

Year 9: Getting Ready to Choose

Year 9 is the last and most important year of KS3. At many schools, this is the year students choose their **GCSE subjects (options)** and start **DofE Bronze**. Children turn 14, and identity, friendships and independence come to the fore. This year's decisions shape the next two years of study, but no decision is irreversible: the aim is to choose calmly and with good information.

"Success is being better than you were yesterday." — Anonymous

Every flower blooms in its own time

No two flowers in a garden are alike. Some bloom on the first day of spring, others in midsummer. Some love the sun, others the shade. But they are all flowers, and each one blooms in its own time.

Our children are the same. Settling into a new school, new routines and sometimes a new language or country can take time. Taking longer does not mean falling behind; it means putting down roots.

Our job is not to compare them with someone else's garden, but to make sure they never go without water, sunlight and patience.

Three goals for this year

1. Informed choices: choosing GCSE subjects with a balance of enjoyment, ability and future plans. **2. DofE Bronze:** completing the Volunteering, Physical, Skills and Expedition sections. **3. Studying smart:** making self-testing and spaced repetition a habit, so they start GCSEs ready.

"Two heads are better than one." — Proverb

Why now? What do universities and employers look for?

Year 9 grades aren't asked for directly in applications, but the GCSE subjects chosen this year and experiences such as DofE start to matter directly. And what universities and employers want is built from habits and experiences gathered over the years:

University	Employer / Apprenticeship	The AI era
Academic results: GCSE and A Level (or equivalent) grades. Interest in the subject: reading, projects and competitions beyond school. The 3 UCAS personal statement questions: 1) Why do you want to study this course? 2) How have your subjects and education prepared you? 3) What have you done outside education, and why are these experiences useful?	Core skills: communication, teamwork, problem solving, reliability, initiative, digital skills. "Can you give me an example?" Interviews test skills through real examples (the STAR method). Experience: volunteering, responsibility, work experience. Apprenticeship applications ask the same questions.	What stands out: curiosity, creativity, people skills, critical thinking and using AI well (checking information, citing sources). In Year 9 this means: informed GCSE choices, DofE Bronze, first STAR skill examples and researching work experience.

A good answer to question 3 ("What have you done outside education?") years from now starts today. Doing something is not enough; writing down what was learned matters too.

12 core skills

Unifrog, the careers platform used by many schools in England, asks students to record which skills they developed in each activity under these 12 headings. The suggestions in this guide are matched to the same skills.

Skill	What it means	Year 9 example
Reading	Understanding a text and picking out information	30 minutes of reading a day, researching subject choices
Writing	Expressing ideas clearly and in an organised way	A “Why I chose these subjects” piece, a STAR example
Numeracy	Working confidently with numbers	IXL, UKMT Intermediate Challenge
Planning	Setting goals and mapping out how to reach them	Options timetable, DoFE plan, expedition route
Listening	Taking in information and ideas accurately	Options evening, teachers' advice
Speaking	Explaining your ideas out loud	Asking teachers about subjects, debating
Teamwork	Working with others towards a shared goal	DoFE expedition team, volunteering
Leadership	Motivating and guiding others	Mentoring Year 7s, a role on the expedition
Problem solving	Finding a solution to a situation	Weighing up subject-choice scenarios, maths
Creativity / Innovation	Coming up with new ideas	DoFE Skills section, a project
Independence	Working effectively on your own	Keeping their own eDoFE records
Adaptability / Resilience	Adjusting to change and keeping going after setbacks	The expedition, new subject decisions

At school and at home: what to work on

“An investment in knowledge pays the best interest.” — Attributed to Benjamin Franklin

What?	How?	Skills it builds
Weekly study plan	Put homework, revision and DoFE hours into the same plan	Planning, Independence
30 minutes of reading a day	Fiction + non-fiction; topics close to the subjects they want to take at GCSE; twice a week in the home language if you have one	Reading, Writing, every subject
Maths	The school's platform + IXL Year 9 Maths (2 × 20 min a week); Corbettmaths 5-a-day	Numeracy, Problem solving
Self-testing + spaced repetition	10 minutes a week per subject of “close, recall, check”; review again after 1 day, 1 week and 1 month	Independence, Reading

Notes and summaries	A one-page summary or mind map for each topic; very useful at GCSE	Writing, Planning
Researching subjects	For possible options: GCSE content, how it's assessed, views of teachers and students	Listening, Problem solving
Using AI well	Use it to explain topics and generate questions, not to write homework; follow the school's rules	Problem solving, Independence
Competitions	UKMT Intermediate Mathematical Challenge (Years 9–11), writing and science competitions	Numeracy, Adaptability / Resilience

Outside school: what to try

The five areas below follow the sections of the **Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE)**, the best-known programme for young people in the UK. In Year 9 these areas are the actual sections of DofE Bronze (details below).

