

Curriculum Overview – AQA Art and Design GCSE Photography

Rationale

GCSE AQA Photography is far more than a technical introduction to cameras; it is a profound exploration of visual literacy and personal identity. By prompting students to move beyond the lense of a modern smartphone, photography teaches students to view the world through a highly analytical, artistic lens. It challenges students to treat the camera as a fluid tool for storytelling, balancing the strict mechanics of exposure, lighting, and digital manipulation with deep thematic research. Through the required development of a comprehensive portfolio, students do not just document what they see—they critically engage with the work of historical and contemporary photographers and artists, learn to embrace the trial-and-error of the creative process, and ultimately find their own unique visual voice.

Curriculum Intention at KS4

AO1: Develop ideas through investigations, demonstrating critical understanding of sources.	Investigating Visual Approaches: You don't just look at a photograph; you deconstruct how it was made. You analyse the artist's use of lighting (e.g., harsh high-contrast shadows vs. soft diffused light), composition (e.g., rule of thirds, leading lines), camera settings (e.g., shallow depth of field, long exposure blur), and context.
AO2: Refine work by exploring ideas, selecting and experimenting with appropriate media, materials, techniques and processes.	Experimenting with Techniques & Processes: This is where you test different ways of capturing or manipulating an image. You might experiment with physical camera controls (like changing shutter speeds to capture motion blur versus freezing action) or physical techniques (like using macro lenses, lens flares, or studio lighting setups). Selecting Media & Materials: In photography, "media" includes both digital and physical materials. You might experiment with digitally editing a photo in Photoshop (testing high-contrast black and white versus oversaturated colour grading), or you might physically manipulate prints by cutting, layering, sewing into, or chemically distressing the paper.
AO3: Record ideas, observations and insights relevant to intentions as work progresses.	Visual Recording (Observations): This is the act of taking the photographs. It involves capturing a wide range of observations related to your theme. Instead of just taking one photo of a subject, you record it from different angles, under different lighting conditions, and at different times of day to see how the visual narrative changes. Planning and Intentions: AO3 requires you to document your plans <i>before</i> you even pick up the camera. In photography, this means outlining your logistical and creative goals, proving that you have a clear vision for what you want to achieve. Reflective Insights: This is the written commentary that goes alongside your images. You record your insights by analysing what went right, what went wrong, and how your ideas are evolving as the work progresses.
AO4: Present a personal and meaningful response that realises intentions and demonstrates an understanding of visual language.	This objective represents the final climax and realization of the project. Students must produce a meaningful final outcome (or a series of related outcomes) that brings all of their previous research, experimentation, and recording to a successful conclusion. The final piece must share an obvious, unmistakable visual link to the preparatory work in their sketchbooks. Furthermore, the outcome must demonstrate a strong grasp of visual language—utilizing elements like composition, colour theory, line, tone, and texture to create an impactful, personally expressive piece of art.
Written Communication	Pupils are expected to use continuous, insightful written annotations to explain the conceptual thinking behind their practical work, evaluate their experimentation with materials, and provide critical analysis of historical and contemporary artists' work. Rather than demanding long, formal essays, the specification requires that writing be deeply integrated alongside visual elements to clearly articulate the student's creative intentions and self-reflection as their project progresses. Crucially, students are assessed on their ability to use appropriate specialist art vocabulary (such as composition, form, tone, and media) to justify their creative choices.

