OXFORD

INTERNATIONAL AQA EXAMINATIONS

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GCSE PLUS

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PLANNING AND PREPARING YOUR WORK

INTRODUCTION

'FAIL TO PREPARE, PREPARE TO FAIL'

This old saying is certainly true of a GCSE Plus project because you are in control of what you study, how you study and when you study. As such, once you have decided on the topic for your GCSE Plus project and refined this into a suitable title, it is time to **plan** the work in more detail. This handout will outline some key planning methods and skills that you can use.

SETTING CLEAR AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Remember, the primary place to record your planning is in the *Progress diary*. Once you have a clear idea about what you want to do and how you intend to do it, there is a space in the 'Candidate proposal' section to record your 'Aims/objectives/plan'. You should also use the *Progress diary* log to record further planning as you go along. Students sometimes choose to submit additional evidence of their planning, eg a time-line or Gantt chart, which is often helpful to the examiner. However, doing this is not a substitute for completing the *Progress diary* in detail.

PLANNING BEGINS WITH SETTING AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- **Aims**: Aims set out what you hope your project is going to achieve. Normally this is a single aim, or maybe two if they are closely linked. The aim of your project should be clear from your title, eg to investigate the developments in golf ball technology in the last fifty years and assess which has been most significant.
- **Objectives**: Objectives are the goals or steps that you will meet on the way to meeting your aim. In other words, how you will achieve it. Objectives use specific statements which define measurable outcomes. Eg:
  - Gather research relating to historical developments in golf ball technology
  - Decide on appropriate criteria by which to assess impact
  - Assess each development in light of these criteria

The key thing for both aims and objectives is **clarity and precision**. **Clarity** means that there is nothing vague about what you want to achieve. **Precision** means that you have been specific in what you want to achieve and how you intend to achieve it. For example, consider the following titles and how clear and precise they are in terms of their aims:

- **'A study into how things fly.'** This title is clear (there are no ambiguous words) but it is not very precise: 'things' is too general. Does it mean man-made things or natural things?

- **'Which European football club has been the most successful in the last thirty years?'** This title is precise – it specifies a particular group of football clubs (European ones) and a particular period of time (the last thirty years). However, it is not clear what is meant by 'success'. This could be in financial terms, or winning trophies, or size of fan base, or rate of growth (or a combination of these).
- **'What is the likelihood of conscious, artificial intelligence being created in the next fifty years?'** This title is both clear and precise. There are no ambiguous words and there is a good degree of precision.

When it comes to setting your objectives, one useful approach is to ask: are they '**SMART**'? This is a set of five criteria which you can use to evaluate whether your objectives are useful:

- **Specific**: Be precise about what you are going to do (see above examples).
- **Measurable**: Make sure you will be able to tell when an objective has been achieved. This could be getting a set number of responses to a questionnaire or completing a particular set of experiments.
- **Achievable**: Do you have the necessary resources to achieve the objective, eg time, money, skills?
- **Relevant**: Is your objective relevant to your overall aim? An objective might be interesting in its own right but it needs to help you build your argument.
- **Time constrained**: Set a deadline for each objective. Can you achieve that objective in that time?

TURNING YOUR OBJECTIVES INTO A TIME-PLAN

Once you have set your aims and objectives the next step is to turn the objectives into a time-plan. You may need to break each objective up into smaller tasks – this is perfectly fine. Once you have done this you should consider how long each task will take and what resources you will need to complete it.

GCSE Plus work involves setting and meeting deadlines that may be weeks or even months in the future. Managing your time is crucial to a successful GCSE Plus project. A time-plan can help you to do this, much like you might use a calendar or a diary to plan your time or revision schedule to help you prepare for exams.

Below are two examples of time-plans you might want to use.

1. **A simple time-plan.** In the column on the left, list all the individual tasks that your GCSE Plus involves, in the order they need to be done. Then estimate how much time each task will require and set a deadline based on this estimate. As you complete each task, tick it off in the final column.

Task	Time required	Deadline	Achieved?

2. **Gantt chart.** A Gantt chart is a more visual way to plan your time. As with the simple time-plan above, tasks are listed in the left column, and each task has a row. However, time is represented along the top row (either in days, weeks or months – depending on how long you have), from the start date to the final submission date. Tasks are represented by cascading horizontal bars and can be linked to other bars to show how tasks are related/dependent on each other. Eg you cannot begin your report until you have completed your research. The length of a bar shows the duration a task is estimated to take. You can also add key dates onto the Gantt chart to help your planning.

Task Name	Q1				Q2			Q3
	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul
Planning		███	███					
Research			███	█				
Design				██				
Implementation					███	█		
Follow up							██	

You can find advice on how to construct a Gantt chart online. There are even software packages available that will help you construct one.

There are lots of different ways to map out and plan your time – these are just two approaches. The important thing is that you do plan and that you record this plan in a systematic way. It's also important to remember that time-plans are working documents. Don't be afraid to change them (revise your timings, change your deadlines, etc) as you go along and the circumstances around your project change.

TIME-MANAGEMENT ADVICE

Most of the time you spend working on your GCSE Plus project (about 20 hours) will be spent working independently. This means that managing your time is crucial to your success. Time management means establishing how much work needs to be done and working out how to spread it out over the time available. Below is some general guidance for successful (and unsuccessful!) time management.

