

The essential guide to choosing your Leaving Cert subjects

SELECTING THE right subjects for the Leaving, and the level at which to take them, is a critical task faced by 60,000 second-level students every year. The wrong choice here can have unintended consequences in two years' time, when students find paths into college are blocked by unfortunate subject gaps. There are good reasons why students tend to have a science subject and a third language in their arsenal and, as you will find if you read on, there are no "soft" options on the Leaving Cert exam.

GETTING IT RIGHT

Your schools will probably offer you the option of studying seven subjects. Your best six grades, achieved in one sitting of the Leaving Certificate or its equivalent, will be used to calculate your point score for entry purposes to college courses.

If you are taking more than one ordinary level paper from the beginning of your two-year Leaving Cert programme, you may want the option of having six higher-level papers for points purposes.

You can only achieve this by taking an extra subject either inside or outside school. You need to be very careful before considering this option. There is no such thing as an easy higher level paper and every subject requires considerable time commitment and effort on your part. Eight subjects are a major undertaking. If the additional subject is being studied outside school, you will have to factor in the time travelling to and from such a grind. All this time and effort eats into the time available to you to work on the seven subjects you are studying in school.

SHOULD STUDENTS TAKE ON EXTRA SUBJECTS OUTSIDE SCHOOL?

If there are timetable restrictions that make it impossible for you to take a subject you particularly enjoy you could consider taking it outside school, provided you factor in an appropriate amount of study time to cover all your other subjects. Alternatively, you might consider changing schools at the beginning of fifth year, to ensure that you get your desired subject choices.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I DO NOT TAKE HIGHER LEVEL IRISH?

Apart from ruling out a number of honours degree programmes which have Irish as a core entry requirement, the main consequence of dropping higher level Irish is that you are precluded from studying to be a primary school teacher in any of the Irish training colleges.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I DO NOT TAKE HIGHER LEVEL MATHS?

There are many Level 8 degree programmes you can't take if you don't get a minimum of C3 in higher-level maths; engineering, computer science, science, information and computer technology courses and most degrees that include maths as a core subject.

If you are interested in any of these courses you could start your third level journey with a two-year higher certificate programme, which will require a minimum of a D3 in ordinary level maths. Provided you secure a minimum of 60 per cent in your various examinations, you can then progress on to ordinary degree level and from there to an honours bachelors degree. This entire process may add only one or two extra years to your studies, over and above those who secure a place on an honours bachelors degree programme, immediately after their Leaving Cert.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I DO NOT TAKE A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN IRISH AND ENGLISH?

The colleges of the National University of Ireland require a pass in a third language for entry into a large number of their courses. These colleges are NUI Maynooth, Dublin, Galway and Cork, and a range of associated constituent colleges, all of which are listed on the NUI website at www.nui.ie. In recent years NUI colleges have dropped their third language requirement for engineering and science programmes. UCD has also dropped it for their agricultural programmes. Nursing at NUI colleges never required a third language. A third language must be included for arts, human sciences, law, social science, commerce, medicine and health sciences and some other degrees. A third language is also a requirement for entry into the cadetship in the army or air corps.

Trinity accepts Irish as a second language requirement. UL and DCU and the Institutes of Technology do not require a continental language for entry purposes to most of their courses, apart from those which involve the study of such a language.

WHAT'S THE EASIEST SUBJECT IN THE LEAVING CERT AND WHAT'S THE HARDEST?

No Leaving Cert subject is easy but some can be easier than others.

WHAT COMBINATIONS OF SUBJECTS WORK?

You should attempt to select a balanced range of subjects that will leave your further and higher education options open for as long as possible. Most students study Irish (unless exempted), English and Maths. A large majority of students also study a continental language, or for those students coming originally from outside the EU, a native language approved by the State Examination Commission.

In selecting your remaining three subjects, you should study carefully the essential subjects for entry to every third level course, available online at qualifax.ie so you are aware of the minimum subject entry requirements for all courses offered through the CAO. Unless you have a specific career or course interest that is guiding your remaining subject choices, my advice is to spread your final three choices across the entire spectrum of business, scientific, liberal arts and practical subjects. You should also be mindful of the results of previous examinations and aptitudes test results when making these choices.

Choose your subject

Irish

Although studied by virtually all students, higher-level Irish is taken by less than a third of students, with nearly three times as many girls as boys taking the subject. As it is essential for entry into primary teaching, the lack of male students acts to suppress their numbers in primary school classrooms. Many students seem to have a mental block when it comes to studying Irish. For those who do not, Irish is an attractive higher-level subject.

