

GCSE ART & DESIGN: ESA GUIDE (GRADE 8/9/A*)

This is a GCSE Art & Design (or Art, Craft & Design for the new 9-1 specification) guide on getting a grade 8, 9 or A* in your Art GCSE. I personally got full marks, meaning 200/200 in Edexcel GCSE Art & Design (Legacy Specification), and I pretty much followed these steps in gaining my proudest GCSE. Because I got full marks, I know exactly what I'm talking about, but don't stress! I've got you. This guide is assuming that you are aiming for a grade 8, 9 or A*, meaning the majority/all of your work is fairly photorealistic and skilfully realised. For a grade 8/A*, do as much of this as you can. For a grade 9/full marks, do ALL of it. I know this sounds daunting but you can do it, because I did! I hope you find this helpful!

TITLE PAGE

Create a title page that's as eye-catching as it can be

- ✓ Associate some meaning behind the picture
- ✓ Go for portraiture – portraiture requires more thought and detail and therefore will get more marks
- ✓ If you go for portraiture, go for eyes – this will capture the examiner and will captivate them immediately
- ✓ Most importantly, link the title page to the theme in the picture itself rather than drawing anything and titling it "Theme X". If you already have an idea on what you're going to do, you can foreshadow that in your title page.

THUMBNAIL SKETCHES/INSPIRATION PAGE

Create a thumbnail sketch page next to an inspiration page

For your thumbnail sketch page:

- ✓ Brainstorm a couple of areas (i.e. portraiture, places, objects etc.)
- ✓ From those areas branch into art styles and create quick sketches based on those styles
- ✓ From those styles branch into artists and create quick sketches based on those styles and artists
- ✓ Merge two of the artist branches together to form what I call a "compound thumbnail"
- ✓ If you then merge your compound thumbnail with another two or three areas, this will create what I call a "complex thumbnail"
- ✓ For top marks, you will need several "complex thumbnails" and annotations. Brief annotations, and talk about what you see in the picture and how it links/could link to your given theme

For your inspiration page:

- ✓ Use your thumbnail sketch page to inform a couple of artists that you like the most, and that could influence your work. About three should be fine – I suggest doing one you want to do, one you can do and one you don't really care for, as well as making sure they're different in some way, shape or form, just so the examiner can see that your research is comprehensive. Ideally, choose at least one HYPERREALISTIC artist (you'll see why)
- ✓ Print out pictures of a couple of pieces of artwork made by your artist and write brief introductions about the artist through research (best place to look is their website if they have one) while including your initial thoughts on the artists themselves and their artwork
- ✓ Talk about how their work links to your theme and how you could manipulate their work to either fit the theme if it doesn't (huge hints on technique, style and media etc.) or to create your own piece
- ✓ Pick your favourite (preferably two) artists and write a small conclusion on why you liked those artists, and say how they will help you in creating a piece linked to the theme. Be careful about who you choose – you will be with them until the end!

OBSERVATIONAL STUDIES

Create a series of observational study pages with experimentation of different media

- ✓ At this point you should have decided what you're going to do. Suppose you're doing portraiture, you now need to make a series of approximately five or more as-photorealistic-as-you-can pictures from observation, direct or indirect
- ✓ The best way to do this is to create a series where two link directly to the theme, and two link indirectly to the theme, i.e. two are obvious things to draw for the theme, and two would require more analytical thoughts to see how it links to the theme
- ✓ Briefly annotate all of these and draw one final drawing that involves both an INDIRECT link to the theme, and also uses a different media, and annotate that too

- ✓ On the following page, draw rough one-minute sketches on about two pages. Again, in the example of portraiture, this could be differing positions of the face, and maybe harder-to-draw positions as well
- ✓ Grab a friend so that you can do a photoshoot on them, demonstrating those poses and draw a photo-realistic version of one that is difficult to draw. It will take a lot of time but you will rack tons of marks for not half-assing another piece. Annotate that drawing – you know the drill
- ✓ If you're feeling good, do another photoshoot to help inform your ideas and annotate them (one word per picture is enough) and circle ones you like and cross out ones you hate
- ✓ Find a secondary source of images and draw those too – this will help you figure whether direct observation or indirect observation is better for you. This is vital in informing your ideas – it needs to be as suited-to-you as possible

PHOTOSHOOT

Take a series of photos (this may be from the observational study section) and create edits of them

