

# Welcome to A Level Psychology

## What is Psychology?

Psychology is the scientific study of the mind and behaviour. It is about understanding what causes people to do the things they do and this understanding is used to address many of the problems and issues in society. Some of the areas of human behaviour that psychology explores include:

- How do we remember things and why do we forget?
- What are the developmental changes that occur in humans from birth to death?
- What causes mental illness and how should mental illness be treated?
- What factors cause our gender identity and our sexuality?
- Why do some people commit crime?

## How do psychologists explain the mind and behaviour?

Psychology is such a huge topic and conveying the depth and breadth of the subject can be difficult. As a result, a number of unique and distinctive branches of psychology have emerged to deal with specific topics within the study of the mind, brain, and behavior. Each branch or field looks at questions and problems from a different perspective.

The different perspectives (or “key approaches”) used in psychology to explain behaviour are:

- [The behaviourist approach](#) - all behaviour is learned through classical and operant conditioning. Humans are born a blank slate and no behaviours are inherited.
- [The cognitive approach](#) - internal mental processes such as thinking, memory and decision making cause all behaviour.
- [Social learning theory](#) - all behaviour is learned via a process of observation. We watch how other people are behaving and imitate their behaviours.
- [The biological approach](#) - behaviour is caused by internal biological processes and structures. For example, chemicals such as hormones and neurotransmitters cause changes to our mood. Behaviour also has a genetic basis and traits such as intelligence, sexuality and personality are heritable.
- [The humanistic approach](#) - human behaviour is driven by the motivation to self-actualise (be the best you can be and fulfill your true potential).
- [The psychodynamic approach](#) - early childhood experiences cause adult personality. Painful, traumatic events in our life are locked away (“repressed”) but they can still manifest as mental illnesses such as anxiety or depression.

Click on each link to find out more about the key approaches. Make notes about the key ideas in each approach as you watch the videos. Click [here](#) to read about the different approaches and add to your notes.

## Apply your knowledge of the key approaches

Joel is a 7 year old boy who often gets into fights with the other children at his school. When his teacher tries to talk about his behaviour, Joel simply laughs and makes a joke of it, refusing to see the seriousness of his actions. Joel has now been referred to an educational psychologist who wants to better understand Joel's behaviour so that he can be supported. Over the course of several interviews, the psychologist learns that Joel feels like he can get his own way with the other children by fighting with them. The psychologist also discovers that Joel has two older brothers who were both excluded from secondary school for fighting. When the psychologist talks to Joel about this, Joel describes a family life where fighting is seen as "manly". He explains that if he cried when his brothers "picked on him", his father would often tease him or ignore him completely.

**Using your knowledge of psychology, how would each of the different approaches explain Joel's behaviour?**

Approach	Explanation of Joel's behaviour
Behaviourist	
Cognitive	
Social Learning	
Biological	
Humanistic	
Psychodynamic	

**Try these exemplar exam questions. They are taken from the Key Approaches section on Paper 2.**

*This first question is a question about the behaviourist approach. In this question you have to use your knowledge of reinforcement rather than defining it.*

- 1. Explain how reinforcement might be used to encourage primary school children to pick up litter in the playground. [3 marks]**

*This is an example of a very straightforward question. You are being asked to basically describe two things you know and understand about cognitive psychology. 2 marks per feature are awarded to you.*

- 2. Outline two features of the cognitive approach [4 marks]**

- 3. There are multiple choice questions on all papers. This is an example of a question that could come from the biological approach. You probably recognise it from GCSE Science!**

A phenotype is the result of the combined effect of ....  
Shade **one** box only.

- A neurotransmitters and environment.
- B inheritance and environment.
- C genetic makeup and neurotransmitters.
- D genotype and evolution.

