

*Skills Guide*

# ***THE OCR GUIDE TO EXAMINATIONS***


Version 2

This guide to examinations has been produced by OCR to help you prepare for your examinations. It has not been written to accompany any particular subject or specification, but focusses instead on understanding exam structures and formats and the ways in which you can support your performance in exams.

GCSEs and A Levels are not the only qualifications which have exams. Cambridge Nationals, Cambridge Technicals and many other vocational qualifications have exams as well.

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# Exam structures

Examinations are an important part of many qualifications. Some people like the challenge of exams, whereas others dread the thought of them. This guide will show you how you can prepare for the examinations you have in the future so that you can be successful and achieve your goals.

There are two main ways in which examinations are structured: modular and linear. There are benefits and challenges for both methods.

The modular route is when teachers plan to teach one section (module) at a time. Knowledge is then tested at the end of the module.

The linear route is when the examination takes place at the end of the whole qualification or course. Some people consider this to be the more 'traditional' approach.

There are different revision requirements for each route. For a modular route you will know the different topics within your module, so you can revise all parts in detail. With a linear route many areas will not be tested but you still have to revise all material so that you are prepared. Some people feel there is more pressure when the exams are at the end of the course rather than throughout the qualification. One method of examination will suit some people better than others.

## Essential documents

### How will a qualification specification/centre handbook help me?

All the documents described on this page can be found and downloaded from the internet. Your teacher should be able to provide you with a link. All documents for OCR examinations can be found at [www.ocr.org.uk](http://www.ocr.org.uk)

### Qualification Specification/Centre Handbook

Specifications/centre handbooks are often very large documents and some parts of them will not be useful to you. What might help you is the overview, where you can find out which units are examined, how long the exam is, which content will be tested and what form the exam will take e.g. multiple choice questions or essays.

You do not need to read the whole document but it is definitely advisable to access it online through the OCR [website](http://www.ocr.org.uk). You will just need to know the subject name or qualification code to search on the website.

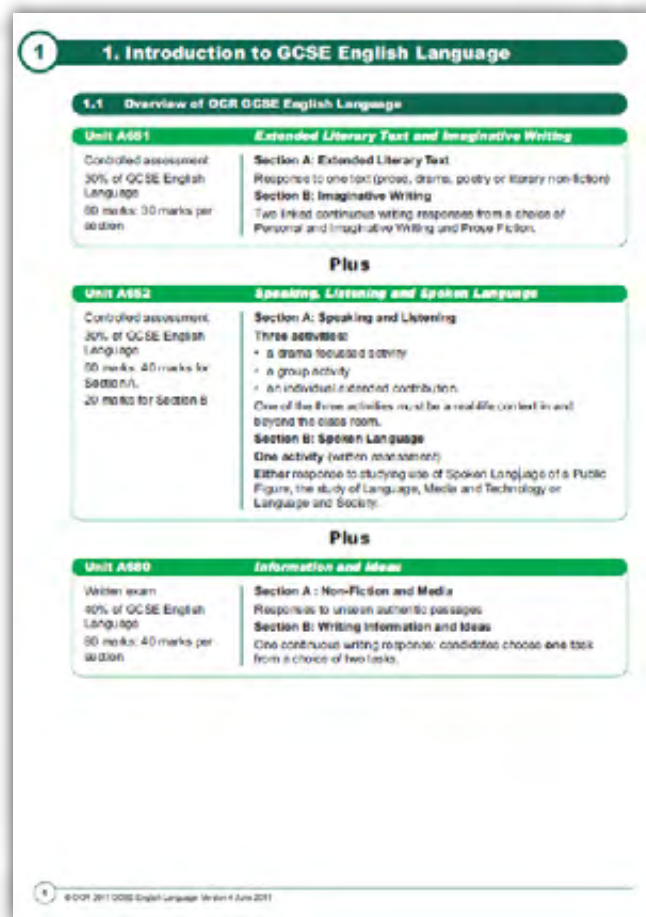
### Past papers

Past papers are exams that were sat by students in previous years. They can be used to give you a good indication of what your own exam will be like. You may need to ask your teacher about which papers will be useful to you as examinations can change and your teacher may be using some past papers for mock tests.

### Examiner's Reports

These documents are reports made by the chief examiner for that exam. They are useful for picking up information about where previous students made mistakes and how you might avoid them.

Most examiner's reports made by OCR are now filmed presentations, but all other documents can be downloaded as PDFs.



# Exam formats

Before you complete your examinations you need to be clear on the style of your examination paper, as they may differ.

