



Department
for Education

Psychology

GCSE subject content

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The content for psychology GCSE

Introduction

1. GCSE subject content sets out the knowledge, understanding and skills common to all GCSE specifications in a given subject.
2. Together with the assessment objectives it provides the framework within which awarding organisations create the detail of their specifications, ensuring progression from key stage 3 national curriculum requirements, and the possibility for progression to A level.

Aims and objectives

3. GCSE specifications in psychology must inspire and engage students by providing a broad, coherent, satisfying and worthwhile course of study which develops an understanding of the ideas and values that characterise 'self' and others. Students will be equipped with a psychological literacy that enables them to apply their knowledge and skills in their everyday lives, including making informed decisions about further study and career choices.
4. Specifications should encourage students to carry out ethical, investigative activities appropriate for the study of psychology at this level, but students will not be directly assessed on these specific activities.
5. GCSE specifications in psychology must enable students to:
 - use specialist vocabulary, psychological concepts, terminology and convention to engage in the process of psychological enquiry
 - acquire knowledge and understanding of psychology, developing an understanding of self and others, and how psychological understanding can help to explain everyday social phenomena
 - understand how psychological research is conducted, including the role of scientific method and data analysis
 - present information, develop arguments and draw conclusions through a critical approach to psychological evidence, developing as reflective thinkers
 - develop an understanding of the relationship between psychology and personal, moral, social and cultural issues, and develop an understanding of ethical issues in psychology
 - develop an understanding of psychological issues, the contribution of psychology to individual, social and cultural diversity, and how psychology contributes to society

Subject content

6. Specifications must require students to study the five core areas of psychology as identified at paragraph 10, and psychological ideas, processes, techniques and procedures, through:

- the five compulsory topics: development; memory; psychological problems; social influence; and the brain and neuropsychology
- two optional topics from the following: criminal psychology; language, thought and communication; perception; sleep and dreaming; or the self
- research methods

7. For each topic area, excluding social influence and the brain and neuropsychology, specifications must require students to study and critically evaluate theories or explanations, including the key features of each theory or explanation, in the context of the specific topic and area of psychology.

8. For topics in which theories or explanations are required, the theories or explanations are listed for each topic in the content below. For each of these topics, apart from development, two theories or explanations are required. For development, three theories are required.

9. For all topics, including social influence and the brain and neuropsychology, two studies, related to each topic are also required. The studies are not listed in the content below and should be set out in specifications.

Knowledge, understanding and skills

10. GCSE specifications in psychology must reflect the learning outcomes, and must require students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of key features of the following core areas of psychology through the study of the compulsory and optional topics, and research methods:

- biological – an understanding of biological concepts within psychology, including neuroscience and genetics as contributors to behaviour
- cognitive – an understanding of thought, information and mental processing as contributors to behaviour
- social – an understanding of the social area of psychology, the impact of social and environmental factors on behaviour and the influence of groups
- developmental – an understanding of how individuals change throughout their lives, with a particular focus on childhood and how both nature and nurture can affect individuals
- individual differences – an understanding of the complex nature of human behaviour and experiences and why and how people are different

11. Specifications must require students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of:

- debates within psychology, including 'reductionism/holism' and 'nature/nurture'
- how psychological knowledge and ideas change over time and how these inform our understanding of behaviour
- the contribution of psychology to an understanding of individual, social and cultural diversity
- the interrelationships between the core areas of psychology
- how the studies for topics relate to the associated theory
- research methods as outlined in the content below

Compulsory topics

Development

- stages of development, including cognitive and brain development
- the role of education and intelligence including Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development, assimilation and accommodation, and the four stages of cognitive development
- the effects of learning on development including Dweck's Mindset Theory and Willingham's Learning Theory

Memory

- the structure and process of memory, including the Theory of Reconstructive Memory and the Multi-store Model of Memory
- features of short-term and long-term memory, including duration and capacity
- inputs and outputs of memory, and how different types of memory are encoded and stored

Psychological problems

- an introduction to mental health:
 - how the incidence of significant mental health problems changes over time
 - the effects of significant mental health problems on individuals and society
- students must study two from the following: clinical depression, schizophrenia, addiction, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD); and know and understand:
 - characteristics of each according to the International Classification of Disease (ICD)
 - one biological and one psychological explanation
- interventions or therapies for each and how these improve mental health

