



Psychology A level

Course plan

This plan shows the structure of the course and gives an outline of the contents. Sections 1–6 cover the requirements of the AS and Part 1 of the A level; Sections 7–10 cover Part 2 of the A level. You need to do Sections 1–10 to prepare for the A level.

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- Making the most of the course
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Topic 8 Choosing a statistical test

Assignment 10



Sample of the A Level Psychology Course from Section 1

Topic 1

Introduction to psychology and its origins

Introduction

What exactly is psychology? Why is it considered a science? What does studying psychology involve? This topic explores some of these important questions, starting with an attempt to answer the basic question of what psychology actually is.

Although psychology is a relatively young discipline, it is easier to understand its current concerns if they are viewed in a historical context. Therefore this topic also explores emergence of psychology as a science and the origins of some of the current theoretical approaches as well as introducing the different approaches used in psychology.

Exam hint

The origins of psychology, which includes Wundt, introspection and the emergence of psychology as a science, are required for the AS and A level examinations.



Objectives

When you completed this topic you should be able to:

- explain what psychology is
- recognise how psychology can be applied to understanding people's behaviour
- describe the theory proposed by Wundt
- explain the use of introspection
- describe how psychology developed into a science out of the domain of philosophy.
- Looking for shared behaviour
- Ever since human life began, there never has been, nor ever will be, anyone just like you. You are unique. That is not to say you don't have anything in common with other people – of course you do. There are many similarities as well as differences in the ways you think and behave and the ways that other people think and behave. Looking for these similarities is one of the main tasks of psychology.

Activity 1

(Allow 10 minutes)

Here are some examples of behaviour. Think about whether these habits apply to you. Put either a tick or a cross against each statement. Then decide whether you think each statement is true for most people. Again, put either a tick or a cross against each statement.

	True for you?	True for most people?
When talking to friends at a party, people still hear someone speaking in a far corner if that person mentions their name.		
People who are rewarded for doing something well, or punished for doing something wrong, may then behave in ways that ensure another reward and avoid another punishment in the future.		
People often seem to work harder when someone important is watching than if they work alone.		
People do things they don't really want to		

because their friends persuade them to.

People's best friends are mostly very similar to themselves.

When people are nervous or anxious, they often prefer to be with others who are in the same state.

People involved in group activities (such as singing in a choir or pulling a tug-of-war rope) often put less effort into the activity than they would if they were the soloist and their individual effort was being measured.

You probably found that some of these observations were not only true for you, but were also true for most people. It seems that we have many aspects of our behaviour in common. For the last hundred years or so, psychologists and others have been looking for the principles that underlie shared behaviour and, in this course, you will find out about what has been discovered so far.

However, as we said at the start, you are also unique. There may be many ways in which the observations above do not apply to you.

Psychologists are therefore also interested in the ways in which people differ from each other. This area is usually called the study of individual differences.

Did you find it difficult to decide if some of the statements in Activity 1 were true for most people? Your instincts may tell you that many of them are, but you probably don't have any actual evidence, apart from your own experience.

Psychologists are concerned with gathering evidence, which will enable them to make an intelligent analysis of people's behaviour.

Your expectations of psychology

Activity 2

(Allow 10 minutes)

Make a list of five questions that you think having some knowledge of psychology might help you to answer.

The questions can be as specific or as general as you like, such as, 'How do children learn?' or 'Why do people get angry?' The questions should be ones that you personally find interesting.

This activity is intended only to help you to think about what you hope to learn from a study of psychology and which areas you find particularly interesting.

You will be asked to refer back to your list later in this topic and see if your expectations are still the same.

Definitions of psychology

Psychology is a vast subject and so it is not easy to provide a single definition. However, one of the earliest definitions was that psychology was 'the study of mental experiences and consciousness'. Another view claimed that it was 'the study of the unconscious mind'. Later on, psychology was called 'the study of behaviour', and more recently, 'the study of the individual'.

