



## Learning in England ∞ Choosing A Levels

### 14 > What are A Levels and how do we choose which A Levels to do?

Advanced Level Examinations are available in a wide range of subjects and are sat by pupils in their last year of Secondary/Senior education, generally taken in a school which is an Examination Centre. The results are very important to the Universities, Colleges and apprentice-providers in determining whether to offer a place for undergraduate study. The highest mark is an A\*; and the lowest mark, to pass, is E.

Pupils will choose three subjects, to study in the Sixth Form/Year 12 and 13. [Some may choose four, for example, Further Maths if already undertaking Maths. Whether to do three or four will depend on school policy and the requirements of the university to which the pupils may want to apply, to study at undergraduate Level].

### How do we choose which A Levels to do?

During the second GCSE year, pupils in Year 11, and their parents are invited by their school to a Presentation Evening by the subject teachers, for each subject on offer at A Level.

*“I wanted to do Law. None of the Universities that I wanted to apply to, specified any particular A Level subjects, though those with significant reading and essay writing were helpful. So, I chose what I liked: History, Politics and Music – one of which was a Facilitating Subject. Looking back, it was a good balance. The content was so interesting and the skills so varied in each subject. I was well prepared for studying Law. I particularly appreciated the supplementary courses that I could do when at University, including French and German for Lawyers.”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Felicity, Law Student



Schools may also offer other courses such as the International Baccalaureate or BTECs. Please see our separate Information Documents on these courses. We visit all the schools which we recommend to you and will be sure that they offer the A Levels you choose

Most schools will offer these subjects. [Some schools will offer the subjects in brackets]. The subjects in bold are called **Facilitating Subjects**, as the universities like their applicants to have at least one and preferably two of these:

Art [and History of Art]	Food	PE/ Physical Education
<b>Biology</b>	<b>French</b>	<b>Physics</b>
Business Studies or Economics	<b>Geography</b>	[Politics]
<b>Chemistry</b>	<b>German</b>	Psychology
Computer Science	<b>Greek</b>	Religious Studies:
[Critical Thinking]	<b>History</b>	Philosophy, Ethics and
Drama or Theatre Studies	<b>Latin</b>	Developments in the
[English Language]	<b>Mathematics and Further Mathematics</b>	Thought of one Religion
<b>English Literature</b>	[Media Studies]	[Sociology]
Film Studies	Music	<b>Spanish</b>
		Technology – Textiles or Timber

#### There are five Examination Boards:

- > AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance)
- > CCEA (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment)
- > Pearson Edexcel.
- > OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations)
- > WJEC (Welsh Joint Examinations Committee)

The content may vary in each Board, but the standard is consistent. It is not 'better' to undertake an A Level with AQA than OCR, for



*I am told that doing a subject with 'Studies' in the title does not have the gravitas of the Facilitating Subjects. Is that right?*



Yes. You should do at least one of the Facilitating Subjects for entry to University. Oxford and Cambridge do not accept subjects with Studies in the title, except Religious Studies.



example. The universities do not regard one Board as ‘better’ than another.

Pupils usually take three A levels. It is not necessary to take more. Some schools actively discourage taking more than three A Levels, unless the subjects are linked, like Mathematics and Further Mathematics. Results come out on the second or third Thursday of August each year. Usually universities make an offer of a place which is conditional on achieving particular grades. More can be learned about the process of applying for University on our separate information document. **Bear in mind that achieving four A grades is not considered as good a result as achieving three higher grades: 2A\*s and an A for example.**

*“I have just gained Distinctions in my Solicitors’ Final examinations, so I am in a very good position to apply for a Training Contract from a firm of lawyers. Unfortunately, there are five times more people passing the Solicitors’ Finals than places in firms for a Training Contract.*

*I had had a head injury just before I undertook my A Levels, so I did not achieve the results that were predicted by my school. For one of my A Levels I achieved a C grade. It amazed me that one of the firms to which I had applied for a Training Contract excluded me because of that C grade.*

*I thought that once I had graduated nobody would mind about my A Level results, but it seems they matter very much – so you had better do your very best....!”<sup>2</sup>*

In making the decision pupils need to think beyond A levels, to what they may study at University. Research may need to be done, before choosing which A Level subjects to study, to see the course requirements. For example: Is it essential to have Chemistry to study Medicine? or do certain combinations of subjects not ‘work,’ like Economics and Business Studies? Are any combinations of subjects *not* offered by the school?

Pupils must commit to the subjects they are choosing not long after this Presentation Evening. Usually the school will have an entry requirement to get into the Sixth Form: 5 GCSEs at Grade 5 or above, with Grade 7-9 in the subjects to be done at A Level. So, if the pupil does not achieve the required grades, he or she may have to reconsider what A Level subjects to do.

As with GCSEs beware of choosing subjects taught by a favourite teacher. He or she might leave; and don’t do courses because your best friend has chosen them! Do the subjects you

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<sup>2</sup> Charlotte, aspiring solicitor



know suit you and in which you will be well motivated to study especially if you come to topics which are difficult.

See our separate Information Documents about applying to read Law or Medicine.

This website has particularly useful and up to date information:

<https://university.which.co.uk/>



*Contact us at Paths to Learning by emailing or Skyping [felicity.gunn@pathstolearning.com](mailto:felicity.gunn@pathstolearning.com) or by booking a call through our website at [www.pathstolearning.com](http://www.pathstolearning.com).*