

# GCSEs

The official student guide to the system



# GCSEs

- Are you thinking about which subjects you would like to take?
  - Are you planning to do your own research and see if you are interested in them?
  - Are you sure that the subjects you are choosing are relevant to your future plans?
- Go back to the book if you are unsure.

GCSE stands for General Certificate of Secondary Education. GCSEs are normally sat by 15- to 18-year-olds in schools and colleges across the country, but they are available to anyone who would like to gain a qualification in a subject that they are interested in.

Although there are other qualifications out there, like National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and the Diploma, most 15- to 16-year-olds take GCSEs in some subjects.

GCSEs are available in over 50 subjects, from English and maths to economics and health and social care. So the good news is that there are almost certainly subjects you will find exciting and interesting. You can study GCSEs alongside other qualifications such as NVQs, other vocational qualifications, various information and communication technology (ICT) qualifications, or as part of a Diploma.



# The low-down on GCSEs

There are some subjects that you have to study until you are 16 – like English, maths, science, ICT, citizenship, religious education (RE) and physical education (PE). You could take a GCSE or a short course

## Choosing your subjects

Choosing your subjects is a big decision, but don't worry – no one expects you to know exactly what you want to do in the future. You will be encouraged to take a wide range of subjects so that you can keep your options open.

Your teachers will give you information about exactly which GCSEs are offered at your school and how you can fit together different courses in your timetable.

## GCSEs and short courses

Most GCSE courses lead to one GCSE, although there are GCSE courses that can be worth half, and others that can be worth two GCSEs.

Certain GCSEs, like citizenship studies, are also available in 'short courses', which are half the size of a full GCSE. Short course GCSEs are helpful if you want to study a subject but don't have time to do a whole GCSE, or if you want to get qualifications in subjects like RE and PE, which you have to study

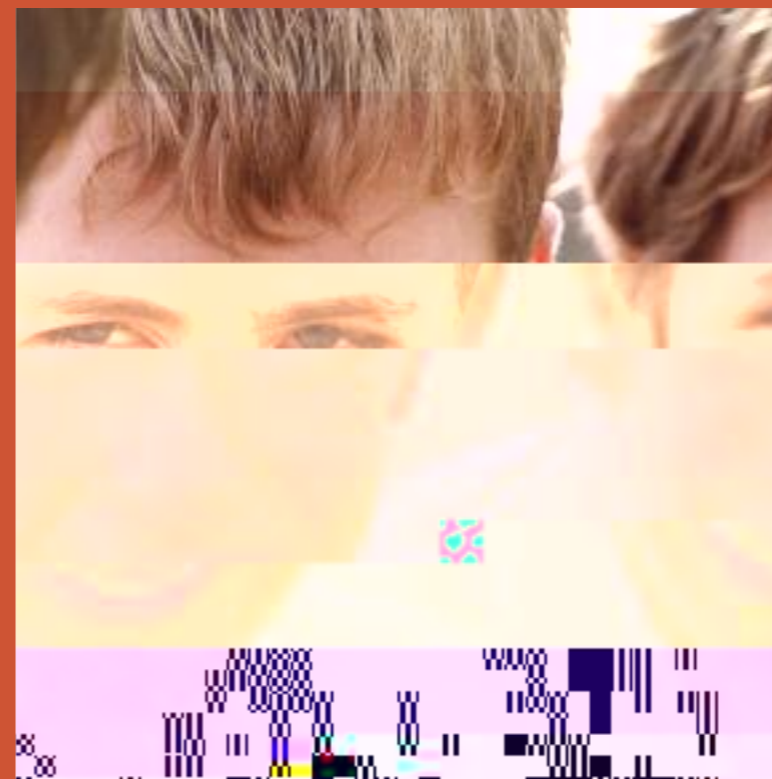
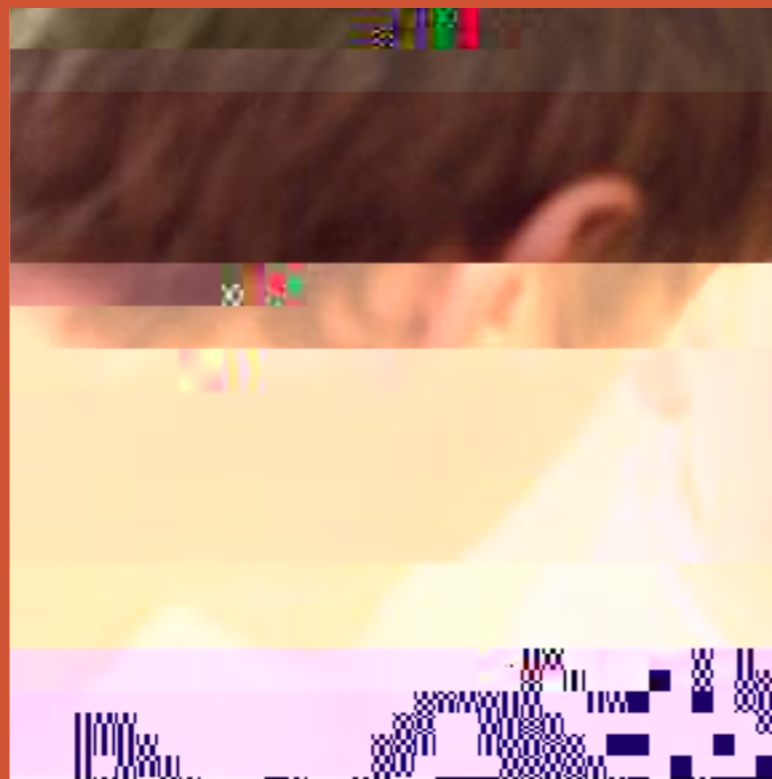
until you are 16. They are available in a range of subjects, including design and technology, geography, history, art and design, and business studies – so if you are interested in studying one of them, check with your school to see which ones they offer. Remember that taking a short course is still hard work!

