All the right letters – just not necessarily in the right order. Spelling errors in a sample of GCSE English scripts

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This article is based on a paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Conference in Edinburgh in September 2008.

Abstract

For the past ten years, Cambridge Assessment has been running a series of investigations into features of GCSE English candidates' writing – the Aspects of Writing study (Massey *et al.*, 1996; Massey *et al.*, 2005). The studies have sampled a fragment of writing taken from the narrative writing of thirty boys and thirty girls at every grade at GCSE. Features investigated have included the correct and incorrect use of various forms of punctuation, sophistication of vocabulary, non-standard English, sentence types and the frequency of spelling errors. This article provides a more detailed analysis of the nature of the spelling errors identified in the sample of work obtained for the Aspects of Writing project from unit 3 (Literary Heritage and Imaginative Writing) of the 2004 OCR GCSE examination in English. Are there certain types of spelling error which occur more frequently than others? Do particular words occur over and over again? How many errors relate to well-known spelling rules, such as 'i before e except after c'?

Literacy has enjoyed a high profile since 1994 and has been promoted in schools through the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS). It was unlikely that the 2004 GCSE cohort (the 'population' from whom our writing sample came) was fully exposed to the NLS. This is because many primary schools introduced the NLS from the bottom up, or at least did not implement it for this cohort (in their final year of primary education in the first year of the NLS) on the basis that it would get in the way of preparation for key stage 2 (KS2) national tests (Beverton and English, 2000). This notwithstanding, Beverton and English noted that, in contrast to previous years, grammar was being taught every day and that all teaching staff in the schools observed had a greater awareness of literacy as a subject in its own right. Therefore, the performance of this cohort in spelling is likely to reflect some of the benefits of the NLS.

The study used a stratified random sample of writing taken from a narrative writing task. The only suitable question was found on a paper which formed an alternative to coursework; a question which asked candidates to imagine, rather than to inform, explain, describe, comment, argue or persuade. This option was taken by only 8.3% of candidates – but these amounted to over 5500 candidates from a wide range of schools. The sample was stratified by grade so the fact that this paper was a minority option should be incidental, as the calibre of a candidate achieving a particular grade should be comparable regardless of the route taken through the syllabus. Whilst the possibility existed that schools choosing the examination option might reflect systematic variations in curricular values, comparison of the examination option schools with the entry as a whole did not suggest that the former were unusually socially or educationally selective. The proportions of independent and selective schools as compared with comprehensives and others were the same for the sample as in the overall entry for this English specification.

Spelling errors were identified in the sampled writing by two researchers, working first separately, and then as a team. Each researcher first went through the printed versions of the script samples identifying and counting spelling errors. The two lists of errors and counts were then compared, again grade by grade, and any discrepancies identified and discussed.

The study identified 345 spelling errors in 11,730 words written, and these were reported in Massey *et al.* (2005), with a comparison by grade with samples of writing from 1980, 1993 and 1994. It was shown that a considerable decline in spelling in the early 1990s (compared with 1980) had been halted, and at the lower grades, improved.

Since then, we have conducted a detailed analysis of the 345 misspelled words to see if there is evidence of particular types of error. Each misspelling has been categorised, and five broad types of error identified. These are:

i.   sound-based errors,

ii.   rules-based errors,

iii. errors of commission, omission and transposition,

iv.   writing errors and

v.   multiple errors.

This article will present a detailed examination of the misspellings and the process of developing the categorisation system used. A number of words – *woman, were, where, watch(ing), too* and the homophones *there/their* and *knew/new* are identified as being the most frequently misspelled words. Implications for the findings upon teaching and literacy policy are discussed.

Background

The way in which children learn to spell is linked closely to learning to read, and with other elements of learning to write. Westwood (2008) reviewed the literature from 1995 to 2007 pertaining to the strategies used to teach children to read in English in Australia and Great Britain and Wanzek *et al.* (2006) published a review of a large number of intervention studies carried out between 1995 and 2003.