- ✓ Either do a new photoshoot or pick a previous one you like and pick your top 3 or 4 pictures and edit them
- ✓ Explain how you edited them (i.e. did you paint on top? Did you draw on top? Did you use Photoshop? What in Photoshop did you use? How did you do it? Is it good? Why? Why not?)
- ✓ From the 3 or 4, pick your top 1 or 2 pictures and go into detail about why you like them and how you can implement that sort of idea into your work. Don't forget to talk about how your work may be linked to the theme.
- ✓ If time permits, although not necessary, draw/paint one of the edits in full and annotate the process.
- ✓ If you have any secondary sources of inspiration (i.e. a YouTube video, a Tumblr post) print screenshots of it and talk about what's going on (the examiner will 90% of the time not know what it is) and how you're going to use it to contribute to your final piece.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS/FORMAL ELEMENTS ANALYSIS

You are now going to delve into one or two artists (one main, one subsidiary) and you are going to do a contextual with integrated formal elements analysis on your MAIN ARTIST and a formal element with integrated contextual analysis on your SUBSIDIARY ARTIST

For your contextual analysis page:

- ✓ Decide which artist you are going to base your work on – this will be your main artist. This means that your analysis will be drawn from their work directly, but in a more contextually heavy environment.
- ✓ When considering context, you need to consider “who, what, when, where, why”. When answering those questions, your level of inference from given information needs to be exceptional. For example, if you're answering “who?”, you need to talk about who they are and their entire background that led them to becoming an artist today, or becoming an artist at that certain stage in his life.
- ✓ Make sure it is relevant. For example, “This artist grew up in suburban areas of Berlin and due to his passion for art as a child, he drew inspiration from the scenery of the city to help influence his ideas. Because of the way he saw the world, he was able to capture a moment before his eyes and spill that instance onto a canvas in the form of a masterpiece. Due to the sheer skill that was demonstrated in his work, he gained popularity, which further inspired him to create more pieces, like the piece titled ‘Berlin Wall in Fragments’ which shows the beginning of a change in culture and the end of everlasting memories that scarred people during the Second World War”. All of this is relevant as you are talking about who they are, where they are from and how that influenced their work by also linking it to landmark events in history AND THE THEME ITSELF. If you do this for every question, this is an example of a near-full/full mark response.
- ✓ Once you've done this for “who, what, when, where, why”, you now need to analyse one of the artist's pieces in terms of formal elements. Pick your favourite and be CRITICAL – talk about both the successes and weaknesses of the work. What is successful about the piece? Why is it successful? What makes you think it is successful? How would people during the time of the creation of this piece have thought about the successful elements of this piece? What is weak about the work? Why is it weak? What makes you think it is weak? You need to be answering all of these questions when evaluating the work, and if you think of more questions the examiner might have, answer them!

For your formal elements analysis page:

- ✓ If you only chose one artist, **SAVE THE LAST BULLET POINT FOR THIS ONE**. If you like the look of two and hence you have a subsidiary artist, continue with this list. For this page, do a brief contextual paragraph on the artist. This one doesn't have to be as detailed as the first one.
- ✓ Pick a piece by this second artist and do the same critical analysis, however have the same level of detail as the context section of the contextual analysis.
- ✓ Write a conclusion summarising both of the pages, and your thoughts on possibly combining the meaning of one artist with the art movement of another, and let this become a free flowing thought for your mind.

ARTIST STUDIES

You now need to complete an artist study and a corresponding response.

- ✓ You should have one hyperrealistic artist as your two "favourite artists" – as annoying as this may sound, examiners much prefer detail and skill in work, and they only really being to focus on creativity in A Level. Doing a hyperrealistic artist (e.g. I chose Toni Mahfud) will exponentially improve your skill level.
- ✓ Choose the piece you want to recreate and draw it to the best of your ability – make your you've captured as much detail as you can and use whatever media you need to use to make it as identical to the original as possible.
- ✓ Once you've done that, create a response to that piece next to it. Ideally, use a photoshoot picture to demonstrate consistency in your work, which is another quality that examiners look for.
- ✓ Write up a short 2 to 3-line paragraph talking about what you've done in your study and how you've used the same method in your response.
- ✓ Then, write up a slightly longer paragraph with a brief evaluation of both the study and response (one positive and one negative for each should be fine).

