Introduction to Psychology A-Level

RHS Psychology Department
Introduction to Psychology

For many of you, Psychology will be a brand new subject. Many students see it as a ‘fresh start’ and look forward to studying something completely different.

‘Different’ is not the same as ‘easy’ though. Far from being a soft-option, many students report that Psychology is their hardest A-Level. The science is rigorous, the content is sizeable, and the mathematical requirements are demanding. You also need to be able to write clearly and persuasively on a range of intellectually challenging issues.

In order to give yourself the best possible chance of succeeding on the course you will need to start the process of acclimatising yourself to Psychology as soon as possible. If you leave it until September you will find that you have already left it too late.

This booklet contains a brief introduction to the course, followed by three study skills tasks. The purpose of each task is to introduce you to a key concept in Psychology and in the process, help you to develop some of the study skills that you will need to survive and thrive on the course.

Please complete these tasks over the summer and arrive in September fully prepared and ready to go.

Good luck and see you in September.

Mr R. Marsh
Head of Psychology
Student Guide

What do I need to know, or be able to do, before taking this course?

You do not need to have studied Psychology at GCSE in order to study Psychology at A-Level. However, there are some key requirements. Psychology is a science and as such you will need appropriate quantitative and research skills in order to undertake practical work. In addition, you will need to have critical thinking and essay writing skills, because you will have to analyse research evidence, make sound judgements and clearly articulate complex arguments in the exam. As a minimum you should have grade 6 or above in Maths, English Language and Biology (or Double Science) GCSE.

What will I learn?

Paper 1 – Foundations in Psychology

In this paper you will learn about the four major approaches; Cognitive, Social, Biological and Learning. In each approach you will;

- investigate some key research topics
- explore some published studies in detail
- find out how research is conducted in that area of Psychology
- conduct some research of your own using specialised mathematical techniques and statistical tests to analyse the data

You will also investigate a key question where your knowledge of Psychology can be applied to the real world, and you will examine various ‘issues & debates’ that link to the topic area.

In Cognitive Psychology the key theme is memory.

In Social Psychology you will investigate prejudice and obedience.
In **Biological Psychology** you will learn about aggression, brain function, and the operation of the central nervous system / neurotransmitters.

In the **Learning Theories** module you will learn about classical and operant conditioning, social learning theory, and phobias.

**Paper 2 – Applications of Psychology**

In this paper you will have an opportunity to study some of the uses of Psychology in the real world. You will discover how the approaches that you have learned about so far, come together to explain human behaviour.

**Clinical Psychology** looks at how mental illnesses are diagnosed and classified. You will study two disorders – schizophrenia and anorexia nervosa – looking at their various different explanations and treatments.

**Child Psychology** is about the development of the individual, from before birth to adolescence and beyond. Topics include attachment, deprivation, privation, the impact of daycare on young children, and autism.

**Paper 3 – Psychological Skills**

This is a synoptic paper, meaning that it is a general summary or overview of the course. To prepare for this exam you will need to review all of the methodology, all of the classic studies, and all of the ‘issues & debates’ that you have learnt so far (including reductionism, the nature-nurture debate, cultural and gender issues in Psychological research, etc).
Is it the right subject for me?

The most important quality for anyone wanting to study Psychology at A-Level is to be **incurably curious** about why human beings behave the way they do. Unless you find this topic utterly fascinating you won’t put in the many hundreds of hours of work necessary to secure a decent grade.

If you take Psychology A-Level you must be;

- prepared to read ahead and independently take notes **prior to lessons**, for a **minimum** of 1 hour per lesson, **every single lesson** (you have 4 or 5 lessons a week)
- willing to have your opinions and values challenged
- willing to listen and take on board new ideas and novel arguments
- able to see both sides of an issue and not reject one side simply because you initially believe it to be wrong

How will I be assessed?

The course is 'linear', meaning that **all 3 papers will be sat at the end of the 2 year course**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paper</th>
<th>Topics Covered</th>
<th>Length of Exam</th>
<th>Marks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 – Foundations in Psychology</td>
<td>Social Psychology</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>90</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cognitive Psychology</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Biological Psychology</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Learning Theories</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Issues and Debates</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 – Applications of Psychology</td>
<td>Clinical Psychology</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>90</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Child Psychology</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 – Psychological Skills</td>
<td>Review of Methodology</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>80</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Review of Classic Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Review of Issues &amp; Debates</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
There will be a range of question types on the exam paper, including short answer, extended open response, and stimulus/data response.

**What can I do after I’ve completed the course?**

Studying Psychology makes you employable. Journalism, nursing and marketing (to name but a few) all welcome trainees who have studied Psychology. In fact, a study of the graduate class of 2009 found that Psychology students were the most employable of all the graduates.

There are many reasons why Psychology students have a better than average chance of getting work;

“**Psychology graduates acquire diverse knowledge and an impressive range of skills that make them highly employable across an enviable range of professions that offer real prospects. Psychology programmes deliver skills employers value, such as numerical skills, the ability to understand and work with statistics, effective communication and the ability to work productively in teams – and this gives students a real edge when competing with graduates from other disciplines.”**

*Dr Alison Green*

**Next steps**

- Talk to the staff in the department and current students of Psychology at the school.
- Look at the detailed course information on the Edexcel website (www.edexcel.com).
- Look at the British Psychological Society’s website (www.bps.org.uk). It gives details of courses in Psychology, career opportunities for those who study Psychology and even has a magazine for A-Level students of Psychology.
The term ‘Locus of Control’ was originally proposed by Rotter (1966). It refers to the extent to which an individual perceives themselves as having mastery over events in his or her environment. Individuals may be referred to as having either a high internal or external locus of control. Individuals with the former view events in their lives as shaped by their own efforts and decisions, whereas the latter view themselves as subject to outside forces such as chance or luck. Rotter argued that the 'locus of control' orientation for most people lay on a continuum somewhere between the two extremes.

