We seek to use lively minds, to work hard, to develop all our talents and to grow through sharing, to be the best version of ourselves

A LEVEL

Geography

TRANSITION MATERIAL

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1. Welcome to A-Level Geography

Congratulations on choosing A-Level Geography! This is a subject that genuinely matters — it explores the dynamic, ever-changing world we live in and equips you with skills in critical thinking, data analysis, fieldwork, and extended writing that are valued by universities and employers alike.

This booklet has been designed to help you bridge the gap between GCSE and A-Level. It will introduce you to the two topics you will study first in Year 12 — Coastal Systems & Landscapes (Physical) and Contemporary Urban Environments (Human) — and give you a head start before September.

How is A-Level Geography different from GCSE?

At GCSE you learned the 'what' — the facts, features and case studies of geography.

At A-Level you are expected to understand the 'why', 'how', and 'so what' — the processes, interconnections and debates.

You will write extended essays and reports, evaluate evidence, construct arguments, and think independently.

The AQA specification rewards students who can apply knowledge to unfamiliar contexts and draw well-reasoned conclusions.

Fieldwork is compulsory: you will complete an individual investigation worth 20% of your final grade.

What This Booklet Contains

An introduction to what it means to think like an A-Level Geographer

An overview of the AQA specification content for your two Year 12 topics

Transition activities to complete before September

Recommended reading, websites and videos to extend your knowledge

Key vocabulary to learn

📝 Before You Begin — Reflect

Think about your GCSE Geography. Jot brief answers to the following questions in the space below:

1. What topics did you enjoy most and why?
2. What do you already know about coastal processes?
3. What do you already know about cities and urbanisation?

Your reflections:

_____
_____
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2. Thinking Like an A-Level Geographer

One of the biggest shifts from GCSE to A-Level is how you are expected to engage with geographical ideas. This section introduces you to the habits of mind that will help you succeed.

2.1 From Description to Analysis

GCSE Approach

- Names a process or feature
- Describes what something looks like
- States a fact or statistic
- Identifies a cause or effect
- Recalls a case study

A-Level Approach

- Explains the mechanisms behind a process
- Analyses why a feature formed and varies
- Evaluates the reliability of data
- Links multiple causes and effects in a chain
- Compares, critiques and synthesises case studies

📝 Activity 2A — Upgrading Your Answers

Read this GCSE-style answer. Can you rewrite it in a more analytical, A-Level style?

GCSE answer: 'Erosion wears away the cliff. This makes the cliff unstable and it collapses.'

Your improved A-Level answer:

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_____

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_____

Tip: Think about WHICH erosion process, WHAT rock type, HOW the process acts, and WHY the rate might vary.

2.2 Using Geographical Concepts

AQA A-Level Geography is structured around a series of key concepts. You should begin to use these terms fluently in your writing and discussions:

Concept What it means for A-Level Geographers

Systems Geography studies the world as interconnected systems — inputs, processes, stores and outputs. Both coasts and cities can be studied as systems.

Scale Geographical processes and their impacts operate at local, regional, national and global scales simultaneously. Always consider scale in your answers.

Place Places have unique character shaped by human and physical processes. Your urban topic will examine how globalisation is reshaping the identity of places.

Process Understanding the mechanisms (physical or human) driving change is central to A-Level Geography. Go beyond describing what happens to explain how and why.

Interdependence Physical and human geography are deeply intertwined. Coastal management decisions, for example, depend on both geomorphological understanding and human values.

Sustainability A recurring theme across the specification — can we manage systems (coastal or urban) in a way that meets current needs without compromising the future?

Risk & Resilience How vulnerable are physical and human systems to change? How can they absorb, adapt to, or recover from disturbance?

2.3 Extended Writing at A-Level

A-Level Geography requires you to write extended responses, including 9-mark, 12-mark and 20-mark essays. The key to success is structuring your argument clearly and supporting every claim with evidence.

The PEE/PEEL Framework — A Starting Point

Point — Make a clear geographical point that directly addresses the question.
Evidence — Support it with data, a case study, or an example.
Explain — Explain the mechanism or process linking your evidence to the point.
Link — Connect to the question or your next point.