Social Influence

- how the influence of other people (individuals and groups), social factors and dispositional factors (for example personality) explain:
 - conformity to majority influence
 - the behaviour of crowds and the individuals within them and the effect of collective behaviour, including pro and anti-social behaviour
 - obeying the orders of authority figures

The Brain and Neuropsychology

- the structure and functions of the brain and how the brain works
- the basic actions of the brain and the nervous system, what neurons and synapses are, and how they interact
- an introduction to neuropsychology: how structure and function of the brain relate to cognitions and behaviour; an example of the impact, on behaviour, of neurological damage

Optional topics

Criminal Psychology

- explanations of why criminal/anti-social behaviour occurs, including the Social Learning Theory of Criminality and Eysenck's Criminal Personality Theory
- the effects of punishment, including prison and alternatives to imprisonment
- rehabilitation, and reducing criminal/anti-social behaviour and increasing pro-social behaviour

Language, Thought and Communication

- the possible relationship between thought and language including Piaget's Theory of the Relationship between Thought and Language
- how thoughts and the structure of language affects our view of the world and how communication is different in animals
- examples of non-verbal communication and explanations including the Evolutionary Theory

Perception

- explanations of sensation and perception, including the Direct Theory of Perception (Gibson) and the Constructivist Theory of Perception (Gregory)
- monocular and binocular depth cues, visual cues, visual illusions, and visual constancies, and the reasons for these
- perceptual set and the effects of the following factors on perception: motivation, expectation, emotion, and culture

Sleep and Dreaming

- functions, features and benefits of sleep
- internal and external influences on sleep, and the features and causes of sleep disorders
- the nature of dreaming including why and when dreaming occurs, the Freudian theory of dreaming and Activation Synthesis Theory

The Self

- definitions of 'the self', 'self-concept' and the role of identity and free will
- the Humanistic Theory of Self to explain the development of self-esteem and the development of personality and the role of internal influences such as temperament and the role of experience
- measuring personality, personality scales and personality types, including the Trait Theory of Self

Research methods

12. GCSE specifications in psychology must require students to develop the following knowledge, understanding and skills in relation to psychological investigation and research methods:

- planning to conduct a psychological investigation and writing a hypothesis including null and alternative
- identifying different types of variables, including independent and dependent variables, and explaining the effect of extraneous variables and how to control for them
- describing target populations, samples, sampling methods, their associated strengths and weaknesses and how to apply them. Understanding the principles of sampling as applied to scientific data
- designing research including consideration of how it would be conducted, using quantitative and qualitative methods including:
 - lab, field, natural, interview, questionnaire, correlation, case study and observation
 - identifying strengths and weaknesses of the above methods, and types of research objectives for which they are most suitable
- using, understanding, interpreting and analysing numerical data and graphical representation of data (see appendix A)
- knowledge, analysis and evaluation of experimental designs, including independent and repeated measures, and their strengths and weaknesses

- analysing the planning and conducting of research, through the consideration of the reliability and validity of sampling methods, experimental designs, quantitative and qualitative methods
- demonstrating knowledge and understanding of ethical issues in psychological research, ethical guidelines, and ways of dealing with ethical issues

Appendix A – Mathematical requirements

In order to be able to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding in psychology, students need to have been taught, and demonstrate competence, to select and apply the following areas of mathematics relevant to Research Methods in psychology:

Arithmetic and numerical computation

- recognise and use expressions in decimal and standard form
- use ratios, fractions and percentages
- estimate results

Handling data

- use an appropriate number of significant figures
- find arithmetic means
- construct and interpret frequency tables and diagrams, bar charts and histograms
- understand the principles of sampling as applied to scientific data
- understand the terms mean, median and mode
- use a scatter diagram to identify a correlation between two variables
- know the characteristics of normal distributions
- understand range as a measure of dispersion
- understand the differences between qualitative and quantitative data
- understand the difference between primary and secondary data
- translate information between graphical and numerical forms
- plot two variables from experimental or other data and interpret graphs

All mathematical content must be assessed within the lifetime of the specification.



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