

# Your qualification Our regulation

GCSE, AS and A level reforms in England

We regulate **GCSEs, AS and A levels** in England so that people can have confidence in these qualifications, and rely on the results.

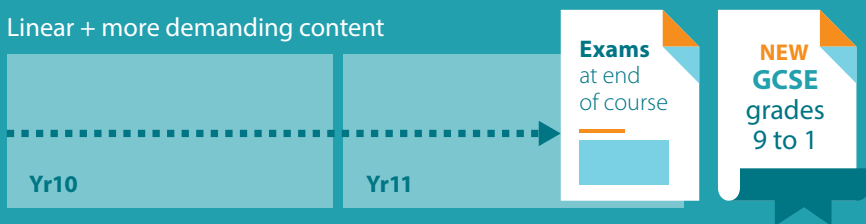
The postcards in this set are:

- The reforms
- Accreditation
- Grading new GCSEs from 2017
- New GCSE grade descriptors
- Awarding for new GCSE student cohorts
- National Reference Test
- Spoken language in new GCSE English language
- Improving science practicals
- New marking review and appeal arrangements
- Grading new AS and A levels
- About Ofqual

## The reforms

### GCSE

Linear + more demanding content



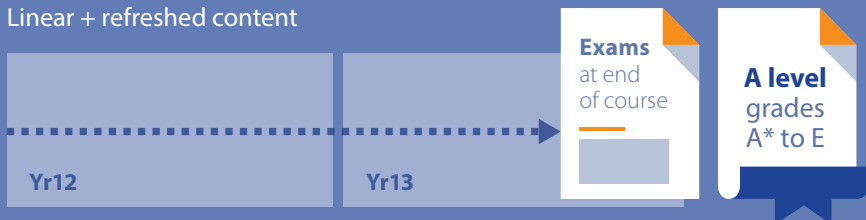
### AS level

No longer count towards an A level + refreshed content



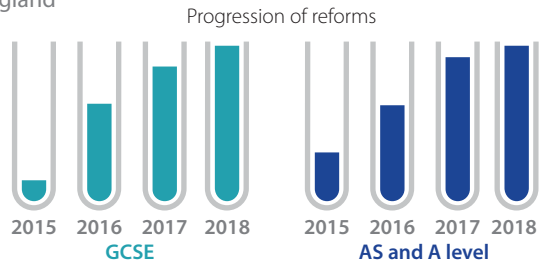
### A level

Linear + refreshed content



## GCSE, AS and A level reforms in England

### The reforms



**GCSE, AS and A level** qualifications are being reformed. **The new subjects are being introduced gradually**, with the first wave being taught from September 2015. Subjects that have not been reformed will no longer be available for teaching from September 2018.