INITIAL IDEAS

Create a set of 3 – 5 initial ideas and give comprehensive reasoning for the ideas and how they link to the theme

- ✓ First, use a double page to create an "Areas of interest" mind-map. Now that you're equipped with more information about the theme, this will just be a more developed version of your initial thumbnail sketch page. Include the same thing if you want, and do make sure to do more media experimentation to constitute more of your sketchbook with AO2 content.
- ✓ Now's the good part! So far you've done numerous observational studies and you also have an inspiration page to refer to in order to inform your ideas. From these pages, create a mind-map on a separate sheet of paper or draw 3 – 5 boxes, list the theme and any relating words/thoughts, and draw whatever comes to mind. Don't spend time on this part at all! Do rough 30-second sketches that will only act as a memory jog when it comes to formulating your initial ideas section.
- ✓ Once done, you should have any thoughts written down associated with each rough sketch. Now, formulate a section where you demonstrate each initial idea on a sketch that either takes up one full page or most of a page – make sure it is noticeable to the examiner.
- ✓ This is where it begins to get hard. Your analysis needs to be as comprehensive as possible for each idea, as you cannot provide the examiner with any questions to ask about your work from here on (in all honesty, you wouldn't want the examiner to question anything at all!). Begin by describing the piece and its composition. The composition is very important and you need to have a vague idea on what media you will be using. This includes paper, paper size, paper type, pencil, paint, pastel, acrylic, oil, printing, writing, ink and so on.
- ✓ For every medium you state, you need to give a sentence or two on why you choose that medium. Yes, that means even if you chose all of the above, you need to write a sentence for each and every one of them. For example: "If I were to continue this idea I would use a 12-grade pencil system in order to full realise and graduate each depth/area of the piece in order to bring a sense of relief and 3D effects". Do this for EVERY medium you state.
- ✓ Explain why you drew this piece. This is the part that students find the hardest, and for good reason – most artists draw stuff at random for no reason or with no meaning associated with the picture. Don't worry – so did I. The best way to go about this is to literally bulls*** your way into convincing the examiner that it definitely DOES link to the theme. As odd as it sounds, the more irrelevant your ideas are at first glance, the better it is because the more original you'll seem. For example, my theme was "Beginning and/or End", and the way I justified my idea was "this piece demonstrates both the beginning of a revolution and reinforcing a swaggering step forward in society and the end of hatred, misogyny, misandry and overall double standards in people of our culture today". I literally pulled that out of nowhere, and you can too.

- ✓ Overall, your analysis should be no more than a paragraph long. Generally, people stick to 2, maybe 3 mediums and the meaning of the piece doesn't take that long. In fact, if you find mind-mapping the analysis easier, do it as long as you're being equally as comprehensive about your work.

SECOND PHOTOSHOOT

Now that you have your initial ideas, do another photoshoot that will help you realise your ideas

- ✓ Time to get the camera out again. This photoshoot can be however short you want, but it must realise your ideas. Even if you have four ideas and have one picture per idea, that's good enough.
- ✓ Do brief notes on which idea it links to and how it will realise your idea.
- ✓ Draw a full photorealistic version of your favourite picture (ideally the one that links to your favourite idea[s])
- ✓ Briefly talk about the successes and weaknesses of that idea.

DEVELOPMENT CHAPTER

This chapter will be the longest chapter – you now need to collect your favourite ideas, combine them into developing ideas where you will be exploring each and every assessment objective to its full extent

For the colour experimentation pages:

- ✓ On the first page of your development chapter, format a diary page where you will record what you do every week leading up to the end of your development chapter. This will create an overview of the development chapter and will inform the examiner on what to look forward to. Make sure you use and highlight key words!
- ✓ Begin your first instalment with about two pages looking into colour. Take one major part of your piece and recreate it using different colours and media to demonstrate experimentation.
- ✓ KEEP THE PIECES YOU MESS UP. You need to show the examiner that you recognise your weaknesses and descriptions such as "this wasn't very successful because I diluted the paint too much so I won't do this next time" will get you lots of marks because it shows a true experiment – no experiment is perfect and although it burns our souls as GCSE artists to have it in our book it is a necessity in getting that A*/8/9 grade.
- ✓ Swatch the colours you use (ideally on the side of the page), code them i.e. Colour 1, Colour 2 etc., and reference them whilst annotating each experimentation.
- ✓ Use different colours and media, for example when I was experimenting with eyes I used bluish greys and biro on one page then reds in acrylics, pencils and oil paints on another page.

