

A-level

# AIMING FOR AN A IN GEOGRAPHY

MASTER THE  
SKILLS YOU  
NEED FOR  
AN **A GRADE**

# GEOGRAPHY

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## Getting the most from this book

Aiming for an A is designed to help you master the skills you need to achieve the highest grades.

The following features will help you get the most from this book.

### Learning objectives

- > A summary of the skills that will be covered in the chapter.

### ✓ Exam tip

Practical advice about how to apply your skills to the exam.

### Activity

An opportunity to test your skills with practical activities.



### Common pitfall

Problem areas where candidates often miss out on marks.

### The difference between...

Key concepts differentiated and explained.

### Annotated example

Exemplar answers with commentary showing how to achieve top grades.

### Worked example

Step-by-step examples to help you master the skills needed for top grades.

### Take it further

Suggestions for further reading or activities that will stretch your thinking.

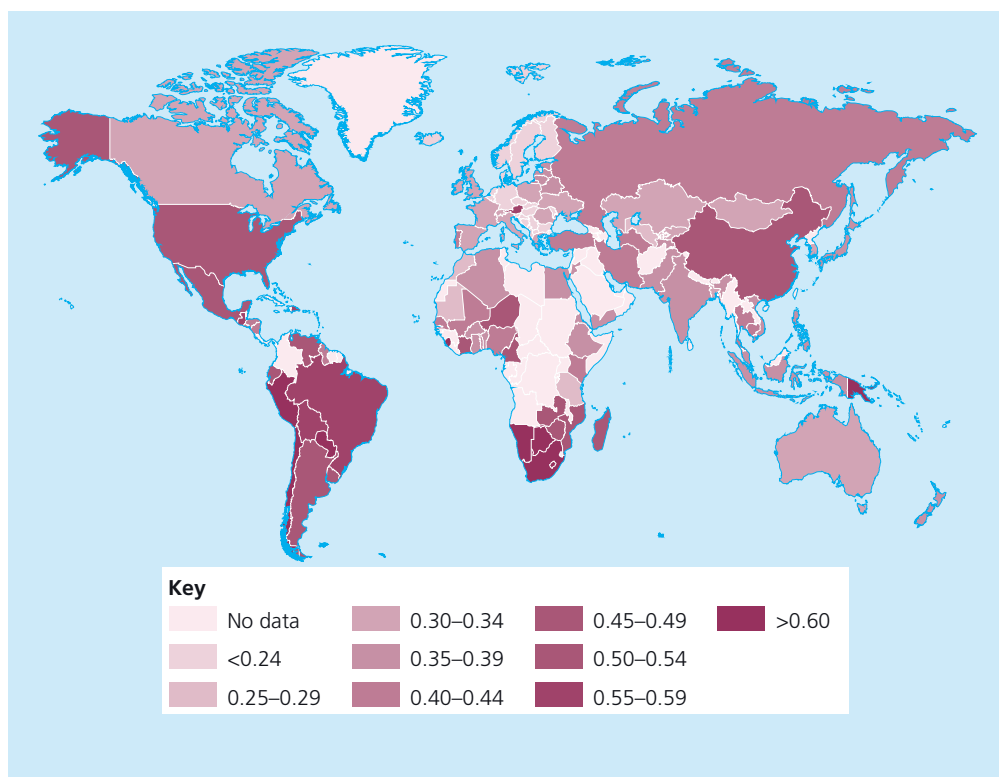
### You should know

- > A summary of key points to take away from the chapter.

## Thinking critically about geographical information

Figure 2.9 shows a choropleth map illustrating the global pattern of Gini coefficient values on a country-by-country basis. This is arguably a flawed resource.

- The Gini coefficient itself is a relatively complicated measure to understand (it shows the extent to which income is evenly distributed among the citizens of a territory: a Gini value closer to 1 than 0 indicates a higher degree of inequality).
- Because ten data classes have been used, the pattern is harder to analyse than it needs to be.
- In the study context of global disparities in economic development, it is unclear why anybody would want to produce a map with ten interval classes on it. Three or four classes might suffice if the objective (or 'story') of the map is to reveal broad global variations in the level of economic inequality found within countries.
- Can you suggest an alternative key for this map, using just three or four classes? What intervals might you use?