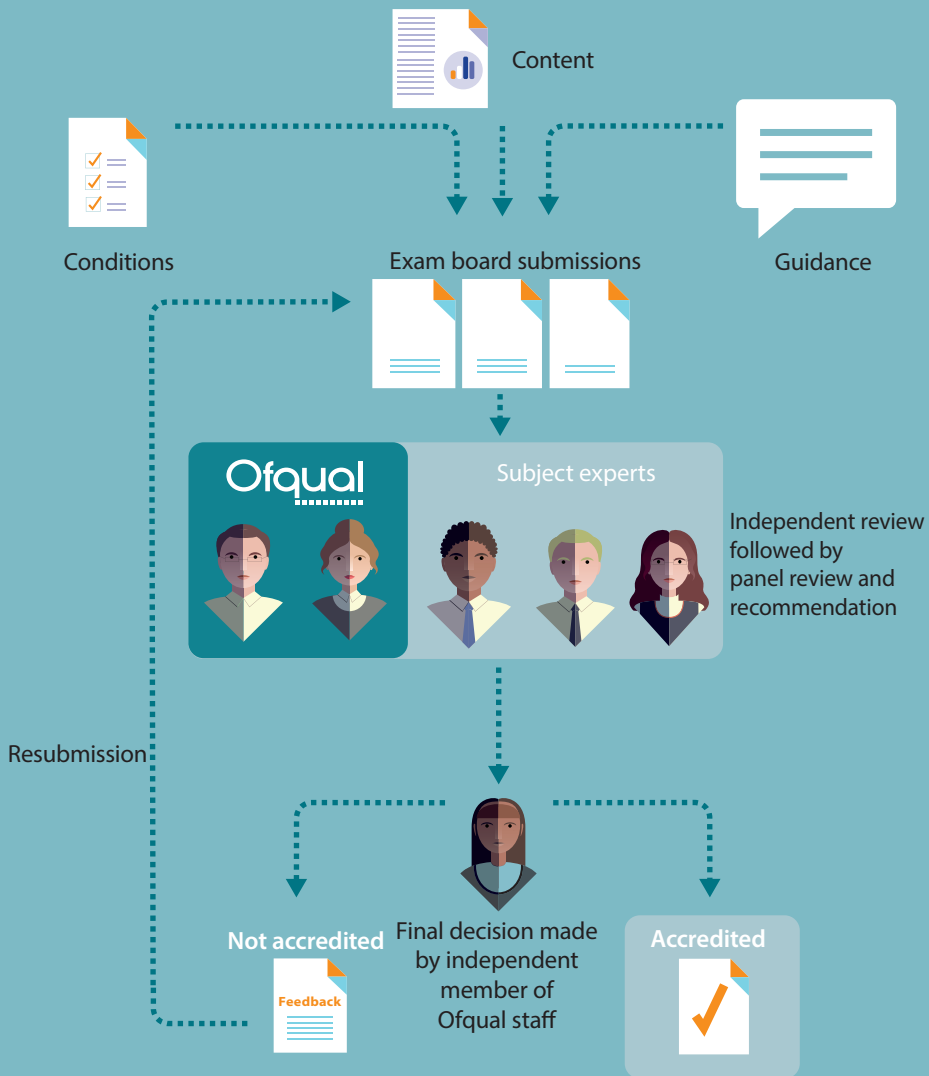
### Reformed GCSEs

- will have more demanding content
- have been designed for a two-year period of study
- will be linear, so students will take all of their exams at the end of the course
- the degree of non-exam assessment will reflect balance and nature of new subject content
- will have a new grading scale from 9 (top grade) to 1
- students studying combined science will receive one of 17 possible grades, from 1-1, 1-2, 2-2, 2-3... to 9-9

### Reformed AS and A levels

- content refreshed with greater input from universities
- AS results will no longer count towards an A level
- will be linear, with AS assessments typically taking place after one year of study and A levels after two
- will keep the A\* to E grading scale (A to E for AS level)
- the degree of non-exam assessment will reflect balance and nature of new subject content
- grading standards stay the same

# Accreditation process



## Accreditation process

We use accreditation to decide whether new **GCSEs, AS and A level** qualifications produced by exam boards can be awarded.

---

The Department for Education **determines the subject content** for reformed GCSEs, AS and A levels, which exam boards use to produce submissions that must also meet our rules (known as Conditions). We determine the assessment rules and we produce guidance about our rules. Exam boards must use all of these to develop their qualifications.

---

Exam board submissions must include a specification, an assessment strategy and sample exam papers and their mark schemes. Each submission is **reviewed against our General Conditions and qualification and subject level conditions**. There are two stages to the review. The first is an independent review by at least two subject experts and Ofqual staff. The second involves the experts and Ofqual staff meeting, as a panel, to consider the findings together. Each submission has to meet the same standards and give us confidence that it is appropriate for the subject, qualification level and target group of students.

---

The final accreditation decision is taken by an independent member of Ofqual staff who considers the recommendations and evidence provided by the panel. If the decision is not to accredit the qualification, the reasons for rejection are explained to the exam board.

## Grading new GCSEs from 2017

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

**GOOD PASS (DfE)**  
5 and above = top of C and above

**AWARDING**  
4 and above = bottom of C and above

**Exams in reformed English language, English literature and maths GCSEs will be taken for the first time in 2017. These will be graded from 9 to 1, instead of A\* to G.**



Statistical predictions will be used in 2017 to ensure there is alignment between the new and current grading structures, such that:

