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OCR

What to expect · Exam Board Factsheet

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Exam Board Factsheet

18 entries

OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA) sets the Gateway sciences and Maths A among others. Here is how OCR assesses you and where students win and lose marks.

About the board

Who OCR is

OCR stands for Oxford, Cambridge and RSA. It is one of the main exam boards in England, run by Cambridge University Press and Assessment, and it sets qualifications across GCSE and A Level.

Two science routes

At GCSE, OCR offers Gateway Science (suite A) and Twenty First Century Science (suite B). Most schools sit Gateway. Check the spec code on your past papers so you revise the right one.

Find your spec code

Every OCR course has a code, for example J250 for Gateway Combined Science. The code is printed at the top of the paper. Match it to the specification on the OCR site so your notes cover the right content.

How the papers work

Higher and Foundation tiers

GCSE science and maths are tiered. Foundation runs from grade 1 to 5, Higher from 4 to 9. Sit the tier your teacher enters you for, and learn the grade boundaries so you know what each mark is worth.

Practical activity groups

OCR Gateway groups the required practicals into Practical Activity Groups, the PAGs. You do not get a separate coursework grade, but exam questions test whether you understood the method, the variables and the results.

Practicals are examined

Around 15 percent of your science marks come from practical skills, tested inside the written papers. Expect questions on apparatus, measuring accurately, spotting errors and improving a method, so revise how each PAG was actually carried out.

Maths inside science

A set share of marks rewards maths skills, such as rearranging formulae, reading graphs, using standard form and working out percentages. Take a calculator and practise these so you do not drop easy marks.

Synoptic questions

Later papers, especially at A Level, ask you to pull together ideas from different topics in one answer. A single question might link energy, bonding and rates, so revise across the whole course rather than topic by topic.

Command words and style

Read the command word first

OCR tells you exactly what to do through command words. State means a short fact, describe means say what happens, explain means give a reason, and evaluate means weigh up both sides and reach a judgement.

Calculate and show your working

When a question says calculate or determine, set out each step clearly. Even if the final number is wrong, OCR awards method marks for correct working, so never just write a bare answer.

Level of response answers	The longer 6 mark questions are marked in bands, not by ticking single points. To reach the top band you need accurate science, clear structure and a line of reasoning that links one idea logically to the next.
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Where students lose marks

Describing when asked to explain	A common slip is saying what happens but not why. If the command word is explain, every point needs a because or a so that. Describing alone caps you well below full marks.
Ignoring the mark allocation	A 4 mark question wants four distinct points. Students often write two and stop, or pad one idea out. Treat the marks in brackets as the number of separate things the examiner is looking for.
Vague extended answers	On level of response questions, woolly writing that drifts between points stays in the bottom band. Plan a quick order, use the right terms, and make sure each sentence moves the argument forward.
Forgetting units and significant figures	Dropping the unit, or rounding to the wrong number of significant figures, loses marks that the science earned. Carry units through every calculation and match the figures in the question.

Nile tips

Drill OCR past papers	Boards phrase questions in their own way. Working through OCR papers, not another board's, trains you to spot their command words and the style of their mark schemes before you sit the real thing.
Learn from the mark scheme	After each paper, mark your own work against the OCR scheme and read the examiner report. You quickly see the exact wording OCR rewards and the careless errors that cost most students marks.
Make a PAG revision card	Write one card per Practical Activity Group covering the method, the equipment, the key variables and the main source of error. These cards turn the trickiest practical questions into easy marks.