The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology says: 'Psychology simply cannot be defined ... it really isn't a thing at all, it is about a thing, or many things.' So where does this leave us? We are embarking on a course of study, but cannot even define what it is that we're supposed to be studying! An optimist would say that this is not a problem – it's a challenge. And if that's the way you approach the study of psychology, so much the better.

For now, we'll say that psychology is that branch of knowledge concerned with studying human (and some other animal) behaviour and human experiences, or as Atkinson et al. (1999) put it: 'the scientific study of behaviour and mental processes'. Clearly, a huge range and diversity of topics are included within psychology. An understanding of the different areas of psychology will help to

make the range and diversity manageable – for this reason, this topic provides an overview of the subject.

Psychology developed from the nineteenth-century philosophical view that it was appropriate to apply the methods and principles of the natural sciences to the study of human beings, and from the advances made in sciences such as biology. You will investigate the historical context of psychology later in this topic.



You can read more about definitions of psychology at:

[http://psychology.about.com/od/psychology101/f/psychfaq.htmApplying psychology](http://psychology.about.com/od/psychology101/f/psychfaq.htmApplying%20psychology)

Psychologists have applied their understanding of people's behaviour in many aspects of our lives. There's so much to be discovered in just about every area of human experience.

Psychologists use a number of different research techniques, which you will learn about as you work through the course. They are discussed in more detail in Section 6. All the techniques, however, aim to produce evidence that is **verifiable** – that is, other people with the expectation of producing the same results can repeat the studies. If the same results are not obtained, then it should be possible to uncover the source of the difference.

Activity 3

(Allow 5 minutes)

If results or data are to be verifiable (so that other people would be able to repeat the study and get the same results), what implications do you think that has for the way the () is carried out?

Write down two ideas that come to mind.

You might find this tough if you are not familiar with the workings of scientific investigation.

If results or data are to be verifiable, they must fulfil certain conditions:

- The study must be carried out and reported with precision. Just as a chemist in a laboratory would not simply add an unmeasured dash of dilute hydrochloric acid to a mixture in a test tube, so a psychologist must be as precise as possible in the conditions for a given study.

- The data must be objective rather than subjective. Objective measures are not influenced by personal feelings, opinions, biases or preferences and their accuracy can be examined.

Interpreting evidence

Although the collection of evidence in psychology is very important we don't want to leave you with the impression that psychology is only about collecting evidence. Evidence on its own has little meaning – the next stage is appropriate interpretation of that evidence.

During your course you will meet some rather fundamental disagreements between psychologists on what a particular study means and how the data should be interpreted. This is the point where personal experience can be of assistance to you in psychology. The knowledge that you have acquired in your everyday life may suggest a new interpretation of a past study or new studies that should be carried out.

In studying A level Psychology you will find two major components:

- There is a substantial body of psychological knowledge.
- Perhaps even more important, there is material about the research techniques that psychologists use. An understanding of these techniques will allow you to begin not only to examine the interpretations of evidence from studies, but also to evaluate the quality of the evidence itself.

We have tried to give you some ideas of what you will gain from a study of psychology and hope that it is not too different from the responses you gave to Activity 2. All of us have unanswered questions about the nature and causes of human behaviour. Psychology often cannot provide all the answers to these questions, but it can help you to think about how such answers might be obtained.

Is psychology 'relevant'?

Many students, when they start psychology, wonder how relevant the subject will be. We'll look at how it can contribute to two areas:

- understanding yourself and the people that you meet, and
- some real-life problems.

Understanding yourself

Psychology will not necessarily give you a better understanding of yourself or, perhaps more importantly, more control over your behaviour. Psychology cannot yet answer some of the 'large' questions about human behaviour, such as why people get angry, and knowledge of the material that is available will not necessarily help you to understand yourself better. Similarly, a course in psychology will not enable you to understand more easily the hidden thoughts and feelings of those you encounter.

