

Lesson plan:

Understanding how your exams are marked and graded

Subject PSHE / Tutor time

Year group Year 11 (GCSE) or Year 13 (A level)

Duration 15–20 minutes

Topic Understanding how your GCSE or A level exams are marked and graded

Learning objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- know what steps comprise the marking and grading process
- understand how marking is kept fair and consistent
- know how grade boundaries are set and why they change
- feel reassured that the system is trustworthy

Resources needed

- Accompanying slides: [Ofqual GCSE A level grading lesson plan slides](#)
- Screen if using slides provided
- Whiteboard if not using slides provided
- Mini whiteboards or paper for true or false quiz (optional)
- Optional, for end of lesson: [Ofqual How GCSE and A level grading works video](#) (and embedded at back of slide pack)

Lesson outline:

1. Quick-fire starter: True or false? (3 minutes)

Purpose: Surface common myths and misconceptions to address during the lesson.

Read out the following statements (using slide 2). Ask students to indicate if they think each one is true or false.

Don't reveal answers yet – say you'll come back to them.

1. Examiners know which school you're from when marking **(False)**
2. Grade boundaries are set after everyone has sat the exam **(True)**
3. There's a limit on how many students can get top grades **(False)**
4. It's no easier to get a grade with one exam board than another **(True)**
5. It can be harder or easier to get your grades from one year to the next **(False)**

2. The key facts (12–15 minutes)

How marking works (3–4 minutes) – slide 3

- Your answer paper goes to the exam board after your exam.
- It's normally split into individual questions – one examiner marks the same question across many students, making them expert at that mark scheme, which they have already been trained on.
- Marking is completely anonymous – examiners don't know your name, your school, or anything about you.
- Examiners' work is regularly checked as they work through their set of answers.

Quick question to the room:

“Why do you think anonymous marking matters?” (take 1–2 brief responses)

How grade boundaries work (4–5 minutes) – slide 3

- Grade boundaries are set after exams, when marking is nearly complete – not before.
- Two things happen:
 - Exam boards use data on how this year's students compare to those in previous years to make sure the grade boundaries are fair.
 - Experienced senior examiners then look at examples of actual student work around the boundary marks and compare it to last year's standard (the quality of work needed to get each grade). They then recommend the grade boundaries.

- **Why do boundaries change (slide 4)?** Because it's impossible to make papers exactly the same difficulty each year. If a paper is harder, boundaries go down. If easier, they go up. This keeps things fair from one year to the next.

Quick question to the room: “Why do you think the standard of work needed to get each grade needs to stay comparable year-on-year (for example, so that a grade 6 in maths / a grade B in maths this year means the same as it did last year)?”
(take 1–2 brief responses)

Activity: put the steps in order (2–3 minutes)

This short activity will test recall of the marking and grading process just described.

Using slide 5 provided, show a randomised list of the steps and give students 2 minutes to write down the correct order. Or you could turn this into a discussion, asking the class to build up the correct order together.

Wrong order:

- (A) Senior examiners recommend grade boundaries to exam boards
- (B) Exam boards look at data about this year's students and previous years'
- (C) Grades are sent to schools to give to students
- (D) Raw marks are converted into grades
- (E) Exam board splits up answer papers into individual questions
- (F) Answer paper sent to exam board
- (G) Senior examiners review examples of student answers around the provisional grade boundaries
- (H) Examiners mark lots of same question

Then reveal the **correct** order (slide 6):

- (F) Answer paper sent to exam board
- (E) Exam board splits up answer papers into individual questions
- (H) Examiners mark lots of same question
- (B) Exam boards look at data about this year's students and previous years'
- (G) Senior examiners review examples of student answers around the provisional grade boundaries
- (A) Senior examiners recommend grade boundaries to exam boards
- (D) Raw marks are converted into grades
- (C) Grades are sent to schools to give to students

The most important points about grading (2–3 minutes)

- There are no quotas or caps. No limit on how many students can get each grade.
- Stable results year-on-year reflect stable student performance across the country, not artificial limits.

- Your grade reflects your work – no-one is advantaged or disadvantaged by which year they sit their exams.

3. “True or false?” reveal and close (2–3 minutes)

Return to the starter statements and reveal the answers (below, and slide 7). Emphasise these answers as the key takeaways to remember.

- Examiners know your school
False – completely anonymous.
- Boundaries set after exams
True – set once most papers have been marked, and based on comparing data and expert examiners’ judgement.
- Limit on top grades
False – no caps or quotas (i.e. limits) exist. The number of students that can get each grade is not fixed, it is determined by the quality of work shown in the exam.
- Easier exam boards vs harder exam boards
True – it’s no easier to get a grade with one exam board than another.
- “Easy years” and “hard years”
False – it’s no harder or easier to get any particular grade from one year to the next.

Adaptive teaching

- For any students who are particularly anxious, offer a follow-up one-to-one or small group session.
- The interactive activities can be adapted – written responses instead of standing/sitting for students who prefer not to move/interact.

Assessment of learning

- Informal assessment through starter and myth-buster activities
- Quality of discussion responses
- Exit ticket (optional): “Write one thing you now understand better about how exams are graded”