Area	Year 9 examples	Skills it builds	Tip
Physical (sport & dance)	DofE Physical section: progress in their current sport or a new one (Climbing, Rowing, Fencing, Athletics, Swimming, Dance, Gym)	Adaptability / Resilience, Teamwork, Independence	3 or 6 months, about 1 hour a week on average.
Skills	DofE Skills section: Musical instrument, Coding, Film & video, Photography, Cookery, Language skills (including a home language), First aid, Public speaking	Creativity, Problem solving, Independence	Reading and writing in a home language can count as the Skills section, and fits well with preparing for a GCSE in it.
Volunteering	DofE Volunteering section: a food bank, school events, mentoring Year 7s, faith or community groups, the environment, a charity shop (check age limits)	Teamwork, Leadership, Listening	Regular volunteering at the same place; there must be an adult assessor.
Expedition	DofE Bronze Expedition: 2 days, 1 night; with training and practice walks from the school or DofE centre	Leadership, Planning, Adaptability / Resilience	Equipment can often be borrowed from the school or centre; just ask.
Residential	School trips, Cadets/Scouts camps, summer schools (the Residential section is required at Gold)	Independence, Teamwork, Adaptability / Resilience	Not required for Bronze, but valuable experience.

Full list: more than 440 activities (sport, arts, science, volunteering...) and the skills each one builds are included in the UKER guidance pack.

GCSE options: step by step

"He who asks the way never gets lost." — Proverb

At many schools GCSE options are chosen in the spring term of Year 9 (usually February–March); some schools do it earlier. The timetable varies by school, but the process is similar:

Topic	What you need to know
Compulsory subjects	English Language, English Literature, Maths, Science (Combined or separate sciences). Most schools also have non-examined subjects such as RE and PE.
Optional subjects	Usually 3–4 subjects. Many schools recommend a foreign language and History or Geography (the EBacc).
How to choose	3 questions: Do they enjoy the subject? Are they good at it? Does it help their future plans (A Levels, a career, an apprenticeship)? Aim for “yes” to at least two of the three.
What to avoid	Choosing a subject because a friend did, because they like the teacher, or because it's “easy”.
Unifrog	Careers library: the subjects target careers require. Subjects library: where a subject leads at university.
Home languages	If the school doesn't teach a GCSE in your home language, it can often be taken as an extra GCSE as a private candidate, without using up an options slot.

DofE Bronze: what, when and how?

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award is a youth programme recognised by universities and employers in the UK. Bronze can be started at age 14 or in Year 9. If your school doesn't offer DofE, you can sign up with an independent DofE centre.

Section	Length	Examples
Volunteering	3 or 6 months, ~1 hour a week	A food bank, mentoring, the environment, a community group
Physical	3 or 6 months, ~1 hour a week	Sport, dance, fitness
Skills	3 or 6 months, ~1 hour a week	Music, coding, cooking, reading and writing in a home language
Expedition	2 days, 1 night	Training + practice walk + the real expedition

One of the Volunteering, Physical and Skills sections is done for 6 months and the others for 3. Progress is recorded on eDofE (DofE's online system), and an assessor writes a short report for each section.

Unifrog: through your school or UKER

“Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.” — Aristotle

Unifrog is the careers and applications platform used by many schools in England. If your school uses Unifrog, your child logs in with the account the school provides. If your school doesn't provide Unifrog, you can request an account from UKER (ukegitimrehberi.co.uk). Year 9 students see these tools; other tools are under “All tools”:

Section	What is it for?	A small step for Year 9
Skills profile (new)	A skills quiz showing which skills they're strongest in	Do it in September; use it when choosing subjects and careers
Quiz profile	Summary of the Interests, Personality, Work environments and Skills quizzes	Compare the subject list with the Quiz profile's suggestions
Careers library	Career profiles; the subjects each career requires	Note the GCSE/A Level subject requirements of target careers

Subjects library	Which university courses each school subject leads to	Look up possible option subjects here
Know-how library	Guides and videos (choosing subjects, health, careers)	Read a guide about choosing GCSEs
Courses	Short courses and virtual work experience	One virtual work experience in a half term
Activities	Activity log: type, who was there, what was learned, which skills	Log the DofE sections (30+ entries over 3 years)
Skills	STAR examples for the 12 skills	At least 2–3 examples a year
Interactions	Meetings, trips and workshops recorded by the school or an adviser	Options meetings are recorded here

Tip: Be specific in Activities entries (e.g. “We collected 40 parcels for the food bank”). In Year 10, work experience and researching sixth forms come to the fore. Your school may use a different platform (e.g. Xello, Start); the idea is the same: explore, record, update regularly.