If you are taking three different subjects, the papers will be set out differently, examining the different knowledge and skills that you have acquired during your studies. It is vital that, when you walk into the exam, you know the style of exam that you will be taking.

Some exam papers may start off with a case study and you will have to answer questions around this scenario. Other papers will begin with several questions that have short answers so that you can gain confidence before moving onto longer, essay-style answers. Some examinations may begin with multiple choice questions.

You will be able to access sample questions and answers on OCR's [website](https://www.ocr.org.uk). Another important way to prepare is completing mock questions or exams at school or college, which your teachers will mark. You have to remember that the writers of these papers are not testing you to make you fail; they are examining the knowledge that you have and how you are able to put it across in your answers.



## Multiple choice questions

Do not leave a question unanswered as you normally have a 15–25% chance of getting it right anyhow!

If your examination requires you to answer multiple choice questions then you are being tested on your ability to recall factual knowledge, rather than your opinions. The examiners want to find out if you can remember theories or facts rather than relating these theories to a particular question. In order to revise for this type of questions, look at your topics and ensure that you know the important facts and figures that you may be tested on. Ensure that you answer all the multiple choice questions. It's worth having a go at all the questions. Even a guess has a 1 in 3 or 1 in 4 chance, dependent on how many choices there are. If you leave it blank, you've missed that chance.

Do not leave a question unanswered as the examiner cannot award you any marks for a blank answer. If you can't think of a full answer straight away, write something on the page and allow time to come back and answer that question more fully later.

6 Which one of the following is not a suitable response when dealing with a muscle sprain? (circle your chosen option to indicate your answer)

- A Heat packs
- B Bandaging
- C Elevation
- D Ice packs



# Essay questions

It is important when revising for essay-style examinations that you are familiar with the wording that may be used for the question.

Essay questions are testing how much you can remember about a topic, how you apply your knowledge, whether you can argue a point of view or criticise and/or analyse, and if it is clear that you understand the topic. Essay questions also look at how you construct your answer within a set time and how you can cope under the pressure of the exam.

Some command words are asking for more complex responses than others and this will be reflected in the marks awarded. For example, if the question asks you to 'list' things, you are only being asked to recall knowledge and so there will be relatively few marks awarded for this answer. Don't waste too much time on details in your response.

Conserve your time for more complex tasks such as analysing, comparing and contrasting and justifying.

## Selecting essay questions

Often you will be given the chance to choose the essay questions that you are most confident about answering.

If you have revised effectively you should find that you see lots of essay questions you feel confident about answering well. But even so, under exam conditions we can panic and make snap decisions that aren't necessarily the best ones. Sometimes we fail to read the question properly and write what we know, rather than what the question asks.

Before you launch into your essay responses, go through a quick check list:

- Read all the available questions **carefully**, focussing upon the **command words**.

Before you make your choices, ask yourself:

- How much knowledge do I have about this subject?
- Does my knowledge match what the question is asking me to do?
- Am I able to draft a quick bulleted plan of my essay?

Tackle any essay questions you are confident about answering well first, and leave those that you feel are weaker until you have completed your best answers.



# Effective written responses

It's really important to practise structuring your responses to essay questions.

There are a number of techniques to help you plan effective responses.

Your teacher will probably have shared the best format for a particular subject, but here are some general tips you might find useful.

- Spend a moment to ensure you understand the command words in the question and check how many points are awarded. This will give you an indication of how much you need to write.
- Write a brief, bulleted plan of your response. Please remember to strike a line through your rough work so that it is clear that it is not your exam response.
- Try to ensure that every key point you are making has its own paragraph.
- If the question is asking for comparisons or contrasts, list for yourself all the points you have to make. (You should be able to make several points.)
- If you are arguing a point, ensure you have some balance and have explored alternative explanations or opposite points of view.

- Be thorough but precise, avoiding unnecessary waffle. It's a waste of precious time.
- Be clear with your language. If you are using complex and subject-specific words, be sure you understand them and they are used in the right context.
- **Point Evidence Explain (PEE).** Where applicable, provide evidence for the points you are making and always explain how the evidence supports your point.
- Help your essay or argument flow by linking the points or ideas with introductory or concluding sentences.
- Ensure the thrust of your argument and the direction of your essay runs through all your paragraphs. Don't leave it until the conclusion.
- **Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPAG).** When you have completed your exam, if there is time, proofread your essays, double-checking for silly mistakes, spelling errors and grammatical inaccuracy.

Spend 5 to 10 minutes checking your answers before the end of the exam. Make sure you have actually answered the questions. It may seem obvious but remember that the examiners are wanting thorough and precise answers.

## Exam performance

### Non-written responses, graphs and diagrams

Some exam questions will require you to show your maths skills, graph skills or your ability to illustrate your understanding using diagrams.