However, knowledge of psychology can help you in some ways. For example, there is an effect known in psychology as 'bystander apathy'. This simply means the tendency of bystanders at an emergency to stand by rather than to intervene or offer help.

A series of studies have gone some way to uncovering why people act in this way; it is certainly not simply apathy that prevents them from offering help. One study (Beaman et al, 1978) staged an apparent emergency for students who had been fairly recently taught about the causes of bystander apathy. Of these students, 43 per cent went to help compared to 25 per cent of students who had not heard about the material.

So, psychology, perhaps in some unexpected ways, may affect your behaviour. However, rather than being able to supply all answers, what you will derive from psychology is the ability to ask questions about behaviour.

Real-life problems

In answer to the second point made above, some psychology focuses on real-life problems and some does not. There are two useful distinctions that can be made.

Pure versus applied research

The first is between pure and applied research. The starting point for **applied research** is usually a practical problem and the aim is to provide an answer, both by conducting new studies and by drawing on pre-existing understanding, which relates to the problem area. **Fundamental** or **pure research** is, on the other hand, undertaken for its own sake, regardless of whether or not the knowledge can be applied. For example, one might want to know if very young infants show a preference for looking at pictures of human faces rather than at complex patterns. Sometimes this kind of research can appear rather remote from everyday experience.

Pure research, however, always has a problem or interesting question about human behaviour as its starting point, although sometimes the question can be difficult to spot. Faces are a very important part of our environment; questions about how we recognise familiar faces and how this ability develops could lead to the study on young infants described above. At the root of most research in psychology are real-life problems or at least questions about recognisable real-life phenomena.

Person versus process approaches

The second important distinction is between person and process approaches within psychology (Legge, 1975). The **process approach** is likely to appear less 'relevant'. Psychologists who take this approach focus on processes such as memory, reasoning or learning. They usually study such processes separately and in the simplest form to which they can be reduced. Some of the research, if viewed out of context, can appear distinctly strange.

'I know it's difficult to write your name with your foot while reciting the alphabet backwards, but I would like you to try!'



The following activity illustrates the kind of test that might be used by a psychologist taking a process approach.

Activity 4

(Allow 5 minutes)

Read aloud once, at your normal speed, the set of numbers given below. Then immediately close your eyes and try to repeat them.

5 7 1 9 8 1 4 6 2 1 7 6

Now try again, using the same procedure, with the following set:

1957

1846

1672

Which did you find easier to recall?

You probably found the first set of numbers extremely difficult to recall, whereas the second set, which has identical components, should have been relatively easy. This phenomenon tells us something interesting about memory capacity and how knowledge that we already have can improve performance. We seem to be able to retain about seven units of information in a kind of temporary store, but our knowledge base determines what will constitute a unit. Thus, the first set of twelve digits was outside your capacity, but the second set of three dates was well within it.

Tests such as this can often seem to be far removed from everyday human behaviour. The idea, however, is that by studying processes such as memory in isolation and reduced to the performance of simple tasks, one will gain an understanding that can gradually be built back up to explain more complex pieces of behaviour. Although the studies themselves may not seem relevant, the overall purpose clearly is.

By contrast, the **person approach** focuses on the whole person and usually involves studying people performing behaviours that are recognisably human and 'relevant'. Research on bystander apathy mentioned earlier falls into the person category.

Each approach has its advantages and drawbacks; ideally, they should be complementary to each other. It is important to note that the person/process distinction is independent of the pure/applied distinction. Both pure and applied research can make use of either approach.

You should now recognise that psychology is much more than mere common sense or intuition. The theories held by psychologists are based on evidence, not on 'gut feeling'. When you have studied the strengths and weaknesses of the research methods that psychologists use to collect their evidence you will be in a good position to evaluate whether the views they hold are valid.



If you follow the link below you can read some more about the aims of psychology. Also click on the link 'goals of psychological studies' to read more.

