

FAQs about A-level retakes

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What's the point of retaking A levels?

The main reason is to get onto a degree course which requires better grades than the ones you've got. Students often comment that pride is involved too: "I don't want to compromise my plans and I want to prove that my grade isn't a true reflection of what I can do".

When is retaking a good idea?

Retaking A levels has to be a serious option if you haven't got the grades for the course of your dreams, and you are confident you can improve on the results you've already got.

Do universities accept A-level retakes?

Yes, in almost all cases. A few will increase the standard offer, but most appreciate that students who retake are highly motivated and, because they have overcome disappointment, will work harder on the degree. Ring up the admissions officers for the degree courses you want, and ask them whether they would consider you with retakes. They should welcome your enquiry and give you an honest answer.

Will I improve my A-level grade?

Most students who retake A levels improve, and it's not uncommon for a student to get several grades higher. If you know why you didn't get the grade you wanted (for example, you were ill, or you didn't work hard enough, or you panicked during the exam) you can make sure that doesn't happen again when you retake. If your teachers tell you you've got the ability to do better, you probably will. Take examples of your work to a CIFE college to get a frank and independent view of its quality and potential.

Do I have to retake all the AS / A2 units?

No, you can just retake the units you most need to improve. The exam boards will recalculate your grade taking the best marks you have achieved for each unit, no matter when or how often those units were taken (so long as all the units came from the same exam specification). You might think it better to retake all the units anyway, but bear in mind that you'll still have to work hard to improve a unit you have already done well in. CIFE colleges have a lot of experience in helping students work out what to retake and what to leave.

When can I retake A level units?

There are two exam sessions each year, in January and in June. All AS and A2 units are set in June, but not all are set in January. Your school (and any CIFE college) should be able to tell you whether a particular unit is available in the January exam session. Before you ask, make sure you know the exam specification (a 'specification' consists of the name of the exam board, and the title and number of the exam subject), and the title and number of the exam units you want to find out about.

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CIFE colleges are sixth-form specialists, getting students into good universities. As independent colleges they can provide a big range of subjects and courses, and really small classes. Above all, they focus on you, the student.

You may find it better to retake some units in January and some in June. That will depend on how many units you want to retake, when units are available, and how much improvement is needed in each. Get advice if you want to talk through the issues.

Where can I retake A levels?

Joining a CIFE college course specifically designed for retakers is likely to be a better option than just repeating your last year at school. In a new environment, with different teachers, you will see your work through fresh eyes and feel you are moving forward again. This is what CIFE colleges are all about.

What about entering for the exams?

If you join a retake course, the college providing it will deal with exam entries for you, but if you are studying on your own you will need somewhere to actually take the exams. You can't enter for the exams just by contacting the exam board: you must enter via a 'recognised centre'. Your old school may be willing to enter you for the exam (but don't just assume they will!), and most CIFE colleges can help by entering you as a 'private candidate'. Exam entries need to be made early, by late September in the case of January exams, and by mid February for the summer. You may be able to enter later than this, but it can become very expensive.

What happens to my old A-level result when I retake?

When you finished taking all the units required by a specification, the best marks you got for each unit are 'cached-in' (or 'aggregated') to give you an overall grade. Your old school will have requested that cash-in for you automatically. When you resit units and want to get a new and improved grade, you simply get the college you resat with to ask for a new cash-in.

When that happens, the exam board will issue you with a new grade based on the best results you've got for all the units taken, irrespective of when you took them. The new grade replaces your old grade without you having to do anything specific to decline it. Not so long ago you had to officially 'de-cash' your old grade before you could ask for a new one. Now you don't have to.

What are 'legacy' A levels?

In all subjects except Maths, A-level syllabuses changed in 2008. Pre-2008 syllabuses, which are called 'old' or 'legacy' or 'curriculum 2000' syllabuses (here we will call them 'legacy'), have been phased out: summer 2009 was the last major session for 'legacy' exams. In Maths, 'legacy' syllabuses will continue unchanged for the next few years. If you took a 'legacy' syllabus in any subject other than Maths, you can't retake that same exam now, though you can take a 'new' syllabus in the same subject - see below. You can double-check whether you took a 'legacy' A level if you know the official syllabus number of the exam you sat: 'legacy' units have different numbers from 'new' units.

Can I take all the units for an A level in summer 2012?

Yes you can take all the AS and A2 units in the same session, and this makes it possible to do a complete A level in one year. This not only helps resit students but makes it easier to change school half-way through the sixth form: you don't need to worry about whether your new college offers exactly the same exam board the one you studied in lower sixth.

Is changing A-level syllabus difficult?

Changing for summer 2012 is unlikely to be a major problem. Although some of the content may have changed, most of it will be the same. The pattern of assessment may have changed too, but there's plenty of time to get used to that.

CIFE colleges can give you detailed advice on how much change you might face, and you may well find that a new syllabus suits you better than the one you studied previously.

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