At A-Level you will develop this further by: evaluating the strength of your evidence, considering counter-arguments, and synthesising multiple perspectives.

3. Coastal Systems & Landscapes (Physical)

This is Component 1, Section A of the AQA A-Level Geography specification (3700). It builds significantly on GCSE coastal processes and introduces you to the concept of the coast as an open system.

3.1 AQA Specification Overview

The following table maps the key content areas you will study:

AQA Ref Topic Key Focus

3.1.1 Coasts as natural systems Systems thinking: inputs, outputs, stores, flows; open system; dynamic equilibrium

3.1.2 Systems and processes Marine energy (waves, tides, storm surges); sediment sources and cells; sub-aerial processes; weathering and mass movement

3.1.3 Coastal landscape development Landforms of erosion (cliffs, wave-cut platforms, caves, arches, stacks); landforms of deposition (beaches, spits, bars, tombolos, dunes, salt marshes)

3.1.4 Coastal management Hard and soft engineering; managed retreat; ICZM; the role of cost–benefit analysis; case studies of management schemes

3.1.5 Coastal risks (climate change) Sea level change (eustatic and isostatic); impacts of rising sea levels; storm surges; vulnerability and adaptation

3.2 From GCSE to A-Level: What Changes?

You already know (GCSE)

- Types of waves (constructive/destructive)
- Erosion processes (HACC)
- Erosional landforms (cliffs, arches, stacks)
- Depositional landforms (beaches, spits)
- Hard and soft engineering methods
- Case study of coastal management New at A-Level
- Coasts as open systems with energy budgets
- Sediment cells and sediment budgets

- Sub-aerial processes and weathering in detail
- Dynamic equilibrium and negative feedback
- Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM)
- Eustatic and isostatic sea level change
- Climate change impacts and adaptation strategies

3.3 Key Vocabulary

Learn the definitions of the following terms before September. Use the space provided to write your own definitions — use a dictionary or textbook rather than copying these prompts:

Term	Your Definition
Littoral zone	
Sediment cell	
Dynamic equilibrium	
Sub-aerial process	
Wave refraction	
Longshore drift	
Eustatic change	
Isostatic change	
Fetch	
Tidal range	
ICZM	
Managed retreat	

3.4 Transition Activities — Coastal Systems

📝 Activity 3A — The Coast as a System

Draw a simple systems diagram for a coastal sediment cell. Include at minimum:

- Two inputs
- Two stores
- Two outputs
- One feedback loop

Use the space below:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Think: What would happen to the system if a groynes were built? Would this be positive or negative feedback?

📝 Activity 3B — Coastal Processes and Landforms

For each of the landforms below, write a brief account (3–4 sentences) that:

a) Names the main processes responsible
b) Explains the mechanism of formation
c) Identifies the conditions needed

1. A wave-cut platform:

2. A spit:

3. A salt marsh:

📝 Activity 3C — Should We Always Defend the Coast?

Read the following scenario, then answer the question below in a short paragraph (8–10 sentences).

Scenario: A small community of 200 homes sits behind an eroding cliff on the East Yorkshire coast. The rate of retreat is approximately 2 metres per year. A hard engineering scheme (rock armour revetment) would cost £4 million and protect the homes for 25 years. A managed retreat policy would involve buying the homes and allowing natural processes to continue.

Question: 'Managed retreat is always the most sustainable approach to coastal management.' To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Your answer:

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A-Level tip: 'To what extent' questions require you to agree in part, disagree in part, and reach a supported judgement. Avoid saying 'it depends' without explaining what it depends on.