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

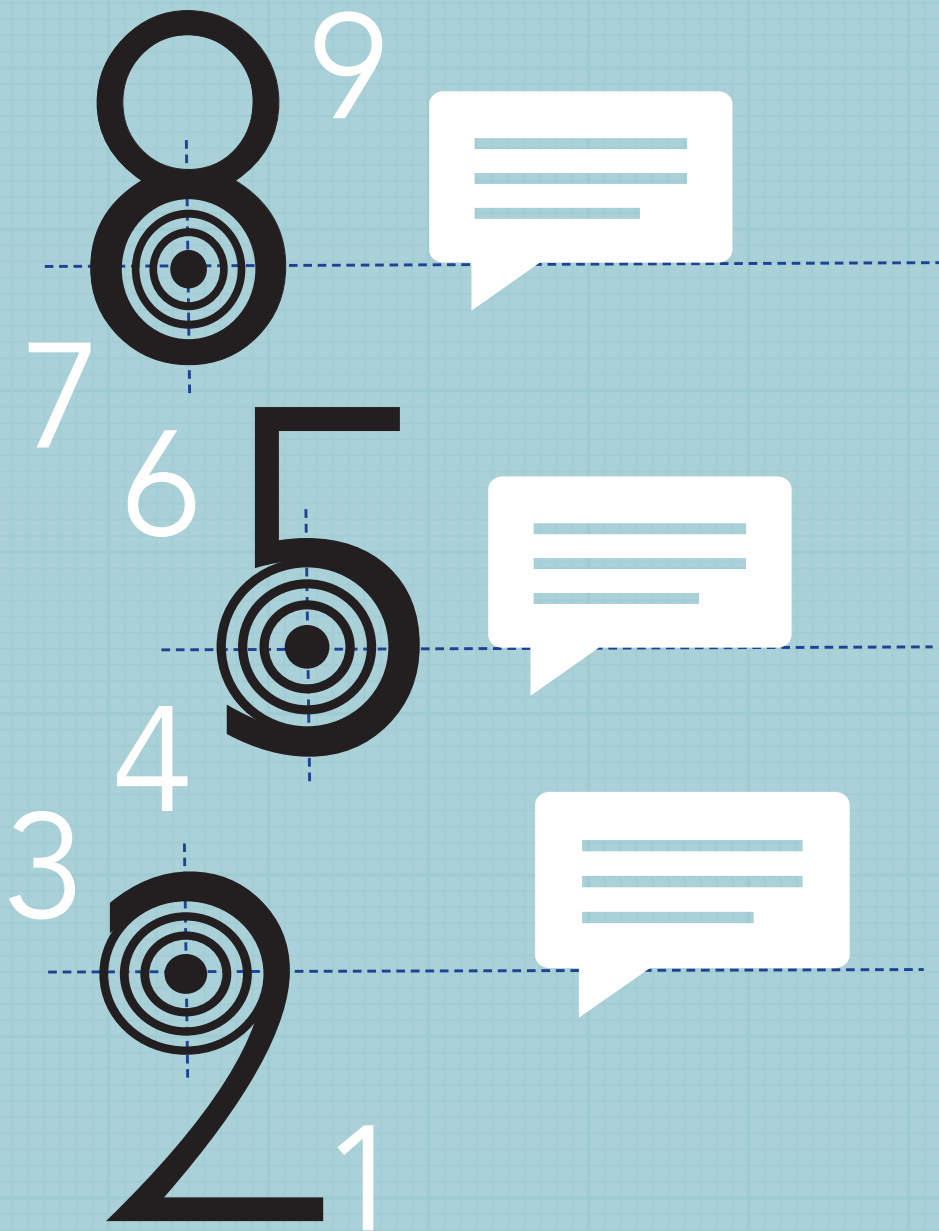
All other grade boundaries will be set arithmetically, as now. For example, the boundaries at grades 5 and 6 will be set based on the difference in marks between grades 4 and 7; grade 5 will be set at one third of the difference in marks, and grade 6 at two thirds the difference in marks.

The government's definition of a 'good pass' will be set at grade 5 for reformed GCSEs. A grade 4 will continue to be a level 2 achievement. The Department for Education does not expect employers, colleges or universities to raise the bar to a grade 5 if a grade 4 would meet their requirements.

The new grading structure will be applied to other GCSE subjects in 2018 and 2019.



New GCSE grade descriptors



**We have developed grade descriptors for the reformed GCSEs graded 9 to 1. These aim to assist teachers by providing an indication of the likely level of performance at grades 2, 5 and 8.**