This orientation or aspect of personality was regarded by Rotter as the product of learning, though the extent to which it is a fixed personality characteristic across situations or the lifespan is debatable. More specifically, Rotter argued that locus of control was affected by the pattern of ‘reinforcements’ (rewards and punishments) that had followed an individual’s earlier actions. Locus of control reflected the subsequent beliefs and attitudes that individuals came to develop about their own ability to affect their environment as a result of this pattern of reinforcement. The approach thus represents a combination of behavioural factors (actions) and cognitive factors (thoughts).

A high internal locus of control is often regarded as psychologically healthy and to correlate with success in terms of factors such as achieving career goals.


See: [http://wilderdom.com/psychology/loc/LocusOfControlWhatIs.html](http://wilderdom.com/psychology/loc/LocusOfControlWhatIs.html)
Task:

Success in A-Level Psychology will depend upon your ability to tackle, understand, organise and use material such as that in the box overleaf. This task is designed to ensure that you feel confident about that process. In a sense, to try to increase your ‘locus of control’ about ‘locus of control’.

Here’s your task (90 mins):

1) **Read and understand**
Skim through once to get some sense of what it’s all about. Then read through in more depth to identify any terms you’re not sure of or parts where your understanding isn’t clear.

2) **Identify terms or ideas you don’t understand and clarify them**
Go through with a highlighter pen or underline. Look things up, ask a friend or ask your teacher. Do whatever you need to do to clear these up.

3) **Organise and simplify**
Here’s the real learning part. There are loads of things you can do;

   - Make a list of the key words
   - Draw a table reflecting the two extremes of locus of control
   - Think up ‘day-to-day’ examples to illustrate the points
   - Write statements like ‘I was never meant to get a good job’ and use them to represent different attitudes
   - Draw a mindmap / chart / table / picture / diagram to illustrate the key terms
   - Use a mnemonic to help you remember; can you develop an acronym or acrostic to illustrate the key points?

4) **Finalise**
Tie all of this together and create a resource that will help you or others revise and understand the topic.
5) Think
What's the central conclusion here? Do you agree with it? How does it relate to other Psychology that you know? If you don't know about them already, look up 'Hardiness' or 'Type A behaviour' in the Stress section of a Psychology textbook. How do these ideas fit in with the idea of locus of control? Write a paragraph explaining your thoughts on this.

6) Evaluate
What's good about the concept and what's more of a problem? What do the textbooks say? What does your teacher say? What do you think? Write down one ‘for’ paragraph and one ‘against’ paragraph.

7) Reflect
No writing down for this bit – it’s not ALL notes and exams. What about your locus of control? Do you have a sense of whether you have a high internal locus of control or not? How do these issues relate to you? Can you think of any examples?

8) Practice
Can you find two examples of exam questions about locus of control and write them in your notes? Could you do them? What would you write?

If you can get into the habit of doing these tasks with everything that you cover in Psychology, you will enter your exams with a very high sense of internal locus of control, get a good grade and luck will have nothing to do with it!
Study Skills Task:

Strategies for Memory Improvement

You probably already use a range of memory improvement strategies. For example, how do you remember the following?

1) A phone number?
2) A password for a website?
3) The number of days in January?
4) The colours of the rainbow?
5) Things you have to bring into lessons the next day?
6) The order of musical notes?
7) Whether ‘i’ comes before ‘e’ in a word?
8) Class notes for a mock exam?

Task: Write a brief description of the following techniques, including examples, and identify which of the above items you think could be memorised using each particular technique. Research each technique on the internet if you are stuck (45 mins).

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<tr>
<th>ACRONYMS</th>
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<th>ACROSTICS</th>
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<th>ORGANISATION / CHUNKING</th>
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### Study Skills Task: Dealing with Stress

There are two distinct approaches to dealing with stress; problem-focused and emotion-focused.

**Task:** Research the topic using a Psychology textbook or the internet first, and once you are confident that you understand it, use the terms given below to fill in the table overleaf (30 mins).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prioritising</th>
<th>Relaxation</th>
<th>Wishful thinking</th>
<th>Unpleasant emotions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I’ll write a study plan”</td>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>Rethinking the situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats from the environment</td>
<td>Reduce individual’s stress level</td>
<td>Feelings</td>
<td>“I’ll apply to a different university with a lower points offer”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I did alright at my GCSE’s without revision”</td>
<td>“Exams aren’t the only thing in my life – I must keep it in perspective”</td>
<td>Reduce individual’s stress level</td>
<td>“I don’t care how I do anyway”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’ll ask for help with revision”</td>
<td>Passing the blame onto someone else</td>
<td>Action planning</td>
<td>Giving up on the task</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this approach an individual will try to change their:

In order to eliminate:

This could involve strategies such as:

Examples in terms of preparing for exams:

Goal of approach: