

Choosing GCSE Options (www.plotr.co.uk)

1. Should I base GCSE options on what I'm good at?

You're likely to enjoy the subjects you're good at. Being good at a particular area might help you manage your GCSE workload, too, because you'll be able to complete work more quickly and get good results. What's more, learning more about a subject you have natural ability in might be useful when making career choices later down the line.

Finally, good GCSE grades could affect your university options (if you decide to take the uni route) because universities and colleges only accept 5-9 (or, if you're using the old system, A*-C) GCSE pass grades for most degree courses. If you're not sure how good you are at a subject, you can talk to your teacher and ask for advice.

2. Should I base GCSE options on what I enjoy?

It's fine to consider choosing subjects you like at GCSE level. You'll be studying that subject for several periods a week for the next two years, so it'll definitely help if there are aspects of the subject you enjoy! Even if you hate school, there's bound to be a subject you connect with. This could work to your advantage, because if you enjoy a subject you are more likely to work harder and get a higher grade in it. It's okay to do a subject just because you like it.

When choosing subjects you enjoy, ask yourself two things:

- What's the **content** of this subject? (Are you interested in the things you'll be learning about?)
- What **skills** does it require? (Do you think you can build the skills this subject requires?)

If you're worried about your final list of choices, look at the list and ask yourself: Is my final list of options a balanced one? Is it all just 'easy' subjects, which I like but might not be useful to me when it's time to do further education and/or get a job? Or is it a fair mix of useful stuff and fun stuff? (Not forgetting that useful stuff can be fun too!)

3. Should I choose a GCSE subject because I like the teacher?

It's a tricky one, because a great teacher can inspire you to do your best in a subject. However, how much you like your teacher should not be one of the key factors when choosing your GCSE options. That inspirational teacher might leave school, after all. There's no point doing a subject just to impress your favourite teacher, either. They won't be in your life forever –

4. Should I choose a GCSE subject because my friends are doing it?

It's better not to just choose a GCSE option because your friends are taking it. Doing different GCSEs shouldn't have any effect on your friendships – it will just mean you have lots to talk about when you're together at other times. Plus, there's a chance you'll make additional new friends in the subject you choose, too.

5. Whose advice should I listen to when choosing GCSE options?

Teachers at your school are really well-placed to offer you advice and support; do talk to your teachers if you have any questions about your GCSEs and how it all works.

Careers advisors are extremely well-trained and prepared to help you with your careers and GCSE-related questions - whatever your questions are, they will be able to offer support, resources and information to help you with your choices.

Your parents can also help – they may not understand new point systems and things that weren't around in their day, but they should have your best interests at heart.

Your friends will be going through the same stress as you, so you can bounce ideas off them if you like... but it's important to remember it's your final decision.

6. Are my A-level choices affected by the GCSE choices I make now?

Some A-level options don't require you to have studied them at GCSE first – for example, psychology, economics, media studies or law – but for others you'll need the GCSE, so check with your teacher to make sure. Some A-levels, like science, may no longer be open to you if you choose a single science at GCSE. Taking double award science (core + additional) or triple award science (physics, chemistry and biology) at GCSE will help to keep your future options open.

7. Do universities care about which GCSE options you choose?

Most universities need you to have English and maths GCSEs... which is handy, because you'll be studying them as core GCSE subjects anyway.

For some degrees, or careers, their requirements for GCSE and A-level subjects aren't too limiting. For example, most unis don't mind which subjects you've studied before if you want to do a Psychology degree – they just want you to have done well in the (usually 'traditional' or 'hard') subjects you chose.

In some cases, you'll need specific A-levels (and therefore the GCSEs you need to be able to do those A-levels) to get on certain university courses (e.g. the sciences, history or foreign languages).

8. How important is it to get good grades in my GCSEs?

If you want to give yourself a wider choice of options after school, getting good grades is quite important. If you think you might struggle to achieve these higher pass grades, ask for support from teachers in choosing a set of GCSE options that will help you focus on your strengths and what you most enjoy – since, if you enjoy a subject, you're more likely to do your best and perform better in it. You'll still be wanting to get a balance of what you'd most enjoy studying for two years and what will be most 'useful', though.