---

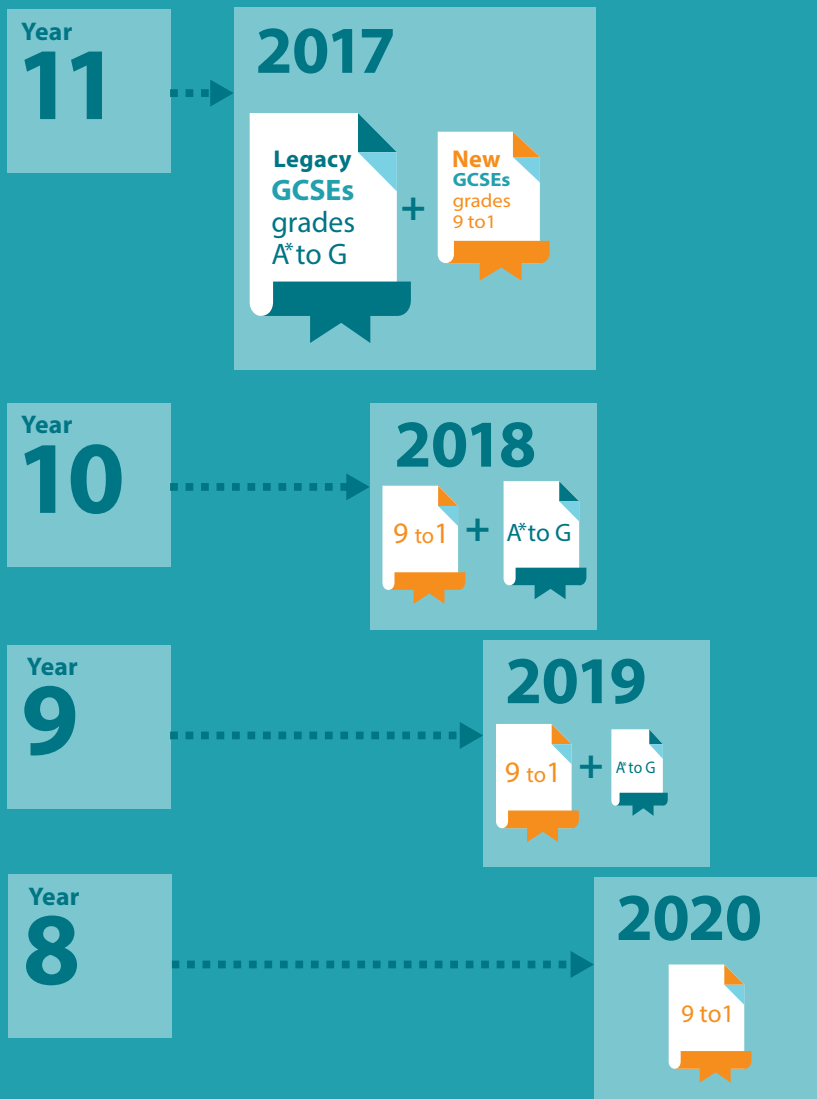
The purpose of these grade descriptors is to give an indication of average performance at the mid-points of grades 2, 5 and 8. The descriptors are not designed to be used for awarding purposes, unlike the 'grade descriptions' that apply to legacy GCSEs graded A\* to G.

---

The grade descriptors were developed with the input of subject experts and exam boards. The wording draws on the relevant subject content published by the Department for Education as well as the assessment objectives published by Ofqual.

The grade descriptors can be found on our website.

## Awarding for new GCSE student cohorts



## **New GCSEs are being introduced gradually, with the first wave taught from September 2015. Students will sit a combination of legacy and reformed GCSEs until 2019.**

---

### **Year 11 in September 2016**

These students will take new exams in the first reformed GCSEs subjects – English language, English literature and maths. Their final GCSE certificates will comprise a mixture of numbers and legacy letters.

### **Year 10 in September 2016**

These students will start a wider range of reformed GCSEs, but they may also take some legacy qualifications. As such, their final GCSE certificates, in 2018, may comprise a mixture of numbers and letters.

### **Year 9 in September 2016**

All GCSEs, with the exception of some lesser-taught languages, will have been reformed by the time these students select their subjects. As such, their final GCSE certificates will mainly comprise numbers.

