



**Oxford Royale Academy**  
inspirational cultural and academic courses

# The **Ten Mistakes** You Are Making With Your A-Level Choices





The UK A-level exam has existed in some form since 1951. While the exam has changed hugely in style and content since that time, over the years, that nonetheless means that a lot of mistakes in A-level choices have nonetheless been made time and time again.

---

If you want to avoid making a fatal mistake in your A-level choices – a mistake that will make it tricky to get accepted on to your preferred degree course, for instance, or that may even require you to resit a year to pick up an A-level you should have taken from the start – this guide is here to help you out.

### **A quick note on terminology**

We will deal primarily with UK A-levels in this guide, though a lot of the advice will have relevance for A-levels in other countries too. AS-levels refer to the exams taken at the end of the first year of A-level; A2 is their scarier sequel taken at the end of the second year. The term “A-level” refers to both exams together.

The Sixth Form is the two years in which A-levels are studied, and it is divided into the Lower Sixth and the Upper Sixth, otherwise known as year 12 (the AS-level year) and year 13 (the A2 year) respectively.



# 01

*In short:  
take the standard  
number of A-levels (4  
AS-levels, 3 A2s) unless  
you have a very good  
justification for  
taking more.*

## Just how many A-levels should I take, anyway?

---

**If three A-levels are good, then four A-levels must be better, right? And five A-levels must be better still? Can I take six?**

Well, no. The standard pattern in UK schools is to take four subjects at AS-level and carry on with three of those to A2. If your school makes General Studies compulsory – and if it does, don't complain; it can be a great experience, and getting a good mark in the exam is not a challenge if you put a little work into it – then you may end up with a total of five subjects at AS-level and four at A2. General Studies doesn't really count with any semi-decent university, however, so will be more-or-less disregarded from that point.

Other circumstances in which it might be wise to take five AS-levels include being bilingual and taking an extra A-level in your second language, or if your school offers subjects such as Critical Thinking as an extracurricular. Maths geniuses may wish to take Further Maths as a fifth subject.

As for everyone else? Universities will be unimpressed by straight As in four A-levels if you could have got straight A\*s in three. While Cambridge University's statistics show that a majority of their students have more than three A-levels, this should absolutely not be understood to mean that you have to take four A-levels to get into Cambridge; their admissions documents are abundantly clear on that matter.

To make it plain, if your average mark suffers because you chose to take four A-levels instead of three, universities won't be impressed that you challenged yourself. They will instead think that you incorrectly assessed your own capabilities. There is no harm in having a go at more subjects than the norm if that's your idea of fun, but clear it with your school and be entirely prepared to drop one halfway through the year, if – or ideally before – your workload becomes unmanageable.





# 02

***In short:**  
facilitating subjects are  
good subjects to take,  
but they are not the  
only good subjects  
to take.*

## “Facilitating” is not the same as “desirable”

---

A few years ago, the Russell Group (a set of research-focused elite universities) decided to produce a list of subjects, known as [facilitating subjects](#), that would be seen as particularly desirable to have on one’s university application when aiming for one of those universities (or any university with a comparable league table position). Students are encouraged to take at least two facilitating subjects; [Oxbridge applicants](#) are usually encouraged to take three.

This is, in general, excellent advice, yet students are often misled into hearing “facilitating” and understanding “rigorous” or “academic” or “worthwhile”. While all of the subjects deemed facilitating are rigorous, academic and worthwhile, that is not to say that all other subjects are not.

**It is simply the case that facilitating subjects open many more doors and provide for a greater range of study possibilities than non-facilitating subjects.**

Confused? There are really three categories of A-level subject:

- Facilitating subjects, which are both solid, “hard” subjects and have utility for a wide range of further study options.
- Non-facilitating but solid subjects, which are “hard” subjects of less widely applicable utility in general university admissions – Music, Art, Religious Studies and so on fall into this category.
- So-called “soft” subjects, which are the ones that tabloid newspapers will grumble about. ICT, Accounting and Photography fall into this category. That is not to say that you cannot take any such subjects, but you should not take more than one, you should drop it at AS, and you should do it for the love of it rather than because you think it will have any real utility.