**[1 mark]**

*This question is more challenging. You have to use your knowledge of a theory to explain*

*the behaviour in the scenario. You must use key terminology throughout.*

- 4. Sally spends much of her time looking after her young brothers, Alfie and Jake. Jake is 8 years old and he is very naughty. Sally often shouts at Jake to make him stop what he is doing and do what she tells him. Jake obeys Sally when she shouts. Alfie is 5 years old and he is quiet at home. However, at school, Alfie's teacher has noticed that he shouts at the other children when he wants them to do something.**

**Use your knowledge of social learning theory to explain Alfie's behaviour. [4 marks]**

*Back to a more straightforward question again. A "describe" question - very simply, talk about what you know.*

- 5. Describe what humanistic psychologists mean by the concept of "self-actualisation" [2 marks]**

**How do psychologists study behaviour?**

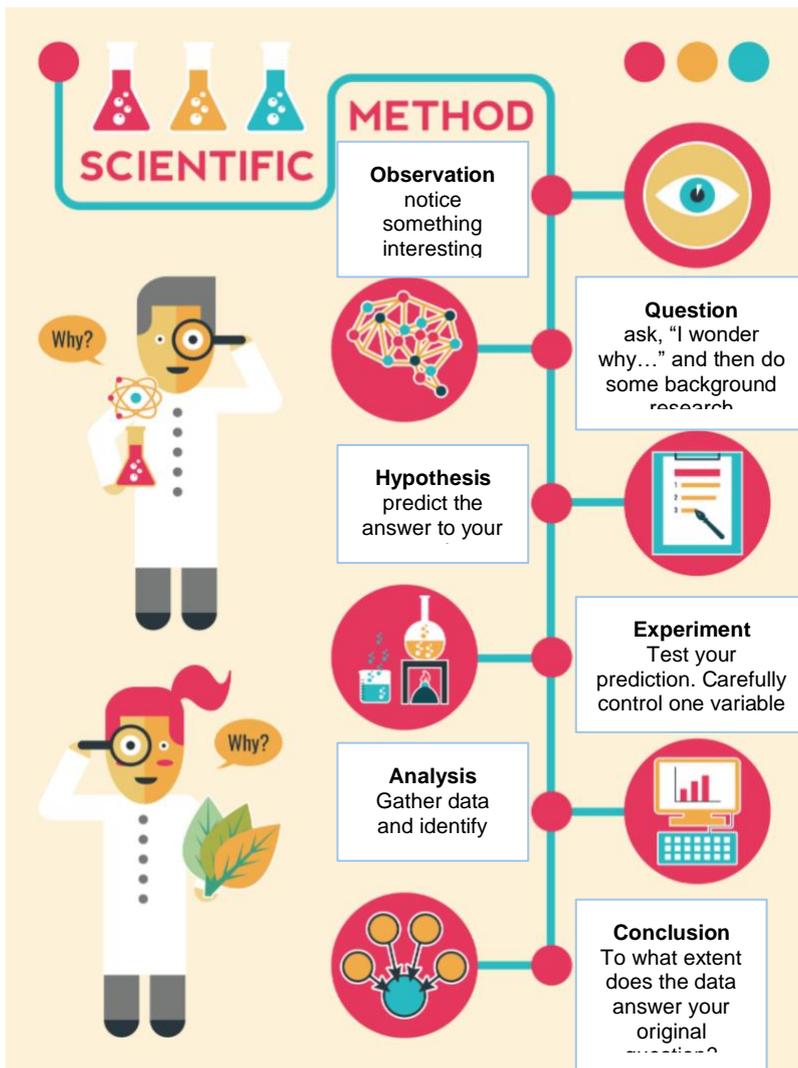
**Important fact number 1:** “Science” is not a subject.

Science is a *specific method* that is used to gain facts and figures to help us understand the world around us. Chemistry uses this *specific method* to better understand chemicals and chemical processes. Biology uses the same method to understand living things and physics uses it too.

The method used by all of these subjects is called the **scientific method**.

**Important fact number 2:** Use of the scientific method involves following a strict set of rules:

**Important fact number 3:** psychology is a scientific subject because it tends to follow the scientific method in order to understand human behaviour.



## Important Terminology

**Experiment:** a procedure used to test a hypothesis where one variable is changed at a time and the effect of changing that variable is measured.