<http://psychology.about.com/od/researchmethods/a/steps-of-scientific-method.htm>

Self check 1

(Allow 15 minutes)

Write down a brief answer to the following questions:

- 1 What is meant by the term 'objectivity'?
- 2 Can subjective reports be verified?
- 3 Below is a list of six psychological studies. Which ones fit into the process approach and which into the person approach?

Six psychological studies	Psychological approach
a A study of interaction between mothers and infants in the first few hours of life.	
b A study of recall of lists of unconnected words.	
c A study of the effects of different amounts of reward on the speed of learning a prose passage.	
d A study of the effects of divorce on the development of children.	
e A study of the extent to which people will obey an authority figure.	

-
- f A study of how we locate the direction from which a sound has come.
-

You will find the feedback to self checks at the end of this section.

The beginnings of psychology

Exam hint

You need to have an awareness of the early history of psychology, particularly the work of Wundt.

Wundt: the first psychologist?

The emergence of psychology is usually dated from 1879, when Wilhelm Wundt established the first experimental psychology laboratory in order to investigate the working of the mind through a technique called **introspection** – observing and analysing the elements that make up mental processes.

Wundt deliberately set out to make experimental psychology an independent discipline and he declared his aim was ‘to mark out a new domain of science’ (Wundt, 1874). Psychology therefore staked a claim to areas of enquiry that had previously been seen as parts of either philosophy or biology. It is not surprising that ideas, problems, questions and methods were imported from both of these disciplines, and that their influence can readily be seen in the work of the early psychologists.

Wundt and his associates focused their investigations on conscious mental experiences. It was largely prevailing philosophical thought that created the climate for such a focus. One of the enduring questions of philosophy concerns the relationship between mind and body – or between conscious mental experiences and physical events. The desire for a cup of tea is a mental experience; getting up to make one is a physical event. Falling over a chair is a physical event; the feeling of pain is a mental experience. Activity in the nerve cells of the brain is a physical event; seeing a teabag is a mental experience.

While you might argue that the two must interact, you are still left trying to explain the exact nature of the interaction.

In Wundt's time, the fashionable answer to the mind–body problem was that while mental experiences and physical events occur simultaneously, they do not interact or influence each other. Such a position legitimised the study of mental experiences in their own right. While the premise on which Wundt based his work is no longer accepted, psychology has still not found a way to characterise the relationship between mental experiences and physical events.

The technique used by Wundt was introspection which is the examination of one's own thought processes.

Read in the textbook at the beginning of Chapter 5 about Wundt and the use of introspection.



You can read more about Wundt using the link here:

<http://psychology.about.com/od/profilesofmajorthinkers/p/wundtprofile.htm>

Empiricism

Psychology also inherited the doctrine of **empiricism** from philosophy. This idea was first put forward by Locke, a philosopher who wrote in the eighteenth century. The basic notion of empiricism is that people are born with minds like blank sheets of paper; no knowledge is innate. According to this doctrine, all knowledge comes from information acquired through the senses and reflections on this information. Thus, new knowledge can only be acquired empirically or 'through the senses'.

To the early psychologists, observations of private mental experiences obtained through introspection constituted perfectly respectable empirical evidence.

Unfortunately, because such observations are subjective, disagreements between observers cannot be resolved.

Read in your textbook about 'The emergence of psychology as a science' in Chapter 5.



Self check 2

(Allow 5 minutes)

Write down a brief answer to the following questions:

- 1 What was Wundt's main aim in 1879?
- 2 What did he do to achieve it?
- 3 What is meant by the term 'introspection'?

You will find the feedback to self checks at the end of this section.

