

DURHAM JOHNSTON
COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL
DARE TO BE WISE

Key Stage 4 Options Core *Curriculum*

2026-28

Core Curriculum



This booklet details the core curriculum for Key Stage 4 students.

In Year 10 and 11, all students will study the core subjects as follows:

English	4 periods a week (Students will study both Language and Literature in this time)
Mathematics	4 periods a week
Science	6 periods a week (2 each of Biology, Chemistry and Physics)
Religious Studies	1 period a week
Physical Education	1 period a week

For all of the core subjects, students will be taught in 2 parallel bands; this allows for setting in the separate subjects within the band.

Levels of entry where relevant – and in the case of science, the course followed – will be determined by ability, to ensure all students achieve the best possible results.

Please note, the information in this booklet is correct as of January 2026.

GCSE English Language



Exam Board AQA

Specification <https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/english/gcse/english-8700/specification>

Content

Paper 1: Explorations in creative reading and writing

The aim of this paper is to engage students in a creative text and inspire them to write creatively themselves by:

- in section A, reading a literature fiction text in order to consider how established writers use narrative and descriptive techniques to capture the interest of readers;
- in section B, writing their own creative text, inspired by the topic that they have responded to in section A to demonstrate their narrative and descriptive skills in response to a written prompt, scenario or visual image.

The source for the reading questions will be a literature fiction text. It will be drawn from either the 20th or 21st Century. Its genre will be prose fiction. It will include extracts from novels and short stories and focus on openings, endings, narrative perspectives and points of view, narrative or descriptive passages, character, atmospheric descriptions and other appropriate narrative and descriptive approaches.

As a stimulus for students' own writing, there will be a choice of scenario, written prompt or visual image that is related to the topic of the reading text in section A. The scenario sets out a context for writing with a designated audience, purpose and form that will differ to those specified on Paper 2.

Paper 2: Writers' viewpoints and perspectives

The aim of this paper is to develop students' insights into how writers have particular viewpoints and perspectives on issues or themes that are important to the way we think and live our lives. It will encourage students to demonstrate their skills by:

- in section A, reading two linked sources from different time periods and genres in order to consider how each presents a perspective or viewpoint to influence the reader;
- in section B, by providing a written text to a specified audience, purpose and form in which they give their own perspective on the theme that has been introduced to them in section A.

The sources for the reading questions will be non-fiction and literacy non-fiction texts. They will be drawn from the 19th Century, and either the 20th or 21st Century depending on the time period assessed in Paper 1 in each particular series. The combination selected will always provide students with an opportunity to consider viewpoints and perspectives over time. Choice of genre will include: high quality journalism, articles, reports, essays, travel writing, accounts, sketches, letters, diaries.

In section B, there will be a single writing task related to the theme of section A. It will specify audience, purpose and form, and will use a range of opinions, statements and writing scenarios to provoke a response.

Non-exam assessment

The aim of the assessment is to allow students to demonstrate their speaking and listening skills by:

- giving a presentation in a formal context;
- responding appropriately to questions and feedback, asking questions themselves to elicit clarification;
- using spoken Standard English

The assessment will be separately endorsed.

Students will base their presentation on a theme or topic chosen by their teacher with guidance from A.Q.A. Tasks and standards will be exemplified by A.Q.A. Presentations will be on a formal basis and students will need to respond to questions and feedback from the audience. In the assessed piece, students will be required to use Standard English as appropriate.

Assessment

English Language is a linear course. All assessment is at the end of Year 11.

Paper 1:	Paper 2:	Non-examination Assessment:
Written exam: 1 hr 45 min 80 marks 50% of GCSE	Written exam: 1 hr 45min 80 marks 50% of GCSE	Teacher set throughout course Marked by teacher Separate endorsement (0% of GCSE)

AQA STEP UP TO ENGLISH: ENTRY LEVEL CERTIFICATE

<https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/english/elc/english-5970/specification>

This qualification offers non-exam assessment (NEA) for Entry Level students who may struggle initially with the demands of GCSE English Language.

Step Up students work in small class groups.

Reading, writing and speaking are assessed in three classroom-based assessments.

Students begin with the Silver Step Up, progress to Gold Step Up and then move onto GCSE English Language.

What our Year 11 students say about English Language

What do you enjoy about the subject?

I really enjoy the variety of the extracts we look at and that there is a lot of choice in the writing we do. I really like how it is a subjective subject, there are no right and wrong answers so it's fun to play around with ideas.

What I enjoy in English Language is learning about how different writers create different styles and effects with the language they use. I also enjoy being able to be creative with my writing e.g. stories, articles and speeches.

What have you found challenging at times?

I have sometimes found it challenging to have specific structures to follow in essay questions because some of them are quite meticulous and require a lot of thought and concentration.