Long term planning grid

Year	Autumn 1	Autumn 2	Spring 1	Spring 2	Summer 1	Summer 2
10	Introductory phase	Experimental phase	Development phase	Refinement of ideas	Links to artists.	Medium experimentation.
11	Sustained project phase	Sustained project research and development	Externally set assignment phase part one	Externally set assignment phase part two	Selection of portfolio	

Progression in Subject after KS4

Following Key Stage 4, progression in photography branches into distinct academic, vocational, and technical pathways designed to transition students into higher education or the creative industries. Students seeking a traditional, theory-driven route can progress to A-Level Art and Design (Photography), which deepens visual analysis and portfolio development alongside complementary subjects like Media or Film Studies. Alternatively, those favouring a hands-on, industry-focused approach can pursue full-time vocational qualifications, such as a BTEC or UAL Level 3 Extended Diploma, or a technical T-Level in Media, Broadcast and Production. These technical routes prioritize commercial studio skills, digital workflows, and mandatory workplace placements. Ultimately, all of these Level 3 qualifications serve as a launchpad for Higher Education degrees—including specialized fields like fashion photography or photojournalism—or lead directly into professional employment as freelance creatives, commercial studio assistants, and digital content producers

Curriculum Sequencing

Yr 10	Knowledge focus	Assessment focus	Keywords	Personal Development Links
Term	Introductory phase			
Year 10 Autumn Term 1	- Students explore and experiment with a variety of materials, processes and techniques, and investigate different kinds of sources. - Students explore a variety of approaches to drawing angles, camera focus points and potential light sources as well as including written annotation. - Students can work in sketchbooks or select a variety of other surfaces on which to record their observations, ideas and insights. They can work in two- and/or three dimensions and a range of sizes and styles using a selection of media, techniques and materials.	Range of sources Primary and secondary research Photography creations made as responses to research. Small studies that reference artists and photographer links	Sources Independence Links Variety Approach	Resilience and Risk-Taking: The creative process is rarely linear. Students frequently encounter unexpected outcomes.
	Experimental phase			
Year 10 Autumn Term 2	- Students can select and use a variety of traditional and/or experimental recording to document their photographic processes. Students are expected to experiment within these mediums as much as possible. - Exposure: Controlling the brightness of your image. You can explore <i>overexposure</i> (bright, blown-out whites) or <i>underexposure</i> (dark, moody shadows). - Depth of Field (DoF): Adjusting how much of the image is sharp. A <i>shallow</i> depth of field creates a blurry backdrop to isolate your subject, while a <i>deep</i> depth of field keeps everything sharp. - Motion Blur vs. Shutter Freeze: Intentional camera movement or slow shutter speeds to blur action (e.g., light trails), versus fast shutter speeds to freeze a split second in time. - Viewpoint / Angle: Exploring unusual perspectives to develop your idea, such as <i>worms-eye view</i> (looking up), <i>birds-eye view</i> (looking straight down), or <i>forced perspective</i>. - Photomontage / Collage: Cutting, tearing, and layering multiple photographic prints together to construct a completely new, surreal image. - Chemical Distressing: Altering a physical print or film using household chemicals (like bleach or lemon juice) to create abstract textures and decay. - Tactile Manipulation: Physically altering the surface of your prints by <i>embroidering/sewing</i> into them, <i>weaving</i> two photos together, or <i>burning</i> the edges. - Emulsion Transfer: Lifting the ink or photographic emulsion off a print and transferring it onto a different surface like wood, canvas, or textured watercolour paper. - Digital Compositing: Digitally blending elements from multiple different photos into a single final frame using layers and masking. - Colour Grading / Saturation: Exploring mood through colour palettes—either <i>desaturating</i> images to make them clinical and cold, or <i>boosting warmth</i> to evoke nostalgia.	A set of mixed media pieces that focus on a theme. Small samples that show skills with a range of techniques used. Annotations that describe personalised thoughts and opinions.	Manipulation Experimentation View point Exposure Depth of field Composition Motion Still frame	Critical Thinking and Objectivity: Through the continuous cycle of peer feedback and self-evaluation, students learn how to look at their own creations objectively.