# 03

## Everyone loves Psychology

---

***In short:***  
*don't choose a subject just because you've never studied it before.*

Why does everyone love Psychology? We're not altogether sure. Maybe it's the allure of looking into other people's minds. Maybe it's a preoccupation with the pretty patterns of Rorschach tests. Maybe, deep down, we think it'll turn us into Derren Brown.

Whatever the reason, it is our experience that undecided GCSE students put it down as an A-level choice with alarming regularity – particularly in cases where the student has apparently no other interest in studying sciences. The depressing and prosaic answer is probably that after two years of slaving over GCSE subjects, memorising the finer parts of the mark scheme and repeating time and time again that a three-mark question requires three points to be made, a subject that isn't offered at GCSE is tantalising. Taught only at Sixth Form, Psychology feels grown up. You don't know the teachers too well, but you can be sure it won't be someone whose face you've seen at the front of a classroom since Year 7. It is a tempting option.

Nor do we want to discourage any budding psychologists. Yet it is worth remembering that if you haven't taken a subject before, you can't be sure that you will love it. It is even more worth remembering that Psychology is a science (though it doesn't get counted that way on a medical school application – sorry) and if you hate Biology, hate Maths and particularly despise anything to do with statistics, you and Psychology are unlikely to have a good time of it.

There's nothing to stop you having a closer look at exam papers and textbooks before you put down Psychology on your A-level choices form. Choose it because it genuinely seems interesting to you, not because you're desperate to take a subject – any subject! – that doesn't have deep associations with flashcards, past papers and pain.





# 04

## Keeping your options open

---

***In short:**  
some subjects are of little value if taken in isolation, so make sure you're not inadvertently ruling out anything you'd love to study further.*

We've produced [a whole article on keeping your options open](#), so we won't go into that too much here. Let it suffice that there are some subjects that it is pointless to take on their own, except for the joy of learning about them for a couple more years.

The sciences are a good example of this. If you want to take Biology as a fourth subject for the utter delight of learning more about the movement of water through a partially permeable membrane, more power to you. But if you think you might want to take that fascination all the way to university level and your A-level in Biology sits all alone in a sea of humanities, you will struggle. If you take Maths or Chemistry with it, you will open up the opportunity to study it at degree level; Chemistry in particular provides more support to the study of Biology than most school students realise.

**The rule to keeping your options open is simple: the more facilitating subjects, the better, and sciences should be taken in pairs.**

The difference between taking English, History, Biology and Chemistry and taking Creative Writing, Economics, Psychology and ICT is vast. With the first set, you could go on to study English, History, Philosophy, Geography, Politics, Social Sciences, Law, Psychology, Biology, Biochemistry and probably a handful more that don't come immediately to mind. With the second set, you're more likely to make an admissions tutor wonder long and hard about why on earth you bothered.





# 05

***In short:**  
being focused on one  
subject is desirable,  
but don't take it to  
extremes.*

## One-subject blinkers

There's a particular type of person who wants to study Economics. S/he takes Maths, Further Maths, Economics and Business Studies; Accountancy might also end up somewhere in the mix.

This isn't the biggest mistake on this list, yet it is a flawed approach all the same. There is always the danger of realising your utter hatred of all things Economic halfway through year 12 and being quite stuck for alternatives. There is the more likely problem of going to university and discovering a love of something like Economic History and struggling with such a limited background of A-levels.

This problem isn't solely limited to Economics. Literary types might find themselves musing on English Literature, English Language and Creative Writing, for instance. It's easy to be misled by the advice given to prospective science students – that AS-levels in Biology, Chemistry, Physics and Maths would work splendidly together (because they do) – and think that such a focus is desirable for all subjects. A little balance is almost always a good thing.

**HERE ARE SOME NOT-TOO-SIMILAR SUBJECTS THAT ARE KNOWN TO COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER:**

English and foreign languages	Economics and Geography
English and History	History and Classics
Maths and Music	English and Latin
Economics and History	History and Music

We would not discourage anyone from taking Maths, Further Maths and Economics. But throwing in, say, Geography at the end of that mix provides an application that is both broad and deep; focused, while allowing for changes of direction and reconsideration of plans.