English

This is a good higher-level subject for the average student, provided they are prepared to read extensively. Strong written expression is required in achieving a good result.

Maths

Less than 20 per cent of Leaving Cert students take this subject at higher level, with many students falling back to ordinary level when the pressure builds up in sixth year. It is a relatively straightforward subject for those who are good at maths, but tends to be perceived as time-consuming. The introduction of bonus points for students securing a D3 or higher on higher level

maths may increase the take-up of the subject. The roll-out of the revised syllabus through the Project Maths programme should also increase the take-up at higher level among students. (*Since the introduction of the new bonus scheme in 2012, the percentage of students opting for higher-level maths has increased to 27% (2014). Although the extra points can give a student a considerable advantage, the achieved grade in higher maths must be considered in relation to the candidate's other subjects for the extra points to transfer as a net overall gain.*)

History

The history course has been extended beyond military and political history to include social and cultural issues. Students can secure up to 20 per cent of their overall marks by pre-submitting a research paper on a selected topic from a range set out by the State Examinations Commission. Students have to present three essays in their higher Leaving Cert paper, plus a documents question.

Geography

This subject studies the relationship between human activity and the physical environment. It is an extremely wide curriculum. Students have the opportunity to undertake a geographic investigation worth 20 per cent of the overall marks in the final examination. This is pre-submitted in April of sixth year. For both science and pharmacy at TCD, geography is accepted as a science subject for entry requirements.

Continental Languages

The three main elements are comprehension, oral and written presentation. The emphasis is on the ability to comprehend and converse in the language studied; this is reflected in the fact that a third of the final marks awarded are for aural and oral work.

Applied Maths

A very suitable subject for the student taking higher-level maths and physics. Some students complete the programme as an additional after-school subject, taken in one or two periods per week, over the two years of the Leaving Cert.

Physics

Physics has a strong maths element and requires the learning off of many formulae. Students must maintain a laboratory book, as there are 27 mandatory experiments, four of which are offered on the Leaving Cert paper, with three to be presented.

Chemistry

Students taking chemistry have to learn off the chemical components of a series of prescribed experiments. They will be required to present the elements of four such experiments in their examination.

Biology

Students undertake 24 mandatory experiments, the details of which they record in their laboratory book. It is often perceived as an easier subject than physics or chemistry but this is not so. There are high failure rates at ordinary level.

Home Economics - Social and Scientific

This is a combination of cooking, home economics, biology and business. It's an interesting subject, but not the easy honour that some imagine. Twenty per cent of the marks are for a course work journal, completed within normal class time, and pre-submitted in October of sixth year, prior to the written examination. The study of food science is a central part of this subject. Students also have the option of studying one of social studies, textiles or home design.

Business

This subject deals with current realities of a fast-changing business environment. It requires constant attention to the business pages of the quality newspapers. It looks at how organisations are formed, financed and run. It also explores the services that support businesses such as insurance, banking, transport, as well as public service bodies.

Economics

Economics has a mathematical slant as well as graphic and theoretical work. It explores the inner workings of companies, and how they measure their success and progress. At a macro level it examines international trade, the role of government and the EU in controlling the economy, competition and markets. A good subject for the analytical student.

Accounting

Students who enjoyed the bookkeeping part of Junior Cert business should consider accounting. Analysis and interpretation of accounts is the core activity at Leaving Cert level. For those with strong numeracy and reasoning skills.

Religious Education

Students are introduced to the dialogue between science and religion in the exploration of meaning and values in our societies. Twenty per cent of the marks are for the journal, which is pre-submitted prior to the examination.

Music and Art

Most students taking either option will be following on from Junior Cert. At Leaving Cert, art involves work on the history and appreciation of art alongside the design and craftwork.

Construction Studies, Engineering, Design and Communications Graphics

These practical subjects give students hands-on experience working with tools and machinery. Students also undertake theoretical and background work for their final examinations.

Technology

Technology gives students a basic understanding of the principles of engineering, design and project management. If you enjoyed the technology programme at Junior Cert level, and like hands-on activity, this subject may develop an interest in a career in engineering or technology.

Don't

Choose a subject because your friend is taking it

Do

Choose subjects you enjoy

Choose a subject just because you like or dislike the teacher

Choose subjects you are good at

Choose a subject because you think it will be easy

Choose subjects you need for your chosen career

Choose a new subject without finding out more about it

Keep your options open for the future by making a balanced choice now

Make a decision at the last minute without thinking about it

Talk to your Guidance Counsellor and your teachers

But don't panic

Talk to your parents or guardians