Some key rules of thumb will ensure your knowledge and understanding is communicated effectively to the examiner.

#### Your equipment

- Bring the right equipment into the exam, for example a set square, protractor, pair of compasses, ruler, pencil, sharpener, eraser and calculator. Ask your teacher if you are unsure what you will need.
- Ensure that your equipment is in full working order. For example, check you can sharpen your pencil without the lead breaking, that your ruler has a good straight edge, that the calibrations on your ruler and protractor are clear to read, that your calculator batteries have plenty of charge.

#### Draw accurately

- Your graphs, diagrams and drawings in the exam need to be as sharp as possible. You are not being judged on

your art skills but on how technically accurate you can be. When drawing straight lines ALWAYS use a ruler. Similarly, circles and arcs need to be made with a pair of compasses. However good your freehand drawing is, if you want to be technically accurate you need to use technical drawing equipment

- Ensure your measurements are spot on. Slight inaccuracy in setting compass measurements, for example, can throw off the rest of your measurements.

#### Show your methods clearly

- Often you will gain marks for showing your workings out, even if you miscalculate your final answer. If you don't write down your workings out or they are unclear you may lose valuable points.
- Use a new line for every calculation, to make your workings out as clear as possible to the examiner.
- Everyone makes mistakes from time to time. If you make a mistake in your calculations, simply draw a neat line through the error. Don't try to obliterate it. It might help clarity if you draw a line through a whole line of calculation and start afresh on a new line.

# Time management

Once you know the format of your exam you can plan how you want to divide up your time. In the actual exam, you may not be able to stick to your plan rigidly, but it helps to have a general idea of roughly how much time you want to spend on each section and on each question.

## Prioritising

Some teachers will advise you to ignore the order of the paper and start with the longer, harder questions. The reasoning is that if you have timing issues you will have maximised your marks by completing the higher value questions first. This strategy is not always appropriate, so clarify with your teacher when this would be the best approach for your exam.

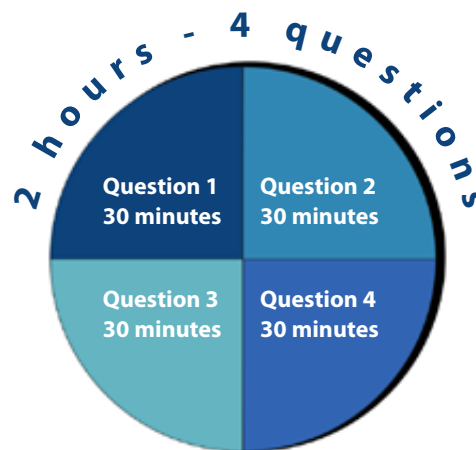
## Pace

Try to stay aware of your pace. Sometimes you can get waylaid by a troublesome question that eats up too much of your time. If it isn't a high value question it may be wise to decide to leave it until you have completed the other questions.

It is important that you read all of the questions first and decide which ones you are going to answer. Select the one that you think will be your best answer, and spend the time you have allotted to it answering the question and then move on to the next one. Make sure you are aware of the time. Even if you have not totally finished a particular answer, you can return to it later. It may sound a little strange, but you can leave space and move on knowing that you have to keep to this time allowance so that you do not spoil your chances of answering the other required questions in the exam paper.

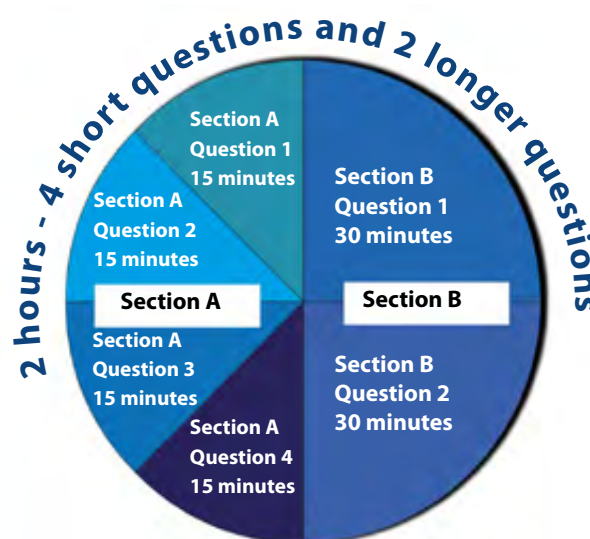
If you have several multiple choice answer questions to complete (or even a whole multiple choice exam paper) and you are not sure of an answer, move on to the next multiple choice question and revisit the ones that you are unsure about later. You can then spend the allocated time on ensuring you select the correct answer. Do not leave any answers blank as you have a 25% chance of getting it correct even if you guess the answer to a four choice multiple choice answer

**Example A:** In a two hour exam with four questions to answer, you will have roughly 25 minutes to answer each question and then 20 minutes (5 minutes per question) at the end to review each answer carefully and add in any extra thoughts.