- **Clear aims and objectives.** If your aims and objectives are not clear from the start of your GCSE Plus project, it is likely you will waste time researching areas that end up not being relevant.
- **Organisation.** Most students find that having a set routine when they work on their GCSE Plus helps. This is up to you to devise. It might be a particular timeslot at school when you have some free time, a specific evening or a regular time over the weekend.
- **Perfectionism.** No GCSE Plus project is perfect (see handout on '*Review*'). Trying to achieve perfection will result in spending too much time on (relatively) minor aspects of your work. Aim for excellence rather than perfection.
- **Procrastination.** This is when important things that could be done today are put off until tomorrow (or a later time). Instead, unimportant tasks are prioritised (like texting your friends). Prioritise what is most important (see below).

- **Pace yourself.** The opposite of procrastination is trying to do many things at once, or things too quickly. This only results in unnecessary mistakes and costs more time in the long run. Aim to do one task at a time; do it well, and then move on to the next objective.

THE EISENHOWER MATRIX

One very useful time-management tool is the Eisenhower Matrix. It is based on a quotation from US President Eisenhower: 'What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important'. The idea is that whenever you are faced with a task, ask yourself two questions:

1. How **important** is the task? (ie does it contribute to the overall aim?)

2. How **urgent** is the task? (ie does it need to be completed right now or can it wait?)

Based on the answers to these two questions, each task will end up in one of four categories, which can be written into a grid:

	Urgent	Not urgent
Important	• revision for a test the next day • an impending deadline ①	• coursework for other subjects • **GCSE Plus!** ②
Not important	• most phone calls/text messages/emails ③	• watching television • social media • aimless surfing of the web ④

Each box is numbered and you should look to complete tasks in this order (1–4). This will ensure you use your time most productively and achieve the most important elements of your work (boxes 1 and 2). The key mistake people make is, after completing tasks in box 1, they then start on box 3 as these tasks often 'shout the loudest'. However, since tasks in box 3 aren't necessarily that important, it's more useful to focus on your long-term goals in box 2.

GCSE Plus work will usually fall into box 2. If you spend too much of your time in box 3 (or, worse still, box 4), you will find that yourself missing deadlines or rushing to complete work at the last minute.. You should try to keep your GCSE Plus work in box 2. If you apply the Eisenhower method you will do the required work at a consistent rate, spreading it evenly across the time you have.

FACING PROBLEMS AND MAKING DECISIONS

Most students will experience problems during the course of their GCSE Plus. This is to be expected: research is often unpredictable. It might be that the resources you want to access are proving difficult to attain or understand, or that things are taking longer than you expected, or that your title needs to be adjusted slightly. In such situations, remember that part of how the GCSE Plus is assessed includes 'taking appropriate decisions where necessary' (AO1). Therefore, treat a problem as an opportunity to demonstrate to your supervisor and the examiner how good you are at dealing with problems.

Here are some strategies that can help:

- **Analysing the issue**: What exactly is the problem? How urgent/important is it? What appears to be causing it? Is it something within your power to resolve? What will happen if it is not solved?
- **Propose solutions**: Never 'react' to a problem. Instead, aim for a 'considered response'. This includes thinking about a range of possible solutions. These might include solutions you have used in the past.
- **Discuss with your supervisor**. Your supervisor is there to listen to you and offer guidance (but not to tell you what to do!). Discussing problems often helps to understand them and you supervisor is likely to have had similar experiences in the past. They will be able to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each of your proposed solutions.
- **Record your decision**. Never think that problems are a sign of a poor GCSE Plus. Always record them in the *Progress diary*, including your proposed solutions and final decision, with explanation.

Final thought: Your planning is assessed in two ways: how detailed it is, and how strategic it is.

Detailed planning involves breaking down objectives into tasks and thinking carefully about how much time and what resources each will involve.

Strategic planning involves thinking about 'how best to achieve my aim(s)'. There will always be many ways to achieve an aim and you should make it clear why you chose a particular approach.

TASK

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT!

Create a 'mock' GCSE Plus, to practice skills such as setting aims and objectives and making a time-plan. This can be done fairly roughly and quickly, and can be on **any** topic you like – the important thing is that you get some practice in applying the planning skills, before you come to your real GCSE Plus. Your supervisor might even take a look at what you produce and give you some advice for you to take forward into your real project.

WHAT ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVES DOES THIS RELATE TO?

AO1 Organisation – Use appropriate guidance and a range of methods to develop and implement a proposal by:

i. establish appropriate aims and objectives
ii. planning the work
iii. managing the process, taking appropriate decisions where necessary

Other useful links to further information on planning and managing your work:

- Wikipedia (section 2.3 – The Eisenhower Method): **en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Time_management#The_Eisenhower_Method**
- University of Birmingham Guide to Academic Writing (Chapter 2): **birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/students/guide-to-academic-writing.pdf**
- Solent University (Aims and objectives): **learn.solent.ac.uk/mod/book/view.php?id=116233&chapterid=15294**
- Gantt chart: **smartsheet.com/blog/gantt-chart-excel**
- BBC Bitesize: **bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/design/graphics/drawingsketchingrev8.shtml**

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