3.5 Recommended Reading & Resources — Coastal Systems

Essential Websites
AQA Specification (3700): Download from aqa.org.uk — Section 3.1 (pp. 13–17)
British Geological Survey Coastal Resources: bgs.ac.uk — detailed overviews of UK coastal processes

IPCC Sea Level Reports: ipcc.ch/srocc — authoritative data on sea level change for A-Level evaluation
Environment Agency: Managing flood and coastal erosion risk: gov.uk/government/collections/coastal-erosion-and-management — policy documents and shoreline management plans
Cool Geography: coolgeography.co.uk/GCSE/coasts.php — AQA A-Level coastal notes (good revision checkpoint)

Recommended Reading
AQA A-Level Geography (Hodder Education, Philip Allan) — Chapter 1: Coastal Systems and Landscapes. This is the textbook we will use in lessons.
Mastering the AQA A-Level Geography Essay (various publishers) — look for the section on physical geography essay technique.
The Restless Shore (Adam Nicolson, 2022) — an accessible, beautifully written account of how coasts change, ideal for developing your geographical imagination.
New Scientist and The Guardian's Environment section — search for 'coastal erosion UK' or 'sea level rise' for up-to-date articles to use as evidence in essays.

Videos to Watch
Coastal Processes — Crash Course Geography: youtube.com (search 'Crash Course Geography Coasts')
Holderness Coast Case Study — GeoFactSheet: Available via school subscription or search on YouTube — excellent A-Level case study of managed retreat at Easington
Sea Level Rise — NASA Global Climate Change: climate.nasa.gov/vital-signs/sea-level — data visualisations and explanations
UK Coastal Erosion Documentary — BBC iPlayer: Search 'Britain's eroding coastline' on BBC iPlayer for documentaries showing real-world management decisions

4. Contemporary Urban Environments (Human)

This is Component 2, Section A of the AQA A-Level Geography specification (3700). It examines the forces reshaping cities in the twenty-first century and the challenges of making urban environments sustainable and equitable.

4.1 AQA Specification Overview

AQA Ref Topic Key Focus

3.2.1 Urbanisation Global patterns; causes and processes; suburbanisation, counter-urbanisation, re-urbanisation; megacities
3.2.2 Urban formsLand use patterns; pre-industrial, industrial, post-industrial city; edge cities; post-modern urbanism; mixed-use spaces
3.2.3 Social and economic issues Deprivation; inequality; ethnic segregation; the informal economy; urban poverty; crime and social exclusion
3.2.4 Urban climate Urban heat island; urban precipitation; wind modification; implications for planning
3.2.5 Urban drainage Urban water cycle; sustainable urban drainage systems (SUDS); flooding
3.2.6 Urban waste management Sources of waste; waste hierarchy; strategies for management; landfill, incineration, recycling
3.2.7 Urban sustainability Sustainable urban development; ecological footprint; smart cities; transport planning; energy; food systems; one-planet living
3.2.8 Urban governance Local and global dimensions; NGOs; community-led regeneration; gentrification

4.2 From GCSE to A-Level: What Changes?
You already know (GCSE)
• Urbanisation trends globally
• Push and pull migration factors
• Squatter settlements (slums/favelas)
• Urban land use models (Burgess)
• Challenges in LIC and HIC cities
• One urban regeneration case study New at A-Level
• Suburbanisation, counter-urbanisation, re-urbanisation as cyclical processes
• Post-modern urbanism and edge cities
• Urban climate modification (UHI, precipitation)
• Sustainable urban drainage (SUDS)
• Waste management hierarchy and strategies
• Smart cities, ecological footprint, one-planet living
• Gentrification and urban governance
• Ethical dimensions of urban development

4.3 Key Vocabulary
Term Your Definition
Urbanisation
Suburbanisation
Counter-urbanisation

Re-urbanisation
Megacity
Urban Heat Island (UHI)
Gentrification
SUDS
Ecological footprint
Smart city
Informal economy

4.4 Transition Activities — Urban Environments

📝 Activity 4A — Mapping Urbanisation

Using the data below (approximate urban population figures), answer the questions that follow.