Some other GCSEs, including applied art and design, applied business, engineering, and health and social care, have more topics to learn about so it is also possible to study a 'double award' GCSE in these subjects. Your teachers will be able to tell you which GCSEs your school offers.

## Learn in the work world

GCSEs normally take two years to complete. In those two years you may do controlled assessment, which is used to be known as coursework, in some subjects. Controlled assessments count towards your final grade and may include projects, fieldwork, artwork, experiments or investigations. You will also have to sit exams.

Many GCSEs are now unitised, which means that the course is split into different units, with an exam at the end of each unit. This means that you can sit exams throughout your course instead of doing lots of exams at the end of your two years of study. Your school will be able to tell you more about which of your GCSEs are examined in this way.



If you take a unit exam and don't do as well as you expected, then you can resit the unit to try to improve your grade. Only your best mark for this unit will count towards your final GCSE grade. Resitting exams is no easy option, and takes a lot of extra time and work, so it is definitely best to work as hard as you can for your first attempt. You would need to speak to your teachers about the options available for resitting units, because these depend on the GCSE course you are studying.

# Tiers and grades

- English Language
- English Literature



When you take GCSEs you can achieve pass grades from A\* to G. If you don't achieve the minimum pass mark to get a grade G, then a U grade is awarded, which means 'unclassified'.