	Development phase			
Year 10 Spring Term 1	- Directed project Up to 14 weeks - Students work on a directed project or several mini projects to build on their initial experiences. - This is mostly a teacher directed phase. - Students have the opportunity to fully engage with a given theme and make a personal response when developing, knowledge, understanding and skills development from the introductory phase.	Students begin to choose themes or concepts that develop into a direct project. Teacher and student agree on choice of theme. This encompasses photographers as reference points, styles to work forwards with and independent creations in their own styles.	Development Unique Skill Directed Links Decision making Ownership	Autonomy and Independent Decision-Making: Developing a personal project requires a high degree of ownership. Students must independently choose their thematic directions, select their mediums, and decide when a piece is finished [AO4]. This builds personal accountability and confidence in their own judgment.
	Refinement of ideas			
Year 10 Spring Term 2	- The directed project or mini projects encourage a personal interpretation and response from students to a given starting point or theme. - The teacher can suggest sources and also introduce the idea of a creative journey involving research, development, refinement and presentation of realised intentions with reference to the four assessment objectives.	Refinement takes place after the directed project has been agreed and started. Project works that can be on single sheets, sketchbooks or folder work are continued over a period of time to allow for refinement of process, adapting to respond to feedback or changes to allow for improvements of skill.	Observational Modelling Creative journey Intentions Practice Refine Process Production	Enhanced Spatial and Cognitive Awareness: The acts of observational drawing, structural photographic evidence, and 3D modelling stimulate neural pathways related to spatial awareness, hand-eye coordination, and complex lateral thinking
	Links to artists.			
Year 10 Summer Term 1	- Students will begin to explore artists whose work inspires them. - This may be through technique, colour, subject, country of origin, movement or simply expression. - The work created here could be in the form of outcomes related to their previous experiments or could add onto an ongoing project. - The work may be stand alone or may form the research for a sustained project later on in the development process.	Through development of their own work and research of existing styles, students will begin to source photographers past and present who will inspire their future works. This may look like a series of works or one work that embodies representation of ideas.	Technique Origin Location Culture Thematic Inspiration Relative Relatable Context	Visual Literacy and Empathy: Analysing historical and contemporary photography works from diverse global cultures pushes students to look at the world through multiple lenses.
	Medium experimentation.			
Year 10 Summer Term 2	- Students will progress their ideas thoroughly and with pace to create further medium experimentations that incorporate their research work and earlier developments. - These works will embrace the experimentations and developments from earlier in year 10. Opportunities for medium experimentation are personal and link closer with each individual students thoughts, processes, ideas and requirements for their personalised responses. - Students continue to practice by exploring and applying additional materials, processes and techniques that enhance their bespoke styles, encouraging unique interpretive ways of expressing creativity and flair.	This phase utilises the earlier experimental fact finding stage but focuses purely on medium experimentation. Students are expected to show case their skills using the widest range of mediums available to them. This could be focussed on a series of linking works or could be many, smaller samples.	Range Growth Production Series Enhancement Bespoke Correlating Processing Strength Evaluate Judgement	Emotional Regulation and Mindfulness: For many young people, the focused workspace of developing creative work creates a state of calm and motivation to complete their experimentations.