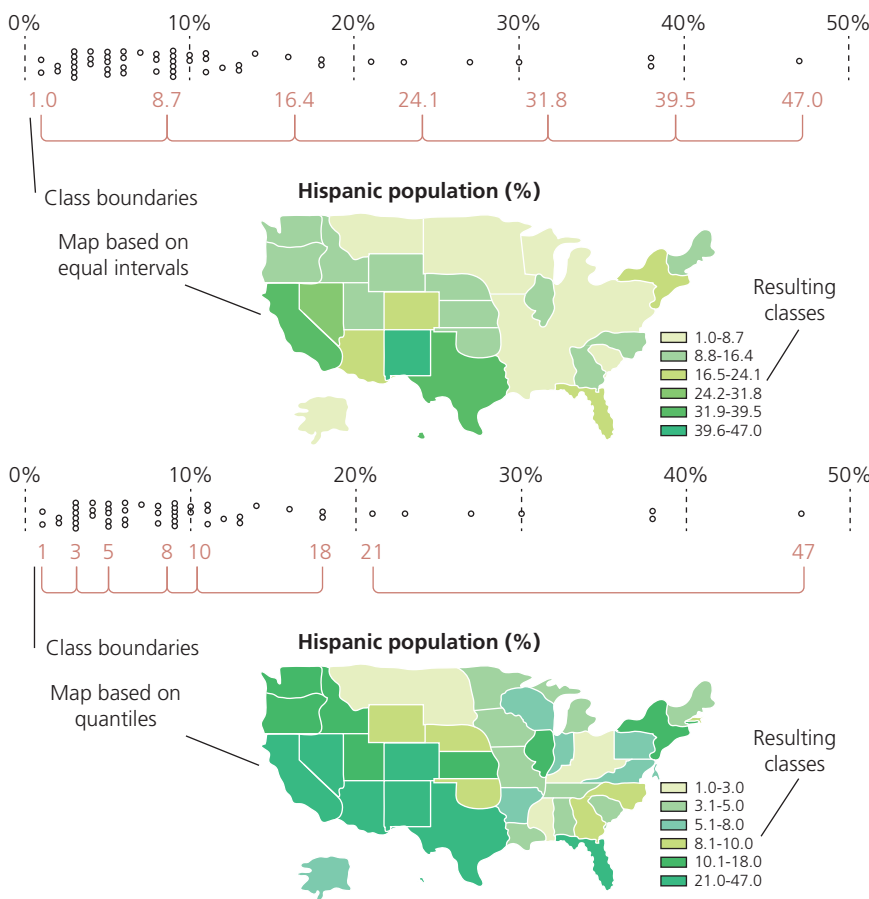


**Figure 2.9** Global variations in the Gini coefficient, 2009

### Take it further

Find other choropleth maps in your course textbook or using an online image search. Look for evidence of good practice and poor practice in the ways they have been created. In addition to the number of classes included, think too about how colour is used in different maps. Some unprofessional choropleth maps use too many wildly varying colours, which makes it harder to grasp immediately the pattern of 'highs and lows' (which are best shown with a gradation from darker to lighter colours).

Figure 2.10 is interesting insofar as it shows two competing representations of the concentration of Hispanic people in different U.S. states. As you can see, at face value the two maps tell different stories. One appears to show relatively low concentrations in most of the continental USA with the exception of one or two states. The other is telling us - at first glance - that much of the USA now has a very high proportion of Hispanic people living there. In fact both maps show exactly the same data. The only difference is that different class boundaries have been used to divide and map the data. This shows how easily facts can become exaggerated and in this context potentially 'politicized'.



**Figure 2.10** How two choropleth maps using the same data set invite a differing analysis

### Studying complex data representations

In addition to spotting flaws with other people's (or your own) data presentation techniques, you can also think critically about steps that could be taken to improve graphs and charts that, at first glance, appear perfectly sound, such as Figure 2.4 (p. XX). In comparison, Figure 2.5 (p. XX) offers a far richer representation of data because two patterns are shown and not just one. Not only are we shown how the number of migrants differs from place to place (shown by the size of the circles), but we also learn how social attitudes vary spatially.