A number of authors have looked at stages by which a child learns to spell. Ehri (1994) identified a 'logographic' stage, whereby a child deduces meaning from the appearance of the words. Later stages include the ability to match letters to speech sounds (Henderson, 1990) and use

these to decode words (read) or to generate their own words (spell). Moats (1995) suggests that a phonetic spelling stage is then attained, with children following a 'one letter spells one sound' strategy. This is the point at which spelling can deviate from conventional 'correct' spellings, especially in English where sound rules do not necessarily match letter rules. At this point the successful speller must memorise specific rules such as grammatical endings, and different words which sound the same but are spelt differently. A study carried out between 1995 and 1998 by the Centre for Language in Primary Education (O'Sullivan and Thomas, 2000) collected data from London primary schools and investigated the teaching and learning of spelling throughout the primary years. Amongst other findings the study reported that it is helpful for teachers to study the mistakes made by individual spellers, in order to assess whether the mistakes they are making are phonetic or visual.

In the UK there have been two main methods of teaching a child to read – synthetic phonics, where children are taught letter sounds before being introduced to whole words (Auger and Briggs, 1992), and analytic phonics, where whole words are introduced from the start. Johnston and Watson (2003, 2004, 2005) have suggested that the reading and spelling skills developed by children taught to read using synthetic phonics are very good.

A number of frameworks already exist which incorporate categories of spelling error. QCA (1999) mentions errors due to unstressed vowels, long 'e', omission of single letters, confusion of consonants and homophones. Homophones are also a feature studied by Hepburn (1991) along with doubling and singling of consonants, articulation, and errors related to inflectional and derivational morphemes. Finally, Mudd (1994) discusses reasonable phonic alternatives – in other words plausible alternative spellings.

Method

The sample of writing from which the spelling errors were identified consisted of the fourth sentence[1] of question 1 (an extended narrative piece of writing) as written by the candidate, and was taken from the scripts of thirty boys and thirty girls at each grade. Where there were insufficient suitable scripts available additional sentences were taken from available scripts. The sentences sampled were keyed into Word™ by a temporary member of staff, preserving all errors of punctuation and spelling. Careful checking was undertaken to ensure that the keying, including errors, had been accurately undertaken. Counts of the numbers of words were then obtained from Word™ software.

Table 1 shows the number of words which were sampled at each grade.

Table 1: Number of words sampled at each grade

Grade	A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Number of words	1238	1082	1303	1208	1567	1734	1739	1859

Spelling errors were identified by two members of staff, working first separately, and then as a team. Each person first went through the printed versions of the script samples, grade by grade, identifying and counting spelling errors. The two lists of errors and counts were then

compared, again grade by grade, and any discrepancies identified and discussed. At any stage it was also possible to inspect the handwritten scripts to verify the exact marks placed on the paper by the candidate. The benefit of the doubt was given in any case where there was ambiguity, which usually arose as a consequence of either poor handwriting, or poor spacing technique. In some cases it was necessary to look elsewhere in the candidate's script for examples of particular letters or letter combinations, or to look at the spacing between other words to see whether the presence or absence of spacing appeared to be deliberate on the part of the candidate.

## Results

Overall numbers of spelling errors

The study identified 345 errors in 11,730 words written. Therefore, 97.1% of words were correctly spelled.

Figure 1 shows the overall numbers of spelling errors by grade. As expected, the number of errors increases by descending grade. Given that spelling errors are one of the (admittedly many) criteria for judging English writing, it would be unexpected if they did not. Figure 2 shows the same data as a percentage of the total number of words, thus adjusting the bars for the number of words written in total (candidates at different grades wrote different numbers of words, and as every word written presents an opportunity for a spelling error, variability in the total number of words might influence the pattern of results). In fact the adjusted graph remains very similar to the raw data.

