

Which subjects should I choose?

The snapshot

- Many teenagers worry about making the “right” subject choices.
- It’s wise to invest time and energy in making subject decisions because a person’s choice of subjects may have a significant effect on which future career and study opportunities will be available.
- Without good support, some young people will make poorly informed decisions based only on reasons like “easy” credits, friends’ choices, teacher likeability, an attitude of “No point – doesn’t lead anywhere”, and subjective views of their own capability. Remember that:
 - There are no “easy options – success in life, work and learning usually requires persistence and focus
 - There is no guarantee friends will remain the same or in the same class in the future
 - There is no guarantee that the teacher will be the person expected.
- Qualifications in some subjects will meet criteria for entry into university or other further study or training, and in other subjects they may not. It’s wise to check in with school guidelines and relevant qualifications frameworks about what the subject may lead to before deciding to take it.
- Every school probably has different options, and different compulsory subjects, so check what is required and offered at the young person’s school or any other school they may be considering attending.
- English and maths (literacy and numeracy) credits are typically part of entry criteria for tertiary study. (Check the specifics for any particular university programme or other tertiary study of interest).
- Simply enjoying or feeling passionate about or interested in a particular subject can sometimes be a valid reason for doing it.
- Sometimes a first pick subject is not available or can’t be fitted in to a timetable. If so, advise the young person and/or parents to talk with the relevant person in school management who is responsible for academic timetables to explore possible solutions and to consider alternatives if necessary.

A word about science, maths, technology and every other subject

Some teenagers are quick to look for reasons to drop science. They may see it as difficult, boring or pointless, may not like the teacher, and so on. However, I suggest considering including science until at least around the age of 15 (the exact age may vary according to the education system of the school and the country) unless there are good reasons not to do so. Science can open doors to a wide range of tertiary career paths. If a young person persisted for just one more year, they might discover an interest in a particular stream of science – which may open future possibilities.

Technology subjects can also open up a range of pathways with good prospects.

Maths is usually a core subject and is so important for many future pathways. If maths feels difficult, then I’m a believer in persistence (see the 5 Ps in Section 3).

Every faculty and subject is of course wonderful, important and worthy. The Arts, languages, English, social sciences, commerce, physical education and so on – they all have great value to learning and lead to important benefits. And it is desirable that young people consider their own strengths, interests and talents in the decisions they make.

A step-by-step guide to making your subject choices.

Step	Key points, and your ideas and thoughts
1. What are your school’s academic guidelines? Find out the number of subjects you can take, the compulsory subjects, the list of subject options, qualification framework information etc.	
2. What subjects do you enjoy most? Think about what you love to do and what your interests are.	
3. What subjects are you good at? Think about what your strengths and talents are.	
4. What subjects might you need for your future career ideas? Find out about tertiary study entry requirements and explore ideas about your future direction. (Note it is okay and “normal” to not have clear ideas or no solid ideas at all).	
5. It might be useful, even when choosing subjects in the early years of secondary school, to check in on employment market opportunities and trends. (See the “Additional supporting information” section at the end of this book for links to more career resources and information).	
6. Start to build your draft subject list. Write your “must haves”. Write “desired” or optional subjects.	
7. If you have too many subjects on your draft list, do a “pros and cons” list for each subject. That is, what do you think are the positives and negatives for each optional subject? (See the “Pros and cons” activity on page 53).	
8. Write your final list	

Ideas for supporting the decision-making process

There are many ways in which you can support a young person in generating ideas and making subject choices. The following are some ideas of helpful actions you can guide the young person towards.

Thinking about “self”

- **Interests, strengths, talents.** Think about the young person’s areas of strength and interest.
- **Activities.** Complete activities in Section 2 (e.g. “Spinning my web”, “This is me”, “Knowing and growing my talents and strengths”) to gain insight into patterns of interests, talents and strengths.

Talking to people

- **Family.** Discuss ideas with family and mentors.
- **Teachers.** Talk to family and teachers about subject choices, pathways and qualifications. For example, talk with subject teachers, school or private career specialists, form teachers and/or school academic leaders.
- **Older students.** Talk to older students who are currently doing those subjects of interest to find out more about what’s involved.
- **Class visits.** In some cases it might be possible to visit a class doing a subject of interest or talk to students who are doing extra class work at lunchtime. Check with the teachers concerned to arrange this.
- **Work experience and reality testing.** It is often really helpful for young people to talk to people working in jobs of interest and, even better, to visit the workplace and experience how it looks and feels in reality. Consider asking if there is a chance of doing some work experience (such as for an hour or two or half a day). This process will help in deciding whether to keep certain subjects and pathways open.

Researching career information

- **Career websites.** Visit career websites to read more information about career pathways of interest. It’s not about deciding on a single job at this point; it’s about figuring out which directions are preferable so those doors remain open. See the “Additional supporting information” section at the end of this book for online resources on how to find and explore career ideas and subject choice guidelines. Many sites also offer free career tools and assessments to generate possibilities for career pathways that match interests and skills.
- **Employment trends.** Consider employment trends and opportunities for potential subjects. For example, consider: What potential career paths might that subject lead to? How competitive are those career pathways? What are the potential opportunities and trends in the marketplace?

Researching study or training criteria

- **Study pathways.** Think about how important the subject is for entry into future training or study. Is it a critical subject? Or is it something that could, if necessary, be picked up later? Some subjects “scaffold” learning, meaning that the young person may have to take that subject in earlier years in order to meet senior subject entry requirements.
- **Entry requirements.** Check entry criteria for university or post-school institutions or training facilities. Most schools will have this information available via the career specialist. Also check “More resources” in the “Additional supporting information” section at the end of this book.

More tips

- Remember that “futures” include both working and living. Some areas may always be interests in life – activities, hobbies, leisure time – and do not necessarily play a major part in first careers or study choices.
- Many schools offer subject choice guidelines. Check the school website or speak to the school career specialist.

Pros and cons

If making subject choices is an issue, complete the “Pros and cons” worksheet on the next page to help make the decision. The young person could do this on their own, or as part of a group or family discussion. Encourage the young person to do their own thinking – to take the lead in completing the activity.

Activity steps

1. If you find you have too many subjects on your draft list, complete the “Pros and cons” worksheet, listing the positive and negative points for each subject.
2. Look back over your completed chart and make your decision. If you are still unclear, ask yourself, “What else could I do to help me make this decision?” See the “Ideas for supporting the decision-making process” above for some suggestions.

Worksheet

Pros and cons

What do you think are the positives and negatives for each of your “optional” subjects?

Subject	Pros	Cons	Decision: yes, no or undecided?	If still unclear ...	
				What else could you do to help decide?	When will you do this by?
Biology	Required to get into med school	Lots of homework	Yes		
German	<u>LOVE</u> it	Can't see how it would help medical career	Undecided		
Film studies					
Physics					