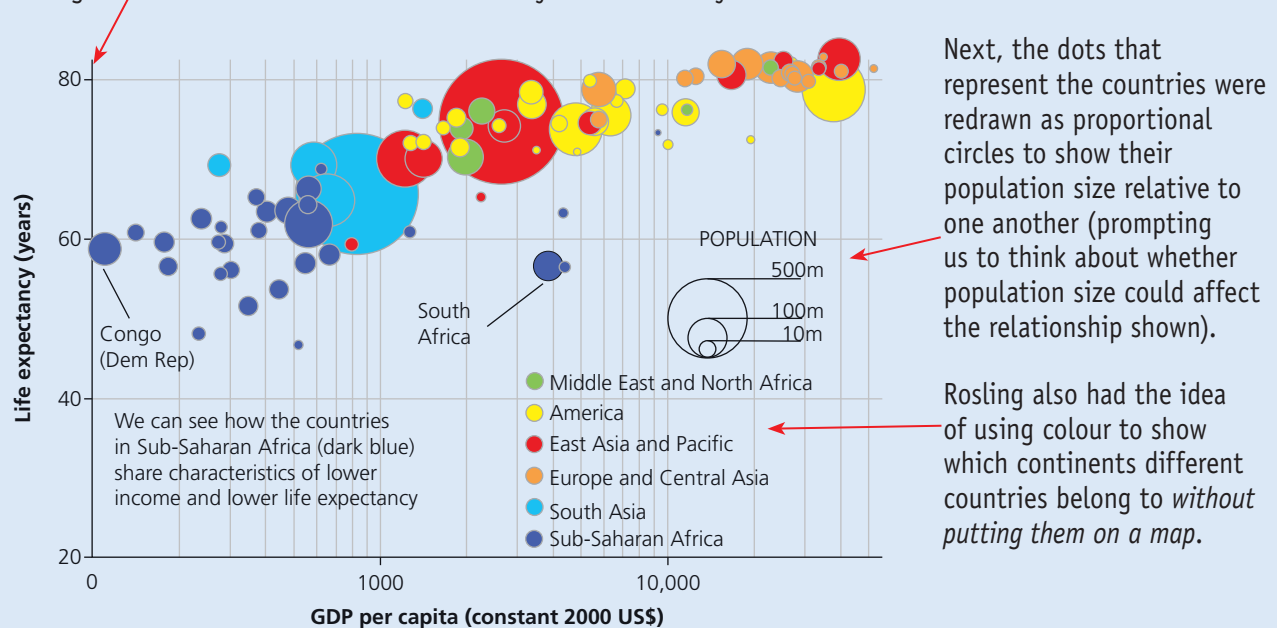
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Even if complex data representations do not always feature in examination papers, you should make every effort during your 2-year course to improve your 'graphical literacy' by finding good examples to study. These may inspire you to produce more ambitious presentations of data in your own independent investigation (see chapter 5). It is also good preparation for studying at university.

### Annotated example 1

Bubble charts in geography are often associated with the late great professor Hans Rosling. His famous data presentations began with a simple scatter plot such as Figure 2.3 (p. XX). Figure 2.11 shows how this simple chart (Figure 2.3) has been modified in several stages to create richer data representation, which conveys multiple understandings about global inequalities in ways that are easy to grasp.

The chart began as a simple plot of income on the x-axis and life expectancy on the y-axis. But it was hard to analyse the relationship for lower-income countries because so many were clustered near the y-axis. The solution was to use a logarithmic scale for the x-axis scale. Variations among lower income countries can now be analysed more clearly.



**Figure 2.11** A modified scatter plot showing the correlation between GDP per capita and life expectancy

Now when we analyse Figure 2.11 we can say, for example: 'Many countries in Asia have similar high incomes and life expectancy to Europe, important exceptions being those with very large populations.'

In his lectures, Rosling also animated his graphs to show changes over time. You can view an example at: [www.ted.com/talks/hans\\_rosling\\_shows\\_the\\_best\\_stats\\_you\\_ve\\_ever\\_seen](http://www.ted.com/talks/hans_rosling_shows_the_best_stats_you_ve_ever_seen).

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### Take it further

The *Financial Times* and the *Economist* make frequent use of advanced graphical techniques. Be sure to look at these publications in a library or online, for example: <https://www.ft.com/data-visualisation>.

A good book to read about the use of data, charts and maps is *The Truthful Art*, by Alberto Cairo (2016).