This paper provides detailed analysis of all the errors to see if it there is evidence for particular types of error. Appendix 1 gives the entire list of words which were spelled wrongly, arranged in alphabetical order.
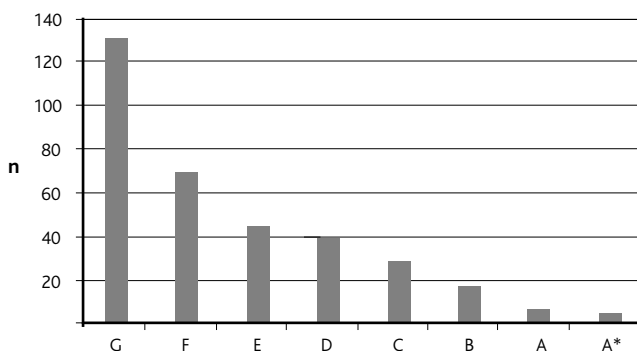
Figure 1: Number of spelling errors by grade
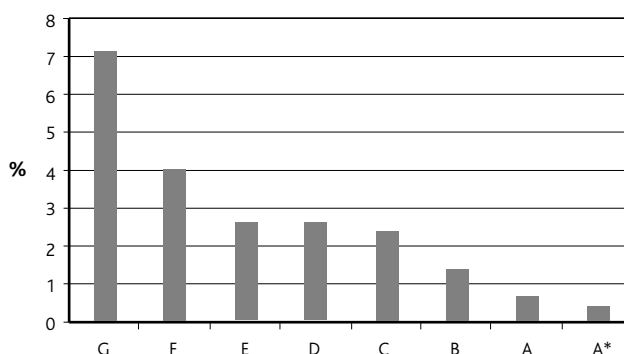
Figure 2: Rate of spelling errors by grade

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1 Everything which appeared between the third and fourth full stop.

Frequently occurring misspelt words

A few words occur more frequently than others. Words which appear in the list more than twice are listed in Table 2, along with the frequency of their occurrence, a list of each misspelling and a list of the grades at which the misspellings occur. (The misspellings and corresponding grades are given in the same order, to enable the reader to identify which particular misspelling occurs at which grade.)

Table 2: Frequently occurring misspelt words

Word	Freq.	Misspellings	Grade
before	3	befor, befor, be for	GGG
finally	4	finaly, finily, finaly, finaly	BGGG
here	3	he, hear, hire,	EFG
knew	5	new, new, new, new, new	DEEFF
their	3	ther, there, thire,	FFF
there	10	ther, their, their, their, the, their, their, their, their, ther	BCEEFFGGGG
they	6	thay, thay, thay, thay, thay, thay	GGGGGG
too	4	to, to, to, to	DEFF
towards	3	to-wards, to words, to words	EGG
until	3	untill, untill, untill	CCF
watch(ing)	4	wach, waching, waching, waching	EFGG
went	3	when, when, whent	GGG
were	5	where, where, where, where, where	CDDDG
where	4	were, were, were, were	DDDF
woman	11	women, women, women, women, women, women, women, women, women, woneman, women,	BCDDEEEEFFG
you	3	u, yo, yoy	GGG

Seven of these words – *here, their, there, too, were, where, you* – appear in published Key Stage 1 lists and *before, knew, until, watch, woman* all appear in Key Stage 2 lists.

Although *women* for *woman* is the single most frequently occurring mistake with ten instances (and occurs at every grade from B downwards), the *their/there* homophone is a close second, with eight occurrences, seven of which are *there* for *their*.

Misspellings by type

The misspellings presented by candidates have been grouped into broad related categories of error. Categories were derived via a process of grouping together similar error patterns, and are shown in Figure 3. As far as possible the 'types' of error were kept as simple as possible, in the spirit of the original Aspects of Writing (the generic name given to the series of reports produced by Cambridge Assessment, and its predecessor, UCLES) research. This resulted in the following categories:

- Sound-based error – homophones, incorrect consonant, e for y, vowel sound error, morpheme error.
- Rules based error – doubling/singling, text-speak.
- Omission, commission and transposition – single or paired letters added, omitted or transposed.
- Writing error – spacing, end of word missing.
- Multiple errors.

Where a misspelling might fall into several categories (i.e. *accross*, which is both a doubling error and the insertion of an additional letter) the most obvious/most precise error type was allocated; in this case, doubling).

Discussion of error types

Sound-based

Homophones form the first category of error types. 34 of the 345 errors (9.8%) were of this type. The *there/their, know/no* and *knew/new* confusions accounted for nearly half of these. These errors have already been discussed in the section on frequently occurring misspelt words.

Fifteen errors consisted of the transposition of a single wrong consonant. Many of these were phonetically plausible spellings; however, there were instances of a 'k' at the end of *–ing*, instead of the 'g', and of 't' replacing 'd' in *–ed* endings. These were potentially due to articulation error, resulting in spelling error. Two errors involved the transposition of a vowel for a consonant – in both cases 'e' for 'y'.

