A Guide to choosing A-level Courses

For 2020/21

Prince Henry's Grammar School
SPECIALIST LANGUAGE COLLEGE

A guide to choosing your A-level courses

Most students in the Sixth Form will select **three** A-level courses, or a combination of A-level and BTEC/Applied courses, and will continue with these courses for two years (this is a change from the old modular system in which students chose four courses in Y12 and dropped back to 3 in Y13.) Without a 'drop' subject, it is more essential than ever that students make informed subject choices. It will still be possible to take four A-level subjects, but this is only recommended for students with very strong GCSE results.

Different universities have different requirements in terms of subject combinations, and certain courses at university will have very specific subject requirements. It is important to choose subjects at A-level which you think you will enjoy and want to study, but it is also important to select subjects in which you will be able to achieve a good grade and which keep your options open for the future. There is no point in choosing a subject which you think you **should** do if you are unlikely to get a good grade in this subject through lack of interest or aptitude. On the other hand, you need to think about your combination of subjects so that you do not close down opportunities for the future.

Facilitating subjects

The Russell Group universities (the 24 leading UK universities) traditionally published a list of **facilitating subjects**. These are subjects which are required more often than others for entry into their university courses and therefore choosing at least **one** of these subjects can give you the greatest range of options when it comes to applying for university. The facilitating subjects are:

- Mathematics and Further Mathematics (some degrees will count these as one choice only, others will accept these as two A-levels. If in doubt, ask the Sixth Form team)
- English **Literature**
- Physics
- Biology
- Chemistry
- Geography
- History
- Any Modern Foreign Language (i.e. French, German or Spanish at PHGS)

Other A-level subjects which are seen as strong academic subjects offering good preparation for university are:

- Economics
- Religious Studies
- Politics
- English Language

These are not included in the facilitating subjects list as they are rarely a required subject for any degree, however they offer good general transferable skills and are well regarded by Russell Group admissions tutors.

If you wish to study Art or Music at a Russell Group university, then Art or Music A-level is usually a requirement.

This list of subjects is not intended to 'demote' other A-levels or claim that they are less rigorous, it is simply that they are not required subjects for many degrees and therefore do not keep as many options open. If you have a definite career path in mind, then some of the other subjects are often really useful and sometimes essential. For further information, please see the Russell Group Informed Choices website https://www.informedchoices.ac.uk/

Subject choices for certain types of course

Although many are often not sure of exactly what they want to do at university, a lot of students in Year 11 have a general idea of the sorts of subjects that appeal to them. Certain groups of subjects at A-level can give you the most flexibility for degree courses in broad areas of study.

Science courses

Most students who are interested in studying some form of science degree will take a combination of Chemistry, Biology, Physics and Maths. Some students prefer to study two sciences and one arts/humanities subject in order to retain a broader range of options. It is possible to study three science subjects and one humanities subject at PHGS, but this is only recommended for students with strong GCSE results. If you are interested in a science course at a Russell Group university it is essential to take at least **two** science subjects.

Science courses at university tend to fall into two broad camps:

Biological/life sciences – degrees based on Chemistry and Biology including most of the medical sciences. For most of these courses you will need Chemistry **and** Biology A-levels. Maths is also a requirement for many Chemistry courses.

Physical sciences – degrees based on Maths and Physics including Engineering. Maths **and** Physics A-levels are essential here, and Further Maths is very useful if you are a talented mathematician. For some Maths and Engineering degrees, Further Maths is mandatory.

Essay based subjects

Other students are interested in the arts/humanities/social sciences courses. Taking at least two facilitating or strong academic subjects with one interest based subject or creative/talent based subject will give access to a wide range of university degrees, but not normally maths or science degrees. Courses such as Law, Business, Psychology, Management, Sociology, Philosophy and Politics tend to have no specific subject requirements but taking one or two facilitating subjects will give access onto a wider range these courses as well as keeping open more tradition options such as History, English or Geography.

