the same proportion of pupils will achieve a grade 4 and above as currently achieve a grade C and above
- Broadly the same proportion of pupils will achieve a grade 1 and above as currently achieve a grade G and above

It is important to realise that the new GCSEs have more grades. While it is true to say that the same proportion of candidates will get a 4 AND ABOVE as currently get a C AND ABOVE, it is NOT true to say a grade 4 is directly equivalent to a grade C. This is because of the expanded number of grades above a 4. So, a grade 4 represents the bottom two thirds of a grade C, while a grade 5 is the equivalent of the top third of grade C and the bottom third of grade B.

5. As the top grade is grade 9, will there be similar numbers of 9s awarded to A*s currently?

There is more differentiation in the reformed qualifications, as there are three top grades

(7, 8 and 9), compared to two in the unreformed qualifications (A and A*), so you would expect that fewer students will get a grade 9 than previously got an A*.

6. I want my child to aim for the equivalent of a grade C across all subjects but I am confused as to whether they should be aiming for a 4 or a 5

Because the same proportion of candidates will get a 4 and above as currently get a C and above, aiming for 4 and above is equivalent to aiming for C and above. However, the government has defined a 'good pass' as a grade 5, in reality this is equivalent to a lower B grade or a high C grade. This shows that the Government is raising the expectation in terms of what it hopes students will achieve. Grade 4 is the equivalent to a Level 2 with grades 3 and below level 1. A grade 4 is what the government will consider as a 'pass' but it will be down to individual institutions' entry policy as to whether this will be enough to secure a place at the college or university of your child's choice. If your child has achieved a grade 4 in English and maths they won't be required to resit those subjects post-16.

7. If 5 is the new 'good pass' and 4 means my child won't have to resit English and Maths GCSE, how do I know that the 4 they might get will be sufficient to secure access to further education, training or employment? Should they resit until they get a 5 anyway?

A grade 4 is considered a 'pass' and your child will not be required to resit if they achieve a 4 in maths and English this summer. The current government intention is to introduce resits post 16, as part of the condition of funding, for those not achieving Grade 5 from 2019 onwards. However the government will take a view on this in the light of experience gained over the next year or so and may well review in time.

8. My child is sitting the new maths GCSE this summer - what are the main differences between the old and the reformed maths GCSEs?

The main differences are the structure of the assessment (more examination papers for students to sit), the content of the syllabus and the examination questioning styles. One of the aims of the reformed maths qualification is to encourage students' development of problem-solving skills, and this is reflected in the way that the questions are worded and structured in the assessment.

9. How will employers be informed and educated on the differences between the new and old grades and qualifications?

The DfE is working with the independent regulator Ofqual, exam boards and partner organisations such as the Confederation of Business Industry (CBI), using a variety of products and channels including social media, to ensure that all stakeholders can get access to the information they need. This includes ensuring that employers understand that the new GCSEs are more demanding, and that a new grade 4 represents a similar level of achievement to a current [low/medium] grade C – the threshold for a level 2 qualification.

10. Will employers/colleges be asking for a 4 or a 5 as part of their entry criteria?

Employers, colleges and universities will continue to decide the level of GCSE grades needed to meet their individual employment or study requirements. The DfE is encouraging employers, colleges and universities to have realistic expectations of pupils in the first cohorts to sit the new, tougher GCSEs when setting their entry requirements for work or further study. Employers and colleges will also need to recruit the same number of students as previously so are likely to set their criteria in terms of the equivalence of C and above and 4 and above.