**Example B:** If a two hour paper has two sections with four short-answer questions in section A and two longer answer questions in section B, the section B questions will take you longer to complete as they will require discussion and evaluative essay-type answers which are more in depth compared to the four shorter answers in section A.

In this situation you would split the paper into two one-hour parts, with 15 minutes per question for part A and 30 minutes per question for part B, allowing for the important re-reading and reviewing time.





# Managing your performance

It is understandable that you may feel under pressure during your exams.

There are plenty of things you can do to give yourself the best possible chances of success.

- Make your revision schedule well in advance and stick to it.
- While you're preparing for and taking exams it's important to take care of your physical wellbeing. If your body is well then your mind functions much better. Get into healthy sleep patterns, eat sensibly and regularly, keep yourself hydrated and get some exercise.

**Proper  
Preparation  
Prevents  
Poor  
Performance**

## Managing stress

It is inevitable that as the exam looms you will become more agitated or stressed.

It is important to have time to yourself in order to get away from your revision and do something totally different.

- If you regularly play a sport, it will help your stress levels to keep taking part.
- If you do not play sport or do regular exercise then find one you might enjoy as it is great for relieving stress.
- Listen to music.
- Talk to your friends about how you are feeling as you may find they feel the same and you can help each other.
- Meditating can relax and empty your mind for a period of time.
- Focus your mind on positive thoughts rather than negative ones. Having a positive outlook should inspire you and the others around you.





# On the day

## What to expect

You should be given an exam schedule well in advance of your exams. Occasionally there are clashes, or you might find that you have exams timetabled one after another without any breaks. You must make your exams officer aware of any problems with your schedule immediately so that they have enough time to make adjustments for you, if possible.