Fifty-two errors related to the vowel sound. Again (or *agen* according to one such candidate), most of these were phonetically plausible spellings. Nonetheless, many of these words are to be found on the lists of spellings at KS1 and KS2 – e.g. *hospital, heard, some, doctor, they*.

Rules-based

Doubling/singling errors

There were 13 doubling errors and 22 singling errors, together accounting for 10% of all errors. Only one of the errors (*aclimatised*) was an example of an affix error.

Suffix errors

There were 24 suffix errors (7% of the total), of which a very high proportion involved adding *–y* or *–ly* to a word or involved the 'y' to 'i' rule (changing a *y* to an *i* before adding *–ed* (e.g. *replyed*).

Two errors were 'text' (mobile phone/computer text messaging) influenced. Once again these are phonetically plausible alternatives to conventional spelling and are intentionally used in defiance of 'conventional' spelling rules during text messaging. The very small number of these errors was remarked upon in the original report, and it is pleasing to see that candidates seem by and large to be aware that they must not use such devices in a written English examination, however much they are used in social contexts.

Omission/commission of single letter and transposition

Forty-nine errors consisted of the omission of a single letter, whilst thirty-four were the insertion of a single letter. In some cases these were clearly the result of idiosyncratic spellings – notably silent letters. In other cases, the error perhaps owes more to carelessness.

Only ten errors were a straight reversal of two letters, and just one of these related to the 'ie/ei' rule.

Writing errors

Two types of error have been categorised as 'writing' errors. These are errors of spacing – writing two words as one or vice versa, and missing the last letter from a word. In several instances there is evidence from the scripts that candidates did know the correct spelling in the case of the latter category, but had left off the final letter in haste.

Multiple errors

These errors form the arguably most striking type of mistake, and have most effect upon the appearance of the word. First are those misspellings which seem to be made up from two separate errors. For example:

Figure 3: Misspellings by type

Sound-based

Homophones

greatful	ruff
hear	stairing
here	their (x6)
layed	there (x2)
lent	to (too) (x4)
new (x5)	to (two)
no (x2)	warn
past	weather
piecefully	who's
road	your

Single consonant confused with another single consonant

ang	pup
edje	reseption
glanze	somethink
looket	startet
nothink	surport
pankakes	trappling
pass	warking
pud	

e for y

empte	lade

Phoneme- grapheme mismatch

agen	practicle
clame	quiot
comfatable	re-esuring
cud	saed (x2)
deap	sead
devestating	screeming
docters	secutary
egere	suffercated
examaning	sume
extreamly	survay
frale	thay (x6)
hospitel	tomarto
hourse	trough (true)
hurd	tumer
nely (x2)	uncomfertable
nieve	weerdos
paitients	women (x10)
parshly	wonted

Rules-based

Suffix rules

ly

definatly	slightley
funnyly	slowley
highley	unnaturely (x2)
luckly	

drop e before adding -ing

closeing	hopeing
comeing (x4)	stareing

y

angery	inevitabely
angrey	panicy
babys	scarey

y to i

replyed	tryed

ed

answerd	offerd

Doubled consonant where should be single

accross	ponny
allways	pressumably
harrassed	quietly
normall	ridding
openned	unoccuppied
	untill (x3)

Single consonant where should be doubled

acident	ofering
aclimatised	penciled
asortment	poped
atempt	siting (x2)
caled	spliting
comotion	stifly
embarassment	stoped (x2)
finaly (x3)	sufering
gona	tanoy

Text influenced

thanx
u

Omission, commission, & transposition

Single letter omitted

assiting	plasic
attemted	plesant
belive (x2)	quit
complant	quitly
coner	relised
consious	scrunced
contined	set
crowed (x2)	skatebord
denist	stared
drumsicks	(started)
easly	stiped
emty	stroger
enviroment	studing
everone	subconsiously
exept	suprise
exusing	suprisingly
fustrating	tak
grove	tepted
is (his)	the (they)
newpaper	throt
nuber	wach
ofering	waching (x2)
overwelming	wat
pachy	were (where)

Unnecessary letter inserted

alls	otheir
anixiously	plance
anouther	propbable
diden't	site (sit)
disrupte	smocking
doupe	stat
hand (and)	throught
has (as)	tould
heared	verey
hoppe	watiching
markers	whant
minde	whas
minuites	whent (x3)
off (of)	where (x5)

