

Tiering guide: Foundation or Higher tier for GCSE languages?

What did 2018 show us
about tier choices?

What are the key
indicators to support
future decisions?



View our comprehensive guide
alongside our [quick reference poster](#).

[aqa.org.uk/languages](https://www.aqa.org.uk/languages)

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Foundation or Higher tier? How confident are you?

Tiering decisions for GCSE languages aren't always easy, especially for potential grade 5 students.

Data from the very first exams suggested some decision-makers should reconsider their entry policy. 2018 exams were unique in that grade 3 on the Higher tier was wider than it will be in future. If future national tier choices mirror them, a greater number of students may not achieve a grade.

Fortunately, the contributing factors are manageable.

Nobody is a better judge of a student's ability than their teacher, but we can recap some key considerations. We've collected our existing guidance alongside other useful advice. To decide whether this guide is for you, think about your experience level.

Beginner

You're used to making tier choice decisions and they're usually appropriate, but you could do with a recap? We've covered all the key points visually on a single page. See our [Tiering guide: Quick reference poster](#).

Advanced

You're the lead in your department when it comes to tier decisions and it's your responsibility to give your colleagues a common understanding? This guide is for you.

You know your students best, so our help can only go so far. This resource covers the other essential key points along with the context needed for an in-depth understanding.

Do you have a question about tiering?

Email our subject specialists at mfl@aqa.org.uk with the subject line "GCSE languages tier choices" and if we can help, we will.

Foundation tier has changed

Tiers in the new specifications were adjusted and Foundation tier now caters for additional higher-ability students than it once did. That's not to say that it's 'harder' – it's just broader.

Legacy GCSE languages		Current GCSE languages	
Foundation	Higher	Foundation	Higher
			9
	A*		8
	A		7
			6
		5	5
C	C	4	4
D	D	3	(3)
E	(E)	2	
F		1	
G			
U	U	U	U

In the context of 9-1 grading, grade 4 is considered a ['standard pass'](#).

Foundation tier exams go up to a grade 5. Grade 5 is considered a ['strong pass'](#).

Previously, Foundation tier was capped at a grade C on the legacy specification.

Similarly, the Higher tier now only goes down to a grade 4 (a 'standard pass') as opposed to the previous grade D.

In summary

The tiers shifted with exam reform to cover a different range and this should influence the entry decisions that you make for your students.

The table on the left summarises this.

An 'allowed grade 3' is mentioned in brackets in the current Higher column. This is the so-called 'safety net' grade, and we'll recap the purpose of this next.

The safety net

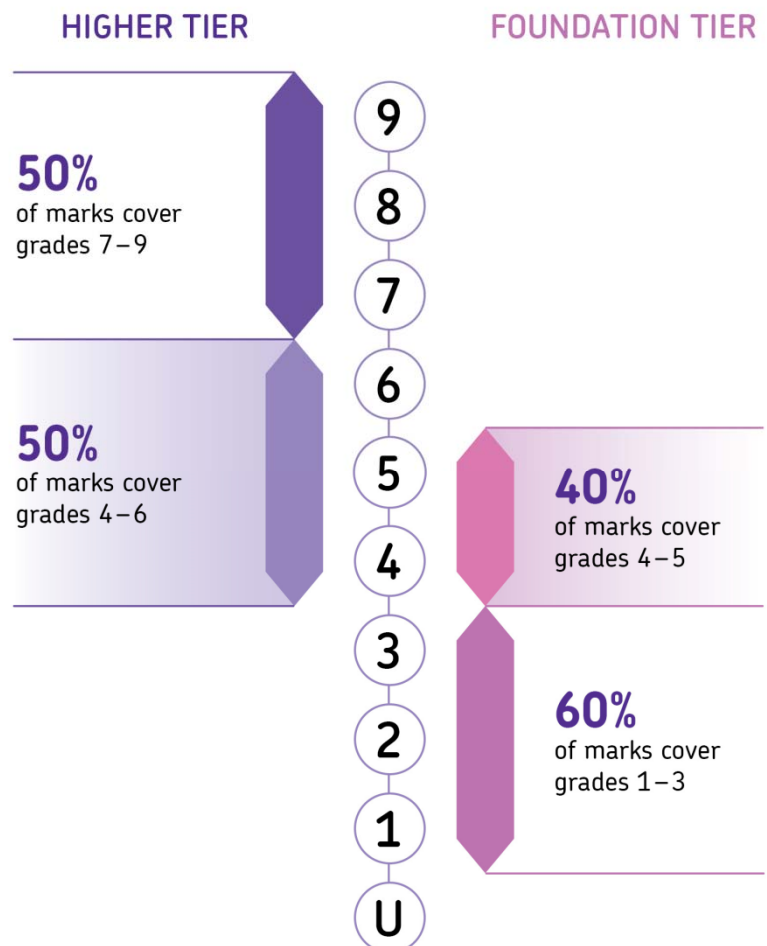
When we think of grade boundaries, the distance between the top of the grade and the bottom of the grade is known as the 'width'.

For example, Higher tiers in languages target the six grades of 9 through to 4 at even widths. The reality is that these flex a little year-on-year based on the statistical reality, but that's the principle.

It's also a reality that some students underperform on exam day. This is why there's also an 'allowed' grade 3 on the Higher tier.

No questions target the 'allowed grade 3', and it's half the width of a normal grade. It just exists as a contingency to catch solid Higher tier students who have an off day.

Without the safety net of the 'allowed grade 3', these students would fall off the scale completely. They'd receive a grade U – an unfair reflection of their ability.