Language courses

Studying one language at A-level along with another facilitating subject will give access to a wide range of language degree courses. A student who can offer two languages at A-level will be highly sought after by universities and will often be able to select a course which offers a new language from scratch, as they have proven ability in the field. One language at A-level can also be very useful for entry onto combined degree courses such as International Business with a language.

Art courses

For students interested in Music at degree level, Music A-level combined with the practical music grade exams and music theory exams are important.

For Art courses, many students elect to study an art foundation course prior to their degree programme. Art A-level combined with at least one facilitating subject will give you the basis for a portfolio to gain entry onto a foundation course in addition to the A-levels required to move on to a university degree afterwards.

For Drama courses, most universities do not ask for specific A-levels and will consider students for whom Drama has been an extra-curricular or out-of-school activity, however some do wish to see Drama or Theatre Studies A-level. Many courses will call students for audition/interview and will base their decisions on this as well as A-level grades.

BTECs and other Vocational Qualifications

Many Russell Group universities will accept some BTEC/Vocational subjects for some courses. In general, the single A-level equivalent BTEC/Vocational subjects (offered at PHGS) combined with some A-level subjects are more widely accepted than the three A-level equivalent BTEC courses (usually offered at FE colleges). BTECs are usually accepted for the more vocational degree courses (with the exception of Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science) and for Business and Sport related courses. The individual university websites give more guidance here, but these courses are far more widely accepted than many students and parents expect.

Other universities

Obviously the Russell Group universities are not the only option post-18, and other universities may well be higher up in the rankings for certain courses. The 'teaching' universities often have a strong reputation for a particular area of study and are happier to accept a wider range of A-level and BTEC/Vocational courses. For example, Leeds Beckett University is very highly ranked for Sports courses, Manchester Metropolitan University is widely known for Primary teaching courses, and Edge Hill University consistently tops the polls for best overall student experience. Russell group universities are geared towards research and expect a high level of independent learning from their students, whereas other universities are more geared towards teaching and will offer more guidance throughout degree courses. The choice of university, and therefore of A-level subjects, needs to be based on your individual strengths and weaknesses, and not simply on which is perceived to be the 'top' institution.

Apprenticeships and Internships

There are a wide range of alternatives to university available, including degree-level apprenticeships and internships that can also lead to degree level qualifications while working for a major company. Some apprenticeships, such as those in Engineering, have very similar A-level requirements to the equivalent degree courses, while others are simply looking for three good A-level grades in any subject. If you have a particular career path in mind, then seek advice from the Sixth Form team about the most appropriate A-level choices. Often these will be similar to the recommended courses listed below for each subject.

Careers and the jobs market

It is also worth reflecting on the changing jobs market and on the skills and abilities that will be beneficial for the future. Many jobs that pay good salaries now did not even exist 10 years ago and this rate of change is unlikely to slow. For example, in the local area one of the fastest growth areas for jobs is in the field of IT and Digital Media. Whereas in the past IT and Media qualifications may have been seen as a 'soft option' at A-level, this is no longer the case as the need for skills in this area is urgent and the qualifications reflect the rigour required to succeed in a growing market. The vocational qualifications in ICT and Digital Media offered at PHGS can be studied alongside traditional A-levels and offer a clear route into this growing industry.

If you know what you want to study after Sixth Form

Universities vary in their entry requirements for different courses, and the only way to be completely certain is to check the individual university websites, however, the list below shows the most common subject requirements for some of the most popular degree courses.

Accountancy

Essential: Sometimes Maths but usually no required subjects

Useful: Maths, Business Studies (including BTEC), Economics

Aeronautical Engineering

Essential: Maths and Physics

Useful: Further Maths, Product Design, Computer Science

American Studies

Essential: Varies, but often History and/or English Literature

Useful: English Language, Politics

Anthropology

Essential: none

Useful: Biology, Sociology

Archeology

Essential: none

Useful: History, Geography, any science subject

Architecture

Essential: Some may require Art

Useful: Art, Maths, Product Design, Physics

Art and Design

Essential: Art or Design Technology.

