

WHY DO GCSE EXAM BOARDS DIFFER?

As a student sitting your GCSEs, you may be wondering why there are different exam boards across your subjects. For some schools- even within the same subject- you might find that someone in a different class is with a different exam board to you! This can be confusing, maybe even worrying. You might wonder if there's a secret reason why your teacher has signed you up for a certain one! Here, we look at some of the reasons exams boards differ- and how this applies to you.

Firstly, you do not need to worry. Head of subjects (or sometimes your teacher) will decide which exam board you will go with. Staff do not make the decision lightly. They are given plenty of paper work and information (called specifications,) to read through. These are very detailed documents to help staff make the best choice for your individual school. Often, teachers weigh up the pros and cons of different exam boards before coming to a decision. Rest assured, your teacher is likely to know some of the reasons why your school has picked a particular exam board. You can always ask them, although- to be honest- the answer is not usually very interesting!

There are five GCSE boards covering the United Kingdom. You'll know some of them as [AQA](#), [OCR](#), [Pearson Edexcel](#), [WJEC](#) and [CCEA](#). Each one offers slightly different layouts and set up questions and materials.



How is this fair, you might ask? And what if I was to change schools or miss out? What if your friend at another school seems to be learning something different to you?

Don't stress. What you cover in class will be similar, regardless of the exam board you are with. The exception is if you are sitting an exam with 'set texts' (for example your class might study a book that another school might not be studying). Separate exam boards sometimes have different lists of texts that you need to read. The only time this will affect you is if you move schools or maybe even move classes.

Despite set texts- or other test questions looking different to yours- you will still be marked on the same skills and techniques, regardless of how the questions are asked. Each exam board invites students to apply or show the same sort of skills per subject. While your Religious Studies paper might ask you to 'explain' part of a topic, the other exam boards for RS are also likely to test your ability to 'explain,' too.

There are some students- and this might be you- who also wonder if exam boards are picked by how 'hard' or 'easy' they are. If you struggle with a certain subject, you might believe that your teacher picked an exam board that would 'simplify' the test down for you. It's important to clarify: this is not the case!

A few years back there was media coverage surrounding this and, while some papers word their questions to look more straightforward than others, there are currently no significant differences. Exam boards are under pressure to make things as equal as possible. Some of you may be aware that there are 'foundation' and 'higher' papers for certain subjects, and they are there to address your academic strengths. This is so you can sit an exam that is appropriate for your ability. Students with a different exam board aren't going to be marked any 'better' or 'worse' than you. It just doesn't work like that.

To ensure you, as a student, are being treated fairly in the exam process, there is a government regulation company called Ofqual. Think of this a bit like 'Ofsted.' They check that every exam board meets certain standards. Ofqual assesses the way students across the country are marked. It's all about keeping things as fair as possible, for everyone.

You'll also notice, on your exam timetable and practise papers, that you can be completing an English GCSE, for example, under an entirely different exam board to your Maths GCSE. Or your science or your history, the list goes on. Again, this is not a random selection made by your teachers (and it's not the case that your school can't make up its mind!) Instead; some staff prefer particular exam boards over others. Usually, this is to do with the experience of the teachers in each of your school's departments. It might also be to do with specific subjects only being offered by selected exam boards.

Your teachers want to teach you with confidence. They want the best for you, and they want to be able to provide you with all the information and knowledge that they have on an exam paper. Many of the teachers in one of the subjects in your school, for example, might have taught with one exam board for lots of years. Therefore, your teacher continues to teach under this exam board- and puts you into this exam- because they know the exams well. If a teacher knows an exam structure in detail, then the chances are they will pass their knowledge on to you. You might be familiar with your teachers saying things such as: "This question is usually worded like this..." or "Two years ago, this paper got students to do this..." and this means your teacher knows the paper well and has probably taught it in the past. You're in safe hands.

Even if your teacher starts with a new exam board, or you have a new teacher, rest assured they will have done their homework! All teachers do plenty of research into your exam questions and what the exam board will want from you. The exam companies also provide teachers with lots of tools and example material (such as past papers you may come across!) As a student, trust your teacher: they will want you to succeed as much as you do!

Finally, now that you've read a little more on why GCSE exam boards differ, it might be a wise idea to find out from each teacher which exam board you are completing each subject with. If you want to have a look at the exam company's website yourself, you can (although just be aware they are usually aimed at teachers!) Alternatively, some exam boards supply specific revision books to help you with their exams, which you might find helpful to back up what you cover in class!