10 tips for parents (Year 9)

“Do not be afraid of growing slowly; be afraid only of standing still.” — Chinese proverb

- **It's your child's choice:** guide and inform, but let them choose their subjects. A choice they own will carry them through two years.
- **There's no “easy subject”:** a subject they enjoy and work at gets better results than one chosen because it's “easy”.
- **Keep doors open:** without a clear goal, a balanced list (a language, a humanity, a creative or technical subject) keeps options open.
- **Go to options evening together:** write the questions together beforehand.
- **Support DofE:** help with equipment, transport and finding a volunteering place, but let your child keep the records.
- **Adolescence and emotions:** mood swings are normal; listen without judging. If sadness or anxiety lasts, talk to the school's pastoral team.
- **Sleep and screens:** 8–10 hours of sleep is recommended at 14; phones out of the bedroom at night.
- **Prepare for work experience:** start thinking now about contacts for Year 10 work experience.
- **Home language:** if you speak another language at home, decide this year about a GCSE in it, and keep up reading and writing at home.
- **Don't compare:** every child's path and pace are different.

Resources: which platform? Where can I find books?

Which online platform? Little and often

This is the question parents ask most. The rule is simple: **use no more than 3 platforms:** the one your school provides + IXL + one free resource for revision. Too many platforms means none of them gets used regularly.

Platform	What for?	Cost	How to use it in Year 9
Your school's platform	Sparx, Hegarty, Seneca, Educake etc. homework	Paid by the school	Always first: complete all set homework

IXL	Year 9 skills practice in Maths, English and Science; instant feedback	Membership (can be requested from UKER)	2–3 × 20 min a week on that week's class topics
Oak National Academy	KS3 video lessons + short quizzes	Free	Rewatch a topic that was missed or not understood
BBC Bitesize (KS3)	Short explanations, videos and tests	Free	Topic revision, a quick review before tests
Corbettmaths	Maths videos and “5-a-day” questions	Free	A daily maths habit with 5 questions
Duolingo	Foreign language practice	Basic version free	10 min a day in the language learned at school
Unifrog	Career exploration, activity log, Read-Watch-Listen	School account; otherwise can be requested from UKER	1–2 tasks a month (see the monthly checklist)

Where can I find books?

- **School library:** the easiest route; ask the librarian for suggestions suited to your child's age.
- **Local council library:** membership is free. If a book isn't on the shelf, it can be reserved from another branch.
- **E-books and audiobooks:** borrow them free with the same library card through your council's app (Libby or BorrowBox).
- **Second-hand:** charity shops, Oxfam Books and online second-hand booksellers are great value.
- **Books in your home language:** many council libraries have world-language collections (ask your library); community centres and supplementary schools often lend books; visits to family abroad are a good chance to stock up.
- **Swap with friends:** a “book swap” with families of the same age is both cheap and motivating.

Two languages, one advantage

“To have another language is to possess a second soul.” — Attributed to Charlemagne

For children who speak another language at home, being bilingual is one of their biggest advantages. Strengthening the home language through reading and writing deepens family ties today and opens academic and career opportunities later:

- **GCSEs in home languages:** exam boards such as Pearson Edexcel and AQA offer GCSEs (and often A Levels) in many community languages, including Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Polish, Russian, Turkish and Urdu. If your school doesn't offer one, your child can sit it as a private candidate. Some students take it early, in Year 9 or 10. Year 9 is the right time to decide: does the school offer it, or will they enter as a private candidate?
- **In the eyes of universities and employers:** a second language is concrete evidence of communication, cross-cultural understanding and adaptability. The Unifrog talk *Grow Up, Learn Another Language* (Gaston Dorren, TED) covers this.
- **Practice at home:** 20–30 minutes of reading in the home language twice a week; one short piece of writing a week (10–15 sentences on GCSE-style topics such as introducing yourself, school, holidays or future plans); news or documentaries in the language.
- **Choose the right level:** if reading in the home language is weaker than in English, start with easier books and build up. Some classic novels contain violence or adult themes, so it's worth a parent having a look first.