An overview of approaches used in psychology

You need to be aware that psychologists adopt different approaches to the study of psychology. So some might focus on the influence of our physiology on our behaviour (the biological approach); others might focus on the influence of our thought processes on our behaviour (the cognitive approach); others will focus on the impact which those around us have on our behaviour (the learning approach). Of course, we are all aware that our behaviour is influenced by an interaction of all these things but some psychologists put more emphasis on one of these approaches. The approach adopted often, but not always, depends on the topic studied, so for example psychologists studying memory will take a cognitive perspective. On the other hand some psychologists studying the origins of mental disorders will put more emphasis on biological factors while others will emphasise the way in which the behaviour may be learnt.

You will study these three different approaches later in this section and this will give you a good grounding in the different influences on our behaviour.

In Chapter 5 in your textbook read 'In the news' about Elliot Rodger. Note how his behaviour could be explained by using different approaches.

Read in your textbook about 'The emergence of psychology as a science' in Chapter 5.



Self check 2

(Allow 5 minutes)

Write down a brief answer to the following questions:

- 4 What was Wundt's main aim in 1879?
- 5 What did he do to achieve it?
- 6 What is meant by the term 'introspection'?

You will find the feedback to self checks at the end of this section.

An overview of approaches used in psychology

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Activity 5

(Allow 10 minutes)

Look in a newspaper, on the internet or on TV/radio and find an item of news about involving a person's extreme behaviour.

List your ideas for all the possible reasons behind the behaviour.

One example could be someone who tragically died after taking slimming pills. Maybe they had learnt to associate being slim with gaining society's approval, or maybe they had developed thoughts that they were not as thin as they ought to be, or maybe they had a biological problem which resulted in a metabolic drive to restrict their diet.

Each of these ideas can be linked to one of the approaches that psychology uses to explain behaviour. They are:

- the learning theory approach
- the cognitive approach and
- the biological approach.

Study hint

The understanding of these three approaches is required for the AS examination and we'll look at them in more detail later in this section. You need to be able to compare these different approaches in terms of the basic assumptions of each. Keep this fairly simple and by the end of the section see if you can list the differences between each approach.

There are two more approaches needed for the full A level:

- the psychodynamic approach looks at childhood experiences and says that maybe an early event has resulted in a defence mechanism later in life.
- the humanistic approach which values the individual and has respect for individuality and tries not to reduce people's behaviour down to general laws.

We will look at these later in the course.

Summary

In this topic you have explored what psychology is and its relevance to everyday life. You have looked briefly at Wundt and the emergence of psychology as a science along with the terms introspection and empiricism.

You have also met the approaches used in psychology. Topic 2 will look at the learning approach and cognitive approach in detail. Topic 3 will focus on the biological approach.

Now that you have completed your work on this topic you should be able to:

- explain what psychology is
- recognise how psychology can be applied to understanding people's behaviour.

Specifically for the exam, you need to be able to:

- describe the theory proposed by Wundt
- explain the use of introspection
- describe how psychology developed into a science out of the domain of philosophy.

Key terms

In the exam you will be expected to 'use specialist vocabulary where appropriate'. At the end of each topic we give a list of key terms and definitions. You can also refer to the Glossary in the textbook. Here are some of the main terms used in this topic:

Applied research: research that aims to provide a solution to a practical problem

Empiricism: the belief that people are born with minds like blank sheets of paper; no knowledge is innate.

Introspection: the examination of one's own thought processes.

Person approach to research: research that usually involves studying people performing behaviours that are recognisable in everyday life.

Process approach to research: research that focuses on the simplest form of a process rather than in the context of how people behave in real life.

Pure research: research that aims to increase knowledge which may or may not be immediately applied to provide a solution to a practical problem

Verifiable: other people can repeat the study and get the same results.

References

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What next?

We hope this sample has helped you to decide whether this course is right for you.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us using the details below.

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- **enrol by telephone** – just call our course advice team free on 0800 389 2839 and we can take your details over the telephone
- **pay in full** – you can pay in full with a credit or debit card
- **pay in instalments** – if spreading the cost would be useful, we can arrange that for you. Just call our course advice team to organise this.

Contact us

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