9. What's the difference between 'hard' and 'soft' subjects?

Some top universities out there consider certain A-level subjects a bit too 'soft'. In other words, those subjects are considered less likely to push the skills and knowledge of their students. In contrast, 'hard' subjects – also known as 'traditional' or 'facilitating' subjects – are seen by both universities and employers as very useful subjects to study because they show how hard you can work and also teach skills that will be useful in all kind of further education courses and careers.

Examples of 'soft' A-levels include PE and sport, art & design, business studies, accounting and performing arts. If you're aiming for a top university like Oxford or Bristol, you might find getting in a struggle if you've picked A-levels like these.

Thinking about 'hard' and 'soft' A-levels while you're still picking your GCSE options can be very useful. Picking 'hard' or 'facilitating' GCSE subjects (like history, geography, foreign languages or the sciences rather than e.g. business studies, home economics, ICT or media studies) could place you in a better position to go on to pick A-level subjects that universities place a lot of value in.

As a general guideline, consider picking mainly 'facilitating' GCSE subjects to keep your future options as open as possible, and then perhaps picking a 'soft' subject because you're really interested in it, or it specifically matches the direction you want to take in life. However, one size doesn't fit all when it comes to choosing subjects. Your teachers are there to help you. With their advice and support you can choose GCSE options which are a good fit for you.

10. Does my final GCSE options list look balanced?

This is a helpful question to ask yourself once you've come up with a list of GCSE options you like the look of. Does it look like it's got a good general spread of subjects (so not just art or sport and just tech subjects)? Does it feature 'traditional' subjects (like history, geography or Latin) other than your core subjects, so that you've got plenty of future options and a chance to impress universities and employers? Does it feature subjects you'll enjoy doing and want to learn? If the answer to all these questions is 'yes', the chances are you have a balanced final list of GCSE options that will make your next two years rewarding ones and set you up for later life.

11. Does it matter if I'm in a lower set for my GCSEs?

Everyone has different abilities, strengths and learning patterns. What's most important is that you're in the set that's right for you.

Being in a lower set can affect your grades if, for example, you're put in a lower set for maths, and entered for a GCSE paper where the highest grade that can be achieved is a 4-5 (C). This might be a problem if you want to take maths at A-level (you'll normally need a maths GCSE 6-7 (B) grade or higher to make this happen).

If you understand why you were placed in a lower set, don't feel like a door's been slammed in your face... there are still loads of options left open to you in the future, from apprenticeships to uni courses which allow 4-5 (C) grades as requirements.

If you think you're in the wrong set, talk to your teacher to find out what they'd need to see from you (work attitude? Better marks?) before getting you moved up into a higher set.

12. Will I ever regret my GCSE choices?

If you ask around, you'll find many people wish they'd not taken a certain GCSE, or that they'd had a bash at taking another GCSE. But a lot of the time, these are not life-changing regrets – they're more wishes that the two-year experience of taking GCSEs had been even more useful, or even more enjoyable.

At the end of the day, whatever GCSE options you pick will result in two years of you learning things you didn't know before and giving yourself the chance for a better future. If you do end up regretting GCSEs, it's more a case of not winning as much as you wanted than actually losing out.

13. How can I cope with the immense stress of choosing GCSE options? On some days I don't even know what I want to have for breakfast!

Fear not - you can do this! It's tough to choose, but you'll feel quite good about your final list of options once you've done it. And know that however impossible it might feel to make this big decision, you're not alone. Everyone finds it tough to choose their options, yet somehow it happens and you can breathe a sigh of relief and move on.

Hopefully the advice you've found here will help some of your choices become a bit clearer. We wish you luck in your upcoming GCSEs!

Final tip: GCSE grades have changed!

Instead of being marked A-G, your GCSEs will be marked 9-1, with 9 being the highest grade you can get.

Normally, employers, colleges and universities will say they're looking for a A*-C pass grade. As of 2017 they'll be looking for a 5-9 pass grade!

Here's how it all breaks down:

- Grade 9: The highest grade you can get – you'll be in the top 20% of GCSE students in the country!
- Grades 7 to 9: A to A*
- Grades 5 to 9: A good passing grade
- Grade 4: A fair passing grade (a bit like a C)

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.direct.gov.uk/nationalcareersservice select: Job Profiles and type in the job title. Lots of career information including the employment situation for each career in various parts of the UK.

www.plotr.co.uk – look up jobs to find out what they involve and play 'The Game' to find out what job might suit you

www.icould.com watch short video clips of people talking about the jobs they do and how they got into them