

As you'll be aware, the first of the **GCSE Mathematics** examinations for this summer are only a month away, and preparation is no doubt well underway in your centre.

I try each year to send out the latest word from Joint Council on the use of **calculators** in examinations - the latest word hasn't changed much in recent years and you can find the document for 2015 [here](#) (or the original on page 13 of the JCQ *Instructions for Conducting Examinations 2014-15* [here](#)). Always best if you can to sort out calculators before the day of the exam so no-one has to be without one. Also ask your students to check their batteries and the mode being used, so they don't try to find sines and cosines in radians.

This also seems like a good opportunity to offer a few reminders and to answer a few questions we're asked at this time of year. Many of these come under the general injunction of "don't make life difficult for the examiners".

1. The rubric on the front of the examination papers says to use **black** ink or ball point pen. I shouldn't think there are many that use fountain pens and ink these days, but be aware that all scripts are scanned so they can be marked onscreen by examiners and black ink shows up clearly.

2. The rubric on the front of the mathematics examination papers also says that you must have an HB pencil. Use your pencil for graphs and diagrams, but not for general writing. HB pencils will scan; H pencils can be a bit faint so avoid using them.

3. Coloured pencils shouldn't be used, no matter how pretty the result may look - the scanner doesn't pick up colour and all will look grey.

4. Highlighter pens may be used by students who wish to highlight words in the questions (we do get asked). However, they shouldn't be used for any answers; again, they don't scan well and the darker coloured ones tend to obscure rather than illuminate.

5. Tracing paper may be used; equally, it may not be needed. You might wish to give it to students before the exam just in case, but students shouldn't worry if they don't actually use it. Mirrors, on the other hand, are not allowed (not even those shiny bits of cardboard that are mirror-like).

6. Don't write any answers below the line on any given page; it won't be scanned. The scanners are programmed to pick up only the space given for the question (to save examiners scrolling through a lot of empty pages). I can't help feeling it used to say "do not write in this space" and I don't know why it doesn't now - all the same, don't write there. The space shown for working is intended to give guidance to students on how much work may be required to arrive at an answer.

7. Don't write any answers on the formulae sheet - they too will be missed.
  
8. Don't forget to look at the last page of the examination paper (the back page) - there's sometimes a question there. Where possible, we like to set papers which have a multiple of 4 pages to save chopping down trees for the sake of blank pages.
  
9. Any pages which are blank will have "BLANK PAGE" written on them. Although this means they're actually not blank, it's intended to show students that they don't have a paper where printing has been missed.
  
10. Don't assume that if you can't do the question, there must be a mistake on the paper - look again or go on to the next one. Mistakes are still mercifully rare, no matter how much I may have put the mockers on this year's exam by saying that.
  
12. We have the same group of examiners setting papers as we have had for a number of years. Nevertheless, the exam paper will be different to anything you've seen in the past, but it won't be that different. Expect to see a few questions which test your understanding of mathematics rather than your memory of past paper questions.
  
13. Our examiners are a pretty cosmopolitan lot and can deal with the occasional European student who uses a comma for a decimal point, or who uses an unusual looking 1 or 7, as long as they do so consistently.
  
14. Examiners are looking to award marks where they can - don't make life difficult for them with truly illegible handwriting, newly invented notation or vigorous crossings out. Try to give the examiners what they are looking for - neat working and clearly written answers.

Doubtless there is more, but this is what I can think of today - I hope it's useful to you and your students over the coming weeks.