Extra syllable inserted

partening	woneman

2 letters reversed

brian	minuets
ect	recieve
frist	retruned
gentelman	thier
minuet	wrinkeld

Writing

Spacing/writing two words as one or vice versa

alot	to-wards
alright	a nother

End of word missing

befor (x2)	of
ever	on
feminin	the (there) (x2)
gonn (gonna)	ther (there)
he (her)	though
he (here)	tong (tongue)
I (it)	use (used) (x2)
imagin	yo
nam	

Multiple

Two 'simple' errors

abound (about)	oader
angshuse	poedem
babal	reapted
behide	remmeberd
be for	sopose
costrophobic	sopted
diesese	stir (stare)
diside	suficate
enbarrased	sumbleing
finily	to words
formiler	toke
glome	tort
gourges	unaturaly
imediatly	when (went)
impaitientley	(x2)
manegd	wittnes
nieghbor	

Part of word missing/ severely misspelled

apoched
appment
blacks (blackouts)
canures (cancerous)
he's (here's)
imaging (x2)
prespetion
prest (pressed)
pust (pushed)
registed
scowered
themsefs
trould (trouble)

3 or more mistakes

alla (all of)
handon (handsome)
immeiadtley
solisters
thire (their)

Extreme phonetic errors

ant shaght (anxious)
asct (asked)
corried door (corridor)
faunt (thought)
hast (asked)
nufse (nervous)
or wright (all right)
torck (talk)

impaitientley consists of two separate inserted letters; *impa(i)tientl(e)y*

nieghbor consists of a transposition and an omitted letter (in UK spelling);*n(ie)ghbo(u)r*

Second are those errors where a whole part of a word is either missing or severely misspelled. The third category within this group contains those few words with three or more individual mistakes, and it was one of the misspellings – *immeiadtley* – which prompted the title of this article – all the right letters, just not necessarily in the right order. Finally, there are a group of words which bear little physical resemblance to their correct spellings, yet have clear phonetic links with them. These are referred to as extreme phonetic errors. It is possible that this latter category may be related to the very specific types of error made by people with dyslexia, but further discussion of this is beyond the scope of the present article.

Discussion

This article has attempted to categorise spelling errors made by students in their GCSE English examination in 2004 into various categories. The purpose of the research was to establish whether certain spelling errors – or certain categories of error – are particularly common, and how they relate to spelling conventions, as taught within schools.

The study has identified five categories of spelling error which further subdivide into sixteen subsections. The categories were derived from the errors observed, rather than from existing categories, so there may be other groups of spelling error which have not been discussed here, simply because they were not encountered. In general, most misspellings fall into the first three categories: sound-based error, rules-based error and errors of omission, commission and transposition. The first two of these categories contain many misspellings that are undoubtedly very familiar to teachers. However, there are no particular sub-categories that are particularly prone to more errors in our sample than others. English is a language which has more than its fair share of idiosyncratic spellings and complex spelling rules. Not surprisingly, many of these errors are connected with those. However, within the category of a single additional letter, there were a number of examples of an unnecessary silent 'h' – *where (were)*, *whant*, *whas*, which are worthy of comment. The category of omission, commission and transposition is more difficult to interpret. It is quite possible that many of these errors occurred as a result of the examination conditions under which candidates were writing, combined with, perhaps, a lack of effective proof-reading of their final piece. The sub-category of writing errors, where the ends of words are missing, could in some cases be due to the same issues. However, the spacing of two words as one, or vice versa, is almost certainly due to candidates' perceptions of those words. Finally, the category of multiple errors produces words which look least like conventional spellings. Interestingly, two simple errors can produce a word that is almost unrecognisable, and it is important to be able to decode these errors for what they are, rather than simply seeing a very distorted word.

Fifteen individual words were identified as occurring with relatively high frequency. In particular, two of these were seen far more often than others. They were the *there/their* homophone, which has been known to be problematic since time immemorial, and *women* for *woman* (not vice versa). *Knew/new* and *know/now* also occurred with relative frequency, but again, this is unlikely to surprise the teaching profession.

A major limitation to the data presented here is the fact that there is no control over which words candidates choose to use. Therefore the study is not a 'fixed' spelling test, and cannot be generalised in the same way as reports of spelling tests. A word spelt wrongly just once does not mean that 479 students can spell it, simply that they did not necessarily try. It would be possible to investigate correctly spelt words to give the other side of the picture, but that would be an enormous task.