**Independent variable:** the variable the researcher changes.

**Dependent variable:** the variable the researcher measures.

**Extraneous variable:** any variable other than the IV that could potentially affect the DV if left uncontrolled.

**Control:** making sure that only the IV affects the DV by getting rid of any potential extraneous variables.

**Cause and effect:** when we are confident that changes in the DV have only been caused by the changes we have made to the IV. We can say this if we are confident that all possible extraneous variables have been controlled.

Research psychologists ask all kinds of questions about human behaviour such as “how big is the human memory”, and then devise carefully controlled experiments in order to answer these questions. They decide who they are aiming their research at (their “target population”) and then obtain a sample of people from their target population to take part in their experiment. The data from this experiment is analysed and then conclusions can be drawn about human behaviour.

## Apply your knowledge of the scientific method

Read the scenarios and answer the corresponding questions.

*A behavioural psychologist was interested in the effects of positive reinforcement on learning. She was particularly interested in finding out if rewarding children could help them to learn their times tables.*

*She was interested in studying 6-7 year olds and so approached two primary schools in her area and asked if 30 Year 2 children from each primary school could take part in her research. In one primary school all of the children were rewarded with a merit whenever they answered a times table question correctly during their normal maths lessons. In the other school, no rewards were given.*

*A week later, the children's teachers were asked to give the children a times table test in silent conditions. The teachers were asked to make sure that the children were all given 15 minutes to complete the test. All the children experienced the same test and the results were collated and analysed.*

1. Identify the target population and the sample in this scenario

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2. Identify the independent and dependent variable in this scenario

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.....

3. Identify one extraneous variable that the researcher controlled. Explain why it was important to control this extraneous variable.

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.....  
.....

*Students often claim that listening to music helps them to concentrate. A psychologist decided to investigate this claim. Forty students from a nearby sixth form centre volunteered to take part in the study. The participants were asked to complete two puzzle tasks as quickly as possible.*

*Task A was to find 10 differences in a 'spot the difference' puzzle while working in silence. Task B was to find 10 differences in another 'spot the difference' puzzle while listening to music through headphones. The time taken to complete each task was recorded for each student.*

1. Identify the independent and dependent variable in this study

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2. Suggest one extraneous variable that you would control if you were the psychologist and explain why it would be important to control this extraneous variable.

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The data that the researcher obtained is shown below:

**Times taken (in seconds) to complete Task A (silence) and Task B (music)**

Participant	Task A (silence)	Task B (music)
1	67	82
2	45	70
3	58	60
4	43	59
5	72	77
6	90	105
7	101	90
8	37	59
9	54	83
10	63	89