Useful: Product Design. Most Art students will do an Art Foundation course following A-levels

Biochemistry

Essential: Chemistry. Some universities also require Biology while others ask from one from Physics/Biology/Maths

Useful: Biology, Maths, Further Maths, Physics, Computer Science

Biology

Essential: Biology, usually Chemistry but sometimes just a second science subject

Useful: Maths, Physics, Computer Science

Biomedical Sciences

Essential: Two subjects from Chemistry, Biology, Maths and Physics

Useful: Maths, Further Maths, Biology, Chemistry, Physics

Business Studies

Essential: none

Useful: Maths, Business Studies (including BTEC) and Economics, ICT

Chemical Engineering

Essential: Chemistry and Maths (and sometimes Physics)

Useful: Physics, Biology, Further Maths, Computer Science

Chemistry

Essential: Chemistry and often Maths

Useful: Maths, Physics, Further Maths, Biology, Computer Science

Childhood Studies

Essential: none

Useful: Psychology, Sociology, Health and Social Care (including BTEC)

Civil Engineering

Essential: Maths and usually Physics

Useful: Further Maths, Chemistry, Biology, Computer Science, Product Design, Geography

Classical Studies

Essential: none (unless Classics in which case Latin or Ancient Greek A-levels are often required although some courses will let you start these languages from scratch)

Useful: Modern Foreign Language, English Literature, History

Computer Science

Essential: Often Maths, sometimes also Computer Science

Useful: Maths, Further Maths, Computer Science, Physics, Philosophy, ICT

Dentistry

Essential: Chemistry **and** Biology (some also require Maths or Physics)

Useful: Maths, Physics, Further Maths

Dietetics

Essential: Chemistry, Biology

Useful: Maths

Drama

Essential: Some courses ask for English Literature. A few require Drama or Theatre Studies

Useful: English Literature, English Language, Drama, Theatre Studies, Performing Arts (BTEC not accepted by some Russell Group universities but many other good universities do accept it)

Economics

Essential: usually Maths

Useful: Economics, Computer Science, Business Studies

Electrical/Electronic Engineering

Essential: Maths, usually also Physics

Useful: Further Maths, ICT, Design Technology, Computer Science

Engineering

Essential: Maths and Physics

Useful: Further Maths, Design Technology, Computer Science

English

Essential: English Literature (some courses accept English Language)

Useful: History, Religious Studies, a modern foreign language

Environmental Science/Studies

Essential: most course ask for two from Biology, Chemistry, Maths, Physics and Geography. Some courses will accept Applied Science (not usually Russell Group)

Useful: Another facilitating subject, particularly a science.

European Studies

Essential: A modern foreign language

Useful: Another language, English Literature, History, Politics, Religious Studies

French

Essential: French

Useful: Another modern foreign language, English Literature, History, Politics

Geography

Essential: Geography

Useful: Some BSc degrees prefer a science subject.

Geology

Essential: Usually two science subjects

Useful: Geography, Computer Science, Maths, Physics, Chemistry, Biology

German

Essential: German

Useful: Another modern foreign language, English Literature, History, Politics

History

Essential: most degrees require History

Useful: Economics, Religious Studies, English Literature, Politics, Sociology, Languages

History of Art

Essential: none

Useful: Art, English Literature, History, Religious Studies, Languages

Italian

Essential: Italian or another modern foreign language

Useful: Another modern foreign language, English Literature, History, Politics

Law

Essential: usually none, but sometimes English

Useful: History, Religious Studies, other facilitating subjects. At least one essay-based subject

Management Studies

Essential: sometimes Maths

Useful: Maths, Economics, Business Studies (including BTEC)

Materials Science

Essential: Two from Chemistry, Maths, Physics, Biology plus occasionally Product Design

Useful: Chemistry, Product Design, Further Maths, Computer Science

Mathematics

Essential: Maths and sometimes Further Maths

Useful: Further Maths, Additional Further Maths, Physics, Computer Science

Mechanical Engineering

Essential: Maths and usually Physics

Useful: Further Maths, Product Design, Computer Science

Media Studies

Essential: some courses ask for English or Media Studies

Useful: English, Media Studies, Psychology, ICT

Medicine

Essential: Chemistry, Biology and one from Maths or Physics gives access to the widest range of medical schools. Chemistry and Biology keeps most options open. Chemistry and one of Physics or Biology gives access to a smaller range of courses. Medical schools strongly recommend that you only study 3 A-levels and that 4 gives no advantage at all.