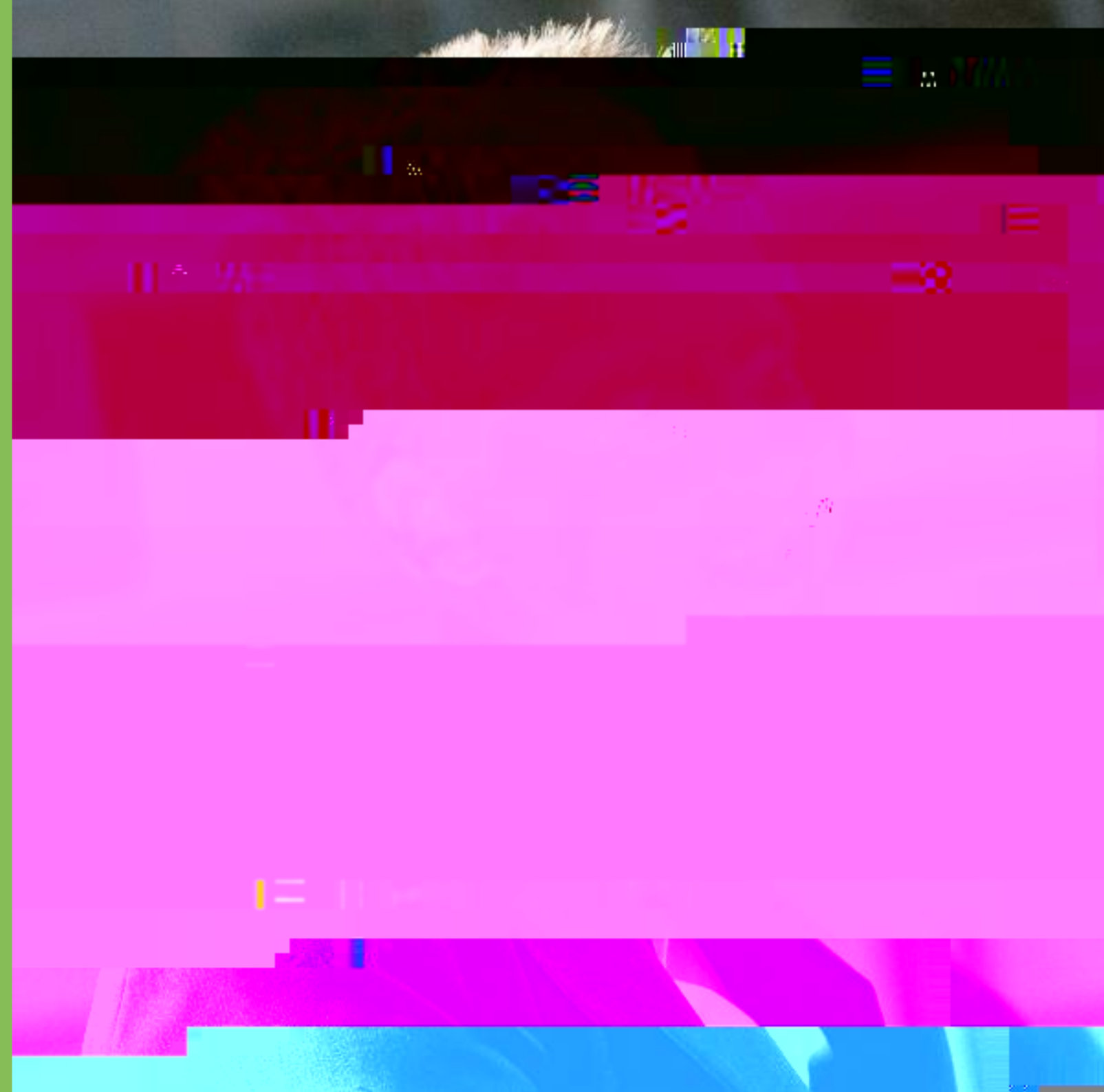
Different subjects are organised in slightly different ways. In some subjects, such as history, music, and art and design, everybody studying the subject sits exactly the same exam paper. In some subjects, like English, science, most modern foreign languages and maths, you have a choice of two tiers. Each of the tiers has a different target range of grades. If you take the higher tier, you will be able to get an A\*, A, B, C or D grade. If you take the foundation tier, you will be able to get a C, D, E, F or G grade.

The exams are structured like this to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to show what they are capable of without being put off by questions that are too hard or too easy.