For the composition pages:

- ✓ After the colour comes composition. You will need to look at physical composition as well as media and material composition. In other words, you'll need to do three different sketches showing different paper sizes, paper types, arrangement of items within the picture and different artistic utensils.
- ✓ On the side, do annotations of each composition and talk about its successes and weaknesses. This is the opportunity to talk about negative space, how it can improve, and what you like about each composition in order to include some qualities in your final composition.
- ✓ Follow on the composition pages with any extra tests you want to make, i.e. any backgrounds or textures

For the main photoshoot:

- ✓ Do another photoshoot but make this of professional production – use a professional camera if you have one, experiment with lighting, have backdrops, do what I did and do the model's makeup (trust me, I'm a boy and it is hard). Make it look like you've put effort into this photoshoot and really convey the meaning of the pictures through your work.
- ✓ Take many photos showing different angles and compositions to show comprehension in ideas
- ✓ Do photoshoots of different locations or models and don't annoy one person! (like I did...)
- ✓ If you have done something like makeup, take pictures of you doing the makeup to show how much effort you've put in! It also shows that you're experimenting outside of the canvas which is top quality content for the examiner.

For the comprehensive subject test pages:

- ✓ This is where you take the main subjects of your piece and explore the hell out of them. Create an initial test for something you haven't yet tested, or something you've tested but less than others, and record the colour swatches. Remember to use creative media, for example I used nail varnish as well as pencil and acrylic paint.
- ✓ Create a series of swatches of the same thing but do them using different methods/integrating different artistic utensils. For example, my first test was a strip of hair with clear nail varnish on top, then I tried it with pencilling in details and using clear nail varnish, then I tried iridescent nail varnish on top.
- ✓ Talk about each swatch and choose a provisional final swatch.

- ✓ Draw a version of the subject of your piece that doesn't have to be complete, but shows the main parts. For example, draw a section of a building that shows both the concrete and the reflections in windows, or draw a face that has at least one eye, a nose, a mouth and an ear, rather than a full face, hair and all. Ideally draw from observation of a photoshoot.
- ✓ Annotate the main subject talking about the successes and weaknesses, and how you will improve and how your work links to the theme so far. I'm sure that you are sick of reading that by now.
- ✓ On another page, do sketches of not-so-crucial things, but things that are still a part of the piece to show you're not winging it in the exam.
- ✓ Repeat this cycle for any other main subjects in your piece. This particularly goes to people who are doing multiple pieces, like a triptych.
- ✓ On the page after this, draw another response to your main artist to show that you're not flowing away from them.

For the "developing connections and meaning in my final piece" page:

- ✓ Print a picture of a piece by your main artist and practice the difficult areas of their piece that may be involved in your work. For example, if you're doing portraiture and you print a portraiture piece that's at an odd angle, practice the eye, which obviously looks different at that angle.
- ✓ Talk about the picture and the meaning behind it. TOP TIP: make it allude to the theme, and that will make the examiner think you've thought about it well if the piece links to your theme.
- ✓ Explain how it links to the theme and talk about how it could be personal to the artist. If you really want to show off, talk about how it could be personal to you as well, since creating a "personal and developed response" is part of the mark scheme.
- ✓ On the following page, put that practice of difficult areas into yet another drawing of your subject, preferably one you will use in your final piece. It is definitely recommended to do this from the main photoshoot.

A couple of miscellaneous pages, no specific section:

- ✓ Have a secondary reference picture and draw it. Do a quick and short contextual analysis and formal elements analysis for that drawing.
- ✓ Create a "surface + media" experimentation page where you experiment with two or three surfaces using two or three types of media but keeping them separate, i.e. I did each row as card, sketchbook paper and cartridge paper and each column as a medium like pencil, and then acrylic. Talk about your favourite and note that as another provisional final choice.
- ✓ VISIT A GALLERY. Make sure you visit a gallery and gain information from there. Use the gallery's pieces to inform your final piece and make sure you use the theme of your piece as a stimulus for what to put on that page. For example, if you're doing portraiture and you've collected landscapes, that's not a good idea. Once you've done sketches of those pieces, talk about how they link to the theme.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENT AND FINAL CHOICES / EVALUATION

This is where you will be giving your final choices and sticking with your ideas and concepts, and practicing your final piece so that you are confident with what to do in the exam.