Useful: Further Maths, Computer Science or a contrasting non-science academic subject.

Music

Essential: Most traditional courses require Music A-level and Grade VII or VIII. Some universities accept Music Performance or Music Technology BTEC. Others will accept strong performers with no academic music qualification.

Useful: some universities prefer at least one essay based subject

Nursing and Midwifery

Essential: Usually Biology or another science. Applied Science accepted by a range of universities.

Useful: Biology, Psychology, Chemistry, Maths, Physics, Health and Social Care

Occupational Therapy

Essential: some courses require Biology or Applied Science

Useful: Psychology, Physical Education or Sport, Sociology, another science subject

Optometry

Essential: Two from Biology, Chemistry, Maths or Physics

Useful: Further Maths, Computer Science

Pharmacy

Essential: Chemistry and one from Biology, Maths and Physics – Chemistry and Biology are the most commonly required.

Useful: Maths, Physics, Computer Science

Philosophy

Essential: none (occasionally Maths is required)

Useful: Maths, Religious Studies, Classical Civilisations, History

Physics

Essential: Maths and Physics

Useful: Further Maths, Chemistry, Computer Science

Physiotherapy

Essential: Biology. Some courses also require a second science subject

Useful: Chemistry, Maths, Physics, Psychology

Planning

Essential: sometimes Geography

Useful: Geography, Maths, Economics

Politics

Essential: none

Useful: Politics, History, Law, Economics, Religious Studies, English Literature, Business Studies

Psychology

Essential: A few courses ask for one science subject

Useful: Biology, Maths, Psychology, Sociology, Chemistry, Computer Science

Religious Studies/Theology

Essential: none

Useful: Religious Studies, English Literature, History

Sociology

Essential: none

Useful: Sociology, Psychology, Geography, Religious Studies, Computer Science

Spanish

Essential: Spanish

Useful: Another modern foreign language, English Literature, History, Politics

Speech Therapy

Essential: Sometimes a science subject, Biology is sometimes specified, but some degrees will accept candidates with no science A-levels.

Useful: A modern foreign language, English Language, Psychology, Applied Science

Sports Science/Physical Education

Essential: Many courses require a science subject, although A-level PE often covers the science requirement

Useful: Biology, Physical Education, Sport BTEC, Psychology, Applied Science

Surveying

Essential: none

Useful: For some types of surveying, Maths and Physics, for Estate Management, any combination is usually acceptable.

Teacher Training (primary)

Essential: At least one from English, Geography, History, Maths, Music, Physical Education, Religious Studies, a science subject.

Useful: Another of the subjects listed above, Psychology.

Teacher Training (secondary)

Essential: At least one from Art, Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Design and Technology, Drama, English, French, Geography, German, History, ICT, Italian, Maths, Music, Physics, PE, Religious Studies, Spanish

Useful: Another of the subjects listed above

Veterinary Science

Essential: Chemistry and Biology plus one from Maths or Physics

Useful: Further Maths

A word about GCSE courses

GCSE results are **very** important. You are unlikely to get a place on a degree course without GCSE Maths and English at Grade 5 or above. Some courses will also expect at least grade 5 in science and one university (UCL) still requires a pass grade in a modern foreign language at GCSE for all degree courses. For courses at Oxford and Cambridge, and for Medicine courses, at least 6 GCSEs at grade 7-9 (or grade A*/A) are expected, with many universities requiring 8 or even 10 GCSE passes at this level.

Your GCSE results are also used to decide whether you will be capable of studying a subject at A-level, and many courses ask for a grade 5 or 6 at GCSE in your chosen subject.

For further advice about A-level courses please speak to the Sixth Form Team. Useful information about the requirements for particular degree courses at individual institutions can be found on the UCAS website or on individual university websites.