Summary

Every year, against all expectations, solid Higher tier students have off days. The safety net 'allowed grade 3' is there for these students. If you feel a student might rely on this grade from the outset, it's probably not worth the risk of entering them for Higher tier. They are likely to have a better experience at Foundation tier.

How 2018 was different and why it still matters

GCSE French, German and Spanish were examined for the first time in 2018. Outcomes were stable compared with the previous year and some schools entered more students for the Foundation tier than they had in the past because of the change to the grading system.

However, with all the changes and the removal of the ability to enter different papers at different tiers, more students underperformed on the Higher tier than exam boards expected.

Ofqual wrote to exam boards to widen the safety net 'allowed grade 3' so that it was actually a full width grade. **These arrangements were for the 2018 exam series only.**

So, if you had large numbers of students on the Higher tier achieving a grade 3 in 2018, it is really important that you look carefully at your entry policy then and your entry policy now and make sure you take into account the information given in this guide. It's likely that some of those 2018 students should have been entered for the Foundation tier. If students of a similar ability are entered for the Higher tier in the future, they would be at risk of not securing a grade.

Summary

If a number of your students achieved grade 3 on the Higher tier in 2018, it is crucial that you revisit your entry policy for future exam series.

Sciences and maths also have Foundation and Higher tiers. If these departments in your school made successful tier choices, we would advise you speak to them about their rationale and key considerations.

Where tiers connect

Higher tier only goes down to a grade 4 and this will influence the decisions you make for your students. Previously it went down to a grade D, so the demand at Higher tier is now greater.

However, Foundation and Higher are connected at grades 4 and 5. This is so standards are comparable across the two tiers. This connection could be key to your tiering decisions because it's achieved using:

- common exam questions in Listening, Reading and Writing
- common criteria in Speaking.

At least 20% of the marks on each tiered paper in Listening and Reading are common to both tiers. We use student performance on these to equate the standard of grade 4 and 5 across Foundation and Higher.

The key to your tiering decision could be:

- to find our sample papers and past papers
- identify the questions that appear on both Foundation and Higher tiers
- look at performance on these particular questions.

If they perform comfortably on those common questions, it could be appropriate to enter them for the Higher tier.

Sample and past papers are split between our public website and our secure logged-in area.

For material on our public website, follow:

aqa.org.uk/French, [German](http://aqa.org.uk/German) or [Spanish](http://aqa.org.uk/Spanish) > Assessment resources

For material on our secure logged-in area, follow:

aqa.org.uk/log-in > e-AQA > Secure Key Materials > GCSE > scroll down to 'Languages'

Summary

If students are unable to succeed on many common questions, then they're unlikely to have a good experience on the Higher tier. In Listening and Reading, 2/3 of the Higher tier is aimed at grade 6 and above.

We'll address this in more detail next.

Key indicators for languages

How well did the student perform on the common questions in Papers 1 and 3 aimed at grades 4–5 in mock exams? For example, in the 2018 papers:

Paper	Questions
Paper 1, French Higher tier	1–4, 17, 24
Paper 1, German Higher tier	1–2, 31
Paper 1, Spanish Higher tier	1–2, 14, 17
Paper 3, French Higher tier	3, 8
Paper 3, German Higher tier	1–2, 9
Paper 3, Spanish Higher tier	1–2, 10

How comfortable is he/she at dealing with the more complex language and grammatical structures used in Higher tier papers?

Have a look at the Higher tier grammar list in section 3.3.2 of your relevant specification to judge how much of this your students will be able to deal with.

GCSE language grammar lists
Specification sections 3.3.2

How well and how consistently does the student meet the requirements of the higher mark bands in speaking and writing?

For example:

- can they develop responses in extended sequences of speech?
- can they convey information clearly, giving and explaining opinions?
- are they able to use a wide range of structures and vocabulary?
- can they refer to the three different time frames as required?
- can they show some spontaneity in speech rather than relying heavily on pre-learnt responses?

Can the student deal with questions that require inference/drawing conclusions in more abstract material?

For example:

- in French Higher tier Paper 1, how well did students cope with the precision required in Questions 12-15?
- in French Higher tier Paper 3, how well did they respond to the questions which required understanding of the different tenses to score the marks, eg Question 4.4 and 8.4?
- in Spanish Higher tier Paper 1, were they able to deduce the lesson from the recording, the instruction and the example in Questions 27-28?
- in Spanish Higher tier Paper 3, were they able to deduce the information from unfamiliar material and infer meaning from the context in Question 7?

How comfortably is the student able to respond to unseen tasks which are more open ended in the Higher tier writing paper?

For example:

- how will they deal with a less structured task in Higher tier Question 2 where they need to develop their own points in response to the bullets?
- can they use complex structures comfortably?
- can they write longer sentences using linking words?
- can they refer to all three time frames in response to the bullet points in Question 1?

Summary

Take specific question paper indicators into account, but remember that grades aren't allocated to individual papers.

The most informed judgements will be based on performance from all papers. Which tier will be most appropriate for the student's expected performance overall?

If circumstances change, so can your tier choice

Mock exams are a key part of decision making for many schools and colleges, but sometimes these take place as early as November.

A lot can change between the autumn and the summer and it's likely you'll have further evidence or data from additional mocks, practice questions or activities as the year progresses.

The entries deadline is 21 February every year

Schools and colleges tell us whether they're [making entries](#) by this deadline.

Change tier for free until 21 April every year

There'll be a charge for entries changed after this deadline.

Remember: if a student takes their speaking test before Sunday 21 April, they must do the remaining three papers at the same tier as their speaking test. Mixed tiers are not permitted.

The [entries process can be summarised](#) on a single page, but reach out if you have a specific question.

Questions about entries

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Notes

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[aqa.org.uk/languages](https://www.aqa.org.uk/languages)