



A-Levels How are they Different?

A Guide to Moving from GCSEs to A-Level Study



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Introduction

Moving from your GCSEs to studying A-levels will pose new challenges and opportunities. You may encounter entirely new subjects that you've never studied before, and develop new interests that will shape your life in the future. You will learn new ways of working and find yourself developing intellectually and emotionally.

As you think about your next steps and reflect on the decisions you are about to make, it will be useful to take some time to learn about how A-Levels are different from GCSEs and how life in a sixth form is different from life at school.

The way you study will change

You will probably hear it said that A-levels are harder than GCSEs, and they are. It's worth pointing out that the 'A' in A-level stands for 'Advanced' - you will be studying a subject at an advanced level and the course is meant to be challenging.

At A-level you will be focusing on three or four subjects, instead of ten, so you will cover a lot more content and study things in more detail. The exams and course work will also be more challenging. A-level exams tend to be longer than those for GCSE. They have fewer and

more complicated questions that require longer and more complex answers.

Your timetable will change too. At school each hour was accounted for, but at sixth form each day will have 'free periods' between some of your lessons. This should not be thought of as 'time off'. Instead this is the time where you direct your own study. Take this time to:

- Prepare for upcoming lessons.
- Do wider reading around the subject.
- Work on improving previously assessed work.
- Revise the content you've already covered.

A-levels put a lot more emphasis on independent study. You will be asked to make use of your free periods to complete additional reading and research. This time will be largely self-directed – in other words it will be up to you to manage your own time and set your priorities. Your teacher may not check up on you, and may set work that they do not expect you to hand in for marking. Instead you will be entrusted with taking responsibility for large parts of your own learning.

You may wonder what this looks like in practise. Prepare for your lessons by making sure you've done any homework, or by revising the content covered in the previous lesson. Wider reading around a subject doesn't just mean sitting in the library: read relevant magazines, listen to podcasts, ask your teacher for recommendations. This will enhance your knowledge and build your confidence. Most importantly make sure you revise assessed work. Marked homework shouldn't be hidden away in your file – ask for feedback, find out how it could be improved and make those improvements.

Elements of your personal life may change too. You may work part time, support family members or develop new pastimes that you need to consider alongside your studies. Balancing these commitments will help you to prepare for managing your own time at university, as well as later, in your working life.



The way you are graded will change

One of the most obvious differences between A-level and GCSE is the grading system. By now you will be used to talking about results in terms of numbers (9-1), but during your A-levels you will switch over to an alphabetic system that runs from A* at the top, down to E at the bottom. GCSE number grades and A-level letter grades do roughly approximate with each other but there is a little more to it than that.

It's important to understand where the boundaries between each letter grade lie for each of your subjects and how you can continuously improve your work to gain the extra marks needed to move closer to the next grade boundary. Get into the habit of asking your teachers about where the grade boundaries have been set for different exam papers, and how far you are from the next grade up when marked work is returned to you. You may only be a mark or two away from a higher grade.

Where you study could change

Your experience of A-levels can be quite different depending on where you decide to study.

Your options are:

- Stay at your present school if they offer the A-levels that you want to study.
- Apply to the sixth form at a different secondary school.

- Apply to a large further education college that offers A-levels.
- Apply to a dedicated sixth form college.

Schools

School Sixth Forms tend to be smaller than colleges and are integrated into secondary schools. If you choose to attend the sixth form at your current school you will probably still be taught by the same teachers as you were before. It will be a familiar environment, but you will find yourself learning in smaller classes and possibly work in a separate part of the school.

Depending on the culture of the sixth form, there may be some similarities with your experience of school. Whilst a uniform policy will be rare, some will still have dress codes that expect you conform to certain standards. This is not the case everywhere, and some school sixth forms may be quite relaxed, so it's important do some research and find out exactly what the school is like.

You can apply to study at a sixth form even if you didn't attend there for secondary school. If you meet their entry requirements you can be enrolled to study there alongside students who may have already attended that school.

To study A-levels, schools and colleges set entry requirements (minimum GCSE grades to study there) and some may expect you to have achieved a certain grade at GCSE to study a subject at A-level (e.g. a minimum of a 7 to study Mathematics). At a minimum you will usually be expected to have at least five GCSEs graded 9 – 4. Schools, due to their smaller size, may set higher entry requirements than colleges.

Colleges

Further Education and Sixth Form colleges can sometimes be large and therefore a little impersonal to start off with. For this reason they can also be good preparation for life at



university both academically and socially. You will be faced with new buildings, new people and new teachers so it could feel a little overwhelming. However, moving to a new, larger learning environment with lots of new people may also be an exciting change.

Due to their larger size colleges tend to offer more A-level options in a broader range of subjects than schools. You may encounter subjects that you have never studied before like Economics, Film, Philosophy and Politics.

Colleges tend to be larger than schools, are usually located in towns and cities, may offer a wide range of courses aside from A-levels and often have more inclusive entry requirements. A college is likely to be more diverse in terms of people's backgrounds, ages and destinations than your school. Colleges may structure their day differently, have fewer rules and regulations and teachers may be called by their first names. This may allow for greater self-expression and freedom, but also means a more grown-up and responsible culture where success can depend on self-discipline and effective time-management.

find the workload? Did they attend a school or a college?

- Do your own research on prospective sixth forms. What courses do they offer? What is their reputation? You could read their inspection reports on the OFSTED website.
 - o reports.ofsted.gov.uk
- Visit the Informed Choices website. Here you can find additional guidance on post-GCSE options and progression to university.
 - o www.informedchoices.ac.uk

Next Steps

There are several things you can start doing now to help you prepare for your A-Levels:

- Research prospective sixth forms online. Many will offer virtual open days and provide information and advice on their websites.
- Where possible you could attend a college or school open day. Sixth forms often run regular events for prospective students where you get to meet the staff, see the facilities and learn about the different subject options.
- If you have friends or family who have studied A-levels ask them what their experiences was like. How did they

