

What are 'A-levels'?

An 'advanced level' or A-level is a qualification offered across a range of subjects to school-leavers (usually aged 16-18 years old), graded A*-E.

A-levels are studied across two years: your AS year (Year 12) and your A2 year (Year 13).

Usually, students:

- Study four subjects in their AS year;
- Drop one, which they achieve an AS-level in;
- Continue with the other three in their A2 year to achieve full A-levels in these.

A-levels and AS-levels have been 'decoupled' in recent years, which means your overall A-level grades now depend solely on exams you take at the end of your second year, for the most part.

Previously, marks that you achieved for a subject in your AS year could be 'banked' and carried over, to contribute to your A-level grade. For those who aren't keen on exams, sadly this is no longer the case.

That said, some subjects still have coursework-based assessment, including art and design. Regardless of the subject, these will only ever account for 20% or less of your final grade.

Check with your school or college as to whether they offer AS-level qualifications.

How do I pick my A-levels?

There are around 80 different subjects available to study at A-level. However, the options available to you will depend on which your school or college offers.

Typical A-level subjects include:

- ones you've studied before eg maths, biology;

- variations on ones you've studied before eg you could choose between English literature, English language, or English literature and language';
- or subjects you've never had the chance to study before eg law, philosophy, psychology etc.

So how do you decide which A-level subjects to take? Here are some pointers:

Certain A-levels can broaden your uni choices

Facilitating subjects are subjects commonly asked for in universities' entry requirements, regardless of the course you're applying to – this makes them a good choice to keep your degree options open.

They are biology, chemistry, English, geography, history, maths, modern and classical languages, and physics.

A-levels are a lot tougher than GCSEs

Be prepared for a big jump in the level of difficulty when you transition from [GCSE](#) to A-level (or any other advanced level qualification for that matter).

You'll also see differences in the way you're taught and in what is expected of you.

Certain uni courses will look for specific A-levels

This is really important if you have a particular degree in mind. You won't be able to apply to some degree courses without having taken some specific A-levels (and scored the right grades in them too, of course).

Have a degree subject in mind? Search for a handful of courses across different unis to make sure you're ticking all the boxes for entry requirements within your subject.

Some courses and unis have lists of subjects they don't accept

Particular universities and courses will view certain A-levels as less effective preparation for university study than others. They may go as far as to list them on 'non-preferred' subject lists.

While entry requirements are often a minimum set of criteria you have to meet, a university may view you differently from another candidate based on your personal statement or your portfolio if your predicted grades just miss the mark.

Many unis aren't picky about your A-levels

There are lots of degree subjects that don't normally have essential subject requirements, and will consider a wide range of A-level choices.

These include accountancy, business studies, law, politics, psychology and social work.

How not to choose A-levels

Alternatively, here are some mistakes to avoid when picking A-level subjects:

- **Don't copy your friends:** don't just take a subject to be in a class with your friends, nor be turned off by one because of what others think of it.
- **Don't just take it for a teacher:** we all have that one teacher we love regardless of whether we're actually any good at their subject. Don't be blinded by your adoration for them and take their subject just because.
- **Don't ignore the big, wide world:** look at what A-level subjects are offered by other colleges and sixth forms in the area. While it may seem terrifying to leave your comfort zone, in two years you may well be making the much bigger move to uni – this can be good practice for those inevitable changes that life brings!