Month-by-month checklist

"Little drops of water make the mighty ocean." — Proverb

Each month: 3 small steps (Academic · Activity · Growth & Careers) + 1 suggestion from Unifrog's Read, Watch, Listen + 1 book. If you speak another language at home, add a book in that language too. The calendar is flexible: if you finish a month early, move on; if you fall behind, just carry on in order. Tick the boxes together with your child.

September · The year of choices begins

- ☐ **Academic:** find out the options timetable; a weekly plan + 30 minutes of reading
- ☐ **Activity:** sign up for DofE Bronze; an activity for each of the 3 sections
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** Unifrog Skills profile + Quiz profile
- ☐ **Read (Unifrog):** Atomic Habits – James Clear (book)
- ☐ **Read:** The Giver – Lois Lowry

October · Studying smart

- ☐ **Academic:** self-testing + spaced repetition; IXL Year 9 Maths
- ☐ **Activity:** DofE: 1 hour a week + log it on eDofE
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** log DofE activities in Unifrog Activities
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** Drop Acid and See Rainbows – Steve Mould (video)
- ☐ **Read:** Refugee – Alan Gratz

November · Explore the subjects

- ☐ **Academic:** a table of possible option subjects + talk to 3 people about them
- ☐ **Activity:** DofE + a competition (UKMT Intermediate)
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** 5 careers + 3 subject profiles (Careers / Subjects libraries)
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** How Social Media Shapes Identity – Ulrike Schultze (TED talk)
- ☐ **Read:** The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas – John Boyne

December · Giving back, and evidence

- ☐ **Academic:** parents' evening: "Would you recommend this subject for my child?"
- ☐ **Activity:** DofE Volunteering: 4+ hours this month
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** the first STAR example in Skills
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** Sanitation is a basic human right – Francis de los Reyes (TED talk)
- ☐ **Read:** Humble Pi – Matt Parker

January · Preparing to decide

- ☐ **Academic:** a draft subject list with 3 scenarios
- ☐ **Activity:** DofE expedition training
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** compare the subject list with the Quiz profile
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** There's no shame in taking care of your mental health – Sangu Delle (TED talk)
- ☐ **Read:** Stormbreaker – Anthony Horowitz

February · Make your choices

- ☐ **Academic:** options evening + hand the form in on time
- ☐ **Activity:** a virtual work experience course (Unifrog Courses)
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** “Why these subjects?” in 5 sentences
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** Technology vs Humanity – The Future is Already Here – Gerd Leonhard (video)
- ☐ **Read:** The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens – Sean Covey

March · Make your voice heard

- ☐ **Academic:** 30 minutes of reading + IXL Year 9 English
- ☐ **Activity:** a leadership or speaking role
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** if relevant, decide on a home-language GCSE + weekly writing in the language
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** Rapid language hacking – Benny Lewis (TED talk)
- ☐ **Read:** Animal Farm – George Orwell

April · Expedition

- ☐ **Academic:** holiday flashcards + self-testing
- ☐ **Activity:** the DofE Bronze expedition
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** log the expedition in Activities
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** Are athletes really getting faster, better, stronger? – David Epstein (TED talk)
- ☐ **Read:** Hatchet – Gary Paulsen

May · Exam practice

- ☐ **Academic:** a 2-week plan for end-of-year tests
- ☐ **Activity:** complete the DofE sections (assessor reports)
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** Activities + Skills up to date (30+)
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** Bend It Like Beckham – Gurinder Chadha (film)
- ☐ **Read:** The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time – Mark Haddon

June-July · A bridge to Year 10

- ☐ **Academic:** report + a summer reading list for GCSE subjects
- ☐ **Activity:** finish DofE Bronze; a summer project
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** 3 possible places for Year 10 work experience
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** Let's clean up the space junk orbiting Earth – Natalie Panek (TED talk)
- ☐ **Read:** Noughts & Crosses – Malorie Blackman

The watch/listen suggestions come from Unifrog's Read, Watch, Listen library. If your school doesn't provide Unifrog, you can request an account from UKER or find the same content free on TED and BBC Sounds. TED talks are made for adults: we recommend watching together, talking about them and turning on subtitles if needed. The books are commonly recommended for Year 9 readers (ages 13–14); if one doesn't grab your child's interest, choose another for that month.

Would you like one-to-one support?

The UKER guidance programme offers one-to-one follow-up for each student, with monthly tasks, a skills map and an activity log. Find out more: ukegitimrehberi.co.uk

Sources: Unifrog student dashboard (Year 9 tools and the 12 skills, October 2026); The Duke of Edinburgh's Award (dofe.org); DofE activity list (dofe.org); UCAS personal statement questions (ucas.com). Information correct as of October 2026.