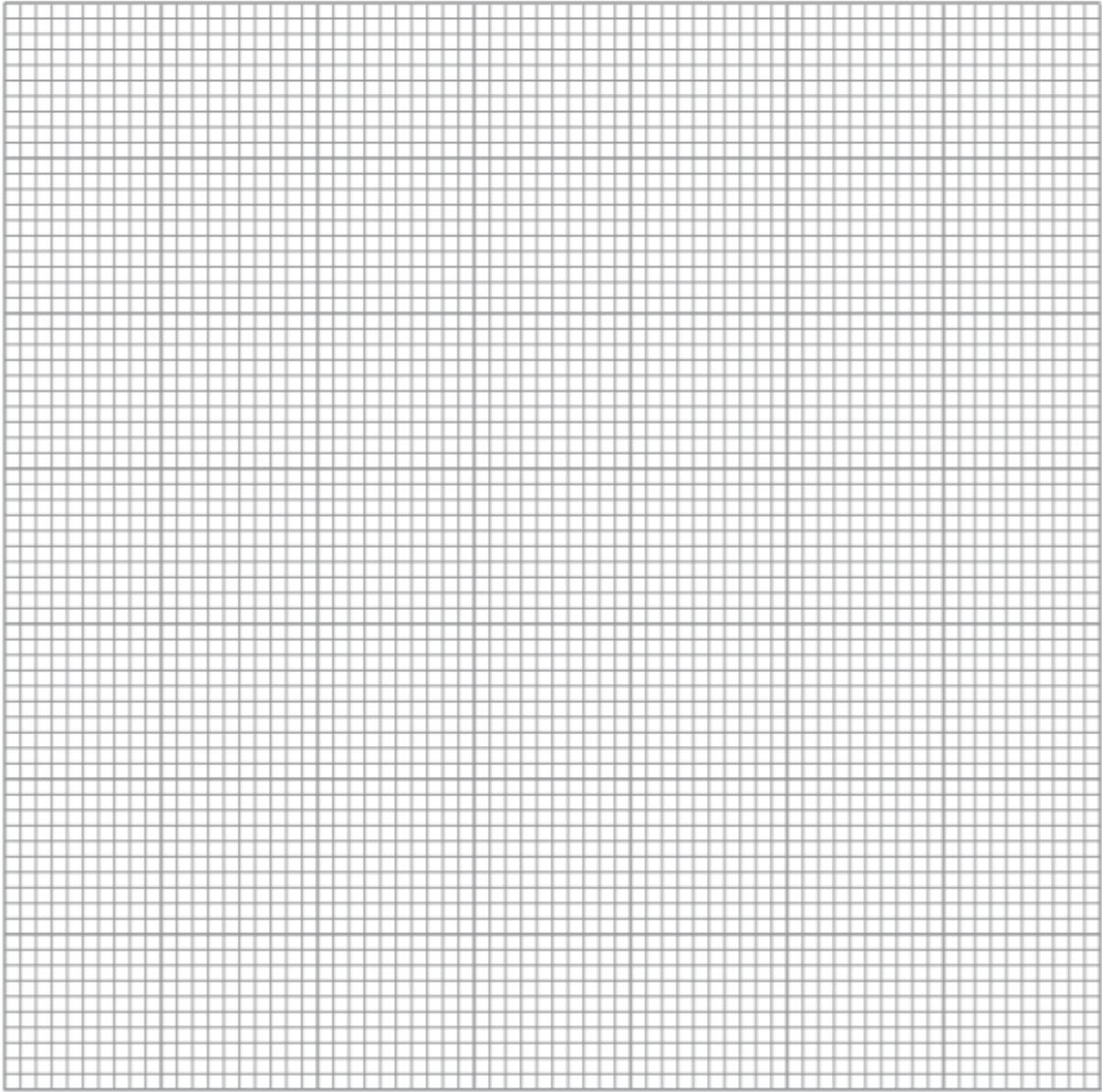
3. Calculate the mean values for both Task A and Task B. Show your workings.

Task A \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Task B \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Present the means from Task A and B in a suitable graph

Title: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



5. What conclusion can the psychologist draw from his data? Explain your answer.

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**Plan your own experiment**

What aspects of human behaviour are YOU interested in? If you are struggling for inspiration click [here](#) to read more about different kinds of psychologists and what they study. When you have decided on a topic that you would like to investigate further, plan how you would do this by completing the table below. Remember - psychologists use the scientific method so it has to be something that can be researched experimentally.

What would be the aim of your research? What question are you trying to answer?	
What would your hypothesis be?	
What would the independent and dependent variables be?	
What extraneous variables would you need to control? How would you control them and why would you control them?	

## Keeping up to date with the latest research

An important part of studying A Level Psychology is reading beyond the specification. To help you get started, we have put together some suggestions for wider reading for you.

Click [here](#) to go to a website where you will find lots of different areas of psychology and links to journal articles, magazine articles and even entire chapters from books. Choose something to read (anything that you are interested in) and summarise what you have read in the space below.

**Provide a brief summary of what you read:**

**State three things you learned from your reading:**

**What did you find most interesting from your reading?**

**Did you agree with everything you read? If so, why? If not, why not?**

### **Quiz Time!**

What have you learned from the videos you have watched and the reading you have done?

Click [here](#) to go to a quiz. Complete the quiz and make sure you leave your email address so that you can be entered into a prize draw. All entries with a score of 100% will go into the draw in September and the winner will receive a prize!

Good luck!