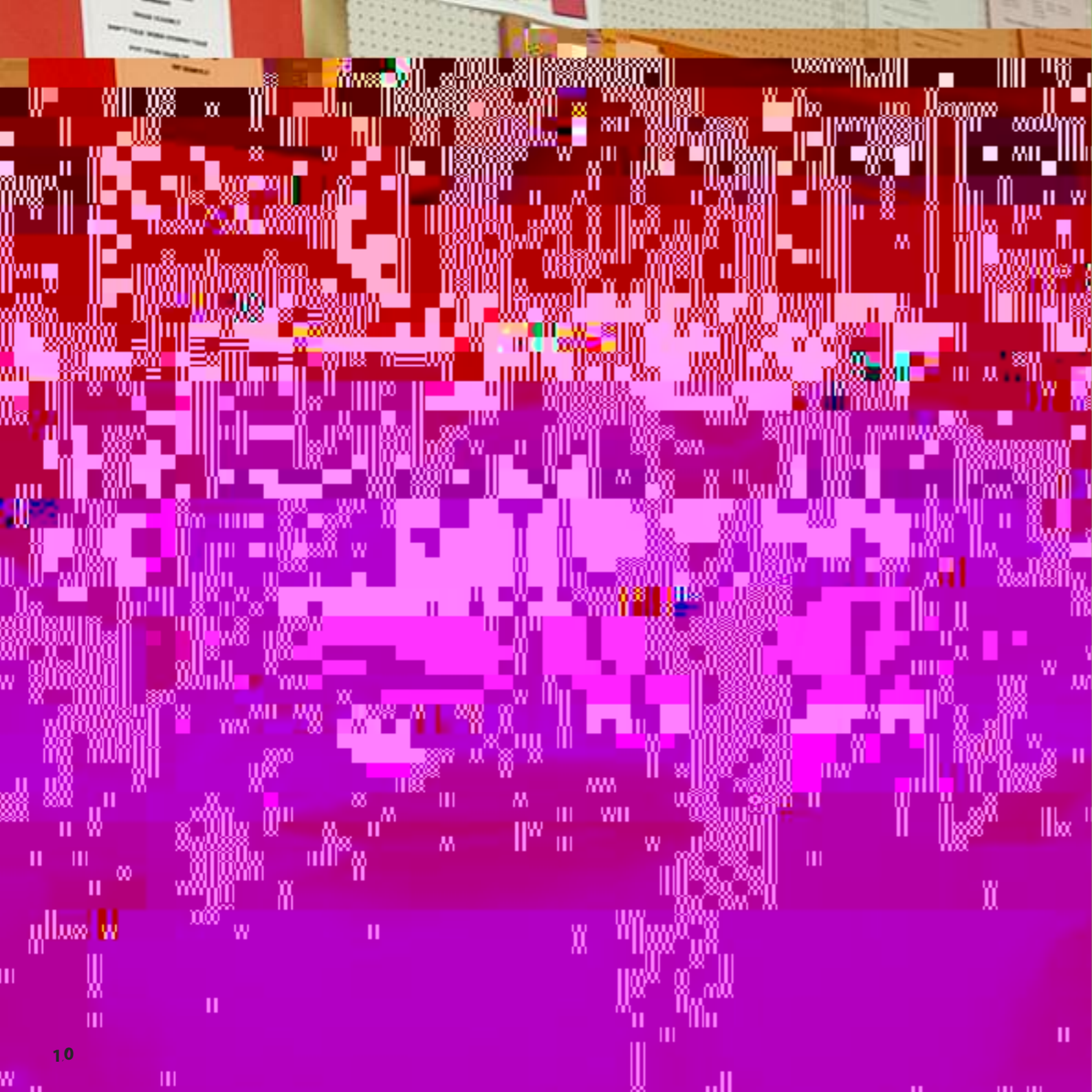
If you have any questions or worries about which tier you should be entered for, then speak to your teachers. They will be able to give you help and guidance.

## Before the exam day

Five exam boards provide GCSEs in England. The exam boards set out what topics you will cover in your course (this is known as a syllabus or specification), write the exam questions, check your coursework and controlled assessments and mark all your exam papers.







A principal examiner, appointed by the exam board, writes the exam papers and creates a detailed explanation of how the papers should be marked. At every stage along the way, experts check that:

- the exam papers are clear
- there are no trick questions or nasty surprises
- the standard is the same as the previous year's papers
- the questions can be completed in the time allowed.

**Special arrangements**

The exam boards aim to give all students a fair deal. They know that for some students the usual exam arrangements aren't suitable. For example, some students who have a disability or an injury like a broken arm, a learning difficulty or who speak English as a second language, may need help. If you think the exam arrangements need to be adjusted for you, speak to your teachers well in advance of the exam. They'll be able to tell you more about the access arrangements offered by the exam board and advise you.

## Day

Once the exam papers have been delivered to schools, it is time for you to put your knowledge, understanding and skills to the test.

If you are ready to sit your exam, but on the day something outside your control affects your performance (such as a family crisis), you may be able to apply for special consideration after the examiners mark your paper. If you think this applies to you, speak to your teacher as soon as possible before or after the exam.

If you are ill on the day of your exam, you must notify your school immediately and they will tell you what to do. You may be able to apply for special consideration, but you must speak to your teachers as soon as possible so that they know that you won't be at the exam and can advise you on what to do next.



## After the exam day

to the change. If the accountable officer and senior examiner disagree, this must be reported and explained to the regulator (For more information on what the regulator does, see page 19).

This is the day you've been waiting for! You'll be able to go to your school to collect your results or they will be posted or emailed to you.

You'll receive your results from each exam board on a separate slip. Each slip will list the subjects you studied and the grade you achieved for each one. If you have taken modular exams then your results slip will have a Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) mark. UMS is the system that exam boards use to combine different unit marks to get your overall GCSE grade. If you would like to know more about the UMS system, then ask your teacher or exam officer for more information.

If you and your teachers aren't happy with your results and feel that something may have been done incorrectly, you can take action. You need to discuss your concerns with your school immediately. Your school can make a request for your paper to be re-marked or have the marks added up again. It can also request your exam papers from the exam board so that you can see how your papers have been marked. But don't expect comments telling you where you went wrong!