There is clearly no single over-riding type of error which is made by the group of GCSE students from whom we have sampled. Those errors that are made are varied, and although it is disconcerting to note the number of most frequently occurring errors which are taught at Key Stage 1, it is, on the other hand, heartening to see how few (relatively speaking) errors are made, when you consider the number of words written overall, especially given that the text was written under examination conditions with no access to dictionaries.

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Appendix 1: Alphabetic list of words which were spelled wrongly in a sample of GCSE English writing

A

about
accident
acclimatised
across
again
all of
all
always
a lot
all right
and
angry
another
anxious
anxiously
answered
approached
appointment
as
asked
assortment
assisting
attempt
attempted

B

babble
babies
before
behind
believe
blackouts
brain

C

called
cancerous
claim
closing
coming
comfortable
commotion
complaint
corner
conscious
continued
corridor
claustrophobic
crowded
could

D

deep
decide
definitely
dentist
devastating
didn't
disease
disrupt
doctors
dope
drumsticks

E

eager
easily
edge
embarrassed
embarrassment

empty
environment
etc
every
everyone
examining
except
excusing
extremely

F

face
familiar
feminine
found
finally
first
frail
frustrating
funnily

G

gentleman
glance
gloomy
gonna
gorgeous
grateful
groove

H

had
handsome
harassed
her
hear

heard
here
here's
highly
his
hope
hoping
hospital
horse

I

imagine
imagining
immediately
impatiently
inevitably
it

J
K

knew
know

L

lady
laid
leant
looked
luckily

M

makers
managed
mind

minute
minutes

N

naive
name
nearly
neighbour
nervous
newspaper
normal
nothing
number

O

odour
of
off
offered
offering
one
opened
other
overwhelming

P

pancakes
panicky
partially
parting
patchy
patients
passed
past
peacefully
pencilled

pleasant
place
plastic
podium
pony
popped
practical
prescription
pressed
presumably
probably
pub
pushed

Q

quiet
quietly
quite

R

realised
reassuring
reception
receive
registered
remembered
repeated
replied
returned
riding
rode
rough

S

said
sat

scary
scoured
screaming
scrunched
seat
secretary
sit
sitting
skateboard
slightly
slowly
smoking
solicitors
some
something
splitting
spotted
stare
staring
started
stiffly
stopped
striped
stronger
studying
stumbling
subconsciously
suffering
suffocate
suffocated
support
suppose
surprise
surprisingly
survey

T

talk
tannoy
tempted
thanks
their
themselves
there
they
thought
throat
too
told
took
tomato
tongue
towards
trampling
tried
trouble
true
tumour
two

U

uncomfortable
unnaturally
unoccupied
until
used

V

very

W

walking
want
wanted
was
watch
watching
weirdoes
went
were
what
whether
whose
where
witness
woman
worn
wrinkled

X
Y

you
you're

Statistical Reports

The Statistics Team Research Division

The Statistics Reports Series is based on the annual national-level examination databases for pupils in England. The objective of these reports is to provide statistical summaries of the information contained in these, such as pupil attainment, pupil subject uptake and subject provision in schools. Some reports will consider patterns over time, particularly if there has been a relevant change in the system. These reports will be produced at a rate of around two or three a year and are available in .pdf format on the Cambridge Assessment website: http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/ca/Our_Services/Research/Statistical_Reports

As of December 2008, the following reports are available:

Statistics Report Series No.1: Provision of GCE A-level subjects

Statistics Report Series No.2: Provision of GCSE subjects

Statistics Report Series No.3: Uptake of GCE A-level subjects in England 2001–2005

Statistics Report Series No.4: Uptake of GCSE subjects 2000–2006

Statistics Report Series No.5: Uptake of GCE A-level subjects in England 2006

Statistics Report Series No.6: Numbers of A-level examinations taken by candidates in England 2006 and the percentages attaining 3 or more A grades

Statistics Report Series No.7: The relationship between A-level grade and GCSE grade by subject

Statistics Report Series No.8: Uptake of GCSE AS level subjects in England 2001–2007.

Statistics Report Series No.9: Numbers achieving 3 A grades in specific A Level combinations by school type and LEA