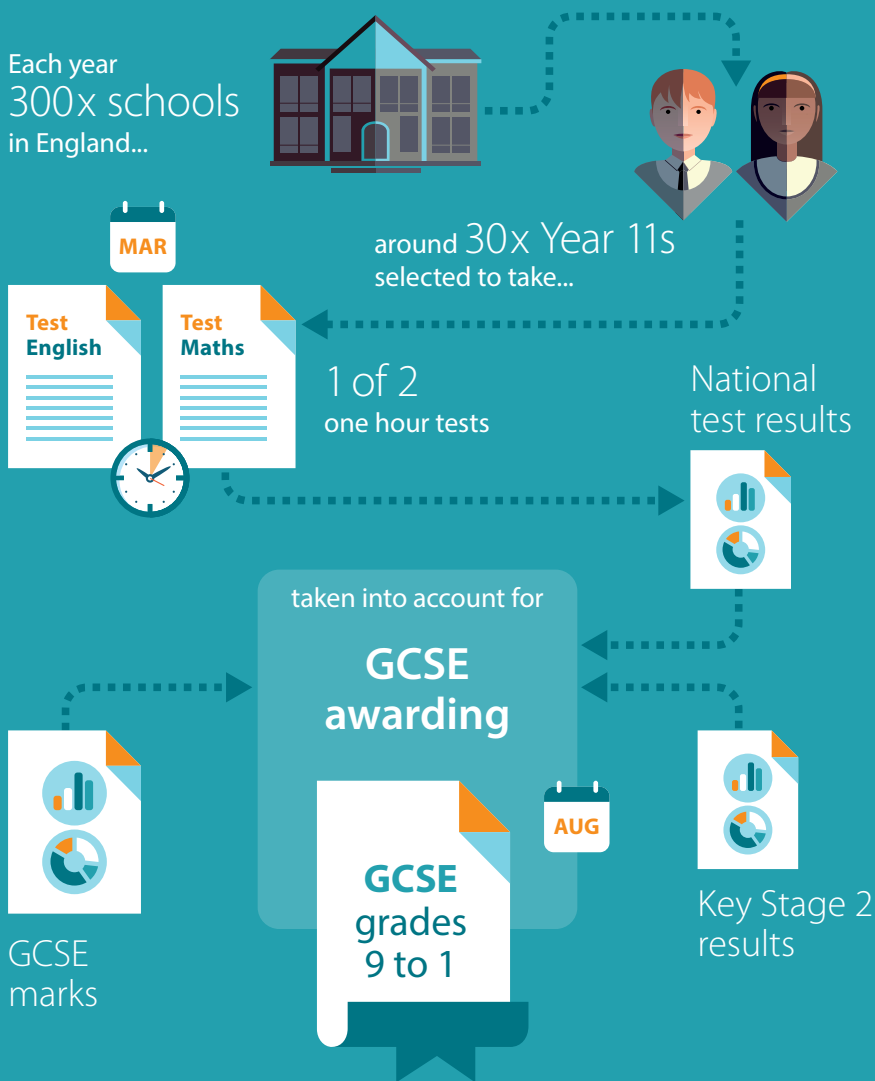
### **Year 8 in September 2016**

All GCSEs will have been reformed by the time these students sit their exams. Their final GCSE certificates will only comprise numbers.

---

We will use a statistical method (known as comparable outcomes) in each year new exams are sat so that students who first sit reformed qualifications will not be disadvantaged as a result of the changes.

# National Reference Test



**The National Reference Test is being introduced in 2017 to provide additional information to support the awarding of GCSEs. Trials in March 2016 allowed us to check processes ahead of the first live test in 2017.**

---

**Annual tests in maths and English** will be taken by a sample of year 11 students in February and March each year. The test questions will remain largely the same from year to year. We will not be able to provide individual feedback to students or schools and the results won't be used for accountability purposes.

---

Each year, around **300 schools in England** will take part in the tests. Legislation requires that these schools take part. At each school, around 30 students will take an English paper and another 30 students will take a maths paper. The tests will take an hour to complete and will be administered and invigilated by the National Foundation for Educational Research.

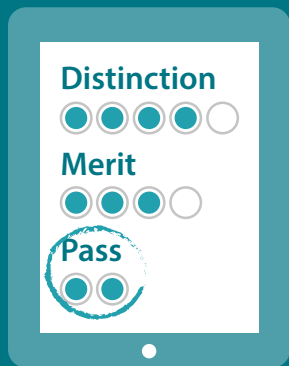
---



**Evidence for  
Excellence in  
Education**

We will **publish national test results** towards the end of August each year. Over time, the tests have the potential to provide a valuable additional source of information that may be **taken into account when GCSEs are awarded.**

## Spoken language in new GCSE English language

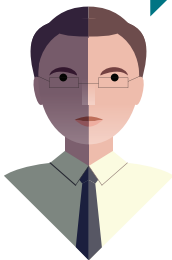


Spoken language  
performance will  
be reported as a  
separate result

## The new GCSE in English language will be first awarded in 2017.

---

**The assessment of speaking skills will not contribute towards a student's 9 to 1 grade. Spoken language performance will be reported as a separate result, at the level of either 'pass', 'merit', 'distinction' or 'not classified'.**