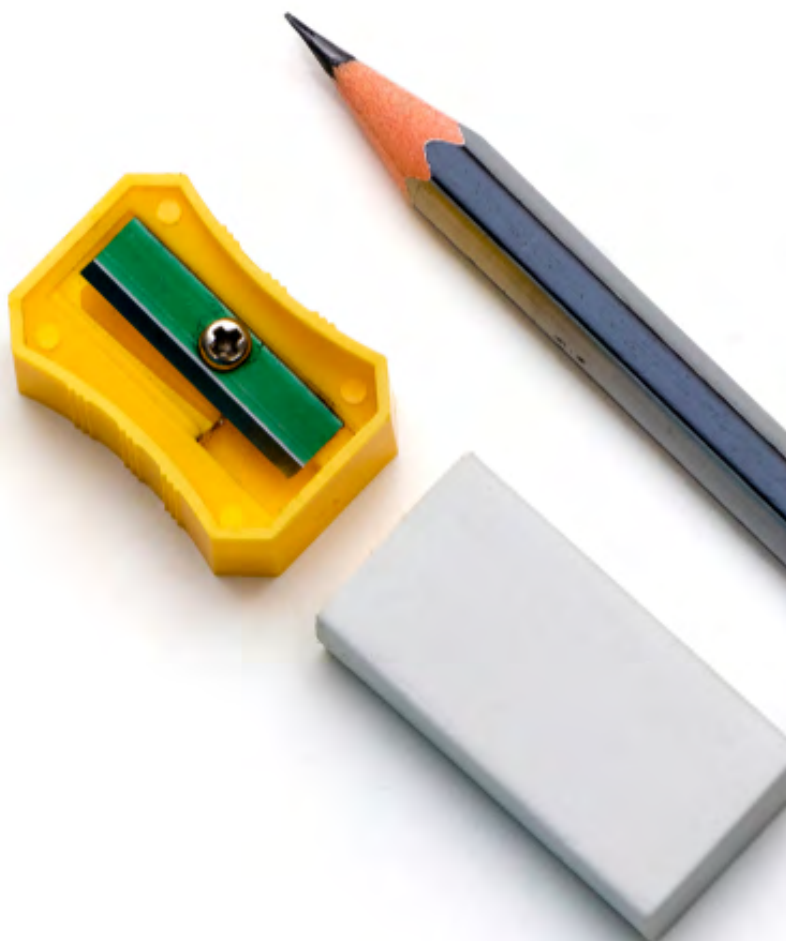
## On the day

- **DO** make sure you arrive well before the exam so that the invigilators can get everyone organised before it starts. When a whole year group is taking the same exam, it can take more than 20 minutes to get everyone seated. In some cases, the same exam is being taken by hundreds of students all across the country so they must all start at the same time.
- **DON'T** try to speak to anyone in the exam hall. Don't even try to catch anyone's eye. Once the exam begins, talking or disturbance of any kind may be considered misconduct and you could be removed from the exam hall and prevented from taking the exam. If you have a question or need to leave the room for any reason, raise your hand and wait for the invigilator to come to you.
- **DO** stay focussed. Listen carefully to the invigilator's instructions. Read and follow the instructions printed on the exam paper or answer booklet.
- **DO** ensure you have filled in the necessary details on all your answer sheets. Any rough planning or draft work needs to be struck through with a line.
- **DON'T** bring your mobile phone, MP3/4 iPod or iPad with you unless your school has already made arrangements to collect them before and after the exam. You may be penalised if you are found to have any of these items on you.
- **DO** follow the rules. You may be disqualified from all your subjects if you are found to have broken the rules or cheated.
- **DO** your best. This is your opportunity to show how much you have learnt and how hard you have worked.

## Equipment

Different exams will require different equipment. You need to check with your teacher what specialist equipment is required for each exam. In general though, your basic equipment should be:

- A black pen and a spare pen.
- Pencils, eraser, sharpener, clear ruler.
- A clear pencil case.
- A wristwatch (not a 'smart' watch).
- A bottle of water.



# Don't panic

If you start to panic whilst answering a question, stop, take a deep breath and think 'I can do this'.

If you know that you will get nervous when you walk into the exam try the following relaxation strategies to help calm your nerves.

- Sit down at your allotted place and take a deep breath in and a long breath out and repeat once. This will help you focus.
- Breathe in again, but this time straighten your back, sit up straight and then breathe out again.
- Look straight ahead, focus your mind on positive thoughts and think 'I can do this' whilst breathing in slowly and then out slowly.

This technique should help calm your nerves, get you used to the situation and make you focus on the exam.

If you have extra time at the end, re-read the exam paper, checking that you have answered all the questions. Re-read all your answers and add in any more points. Check your spelling, punctuation and grammar, as this is important for the flow of answers and ensure you have used relevant terminology in the right context within your answers.

## Exam day summary

Remember that you have revised, you know the style of the exam paper, you have the skills and knowledge and you have prepared well so therefore:

- Keep calm
- Work steadily through the exam
- Write down as much as you can in your allocated time.
- Remember that you 'can do this'!

# If things go wrong

## What if I run out of time?

You will not be the first person to have had these feelings. If you have lost track of time and only have a few minutes left but have more relevant points that you want to include, quickly write down the key points at the end of the answer. It is better to put them in than leave them out and risk not gaining any more marks. It could be the difference between grades.

## What if I can't remember anything?

Exam block is a common problem, but usually it is fleeting. If you find yourself looking at a question and cannot remember the answer:

- If you can, move to the next question and return to it later.
- If you can't move to another question, take a few deep breaths and try not to panic.
- Read the question again, underlining the command word. Try to focus on what the question is asking.
- Try to make some rough notes of the things you do remember about this subject (remember to draw a line through this afterwards so it won't be marked).



# Further guidance

## What if it all gets too much?

It is very common for students to suffer with stress in the run up to and during their exams. Some students can find the pressure affects them very badly. For example, disturbed sleeping or eating patterns, insomnia and feeling low, emotional and anxious are some of the symptoms that might indicate that you are suffering with stress. If you are having any of these problems it is vital that you talk to someone, whether it is your parents, your doctor, your teachers or someone at school in pastoral care like a counsellor. There are lots of ways in which you can gain extra support once people are aware of how much you are suffering and you don't have to struggle on alone. If you don't feel able to talk to anyone there are organisations that can support you.

Here are some links you might find useful to better understand and deal with exam stress. They also give useful contact information in case you want to talk to someone.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/advice/factfile\\_az/exams\\_stress](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/advice/factfile_az/exams_stress)

<http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/>

[http://www.youngminds.org.uk/for\\_children\\_young\\_people](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/for_children_young_people)

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/childhealth6-15/Pages/Examstress.aspx>

<https://www.bbc.com/bitesize/articles/zckydxs>

<http://www.childline.org.uk/Explore/SchoolCollege/Pages/exam-stress.aspx>





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Please get in touch if you want to discuss the accessibility of resources we offer to support delivery of our qualifications: [resources.feedback@ocr.org.uk](mailto:resources.feedback@ocr.org.uk)

## Looking for a resource?

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