- ✓ We are now DRAWING to a close! (I apologise). This is where you will do your maquette trials, meaning a small version of the full piece, or small versions of the full pieces depending on what you're doing, showing the examiner something that will look like your final piece. Remember to include ones that didn't go so well so that you have an indicator of improvement and development for that piece.
- ✓ Create a further development page which shows/talks about your full final choices for what's to happen in your final piece. Give visual depictions of major changes and verbal depictions of changes that aren't as serious.
- ✓ Skip a couple of pages and write a fully comprehensive evaluation, giving a full detailed and exceptional level of analysis starting from the beginning of the exam to the end of the exam and make any points you didn't make before. Integrate other ideas including the initial artists you looked at and other famous art moments, including things like Leonardo da Vinci's work on Divine Proportion and the Golden Ratio. ANSWER ALL QUESTIONS THE EXAMINER MIGHT HAVE! Things like this will get you lots and lots of marks.
- ✓ Do any final touches on your entire sketchbook, make sure that spelling and grammar is correct, make sure your work is fluent and of exceptional ability and if you have time, do one more practice so that you are more confident on what to do in the exam.
- ✓ Although not necessary, you could create a time plan for the 10-hour exam, so you have an idea on what to do during each hour of the exam, and so that you can keep track for finishing the piece.

- ✓ Prepare your surfaces with any bases/primers two days before the exam. This should allow any primers to dry properly so there's no panic for a wet primer before the exam. If you are doing a water-based base, this can be a day before the exam as water dries quickly (I border my pieces of card with masking tape and tea-stained them on the day before my exam, and it worked out fine).

REFERENCE PHOTOS / DOCUMENTARY PAGE

Re-print your main reference photos and create a documentary page

- ✓ Print out your main photos of reference, primary or secondary, to prevent yourself paging through your sketchbook during the final exam. Stick them in the pages you left out but leave one page for the documentary page.
- ✓ Create a documentary page in that remaining page that you will be filling in during your actual exam, including colour and material swatches and quick final tests and studies.

That is your sketchbook work completely finished! Congratulations, and well done to you for (almost) completing what is thought to be the hardest GCSE that currently exists! Looking back on this, you can see how all of AO1 (artist research), AO2 (experimentation) and AO3 (observational studies) have been encompassed throughout your work. AO1, AO2 and AO3 make up your AO4, so all you need to do now is completely recreate your final piece in that final exam and I am 100% sure you will get that A/8/9 grade as long as you've done everything in this booklet. Below are tips for the actual 10 hours of silent hell, but I just want to end this by saying that you have worked extremely hard for this GCSE and I hope you get that top grade that you deserve! I know how draining it can be so God bless you for putting up with two years of intense Art. Please remember to rest and to not let it affect your health as this will be detrimental to the rest of your GCSEs. Speaking of which, good luck in the rest of your GCSEs too! I'm sure you'll do well in everything. Don't rest too long though – don't start to procrastinate your real GCSEs! It's short term pain but long term gain – survive through this now and let the results shine!*

*Yours truly,
Farhan Chughtai ☺*

EXAM TIPS FOR THE FINAL 10 HOURS OF GCSE ART & DESIGN

- 1) Get a good night's sleep the night before the exam and get to school bright and early to do any last minute preparations, i.e. getting paints mixed and ready, getting any solvents you might need, sharpening your pencils, setting out your station and so on.
- 2) If you make a mistake in the exam, DON'T PANIC. Rather than sitting there and wallowing in your own self-pity, DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. It's no good if you sit there and cry because you'll lose time and concentration instantly and the exam will drag. If your pencil breaks while drawing, be patient, sharpen it and carry on. Save the crying for until after the exam at least!
- 3) KEEP AN EYE ON TIME. It's easy to get lost into the joy that is Art, and you could spend more time on something than you think. If you think you're spending too much time on something, pick up the pace without being careless and try to get back on track.
- 4) If you finish early, do things that will make your piece better. For example, if you forgot to finish something, finish it. Make it as perfect as you can. DON'T FORGET TO FILL IN YOUR DOCUMENTARY PAGE.
- 5) If you think you'll finish late, finish as much as you can and make it look decent by the least.
- 6) Take deep breaths and ENJOY YOUR BREAKS. Don't think about the exam during your break otherwise your brain will fall into a spiral and that could lead to a mental breakdown mid-exam, which isn't good. Refresh your mind with water, and remember, after this, it will all be over.
- 7) Once you've finished the exam, go out to celebrate – this is one of the most rewarding GCSEs out there and believe me when I say that you will have battled through a lot. When you're done, Art GCSE is done and out of the way. It might be emotional, I don't know, but you will most certainly be proud of yourself.
- 8) Be proud with whatever grade you get. Although this is meant to be for A*/8/9 grade aiming students, the mark scheme is horrible and can mean that you don't get what you expect. At the end of the day, it's not the grade that counts; it's the commitment and pride for the subject. Whatever grade you get, I'm proud of you ☺