**Teachers will assess their students against criteria which are the same across all exam boards. A student must meet all of the criteria within a specific level to be awarded that classification.**

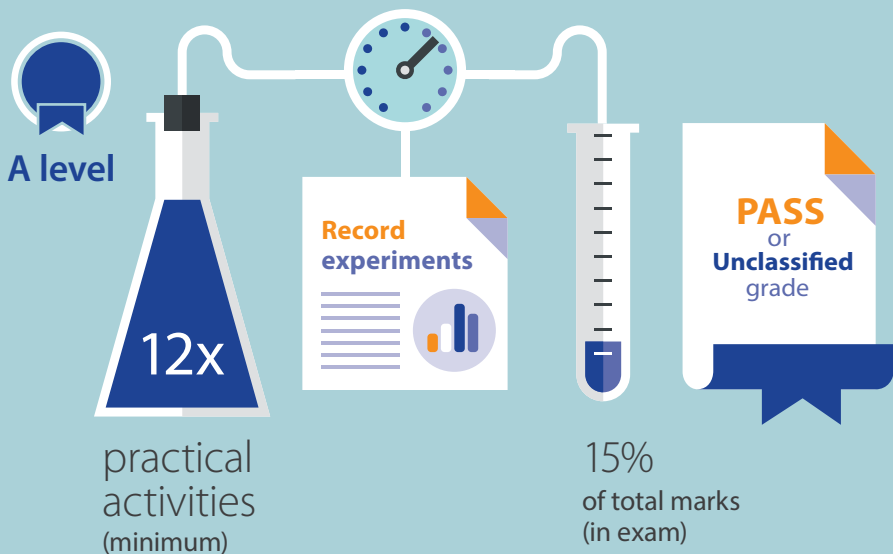
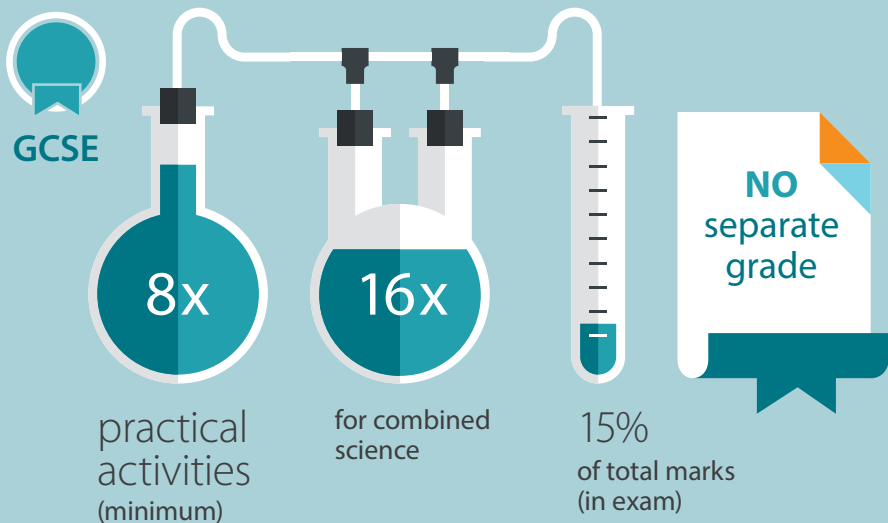


---

Schools will have to confirm they have enabled their students to undertake the spoken language assessment. A sample of students from each school will be filmed to allow exam boards to monitor assessment.



## Improving science practicals



## **We are reforming science GCSEs and A levels. One of the main changes to both qualifications is how practicals will be assessed.**

- Students do at least 8 practical activities (16 for combined science) covering specific apparatus and techniques
- Exam questions about practical work will make up at least 15% of the total marks for the qualification
- Students will be assessed on their knowledge, skills and understanding of practical work
- Students studying combined science will receive one of 17 possible grades, from 1-1, 1-2, 2-2, 2-3... to 9-9



**GCSE**

- Students do at least 12 practical activities per subject
- Students will need to record their activities as they do them
- Written questions about practical work will make up at least 15% of the total marks for the qualification
- Students will receive a pass or unclassified grade for their practical skills at the end of the course alongside their A\* to E grade.
- Teachers will assess their students against criteria which are the same across all exam boards. A student must meet all of the criteria to pass

