

GCSE Grading is Changing in 2017

What do the new GCSE grades mean?

GCSEs will be graded on a new scale of 9 to 1, with 9 the highest grade, rather than A* to G as now, to distinguish clearly between the new reformed and old unreformed qualifications. The 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 20 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.

If the exams are harder, will my child end up with lower grades?

Although the new exams have to cover a 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 since the same proportion of students who previously achieved a C and above will achieve a grade 4 and above in the new GCSEs (see below).

How does the new grading system match the old one? What is a grade C 'pass'?

The new grade scale will not be directly equivalent to the existing one. However, to be fair to students and give meaning to the new grades, Ofqual has decided that there will be some comparable points between the old grades;

New grading structure	Current grading structure
9	
8	A*
7	A
6	B
5	C
4	
3	D
2	E
1	F
	G
U	U

- broadly the same proportion of pupils will achieve a 7 and above as currently achieve an A and above. Therefore, the bottom of a 7 is broadly equivalent to the bottom of grade A.
- broadly the same proportion of pupils will achieve a 4 and above as currently achieve a C and above. Therefore, the bottom of a 4 is broadly equivalent to the bottom of a grade C.
- broadly the same proportion of pupils will achieve a 1 and above as currently achieve a G and above. Therefore, the bottom of a 1 is broadly equivalent to the bottom of a grade G.

Therefore, aiming for 4 and above is equivalent to aiming for C and above. This is, and will remain the level that pupils must achieve in order not to be required to continue studying English and maths post-16. The government has defined a grade 4 as a 'standard' pass. The government will publish schools' results at the 'standard pass' (grade 4 and above), but also at a 'strong pass' (grade 5 and above) in school performance tables only. Number of pupils achieving a 'strong pass' will be a measure by which schools are judged.

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

You would expect that fewer students will get a grade 9 than previously got an A* as there are more top grades (7, 8, 9 instead of A*/A). It is therefore expected that achieving a 9 will be more unusual than previously achieving an A*.

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.

Will employers and colleges be aware of these changes? What will their criteria be?

The DfE is working with Ofqual, exam boards and partner organisations such as the Confederation of Business Industry (CBI) to ensure that all understand that the new GCSEs are more demanding, and that a new grade 4 represents a similar level of achievement to a current low to medium grade C – the threshold for a level 2 qualification. Employers, colleges and universities will continue to decide the level of GCSE grades needed to meet their individual employment or study requirements.

How will schools be judged?

Numbers of passes at 4 and 5 will be published along with those achieving both maths and English (called basics). However, the main gauge of a schools' performance will continue to be their 'progress 8' score. This is an average of all students top 8 subjects including English, maths, two sciences, and a humanity or language. A score of zero means you are ranked in the middle of schools nationally for this indicator. For 2017 only as a transition year, a higher progress score will be given to students achieving 5 and upwards. This may skew the progress 8 score slightly against schools with a less able intake.

6 essential points (at a glance)

1. GCSE Grade 4 is a standard pass and is broadly the same as the old C grade.
2. GCSE grade 7 and above is broadly the same as A, A* and with a new A** grade for grade 9
3. GCSE grade 1 is broadly the same as a grade G
4. Only maths and English exams will be graded 1 to 9 this year, the rest will still be A* to G.
5. Achieving less than a 4 in maths or English will mean having to continue to study this subject post 16
6. Exams are different/more challenging this year and results are therefore not comparable across years

Source of information – ASCL information papers for student, parents and school leaders.