I have found doing practice exams quite challenging because of the time constraints. You have to be able to generate quite a lot of ideas quite quickly and make your piece of writing coherent. However, it becomes easier with practice.

What do you wish you had known about the subject when you were making your option choices in Year 9?

I wish I knew that English Language is a very interesting and complex subject that requires a lot of effort.

Although English Language wasn't an option, it would have been useful to have understood more about the difference between English Language and English Literature. I also realise now the importance of reading different kinds of books (e.g. novels and poetry) as I think that this has really helped my language and writing in

Years 10 and 11. I wish I had understood that earlier, as it would have made me read more in Year 9.

GCSE English Literature



Exam Board AQA

Specification <https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/english/gcse/english-8702/specification>

Content

Aims of the Course

- Read a wide range of classic literature fluently and with good understanding, and make connections across their reading.
- Read in depth, critically and evaluatively, so that they are able to discuss and explain their understanding and ideas.
- Develop the habit of reading widely and often. Appreciate the depth and power of the English literary heritage.
- Write accurately, effectively and analytically about their reading, using Standard English.
- Acquire and use a wide vocabulary, including the grammatical terminology and other literary and linguistics terms they need to criticise and analyse what they read.

Assessment objectives (AOs) are set by Ofqual and are the same across all GCSE English Literature specifications and all exam boards. The exams will measure how students have achieved the following assessment objectives.

AO1: Read, understand and respond to texts. Students should be able to: maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response;
use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.

AO2: Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.

AO3: Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.

AO4: Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.

Assessment

English Literature is a linear course. All assessment is at the end of Year 11.

Paper 1: Shakespeare and the 19th Century Novel	Paper 2: Modern Texts and Poetry
What's assessed: Shakespeare ('Macbeth') The 19 th Century Novel ('A Christmas Carol')	What's assessed: Modern Texts ('An Inspector Calls') Poetry (Power and Conflict anthology) Unseen Poetry
How: Written exam: 1 hr 45 min 64 marks 40% of the GCSE	How: Written exam: 2 hr 15 min 96 marks 60% of the GCSE
Questions: Section A Shakespeare Students will answer one question on their play of choice. They will be required to write in detail about an extract from the play and then to write about the play as a whole. Section B The 19th Century Novel Students will answer one question on their novel of choice. They will be required to write in detail about an extract from the novel and then to write about the novel as a whole.	Questions: Section A Modern Texts Students will answer one essay question from a choice of two on their studied modern prose or drama text. Section B Poetry Students will answer one comparative question on one named poem printed on the paper and one other poem from their chosen anthology cluster. Section C Unseen Poetry Students will answer one question on one unseen poem and one question comparing this poem with a second unseen poem.

What our Year 11 students say about English Literature

What do you enjoy about the subject?

To me, English represents the creative and imaginative part of the mind which I think everyone has some liking to. Literature is a form of art like films, music and paintings. English gives people this ability to make people feel a certain way. It is compelling when you find the literature that speaks to you, and you enjoy reading about it. So many books and so many ways to story-tell, inform, excite, sadden, and there is never one way of doing it. Among the many, you will always find literature that you can resonate with, and it will make you view that literature as profound. People who do not enjoy literature just need to find their right piece of it.

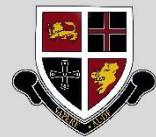
What have you found challenging at times?

Being able to express exactly how you may feel about literature can prove difficult and being able to maintain interest in the subject because you do not enjoy current literature being studied are both challenging. The second challenge is much harder as it is important to not let one bad experience set a precedent.

What do you wish you had known about the subject when you were making your option choices in Year 9?

I wish I knew that, like Maths, it is a necessity and although should be enjoyed and done with your own passion, it is significant to stick with the subject even when the certain literature may not suit you. English Literature is a mandatory subject, but the school teach it for good reason; you need it. Like logical thinking in Maths, it becomes apparent how they can be helpful in day-to-day life but too many people miss the importance of English Literature. People seem to overlook that understanding creativity and recognising imaginative art is another form of thinking equally important to any logical thinking in day-to-day life, because ultimately, it is how you take joy out of anything.

GCSE Mathematics



Exam Board AQA (Higher) & Edexcel (Foundation)

Higher

Specification <https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/mathematics/gcse/mathematics-8300/specification-at-a-glance>

Foundation

[Specification: Level 1/2 GCSE \(9-1\) in Mathematics](#)

Content

The GCSE Mathematics specification covers a range of knowledge and skills. Students must learn key knowledge and the skills required to apply that knowledge and to reason mathematically.

Certification is available at one of two tiers:

- Foundation (grades available 1 to 5)
- Higher (grades 4 to 9)

For most students, the decision on tier of entry is made at the end of Year 9 based on assessment data along with teacher judgement. This decision is made by the Mathematics department to ensure that all students are following the curriculum that is best suited to them and will provide them with the best possible outcome for them.

For a small number of “borderline” students, decisions on tier of entry are made at the end of Year 10 based on assessment data and teacher judgement. In addition to the foundation curriculum, these students will access some Year 11 Foundation content that is also found on Higher tier.

The National Curriculum for Mathematics outlines the statutory content that must be taught at each key stage. The content is sub-divided into six sections.

- Number
- Algebra
- Ratio, proportion and rates of change
- Geometry and measures
- Probability
- Statistics

Assessment

GCSE mathematics is a linear course. Pupils sit three examination papers at the end of Year 11.

All three papers must be taken at the same level i.e., all foundation or all higher. Content from any part of the specification may be assessed on each paper.

GCSE Mathematics	Paper 1 1.5 hours	Paper 2 1.5 hours	Paper 3 1.5 hours
80 marks per paper	Non- Calculator	Calculator	Calculator

What our Year 11 students say about Mathematics

What do you enjoy about the subject?

I enjoy the fact that you learn about a wide range of topics in Maths, so it always maintains your interest as you move on quickly once you have learnt about a certain section. After everything you learn, you get to consolidate your knowledge by doing practice questions, and I like this because it means that you can be sure that you've fully understood the content.

I enjoy the variety in this subject as you learn so many different skills and some of which will help you in your everyday life.

What have you found challenging at times?

I find it challenging to combine different aspects of the course to answer a single question because it may test your knowledge on something you studied earlier, so you need to recall the knowledge you learnt in KS3 to apply alongside the harder GCSE content you just practised. You also need to remember to keep reviewing the topics that you learn otherwise you can find that you forget how to do them.

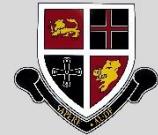
Like in any subject there are challenges and the challenge I've faced in maths are ratios which is easy for some, however for me I have found them challenging at times.

What do you wish you had known about the subject when you were making your option choices in Year 9?

I wish I'd known that Maths wouldn't be a massive leap from Key Stage 3 content, because I had thought that everything you learnt would be completely new, when in reality, the majority of the topics are just building on knowledge that you acquired lower down the school. It pays to work hard in Year 9 to help make it easier to work towards your GCSE.

I wish that I knew that it's ok to fail and you will improve – you've just got to trust your teacher.

GCSE Science



Exam Board **Edexcel**

<https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/qualifications/edexcel-gcses/sciences-2016.html#%2Ftab-Biology>

Specifications Separate Sciences <https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/qualifications/edexcel-gcses/sciences-2016.html#%2Ftab-Chemistry>

<https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/qualifications/edexcel-gcses/sciences-2016.html#%2Ftab-Physics>

Specification Combined Science <https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/qualifications/edexcel-gcses/sciences-2016.html>

Will I study the Separates or Combined Science course?

The course studied will be determined by the Science Department based on ability, attitude to learning and engagement with science, to ensure all students achieve the best possible results. The majority of students will be placed in either a 'Separates' or 'Combined' class at the start of Year 10.

For some students it is too early to make a decision on which course is the most appropriate and these borderline students will be placed in a 'Separates/Combined' class. Students in these classes will have updates at key points in the year on their progress and a decision will be made at the end of Year 10 as to which course they will be entered for in Year 11.

Whilst decisions are based on a range of factors, students who would like to study Separate Sciences should aim to achieve excellent outcomes in end of Year 9 assessments.

Both courses provide a solid foundation for studying all three sciences at A Level.

Content - Biology, Chemistry and Physics (Separates)

The specification more than covers the two-year programme of study for Key Stage 4 of the National Curriculum for Science and leads to three separate GCSEs in Biology, Chemistry and Physics.

The teaching develops knowledge and understanding of scientific principles through consideration of the applications and implications of science and science activities in the world today and there is more content overall than for combined Science.

Throughout the course students must complete a minimum of 8 required practicals for each GCSE where they will demonstrate their ability to collect data by taking measurements in precise and systematic ways. The skills of analysis and evaluation of data will now be tested in the examination papers as there is no longer any controlled internal assessment.

Assessment - Biology, Chemistry and Physics (Separates)

Science is a linear course and external exams will be at the end of year 11. A separate grade is awarded for each of the three science GCSEs.

Certification is available at one of two tiers:

- Foundation (grades available 1 to 5)
- Higher (grades 4 to 9)

GCSE Separate Sciences	Biology	Chemistry	Physics
100 marks per paper	Two 1hr 45min papers (50% each)	Two 1hr 45min papers (50% each)	Two 1hr 45min papers (50% each)

Content – Combined Science

The specification covers the two-year programme of study for Key Stage 4 of the National Curriculum for Science and leads to two GCSEs in combined science at the end of year 11. It is taught by subject specialists in the areas of Biology, Chemistry and Physics and has less content than the separate science courses.

