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AQA

What to expect · Exam Board Factsheet

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18 entries

AQA is the most popular exam board in England. Here is how AQA assesses you, the style of its papers, and where students win and lose marks.

About the board

Who AQA is

AQA (the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance) is the largest exam board in England. Most state schools enter their students for AQA in core subjects, so the papers you sit in maths and the sciences are very likely to be AQA.

GCSE foundation and higher tiers

In maths and the sciences, GCSEs split into a foundation tier and a higher tier. Foundation is capped at grade 5; higher runs from grade 4 up to 9. Your teacher enters you for the tier that fits your target, and you sit the paper for that tier only.

Linear assessment from one spec

AQA courses are linear, so you sit all of your final papers at the end rather than banking module marks along the way. Every question comes from the published specification and nothing outside it, which makes the spec your real syllabus and a reliable revision checklist.

How the papers work

Required practicals

GCSE and A-Level sciences each have a set list of required practicals you must carry out during the course. Exam questions then test the method, the equipment, the variables and the results, so revising what you actually did in the lab earns marks you cannot get any other way.

Maths and quantitative skills in science

A fixed share of the science marks is set aside for maths skills, such as rearranging equations, working with units, reading graphs and handling percentages. In GCSE physics this weighting is the highest, so practise the calculations as hard as the recall.

Assessment objectives

Marks are split across recall, application and analysis. It is not enough to know the facts; a large slice of every paper asks you to apply ideas to a situation you have not seen before or to evaluate data, so train for unfamiliar contexts.

Calculators and formula sheets

Most science and maths papers allow a calculator, though some maths papers have a non-calculator section. AQA now provides a sheet of physics equations in the exam, but you should still learn the core ones cold to save time under pressure.

Command words and style

Read the command word first

Every question opens with a command word that tells you the type of answer wanted. Matching your response to that word is the single fastest way to lift a grade, because answering the wrong way wastes time and earns nothing.

State, give, name and describe

State, give and name want a short fact with no explanation, so one clear phrase scores the mark. Describe goes a little further and asks what happens or what a pattern shows, using the data in front of you, but it still needs no reason yet.

Explain

Explain asks for the reason or the mechanism behind something, the why and the how. Use words like because and therefore to show cause and effect, since a description on its own will not score an explain mark.

Calculate	Calculate asks for a worked number. Show each step and the units, because method marks are available even when the final figure is wrong, and a bare answer throws those marks away.
Evaluate	Evaluate asks you to weigh two sides and reach a supported judgement. Give points for and against, then a short conclusion that says which side the evidence favours and why.

Where students lose marks

Level of response answers	Six-mark questions are marked in bands rather than point by point. A top band needs a clear line of reasoning that joins ideas together with the right vocabulary. Scattered correct facts with no thread stay stuck in the middle band, so plan the order before you write.
Describing when asked to explain	The most common slip is restating the data when the question wanted a reason. If the command word is explain, every sentence should push towards why it happens, not just what happens.
Dropping units and rounding badly	In calculations students lose easy marks by leaving off the unit, mis-rounding, or not giving the answer to the figures asked for. Write the unit every time and check what precision the question requested.
Vague practical answers	On required practical questions, answers like measure it carefully score nothing. Name the instrument, say what you would control, and give a real method, because the marks reward precise method language.

Nile tips

Revise from the mark scheme	Work past papers, then mark your own answers against the AQA mark scheme. You quickly learn the exact phrasing examiners reward, which is often different from how a textbook puts it.
Use the marks as a guide	Let the mark count set the length of your answer. Four marks usually means four separate ideas, so aim for that many distinct points rather than padding one idea out.