Questions matter

Tiering guide: Foundation or Higher tier for GCSE languages

What are the key indicators to support future decisions for the new GCSEs in French, German and Spanish (first exams 2026)?

View our comprehensive guide alongside our quick reference poster in the 'Planning resources' tab for each language

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Version 1.0
February 2025

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Foundation or Higher tier? How confident are you?

Especially with the introduction of new GCSEs in French, German and Spanish with first exams in 2026, we understand that tiering decisions aren't always easy, especially for potential Grade 5 students. Grade boundaries will only be available after the first exams in 2026 – this is always the case with new specifications in any subject.

Nobody is a better judge of a student's ability than their teacher, but we can share some key considerations.

If you are used to making tier choice decisions and they're usually appropriate, you might find a recap useful. We've covered all the key points visually on a single page. See our Tiering guide: Quick reference poster.

If 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 will be very helpful.

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.

If 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.

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Foundation tier grade range

Foundation tier caters for a wider range of students than it once did and allows access to grades 1 to 5. That's not to say that it's 'harder' – it's just broader. The 9 to 1 grade scale will continue to apply to the new GCSE French, German and Spanish exams from 2026.

- In the context of 9 to1 grading, **Grade 4** is considered a 'standard pass'.
- Foundation tier exams go up to a **Grade 5**. Grade 5 is considered a 'strong pass'.
- Higher tier only goes down to a **Grade 4** (a 'standard pass'), with an 'allowed Grade 3' for a limited range of students.
- 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.
- This 'allowed Grade 3' safety net continues to apply to the new GCSE specifications in French, German and Spanish (first exams 2026).

Current GCSE languages	
Foundation	Higher
	9
	8
	7
	6
5	**5**
4	**4**
3	(3)
2	
1	
U	U

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The safety net

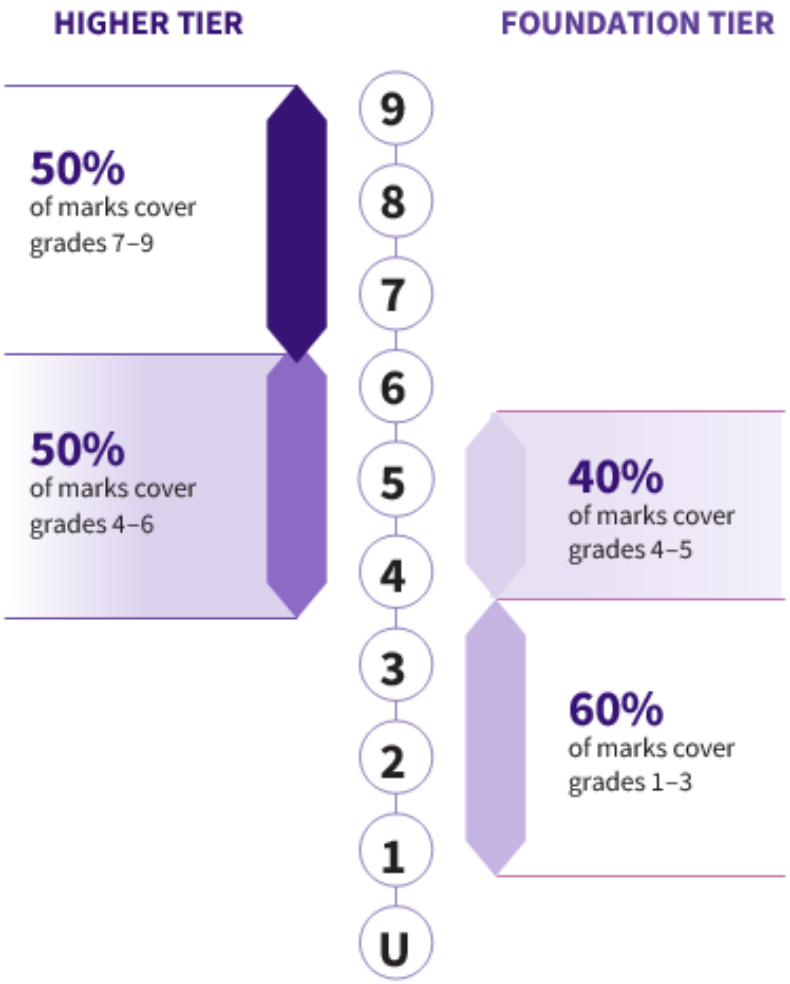
When we think of grade boundaries, the distance between the top of the grade and the bottom of the grade is known as the 'width'.