# Moving on

- [Find out more about the world of work](#)
- [Find out more about the world of study](#)

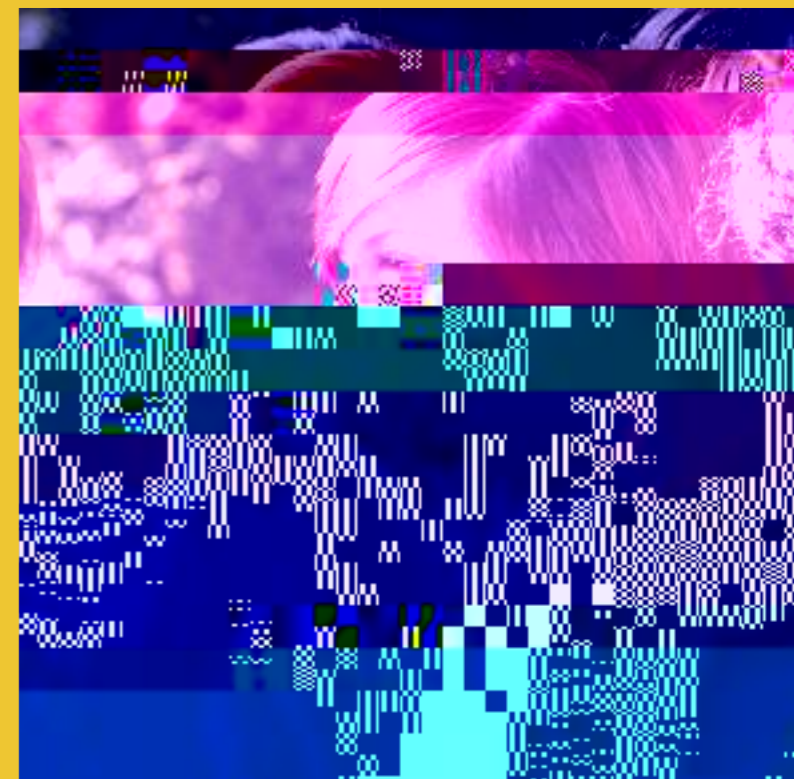
## What next?

Perhaps you've already decided that after finishing your GCSEs you would like to find a job, apply for an apprenticeship or study for more qualifications.

There is a whole range of qualifications to choose from – AS levels, A levels, NVQs, the Diploma, BTECs, OCR Nationals or other vocational courses. If you think that A levels might be the thing for you, then you can find out more in 'AS and A levels: the official student guide to the system', which is available on the Ofqual website at [www.ofqual.gov.uk/alevelguide](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/alevelguide).

You may decide that the world of work is for you and are now looking for a job. You will find details of organisations that can give you careers advice and guidance in the 'Where to go for help' section of this booklet.

Whichever route you decide to take, GCSEs will stand you in good stead for your future study or employment.



For more information on the world of work, visit [www.ofqual.gov.uk/alevelguide](http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/alevelguide)



