



FREE PARENT GUIDE

What Do GCSE Grades 1–9 Actually Mean?

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By Ibrahim, maths tutor since 2018 · Updated October 2026

Grades 9 to 1 replaced A* to G in England, so many parents never sat the system their children are in. Here is what the numbers mean, what schools and colleges look for, and what happens if your child does not get a grade 4.

The Grades in Plain English

Grade 9 is the highest and grade 1 is the lowest. A student who does not reach grade 1 gets a U (ungraded). The old letter grades do not match exactly, but Ofqual, the exams regulator, lined up three points: the bottom of a grade 7 matches the bottom of an A, the bottom of a 4 matches the bottom of a C, and the bottom of a 1 matches the bottom of a G.

New Grade	Roughly Equal To	What It Means
9	The very top of A*	Exceptional. Only a small share of students get a 9.
8	A*	Excellent
7	A	Very strong. Often asked for to study A Level Maths.
6	A high B	Good. Often needed for science A Levels.
5	A high C or a low B	The "strong pass"
4	C	The "standard pass"
3	D or E	Below a pass. Maths must be continued after 16.
2 and 1	E to G	Working towards a pass

Grade 4 and Grade 5

The Department for Education calls grade 4 a **standard pass** and grade 5 a **strong pass**. Many employers, colleges and apprenticeships ask for a 4 in maths and English. Some sixth forms ask for a 5 or 6 across several subjects.

Working At, Predicted and Target Grades

School reports often show three different grades. They mean different things:

Working At

The grade your child would most likely get if they sat the exam today, based on recent work and tests.

Predicted

The grade the teacher expects by the end of Year 11, allowing for the progress still to come.

Target

An ambitious grade, often set by a computer from earlier test scores. It is a goal, not a promise.

A gap between "working at" and "target" is normal in Year 10. A gap that is not closing by the spring of Year 11 is worth a conversation with the teacher.

Grade Boundaries Change Every Year

There is no fixed pass mark. The exam boards set the grade boundaries after the papers have been marked, so the number of marks needed for a grade 4 or 7 is a little different each year. This is why grades on mock exams are estimates: the school has to guess the boundaries.

What Sixth Forms and Colleges Usually Ask For

Next Step	Maths Grade Often Asked For
Most college courses and apprenticeships	Grade 4
Many sixth forms (general entry)	Grade 4 or 5
A Level Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Economics, Psychology	Often grade 6, sometimes 5
A Level Maths	Usually grade 6 or 7
A Level Further Maths	Often grade 7 or 8, sometimes higher

These are typical figures only. Every sixth form and college sets its own entry requirements, so always check the prospectus of the places your child is interested in.

What If My Child Does Not Get a Grade 4?

In England, students who do not get at least a grade 4 in maths by 16 must keep studying maths alongside their main course, usually until 18. Under the current Department for Education funding rules:

- Students with a **grade 3** study towards GCSE Maths again.
- Students with a **grade 2 or below** can study Functional Skills Maths Level 2 (a shorter, practical maths qualification) instead, or GCSE.
- GCSE Maths can be resat in the **November** resit exams (for students aged 16 or over), or the following summer.

The exact rules are set by the government and can change, so check with the college or sixth form. The good news is that a resit is very achievable with the right support, and Functional Skills Level 2 is accepted by many employers and courses in place of a grade 4.

What You Can Do This Week

- Find your child's latest report and note their working at, predicted and target grades.
- Look up the maths grade needed for the courses your child is considering after Year 11.
- If there is a gap, ask the teacher which two or three topics would make the biggest difference.

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