Africa (2000): 37% urban | Africa (2023): 44% urban | Africa (2050 projected): 56% urban
Europe (2000): 71% urban | Europe (2023): 75% urban | Europe (2050 projected): 83% urban
Asia (2000): 38% urban | Asia (2023): 51% urban | Asia (2050 projected): 67% urban
World (2000): 47% urban | World (2023): 56% urban | World (2050 projected): 68% urban
(Source: UN World Urbanization Prospects, 2022)

a) Describe the global pattern of urbanisation shown in the data:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

b) Suggest TWO reasons why urbanisation rates in Africa are expected to accelerate:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

c) What challenges might this rapid urbanisation create? (Think about housing, infrastructure, services, environment)

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📝 Activity 4B — Urban Inequality

Choose a city you are familiar with, OR research a named global city (e.g. Mumbai, Lagos, Rio de Janeiro, London, Detroit).

City chosen: _____

For your chosen city, investigate ONE of the following themes and write a 150–200 word summary:

Option A: How is wealth/poverty distributed across the city's neighbourhoods?

Option B: Has the city experienced gentrification? Who benefits and who is disadvantaged?

Option C: How is the city attempting to become more sustainable?

Your summary:

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Sources consulted:

_____

📝 Activity 4C — The Urban Heat Island

The Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect is a key topic within contemporary urban environments.

a) Briefly explain what causes the urban heat island effect. Aim for at least THREE distinct causes:

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_____
_____
_____
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b) Who is most vulnerable to the effects of urban heat? Consider age, socioeconomic status, and location:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

c) Suggest TWO urban planning strategies that could reduce the UHI effect, and explain how each would work:

Strategy 1:

_____
_____
_____
_____

Strategy 2:

_____
_____
_____
_____

Stretch: The 2003 European heatwave killed over 70,000 people, with cities most severely affected. Research this event and consider what it tells us about the relationship between urban form, climate and human vulnerability.

📝 Activity 4D — Critical Reading

Find ONE news article about urban development, regeneration, sustainability, or inequality published within the last 12 months.
(Suggested sources: The Guardian, BBC News, The Economist, New York Times, CityMetric/Bloomberg CityLab)

Article title and source:

_____

1. Summarise the key argument or issue in 2–3 sentences:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

2. What geographical concepts does it connect to? (Use terms from Section 4.3):

_____
_____
_____

3. What questions does the article raise that Geography can help answer?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

4.5 Recommended Reading & Resources — Urban Environments

Essential Websites
AQA Specification (3700) — Section 3.2: aqa.org.uk — pp. 18–23 cover Contemporary Urban Environments
UN Habitat — World Cities Report: unhabitat.org — authoritative data and analysis on global urbanisation
Bloomberg CityLab: bloomberg.com/citylab — excellent long-form journalism on urban issues worldwide
The Guardian Cities: theguardian.com/cities — well-written articles linking to sustainability, inequality, climate — great for essay evidence
Greater London Authority Data: data.london.gov.uk — real urban data sets and reports, useful for London as a UK case study

Recommended Reading
AQA A-Level Geography (Hodder Education, Philip Allan) — Chapter 5: Contemporary Urban Environments.
Triumph of the City — Edward Glaeser (Penguin, 2011). A compelling, readable argument for why cities make us richer, greener, healthier and happier. Excellent for developing evaluative perspectives.
Evicted — Matthew Desmond (Penguin, 2016). A Pulitzer Prize-winning account of poverty and housing eviction in Milwaukee. Essential reading for understanding urban inequality.
The Metropolitan Revolution — Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley. Examines how cities are innovating in governance and sustainability — links directly to the 'urban governance' section of the specification.
New Scientist — search for 'urban heat island', 'smart cities', or 'sustainable urban development' for peer-reviewed insights.

Videos to Watch
Urbanisation — Hans Rosling / Gapminder: gapminder.org/videos — data-rich visualisations of global development trends including urbanisation
Smart Cities — TED Talks: ted.com (search 'smart cities') — multiple accessible talks exploring the future of urban design and governance
Urban Heat Islands — NASA Earth Observatory: earthobservatory.nasa.gov — scientific explanation with satellite imagery
How to Fix a Flood — Channel 4 Dispatches: Search on Channel 4 or YouTube — examines SUDS and urban drainage challenges in UK cities
Slum Dwellers International: sdinet.org — an NGO perspective on community-led urban development, linking directly to governance content

5. Geographical Skills & Exam Preparation

AQA A-Level Geography tests a range of skills beyond recall. This section introduces you to the skills assessed and how to begin developing them before September.