→ *Handwritten notes on a grid background:*  
1. *Study in a quiet place*  
2. *Study in a quiet place*  
3. *Study in a quiet place*  
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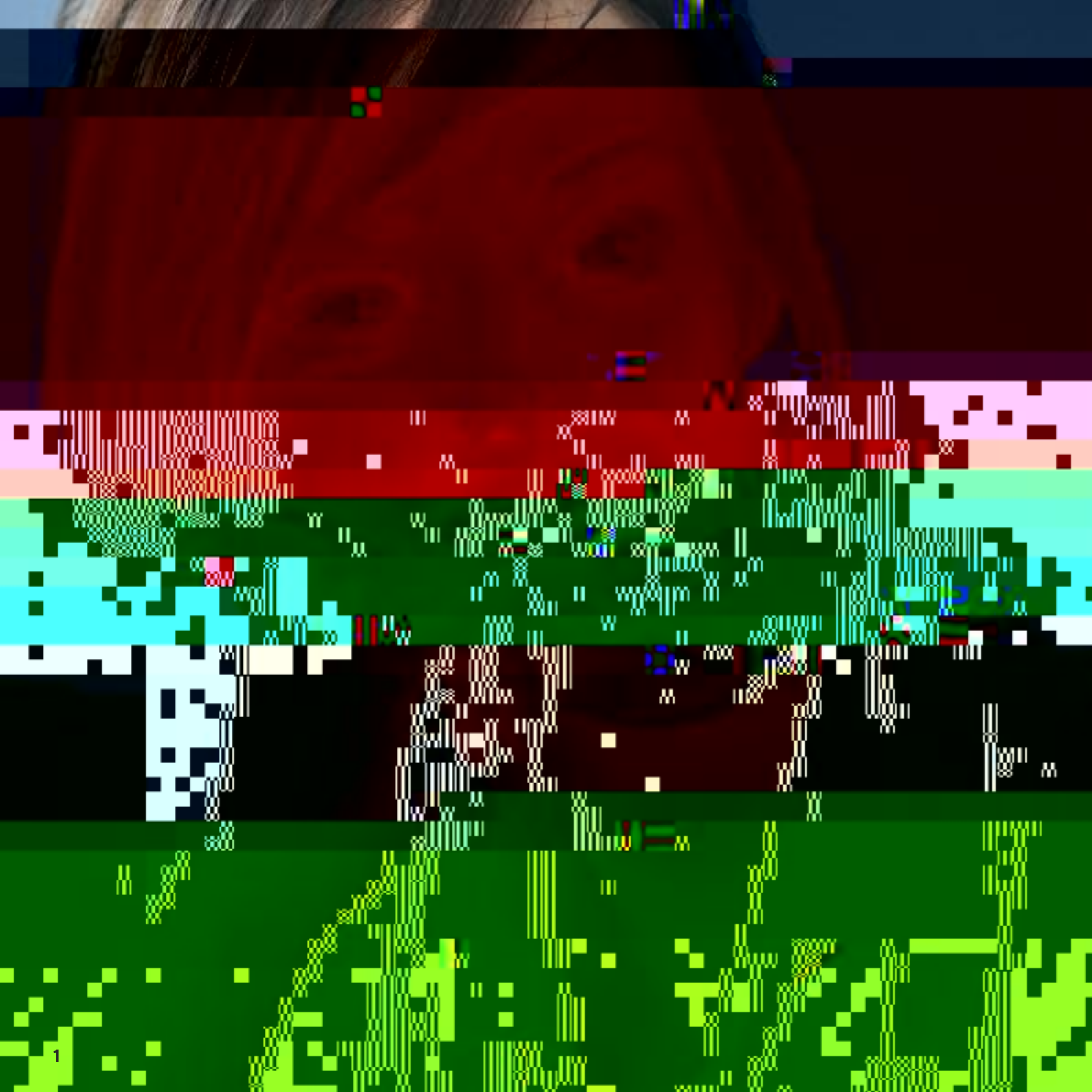
Ease in an extra half hour of work a day at least, by getting up earlier or taking less time over lunch. Over five days that will give you a minimum of two-and-a-half hours of quality study time. You could now have an evening out.

Cover two or three subjects in the one session. Start with the one you dislike most and then look forward to finishing with the one you like best.

Try answering some questions from past exam papers. Your teachers will probably be able to provide these, or you can look on the exam board websites.

## n the e a roo

Take six deep breaths and have a sugary sweet to boost your energy – but don't crunch!



## Board

There are five exam boards that offer GCSE qualifications:

[AQA](#) [Edexcel](#) [Eduqas](#) [OCR](#) [CIE](#)

# Where to go for help

Everything you need to know about qualifications and the exam system, including an online version of this guide and a guide to the AS and A level system.

Help in finding the right courses. Call them free on 0800 101 901.

Everything you need to know about qualifications and the exam system, including an online version of this guide and a guide to the AS and A level system.

The Exams Doctor is on hand to help with all your qualifications and exams questions. George Turnbull has many years' experience in the examination system and can answer queries on A levels and GCSEs, what to do when you get your results, and how to do as well as you can in your exams. Turn to page 14 to read some of his hints and tips about revising and sitting GCSEs.

Free advice and counselling for 14- to 19-year-olds on everything from revision tips and how to deal with stress to what different GCSE subjects involve and how to choose which subjects to study. Call the helpline on 080 800 13219 or text 07766 413 219.

Lots of information on different qualifications for 14- to 19-year-olds.

Information on qualifications from the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Help in finding the right courses. Call them free on 0800 101 901.

All your questions answered about apprenticeships, which allow you to earn while you learn.

Visit this site for the access arrangements booklet and the post-results service booklet (includes information on the exams appeals process).

Information about what to do if you are not happy with the outcome of your exam appeal.

And don't forget there are also the exam board websites listed on page 19.

