

How to get a grade 9 in AQA GCSE Biology (Higher tier)

A grade 9 means dropping very few marks across both papers: complete and precise knowledge, fluent application to new situations and full-mark extended answers. What separates a 9 from a 7 is usually consistency on the hardest questions and precision in every answer, including the easy ones. This plan is for students who are already secure at grade 7.

What a grade 9 asks of you

- Complete, exact knowledge of all seven topics, including every biology-only and Higher tier detail. No weak topic.
- Linking ideas across topics: osmosis and the kidney, active transport and root hair cells, enzymes in digestion and in decay, exercise, respiration and oxygen debt, natural selection and antibiotic resistance.
- Full marks on the most demanding questions: unfamiliar contexts, data with several variables, evaluating methods and conclusions, and precise multi-step calculations.
- Six-mark answers at the top of Level 3: complete, logically sequenced, precise and with nothing irrelevant.
- Accuracy under time pressure: finishing both papers with time to check, and not losing marks on the early questions.

Content to perfect

- Stem cells from embryos, adult bone marrow and plant meristems, therapeutic cloning, and the benefits, risks and ethical issues of each.
- Structure and function in detail: why alveoli, villi, capillaries, xylem, phloem and guard cells suit their jobs, and surface area to volume ratio.
- The kidney (filtration, selective reabsorption, ADH), kidney failure treatments, the eye (accommodation, correcting short and long sight) and the brain.
- DNA and protein synthesis, how a mutation can change the shape and function of a protein, and how non-coding DNA can affect whether a gene is expressed.
- Monoclonal antibodies from start to finish, plant disease detection and plant defences.
- Speciation, fossil evidence, extinction and classification, and how the ideas of Darwin, Wallace and Mendel developed.
- Decomposition, compost and biogas, the carbon and water cycles, and the effects of environmental change on species distribution.
- Food security, sustainable fisheries and biotechnology (mycoprotein, genetically modified crops), with arguments for and against.
- Working scientifically terms used precisely: uncertainty, resolution, validity, repeatability, reproducibility, random and systematic error.

Question types to master

- Six-mark 'Evaluate' questions that weigh several factors and end with a justified conclusion.
- Complex data: graphs with more than one line, hormone graphs across the menstrual cycle, range bars, rates from graphs, and judging whether data support a conclusion.
- The hardest calculations: standard form with unit conversions, the inverse square law, bacterial growth over many divisions, and efficiency across several trophic levels.
- 'Suggest' questions in unfamiliar contexts that need two linked steps of reasoning.
- Critiquing an unfamiliar method and proposing specific improvements that would make the results more valid or repeatable.

Ten-week revision plan

- Every week: five or six sessions of 45 to 60 minutes, plus Daily 5 and flashcards every day. Start earlier than ten weeks out if you can.
- Week 1: a timed mock of each paper as a diagnosis. List every subtopic where you dropped any marks.
- Weeks 2 to 4: work through that list at Hard and Extreme difficulty, alternating Paper 1 and Paper 2 subtopics from day to day.
- Week 5: a linking week. Write six-mark answers that need ideas from two topics, then compare them with the mark scheme and rewrite them.
- Week 6: a practical week. Go through all 10 required practicals: methods, variables, data processing, errors, improvements and risks.
- Week 7: a second timed mock of each paper; fix every lost mark, however small.
- Weeks 8 and 9: Extreme custom papers mixing subtopics from both papers, done against the clock; review your error log after each one.
- Week 10 and the gap between the papers: a final timed Paper 1, then a light review of your cheatsheets before Paper 1; after it, the same routine for Paper 2.

How to use this website

- Notes: tick off every grade 8 and 9 skill in the grade-by-grade checklist, and use the worksheets to check you can use the detail, not just recognise it.
- Custom paper: set Hard or Extreme, long length, with subtopics chosen across both papers, and mark strictly with the mark scheme.
- Mock exams: aim to finish each timed paper with 10 to 15 minutes to spare for checking.
- Progress: keep working until no subtopic stands out as weak, and redo every question you dropped even one mark on.
- Daily 5: keeps your weakest topics under review every day, so small gaps do not reopen.
- Flashcards: use them for the less common biology-only facts that are easy to forget, such as plant defences, brain regions and uses of plant hormones.
- Whiteboard: sketch graphs, genetic diagrams and calculations quickly on screen while you work through questions.
- A free 30-minute trial lesson with Chhetri Academy can give you detailed feedback on your extended answers, which is where top marks are most often lost.

Timing in the exam

- Work at a little under a minute a mark so you finish by about 90 to 95 minutes.
- Use the spare time to check every calculation by working backwards and to reread every six-mark answer.
- Do not over-write. Detail beyond what the marks ask for earns nothing and steals time from later questions.
- Plan six-mark answers for up to a minute so the order is right first time and nothing needs squeezing in.

Traps at grade 9

- Rushing the early, easier questions and dropping marks there. At this level those marks count as much as any.
- Using A-level ideas or loose paraphrases instead of the GCSE terms the mark scheme lists.
- One-sided evaluations, or conclusions that do not give a reason.
- 'Compare' answers made of two separate descriptions instead of direct comparisons.
- Answering data questions from knowledge alone when the question says 'Use the data'.
- Missing the final step in a calculation: standard form, significant figures or the unit.
- Skimming a long stem and missing a detail that changes the answer.
- Adding extra points that contradict a correct one, which can cancel the mark.

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