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 act as a safety net 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.



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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 almost certainly not worth the risk of entering them for Higher tier. They are likely to have a better experience at Foundation tier and can still achieve up to a Grade 5. **There is no reference to the tier of entry on results certificates, so a Grade 4 or a Grade 5 can be from either tier.**

The 'allowed Grade 3' is permanent and will still be available for students who need it with the new GCSE French, German and Spanish specifications (first exams summer 2026).

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

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

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Where tiers connect

Higher tier only goes down to a Grade 4, and this will influence the decisions you make for your students.

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 table below shows the grades available for GCSE MFL.

Foundation	Higher
	9
	8
	7
	6
5	5
4†	4†
3	(3)‡
2	
1	
U	U

† Chained equi-percentile equating used to ensure that standards are equivalent between the tiers.

‡ Allowed grade on Higher tier.

The key to your tiering decision could be:

- to look at our sample papers and past papers from previous exams where appropriate
- identify the questions that appear on both Foundation and Higher tiers
- look at student performance on these particular questions.

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

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

Website

AQA | Subjects > Language > Assessment resources

Centre Services

Log in to your Centre Services account > Centre > enter centre number > Resources > Assessment and training > Language > Category: Assessment material > Resource: Sample assessment material

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, two thirds of the Higher tier questions are aimed at Grade 6 and above. Approximately:

- one third of the marks are aimed at Grades 4 and 5
- one third of the marks are aimed at Grades 6 and 7
- one third of the marks are aimed at Grades 8 and 9.

It’s really important that students understand how these papers are structured.

We’ll address this in more detail next.

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Key indicators for languages

How well did the student perform on the common questions in Papers 1 and 3 aimed at grades 4 and 5 in mock exams?

The common questions and the level of demand for each question in the sample papers are identified in the commentary booklets in the Assessment resources tab for the new GCSE French, German and Spanish specifications.

How comfortable are they 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 3.2 of your relevant specification to judge how much of this your students will be able to deal with.

French German and Spanish GCSE language grammar lists

- French **new** specification (from 2026) grammar lists (specification Section 3.2)
- German **new** specification (from 2026) grammar lists (specification Section 3.2)
- Spanish **new** specification (from 2026) grammar lists (specification Section 3.2)

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

For example:

- how much information do they convey clearly and how well do they develop responses to questions following the Reading aloud and Photo card tasks?
- are they able to use a wide variety of structures and vocabulary?
- can they refer to the three different time frames (e.g. in the overlap question on the Writing paper) when required or appropriate?
- How many minor errors and major errors do they make? (see mark schemes for examples).

How well can the student deal with questions targeting medium level of demand at Higher tier?

For example:

- in the **French** Higher tier Paper 1 sample paper, questions 7 to 9, 12, 14, 16, 20 (option A), 21 (option B), 22 (option A). How well did they cope with the dictation?
- in the **French** Higher tier Paper 3 sample paper, questions 4 to 8, 12-16, 26, 31 and 32. How well did they cope with the translation?
- in the **German** Higher tier Paper 1 sample paper, questions 11 to 14, 18-21. How well did they cope with the dictation?
- in the **German** Higher tier Paper 3 sample paper, questions 8 to11, 20-21, 29-33. How well did they cope with the translation?

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- in the **Spanish** Higher tier Paper 1 sample paper, questions 3 and 4, 13-14, 16, 17, 21-22. How well did they cope with the dictation?
- in the **Spanish** Higher tier Paper 3 sample paper, questions 8 to -12, 13, 15, 16, 17-20. How well did they cope with the translation?

Please refer to the Higher tier *Item commentary booklets* for the accredited sample papers for each language (see the Assessment resources tab for each language) for details of the level of demand of the questions, as well as the *Reports on the exam* published on results day each year for 'live' papers, to help with your tiering decisions.

How confident is the student in responding to more open-ended bullet points in Higher tier Question 3?

For example:

- How well do they deal with a less structured task where they need to develop their own points in response to the two bullets?
- How well do they cope with writing a longer response than the overlap question?
- Are they able to develop ideas, accounts and/or description?
- How clearly do they communicate in writing?
- Can they use a variety of vocabulary and grammatical structures?
- How confident are they with using more complex language?

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**?

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If circumstances change, so can your tier choice

Mock exams are a key part of decision making for many centres, 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

Centres need to 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 21 April, they must do the remaining three papers at the same tier as their speaking test. Mixed tiers are not permitted.

You can find more information about the entries process on our website but please get in touch if you have a specific question.

Questions about entries

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