The teaching develops knowledge and understanding of scientific principles through consideration of the applications and implications of science and science activities in the world today.

Throughout the course students must complete a minimum of 16 required practicals where they will demonstrate their ability to collect data by taking measurements in precise and systematic ways. The skills of analysis and evaluation of data will now be tested in the examination papers as there is no longer any controlled internal assessment.

Assessment - Combined Science

Science is a linear course and external exams will be at the end of year 11. Due to this being a double award GCSE, grades will be allocated on a scale comprising two grades from 9-9, 9-8, 8-8 down to 2-2, 2-1, 1-1.

Certification is available at one of two tiers:

- Foundation (grades available 1-1 to 5-5)
- Higher (grades 4-4 to 9-9)

GCSE Science Combined	Biology	Chemistry	Physics
60 marks per paper	Two 1hr 10min papers (16.7% each)	Two 1hr 10min papers (50% each)	Two 1hr 10min papers (50% each)

What our Year 11 students say about Science

What do you enjoy about the subject?

I enjoy how you get to learn in detail about all sorts of interesting topics from 3 different subjects.

I enjoy studying the broader range of sciences in more depth than in Year 9.

What have you found challenging at times?

I'm not great at the maths side of things however that is a small minority of all of the course.

Some of the technical vocabulary can be tricky to remember.

What do you wish you had known about the subject when you were making your option choices in Year 9?

I wish that I had known how much simpler science is when you work hard and engage in the lessons. When I was younger I never thought I would do well in science as it is known to be a 'hard' subject however if you listen carefully and revise, it really isn't bad at all.

GCSE Religious Studies



Exam Board AQA

Specification <https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/religious-studies/gcse/religious-studies-a-8062/specification-at-a-glance>

Content

Religious Studies provides opportunities for learners to understand more about the world, the religious challenges it faces and their place within it. Following this GCSE course will develop learners' competence in a wide range of skills and approaches, and enable them to become religiously literate, tolerant and engaged citizens. This specification provides a solid basis for further study in this and related subject areas. In addition, it provides a coherent, satisfying and worthwhile course of study for learners who do not progress to further study.

GCSE Religious Studies takes a distinctive issues-based approach to the study of religious, philosophical and ethical studies in the modern world. The course will also enable learners to gain knowledge and understanding of two religions.

Assessment

GCSE RE is a linear course and is externally assessed at the end of Year 11.

COMPONENT 1 (Religions)	COMPONENT 2 (Ethical Themes)
1hr 45 min examination (50%)	1hr 45 min examination (50%)
Learners will explore the key beliefs, teachings and practices of two religions: 1. Christianity 2. Judaism	Durham Johnston students will explore the following philosophical and ethical themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Theme A: Relationships & Families• Theme B: Religion & Life• Theme E: Religion, Crime & Punishment• Theme F: Religion, Human Rights & Social Justice

What our Year 11 students say about Religious Studies

What do you enjoy about the subject?

Understanding other people's daily beliefs and practices. They are very different to my day-to-day routine and being educated on the differences shows the commitment to people's religion and it's just interesting to know what goes into it. Also learning how to write a proper structured argument with a thesis and a hypothesis to help me develop my writing not just in RE but other subjects. In addition, having the opportunity to express my viewpoint on certain aspects of the course, whether or not I agree with abortion for example. Engaging in debate about the big issues of life.

I enjoy getting to learn about other people and their cultures and faith, how they live their lives.

What have you found challenging at times?

The minimal amount of time studying in school. Only get one lesson a week and lots to learn in a small amount of time but if you dedicate a certain amount of time to the subject - high marks are achievable.

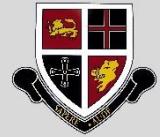
Trying to understand why things are done in a certain faith or understanding the details of what they believe.

What do you wish you had known about the subject when you were making your option choices in Year 9?

We didn't get to pick RE but I'm glad it's a subject I have been given the opportunity to study to broaden my perspectives and learn more about other people's practices. If you try, you can make the most out of the subject.

Ask lots of questions, keep organised notes in your book and try to make the most of every lesson.

Physical Education



Exam Board N/A

Specification N/A

Content

The emphasis in Physical Education moves from breadth of choice to depth. Students must study at least two activities and the aim is for them to acquire more advanced knowledge of strategies, tactics and techniques in their options. Opportunity is also given to experience the organizing and officiating aspects of sport.

It is possible to do more than 2 activities for those students wanting to experience a wider range of options. We hope that by the end of Year 11 students will have experienced some sporting activity which they will continue when they leave school or move into further education, for the benefit of their health.

Assessment

There is no external assessment for Core PE.