# 06

## I want to study a subject, but I hate a vital component

---

***In short:**  
if you dislike an essential part of a subject you think you enjoy otherwise, you don't really enjoy that subject.*

Prospective English students who don't like reading. Prospective Medicine students who don't like Biology. Prospective Engineering students who don't like Maths. We have encountered these in their droves, so it seems worth stating: if an A-level is frequently compulsory to study a particular subject at university, this is not simply because admissions tutors needed a way to cut down on numbers. It is because the skills and knowledge that you learn from that subject are vital to the undergraduate study of that subject.

Many students seem to treat this as a system that can somehow be caught out – and in a way, it can. If you want to study Biochemistry and you hate Maths, you can take Biology, Chemistry, Physics and whatever fourth subject you fancy, and you will get offers from good universities – assuming you get the grades. You may end up feeling very pleased with yourself: “they said I had to study Maths – and I proved them wrong!”

Enjoy that feeling of glee while it lasts, because it will last maybe until ten minutes into your second lecture, when you realise that Maths is considered desirable for Biochemistry with good reason: Biochemistry has quite a lot of Maths in it. You may have to catch up on major chunks of the Maths that other people learned at A-level. Even if your GCSE knowledge is enough to buoy you along, the essential thing is that there will be Maths in subjects that often require Maths, and if you dislike Maths, you're going to have a miserable time for those parts of your undergraduate degree.

This holds for any other desirable subject. You can frequently get the offers rolling in even without having studied whatever it is. **But that subject was recommended for a reason.** You want to be in a position where you enjoy the A-levels that are recommended for your choice of degree – because that suggests quite strongly that you will enjoy the degree as well.





# 07

## These are not the subjects that you want to do

---

***In short:**  
be led by what you  
want to do, not by  
what other people  
want for you.*

Students often make their choices with a view to keeping their options open for two or more subjects. In some cases, this can be entirely legitimate, especially when the subjects are similar: choosing A-levels that suit either English or History is easily done, for instance. Those two subjects paint a picture of a student who is interested in the past and portrayals of the past, who likes stories whether real or invented, and who enjoys writing essays, reading and long afternoons spent in the library.

But then there are the cases where a student will try to choose options for two subjects that are not much alike at all. The classic combination is Law and Medicine. It is possible to construct an impression of a student who has a genuine and equal interest in both – perhaps with an analytical, investigative mind and a keen desire to help people in distress. That's not the first impression that those two subjects evoke, though. The first impression is inevitably of someone who wants a well-paid, well-respected, demanding professional career and who doesn't really have a clue what form they want that career to take. Sometimes this may be because of external pressures, such as a family that is made up almost entirely of doctors and lawyers, perhaps with the occasional teacher or lecturer thrown in for good measure. Different circumstances apply for different subjects.

It ought to go without saying that choosing your A-levels in order to take a degree subject that you aren't particularly sold on is a bad idea. If you're in this situation, remember that there are heaps and heaps of good, respected jobs that require a 2.1 or above without many requirements regarding the degree. Don't funnel yourself into a very particular (and very challenging) path if you are doing so to fulfil someone else's idea of what a successful career should look like.





# 08

***In short:***  
*don't pin all your plans on an unlikely ambition.*

## We all have dreams, but keep your day job in mind

---

The corollary to the above point is if you have optimistic dreams. Optimistic dreams are great and we would not wish to discourage them. Yet the inevitable reality is that very few actors end up in Hollywood, and very few novelists earn enough from their writing to pay the rent.

So what can you do about it? The answer is that you need to choose A-levels that enable your dream (of course!) but also ones that enable whatever it is you're going to do in order to afford groceries while your dream remains a work in progress. So if you long to be a film producer, you might want to avoid Music Technology and Media Studies (which will not help you towards that goal anyway) and take respected subjects like Maths and English that will give you a solid CV, while you spend your free time looking for film-related work experience.

It is perfectly possible both to plan for an unlikely dream and to build a prosaic but comfortable reality where you can afford to eat more than beans and live in a house that's heated to boot.