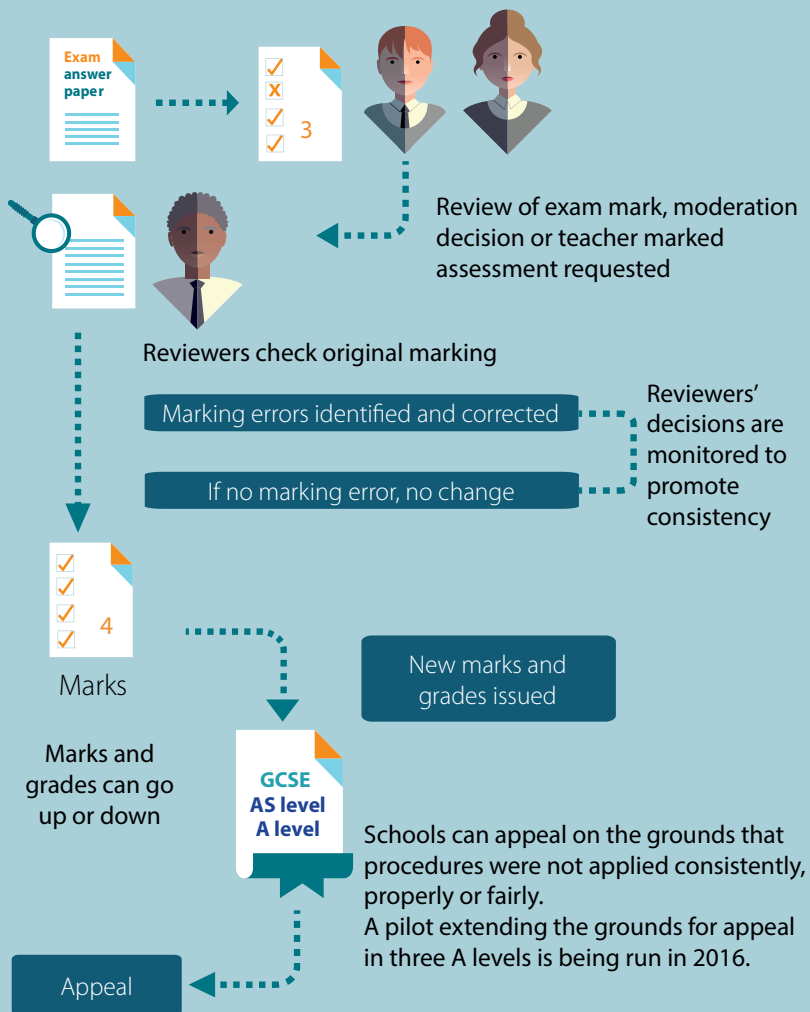


**A level**

### **For both GCSE and A level**

Schools will have to confirm they have taken reasonable steps to make sure that students complete all the defined practical activities. This reflects the critical importance of practical work within the science curriculum.

# New marking review and appeal arrangements



## Exam boards are responsible for marking GCSE, AS and A level exam papers.

---

Markers are specially trained and most of them are experienced teachers. They must complete **compulsory training sessions** to ensure consistency in their approach to marking. The quality of their marking is monitored. If an examiner is not marking properly they might be re-trained or stopped from marking, and their work given to another marker.

---

If a school has **concerns about a mark** they can ask for it to be reviewed by their exam board. Changes have been introduced to make the review system clearer, more consistent and fairer for all students. From 2016, results will only be changed if there is a marking error. Exam boards will train and monitor reviewers to make sure they are acting consistently.

**Schools can appeal the outcome of a review** on the grounds that exam board procedures were not applied consistently, properly or fairly.

---

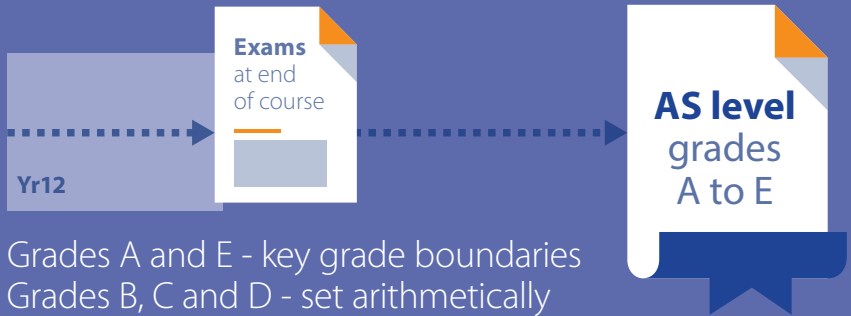
### 2016 pilot

A pilot exercise is being run in 2016 to consider whether the grounds for appeal should be extended to include cases where a marking error was not corrected during the review or that there was a marking error in the review itself.

