

psychology

A Level

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Exam board: AQA



What is this subject about?

Psychology is the scientific study of human behaviour and the mind, arguably the most complex machine on earth. It seeks to explain what makes us who we are as individuals in terms of how we think and feel, as well as understanding what influences our actions. Psychologists apply scientific methodology. They formulate theories, test hypotheses through observation and experiment, and analyse the findings using statistical techniques that enable them to draw conclusions that can be used to provide insight into human behaviour. You will acquire knowledge and understanding of psychological concepts, theories, research studies and research methods in relation to various aspects of human behaviour.

What will I study over the two years?

In the first year you will study five key topics:

- Approaches - the learning, cognitive, biological, psychodynamic and humanistic approaches to explaining behaviour.
- Biopsychology - the nervous and endocrine systems, localisation of brain function, functional recovery of the brain after trauma, studying the brain (e.g. fMRI, EEGs) and biological rhythms.
- Psychopathology - the nature of mental illness, including explanations and treatments for depression, OCD and phobias.
- Developmental Psychology - the formation of attachment and its influence on the development of later relationships.
- Research Methods (to investigate human behaviour) - including experimental and non-experimental methods, scientific processes (e.g. theory construction, hypothesis testing, ethics), data handling and analysis, inferential testing (e.g. the Sign test). Research Methods is integrated throughout the course.

In the second year you will explore a range of topics that aim to build on material taught in the first year of the course:

- Cognitive Psychology - the study of the nature of memory i.e. how information is processed and stored, explanations for forgetting and factors affecting the accuracy of eyewitness testimony.
- Social Psychology - examining how people influence the behaviour of others: conformity, obedience and minority influence.
- Gender - biological and psychological explanations for gender development and gender dysphoria.
- Stress - the role of stress in illness, sources of stress (e.g. workplace stressors, life changes), and managing stress.
- Addiction - explanations and treatments for nicotine and gambling addiction.
- Issues and Debates - gender/culture bias in psychology, reductionism, nature vs. nurture, holism vs. reductionism, idiographic vs. nomothetic approaches to psychological investigation.

You will study Research Methods in greater depth and learn more complex inferential statistical techniques of analysis.

How is the course assessed?

The course is assessed by three written exam papers at the end of the two-year course. Questions vary in style from multiple-choice to short answer questions and those requiring extended writing in the form of full essay responses. Some questions require application of knowledge to novel scenarios.

What skills will I need and develop on this course?

Psychology is not usually available at GCSE, but the GCSE subjects that are closest to the ways in which you will need to work are Combined Science or Biology (where there are technical terms and theories to learn) and History (where there is an emphasis on essay writing). You need to enjoy getting to grips with ideas and issues through reading, and you need to be good at organising ideas on paper in extended writing. You also need to be comfortable with scientific and mathematical approaches. The course develops your skills in analysis, evaluation, research and the analysis of data.

What can the course lead to in terms of Higher Education and Careers?

To study Psychology at most universities, you would need to have a substantial scientific component within your A Level programme. This need not be A Level Psychology itself, though in many cases A Level Psychology would in fact provide enough science within your A Level programme to meet this criterion. It would also indicate a commitment to the subject, provide a sound foundation for university work and enable you to get to grips with what is involved in the scientific study of the subject. However, the more science-orientated degrees in Psychology at some of the more competitive universities would require a more strongly science-orientated programme at A Level, including another science (for example Biology) and/or Mathematics.

Psychology can be studied as a single or joint honours degree. To work as a professional, accredited psychologist you will need a higher degree (MSc). Professional psychologists work in a range of fields, including forensic psychology, health psychology, counselling psychology and educational psychology. However, A Level Psychology is not just for those thinking of taking a Psychology degree and going on to work as psychologists. Any career that involves dealing with people will be enhanced by studying Psychology at A Level. This includes teaching, the police, nursing, social work and work in human resources.

What are the formal entry requirements for this course?

In addition to the general entry criteria that the College requires, you will also need to achieve a minimum of a grade 4 in GCSE Maths and GCSE English Language, and ideally a grade 5 in GCSE Combined Science or GCSE Biology.

What extra support/enrichment activities are on offer?

The department offers subject tutorials enabling students to access 1:1 support from their teacher, and revision sessions to support students in strengthening their understanding of the course content. We offer a practical application of Psychology in our '16-19 Counselling Skills' course. This is a nationally recognised qualification for young people wishing to improve their skills as peer supporters. In the College's Wider Skills Week we offer a number of trips to museums and to the zoo, as well as a taster of the Counselling Skills course. We also offer a course in Psychology (including looking at the presence of psychological ideas in film) as part of the College's Complementary Studies programme.

Subject combination advice:

Psychology combines well with many other subjects. Many students combine it with another science subject such as Biology or Mathematics. Others combine it with Social Sciences and Humanities subjects, such as Sociology, History or Economics. Our experience is that taking it in combination with purely creative subjects works less well unless you have GCSE results significantly above the minimum entry requirements in Science, Maths and English. If you wish to study Psychology at university it is regarded as a science, and degree level Psychology has a heavy biological and statistical emphasis.

What is the difference between Psychology and Sociology?

Both subjects are interested in human behaviour, but ask different questions from a different perspective. For example, in thinking about aggressive behaviour, Psychology might ask what makes individuals aggressive while Sociology might ask why violence has increased in society as a whole. Psychology is a science and you will study explanations of behaviour based in Biology. A Level Psychology also has a strong emphasis on scientific research methods and statistical analysis of data.