

Exam guidance and tips for GCSE (9-1) Religious Studies students

In this blog I'll be discussing the GCSE Religious Studies exams, the different types of questions you'll face and sharing some tips for students who'll be sitting exams in the autumn or next summer.

The exams

You'll be sitting two different types of exam for GCSE (9-1) Religious Studies (three exams in total):

- Beliefs and teachings & Practices (on two out of five different religions, e.g. Christianity and Islam)
- Religion, philosophy and ethics in the modern world from a religious perspective (on one of the two religions studied for Beliefs and teachings & Practices, e.g. Christianity)

The Beliefs and teachings & Practices exams are each one hour long. You'll sit the two exams back to back. In each exam, you'll answer two questions (1-2), each made up of five sub questions (a-e).

The Religion, philosophy and ethics exams are two hours long. You'll answer four questions on four different themes (1-4), each made up of four sub questions (a-d).

The assessment objectives

Your answers will be marked using two different assessment objectives:

- AO1 – demonstrate knowledge and understanding of religion and beliefs
- AO2 – analyse and evaluate aspects of religion and belief, including their significance and influence

Beliefs and teachings & Practices question papers

The table below show how the marks are awarded by assessment objective for each sub question.

There are two questions, each made up of five sub questions:

Part	Marks and AO weighting
a	3 marks AO1
b	3 marks AO1
c	3 marks AO1
d	6 marks AO1
e	15 marks – 3 marks AO1 and 12 marks AO2

Religion, philosophy and ethics question papers

The table below show how the marks are awarded by assessment objective for each sub question.

There are four questions on four different themes, each made up of four sub questions:

Part	Marks and AO weighting
a	3 marks AO1
b	6 marks AO1
c	6 marks AO2
d	15 marks – 3 marks AO1 and 12 marks AO2

Command words

Command words give you guidance as to what you're expected to do in the exam. The exact response expected to a command word will depend on the context. You must read the full question carefully to see exactly what you're expected to do.

Different command words are used for the different types of questions across the two different types of exam paper:

Category	Assessment objective targeted	Command words	Used in
1	AO1 – knowledge recall only	Name State Give	3-mark AO1 questions
2	AO1 – knowledge and understanding	Describe Outline	3 and 6-mark AO1 questions
3	AO2 – analysis and evaluation	Explain Compare	6-mark AO2 questions
4	AO1 – knowledge and understanding AO2 – analysis and evaluation	Discuss	15-mark AO1/AO2 questions

Command words in 3-mark questions

Name

This is used to direct a candidate to respond with the correct name of something. Nothing else is required in the response. This command word is often used when asking for knowledge of three things.

Name the three poisons. (J625/04)

State

The answer needs to be clear and concise. This command word is often used when asking for knowledge of three things.

State three aspects of G-d's nature. (J625/03)

Give

This word is used as an alternative to State. Single word or very short answers are needed. Give three types of religious experience. (J625/06)

Outline

The answer needs to be brief but focussed. It must concentrate on the most important aspects of a topic. It can be used when the question asks for knowledge of more than one aspect.

Outline the meaning of the term 'cyclical universe'. (J625/06)

Describe

The answer needs to be a concise account of the topic in the question. It can be used in the same way as Outline.

Describe the role of Brahma in the Trimurti. (J625/06)

NB

Sometimes, to make things clearer to candidates, the actual command word will be missed out.

Why do Jews observe Shavout? (J625/03)

(Rather than, 'Describe why Jews observe Shabout.')

Command words in 6-mark AO1 questions

Describe

The answer should be a detailed factual response showing knowledge and understanding of the topic in relation to the question.

Describe how prayer can benefit Christians. (J625/01)

Outline

The answer should focus on the key aspects of the topic in the question. The topic could be covered in a 15-mark question but for 6 marks all that is needed is knowledge and understanding of the main points expressed concisely.

Outline the importance of the Hajj pilgrimage for Muslims. (J625/02)

Command words in 6-mark AO2 questions

Analyse

The question is looking for an in-depth examination of the topic and probably an analysis of different approaches. Answers need to unpack the topic of the question and show understanding through analysis. Viewpoints about the topic of the question will need to be analysed, referring where appropriate to sources of wisdom and authority which underpin the viewpoints.

Explain why Christians differ in their support for social justice. (J625/06)

Compare

Answers should focus on the reasons for differences about the topic of the question. Comparison needs analysis of the topic and an explanation of the reasons for differences referring where necessary to sources of wisdom and authority which underpin the viewpoints.

Compare the attitude of different Christian groups towards religious experience. (J625/06)

15-mark questions

For the 15-mark questions on both types of paper, examiners are looking for a discursive response from candidates. This means that in answering the question you need to use sources of wisdom and authority, discuss different viewpoints within the religion and reach a balanced judgement. You don't need to give a unique, personal viewpoint. You must remember to focus on and keep to the question.

3 exam tips

1. Across the exams, you need to show knowledge of sources of wisdom and authority and common and divergent views within religions – these are key aspects of the new GCSE Religious Studies course.
2. Keep your responses to 3-mark questions brief – this allows more time for the extended responses.
3. Time management is key – especially in the Philosophy and Ethics exam. Overlong Question 1 responses will limit your time for Question 4.

Going further

On the [OCR website](#) we have a range of resources that are designed for teachers, but students can also use them to help in preparing for their exams:

The [specification](#) explains the aims and learning outcomes of the qualification. It details what students should know, understand and be able to do. The specification lists the content in detail and provides suggested sources of wisdom and authority.

[Assessment materials](#) include past question papers and mark schemes, examiners reports and candidate answers with commentaries from senior examiners. Students can access the materials from the 2018 exam series.

This blog is based on our [assessment guide](#), ‘Assessment story: Exploring our question papers’. There is also a command words resource that you may find useful. You could also check out my [blog](#) about last year’s exams.

All the best with your studies.

GCSE (9–1)

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