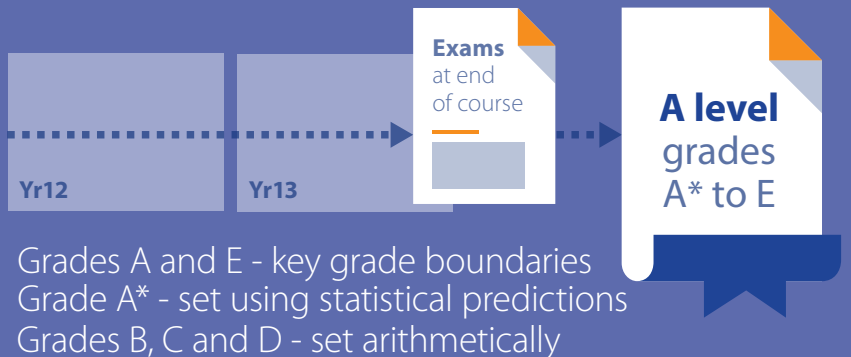
## Grading new AS and A levels

### New and legacy AS level grading

No longer count towards an A level



### New A level grading



## **New AS and A levels will be linear, rather than modular qualifications. This will change the way that some grade boundaries are calculated.**

---

**Existing A level grade boundaries** are set in different ways. Grades E and A are key grade boundaries. They are set by exam boards based on senior examiner judgement of student work, statistical predictions and other evidence.

Grades B, C and D are arithmetic grade boundaries. They are set by dividing the difference in marks between grades A and E equally. Students who currently achieve an A grade overall and 90% of the Uniform Mark Scheme marks on their A2 components receive an A\*.

---

In **reformed A levels**, grades E and A will continue to be key grade boundaries. They will be set in a way similar to existing key grade boundaries. Grade A\* will be set using statistical predictions. Grades B, C and D will continue to be set arithmetically, based on the difference between the marks between grades A and E.

In **reformed AS levels**, grades E and A will also be key grade boundaries and B, C and D will be set arithmetically.



**A level**



**AS level**

About Ofqual  
**Who we are and what we do**

We are **independent** of government and report directly to Parliament



**We regulate a broad range of qualifications taken in England, including GCSEs, AS and A levels. Other regulators exist for the devolved nations of the UK.**

---



**We are independent of government** and report directly to Parliament, although we do work within the context of government policy. Government decides the national curriculum used by primary and secondary schools, the qualifications that can be offered in schools, and the accountability framework by which schools are evaluated. It also determines the vocational qualifications that can be taught in schools and colleges, and the framework for qualifications used in apprenticeships.

---

**We regulate around 150 awarding organisations** who between them award around 14,000 different qualifications. We regulate so that these qualifications are valid and can be trusted, and so that new GCSEs, AS and A levels and other key qualifications are of the required standard.



GCSEs



AS & A levels



Vocational  
qualifications



**“The reforms being made to GCSEs, AS and A levels are ambitious and wide-ranging.**

There are new subjects being taught, new content, new forms of assessment, a new grading system for GCSEs, and new rules covering exam boards’ marking review and appeal systems. In such a period of change, it is essential that all of the component parts of the education system operate well together.

I hope this set of postcards, and the additional information that can be accessed through them, gives you confidence in our commitment to that goal.”

**Sally Collier**  
Chief Regulator



Our statutory objectives are set out in the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009. More information on our goals and objectives can be found in our corporate plan.

[www.gov.uk/ofqual](http://www.gov.uk/ofqual)

You can't order further printed copies of this publication, but digital versions are available at

[bit.ly/offqualpostcards](http://bit.ly/offqualpostcards)

## Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual)

Spring Place

Coventry Business Park

Herald Avenue

Coventry CV5 6UB

Email: [public.enquiries@ofqual.gov.uk](mailto:public.enquiries@ofqual.gov.uk)

Telephone: 0300 303 3344



[twitter.com/ofqual](https://twitter.com/ofqual)



[youtube.com/ofqual](https://youtube.com/ofqual)



[pinterest.com/ofqual](https://pinterest.com/ofqual)



[bit.ly/ofqualnewsletter](http://bit.ly/ofqualnewsletter)

© Crown copyright 2016

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit [nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3](http://nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3)