5.1 Quantitative and Qualitative Skills

Skills You Will Use at A-Level

Statistical analysis: measures of central tendency, dispersion, Spearman's rank correlation, chi-squared tests

Graphical skills: interpreting and constructing line graphs, scattergraphs, histograms, proportional symbols, choropleth maps

Cartographic skills: OS maps, topographic maps, GIS data layers

Qualitative methods: field sketches, photographic analysis, interview/questionnaire design, content analysis

Critical evaluation: assessing the reliability, bias and representativeness of sources and data

📝 Activity 5A — Data Skills Starter

The table below shows cliff retreat rates (metres per year) for 6 sites on the Holderness Coast:

Bridlington: 0.5 Barmston: 1.9 Skipsea: 1.7 Mappleton: 2.1 Tunstall: 1.5 Withernsea: 1.3

a) Calculate the mean cliff retreat rate:

Mean = _____ m/yr

b) What does the range of values suggest about the uniformity of coastal erosion along this stretch?

_____

_____

c) Mappleton is protected by rock groynes. How might this affect the retreat rates at neighbouring unprotected sites, and why? (Think about sediment supply)

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

5.2 Essay Technique — A Quick Guide

The AQA exam includes extended writing questions worth 9, 12 and 20 marks. Here are the key things examiners reward:

Mark band What the examiner is looking for

Level 1 (basic) Simple statements, limited use of geographical terminology, little or no evidence/examples, descriptive rather than analytical.

Level 2 (clear) Some explanation of processes, relevant terminology used, some supporting evidence, beginning to analyse rather than just describe.

Level 3 (detailed) Well-developed explanation, accurate terminology, clear case study evidence, balanced analysis of multiple viewpoints or factors.

Level 4 (sophisticated) Nuanced, well-structured argument; critical evaluation of evidence; synthesis of physical and human dimensions; confident, justified conclusion.

📝 Activity 5B — Evaluate a Model Answer

Read this paragraph written in response to: 'Assess the extent to which human activity is responsible for increasing coastal flood risk.'

'Human activity increases coastal flood risk in many ways. Sea level rise caused by climate change is one factor. Also, building on floodplains is a problem. In Bangladesh, flooding is made worse by deforestation which increases run-off. Hard engineering like sea walls can give people a false sense of security and lead to more development in risky areas. However, natural factors like storm surges also play a role.'

a) Which AQA level (1–4) would you award this paragraph? _____

b) Write two specific improvements the student could make:

1.

_____
_____

2.

_____
_____

c) Rewrite the paragraph to a higher standard using at least ONE specific piece of evidence:

_____
_____
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6. Before September — Your Checklist

Use the checklist below to track your progress with this transition booklet. Aim to have all tasks completed before your first Geography lesson in September.

#	Task	Done? ✓
1	Read Sections 1–2 and reflect on how A-Level differs from GCSE	
2	Complete the key vocabulary tables for both Coastal Systems and Urban Environments (Sections 3.3 and 4.3)	
3	Complete Activity 3A (coastal systems diagram)	
4	Complete Activity 3B (landform explanations)	
5	Complete Activity 3C (coastal management essay paragraph)	
6	Complete Activity 4A (urbanisation data)	
7	Complete Activity 4B (urban inequality research)	
8	Complete Activity 4C (urban heat island)	
9	Complete Activity 4D (critical reading — news article)	
10	Complete Activities 5A and 5B (skills and essay technique)	
11	Watch at least TWO of the recommended videos	
12	Read at least ONE of the recommended books or articles	
13	Bring this completed booklet to your first Geography lesson in September	

A Final Word

A-Level Geography rewards curiosity. The best geographers are those who read widely, question assumptions, and engage with the world around them.

The issues you will study — coastal erosion, sea level rise, urban inequality, sustainable development — are not abstract academic exercises. They are the defining challenges of our time.

We look forward to exploring them with you. See you in September!