Yr 11	Knowledge focus	Assessment focus	Keywords	Personal Development Links
Term	Sustained project phase			
Year 11 Autumn Term 1	- In this phase students move increasingly from dependence to independence as they work on an extended project with a theme or topic of their choice. - The sustained project begins to encompass all the development, experimentation and inquiry completed in year 10. - The project could be a response to a choice of several starting points.	Inquiry and development is increasingly personalised as students move further into independent work. There is no set requirement for how this work should look or be presented, but must be a reflection of all their encounters, research and development throughout their first year of the course.	Time management Focus Discipline Topic Source Inquiry Progress Combination Merge	Time Management and Self-Discipline: With the portfolio representing 60% of the total grade, students cannot rely on short bursts of cramming before an exam. The course demands sustained, independent effort over two years.
	Sustained project research and development			
Year 11 Autumn Term 2	- Students need to explicitly evidence coverage of all four assessment objectives, drawing for different purposes and needs and written annotation. - Students offered a choice of approaches for a sustained project. This should allow students to move from a position of dependence to one of increasing independence as the journey of exploration progresses. - This phase is delivered in a less directed manner with an emphasis on one-to-one exchanges rather than whole group teaching. - The teacher negotiates, advises, suggests and orchestrates possible routes through the creative journey. - The objective is to build upon individuals' experiences and achievements in the earlier stages.	The second Autumn Term is a chance for pupils to ensure that their sustained project does achieve all four assessment objectives. Pupils will continue to work on each key area, following guidance and feedback from their teacher and working together will refine and develop works that may be important to their final individual outcomes.	Critical Self Reflection Peer review Guidance Continuation Sustain Objective Negotiate Emphasis Guided	Critical Self-Reflection: As students annotate their sketchbooks to evaluate their progress, they develop strong metacognitive skills—the ability to think about their own thinking. They learn to analyse <i>why</i> a particular method worked or failed, turning abstract thoughts into structured, objective self-improvement plans.
	Externally set assignment phase part one			
Year 11 Spring Term 1	- Externally set assignment (ESA) papers are available to students and teachers in the spring term. - A preparatory period is followed by 10 hours of supervised, unaided work in which students are required to realise their intentions in the supervised time. - Students select one from seven possible starting points on the paper. - Students need to evidence their creative journey in the preparatory between sessions and once the supervised time is completed, students may not add to or amend their preparatory work.	The exam board will release the externally set assignment which will give a selection of starting point briefs. Students will research the 7 briefs and locate photographers and imagery that embody these themes and topics. Students will refine their preferences. Similar to the processes in year 10, to meet the requirements of the externally set assignment, students will undergo a series of work that follows the pattern of experiments, development, refinement and research stages. All areas will follow one chosen brief.	Assignment Brief Fulfil Starting point Intention Preparatory Aim Theme	Self-Direction and Individual Identity: Unlike the coursework module, where themes are often guided by the teacher, the ESA paper forces students to select their own starting point from a list of prompts. Making this initial choice requires deep self-reflection, helping students identify their personal interests, values, and artistic identity as they decide which theme truly resonates with them.
	Externally set assignment phase part two			
Year 11 Spring Term 2	- This phase is delivered in a less directed manner with an emphasis on one to one exchanges rather than whole group teaching. - Students are creating works that answer the brief set by the exam board, ensuring that their approach encompasses wide variety of skill. - The teacher negotiates, advises, suggests and orchestrates possible routes through the creative journey. - The objective is to build upon individuals' experiences and achievements in the earlier stages of development.	After experiments, development, refinement and research, students have time to begin experimentation and mixed media testing. The work produced will communicate the students individual talents, responses and creativity to their given brief. This series of outcomes can be styled and presented in the format that best suits the students ideas.	Mapping Organisation Materials Intervention Approach Encompass Exploration	Proactive Time Management and Responsibility: The ESA prep phase operates on a strict, immovable deadline. Students must take full accountability for their schedule—mapping out their own timeline for research, photoshoots, and material trials. This builds high-level organisation and real-world project management skills as they learn to manage time efficiently without constant teacher intervention.

	Selection of portfolio			
Year 11 Summer Term 1	- Students review, select and present their Portfolio for final submission in discussion with the teacher, ensuring that the component requirements are fulfilled. Work can be submitted in any appropriate format. - The selection of work chosen for submission must include coverage of the four assessment objectives and a sustained project evidencing the journey from initial engagement to the realisation of intentions. - A selection of further work undertaken during the student's course of study is also submitted with evidence of drawing activity and written annotation.	With the direction of the teacher, students will refine their work into a series of showcases that demonstrate a reflection of their abilities in art. Students will also consider how this body of work may be presented to the external examiner.	Assess Selection Display Annotate Submit Exhibition Collection Variety Submission	Initiative and Resourcefulness: To record authentic primary observations for their chosen theme, students cannot rely on classroom resources alone [AO3]. They must show initiative by arranging their own primary photoshoots, visiting local environments, or sourcing specific physical objects to draw from.
Year 11 Summer Term 2				