**Oxford Royale Academy**  
inspirational cultural and academic courses



# 09

## Difficulty is subjective

---

***In short:***  
*don't be put off subjects because they're said to be hard, or let yourself be drawn to subjects because they're said to be easy.*

A recurring question is whether language A-levels are too hard, and it's nigh-on impossible to answer. Language A-levels are very easy for native speakers. They are hard for dyslexics. They fall on to a sliding scale somewhere in between for everyone else. It is even a challenge to assess whether the majority of students find an A-level relatively hard or relatively easy, as A-levels with a reputation for being challenging (e.g. Physics) are taken primarily by more able candidates. In 2014, 26.5% of students taking Further Maths got an A\*, whereas an A\* grade was only achieved by 1.5% of students taking ICT. Does this mean that it's 17 times easier to get an A\* in Further Maths than in ICT? Obviously not.

Thus, if you got an A\* in GCSE Chemistry, you should not be put off by A-level Chemistry because it has a reputation for being hard. Similarly, if you scraped a C at GCSE Geography, A-level Geography is probably not for you, even though it is seen (not altogether accurately) as one of the easier options among the facilitating subjects. It is not even the case that less respected subjects are generally easier. Yes, we can probably say that the same candidate will have an easier job getting that Media Studies A\* than the same grade in Further Maths. However, for the vast majority of A-levels, the difference in difficulty level is both small and highly subjective.

**Don't choose a subject you're not keen on just because it has a reputation for being easy; definitely don't avoid a subject you're enthusiastic about and do well in because you've heard it may be a little tricky.**





# 10

***In short:**  
the best reason to take  
a subject is because  
you think you'll really  
enjoy studying it.*

## Do it because you love it

---

When you're overwhelmed with exams (which in the UK school system, is the majority of the time after you've passed your 14th birthday), you might find yourself wondering about the point of all of this studying. It can be very hard to enjoy anything when you're in the doldrums of GCSE revision. These are the times when you will wonder if, as an adult, you will ever compare and contrast two sonnets or solve a simultaneous equation. The answer is almost certainly not (although the dates on which various events happened in the Second World War are handy to know for pub quizzes). But that is not really the point. Of course, part of the point is to demonstrate that you can do as you're told, learn the things you're supposed to and regurgitate them in the required way – thereby showing that you can do the same in the world of work in future, a thought that inevitably conjures images of grim factory production lines.

The other point is more optimistic. Ultimately, you're doing all of this – by law, not by choice, but all the same – for the same reason that drives people to try to get in the answers before the contests do on University Challenge; for the same reason that retired people sign up for Open University courses on things that they've never studied before; for the same reason that so much of the BBC's revenue comes from David Attenborough documentaries; for the same reason that non-fiction books on thinking rationally show up on airport bestseller lists even though there are no dragons in them at all.

This is a very long-winded way of saying that learning should be a pleasure for its own sake. If you've got two or three subjects that will lead helpfully towards your future goals, it is OK to choose the rest of your subjects based solely on the fact, say, that History at A-level is great fun. Ultimately, if you're stuck between two or three different subject choices, don't be a martyr to the belief that suffering through two years of Maths will make you a better person.

**If the range of options that you have is reasonably sensible, take the subjects you think you will enjoy most.**



**Oxford Royale Academy**  
inspirational cultural and academic courses



# Oxford Royale Academy

inspirational cultural and academic courses

Oxford Royale Academy offers a wide range of educational courses.

**FIND OUT MORE:**

**[www.oxford-royale.co.uk](http://www.oxford-royale.co.uk)**

## **Oxford Royale Academy**

Yarnton Manor  
Church Lane, Oxford  
Yarnton, OX5 1PY  
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 845 130 60 21

Fax: +44 (0) 845 280 01 22

[admin@oxford-royale.co.uk](mailto:admin@oxford-royale.co.uk)

**[www.oxford-royale.co.uk](http://www.oxford-royale.co.uk)**



 [/oxfordroyale](https://www.instagram.com/oxfordroyale)

 [/OxfordRoyaleAcademy](https://www.facebook.com/OxfordRoyaleAcademy)

 [/OxfordRoyale](https://twitter.com/OxfordRoyale)