## Working with qualitative data

You are required to use and perhaps collect qualitative data while studying A-level geography. This can include:

- interviews with members of the public or experts (which you may read about in articles and books; or may conduct yourself while carrying out fieldwork)
- novels, films, poems, music lyrics, diaries and other written texts (these may contain factual information but are first and foremost a vitally important data source for finding out about people's *perceptions* and *feelings* about places and environments)
- paintings and photographs (again, these can offer factual information about the way a place appeared in the past; but they also give us an idea of how the painter or photographer felt about the place they decided to memorialise)

The new courses, which began first teaching in 2016, put greater emphasis on the importance of qualitative data than A-level geography did in the past, as Table 2.1 shows (p. XX). You may find, however, that most available textbooks continue to provide students with more assistance on working with quantitative data than they do with qualitative data. Here are some suggestions about ways to develop your qualitative data study skills:

- Use online resources that the Royal Geographical Society and Geographical Association have provided to help students develop their qualitative skills.
- Why not 'import' skills you have developed in other parts of the school curriculum? In particular, there will be lessons learned in GCSE English and art that are fully transferable to the A-level geography curriculum. For example, the poem 'Hurricane hits England' by Grace Nichols is studied by many UK GCSE students. In English classes, students will discuss the images and concepts that appear in the poem, which are drawn from the poet's own personal experiences. A central theme of this poem is the way in which hurricanes that sometimes strike England bring the Caribbean's weather to Britain. In this way, two places become connected. At a more personal level, the hurricane led Nichols to reflect on her own West Indian heritage. There is considerable overlap here with the demands of the A-level geography 'Changing places' topic, which requires students to explore cultural and artistic approaches to representing places.

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Most examinations use an answer booklet with lines provided for you to write your answer in, and this gives some guidance as to how long your answer should be. However, handwriting size can vary enormously among a group of students.

Your best advice is to devote time to studying the mark schemes for past examinations, including any specimen papers. These provide you with valuable guidance on exactly what is expected. You do not want to do less than is recommended; it is also unwise to write a great deal more than is expected because this may jeopardise the amount of time remaining for you to complete other questions in the same examination.

When 2 marks are available for an answer, most mark schemes will award 1 mark for a 'basic' point and 1 further mark for a 'developed' or 'exemplified' point:

- A **developed** point takes the explanation a step further (perhaps providing additional detail on how a process operates).
- An **exemplified** point refers to a relatively detailed or real-world example in order to support the explanation with evidence.

### ✓ Exam tip

When you are completing a short-answer task for homework exercise the same judgement that you would in a real examination when it comes to the number of words you write. You need to master the art of writing succinctly while also scoring full marks. Producing a long answer instead of a short answer for the task your teacher has set you is *poor* preparation for the examination that awaits you at the end of the course.

## The difference between...

Here are some possible responses to the following question:

**Explain *one* reason why there is limited access to the internet in some countries. (2)**

How to give a developed explanation	How to give an exemplified explanation
<p>In some countries, people cannot use the internet because of political interference by the government. Citizens are basically not free to visit websites and if they did they could face severe punishment or imprisonment.</p> <p><i>This answer simply states that some governments limit citizens' freedom. The second sentence is not a valid extension of the first point; it is merely 'common sense' writing with no real depth of knowledge or understanding. This only gains 1 of the available 2 marks.</i></p>	<p>In some countries, average incomes are extremely low and most people living there cannot afford internet access due to poverty. A good example of this would be a very poor African country like Ghana.</p> <p><i>This would be awarded the first mark for the basic idea of low incomes with poverty. In an A-level examination it is unlikely that the second mark would be awarded for simply naming an African country. This is not what is meant by exemplification. Only 1 mark is awarded so far.</i></p>
<p>Some governments limit citizens' freedom to post information on the internet. In autocratic states, human rights like freedom of expression are not upheld the way they are in democracies.</p> <p><i>This answer provides a valid extension of the first point using specialist terminology and demonstrating knowledge and understanding of the global governance topic. Many students would not be able to resist adding examples here, such as China and North Korea. However, enough has already been done to score both marks.</i></p>	<p>Low incomes may explain the lack of internet access in the world's poorest countries. For example, GDP per capita remains below US\$1000 per year in some of the poorest sub-Saharan African countries such as Somalia.</p> <p><i>A second mark would be awarded here for sound exemplification. Can you see why? It is also important to realise that this represents sufficient exemplification; it would be a mistake to continue writing about Somalia (even if you knew more facts). Enough has been done for full marks.</i></p>

Some short-answer tasks require students to develop an explanation in greater depth than the examples shown above. For instance:

**Explain the concept of mass balance in relation to water stored in the cryosphere. (4)**

This is an A01 task because it does not ask us to 'explain *why*...' and therefore does not demand a *reasoned* response. Instead, all that is required is a series of statements conveying knowledge and



## Making a judgement when concluding

Evaluative essays may require that a judgement is made for part of the AO2 assessment. For instance, for both of the following titles you are asked to make a final judgement about the extent to which the viewpoint given is true or not.

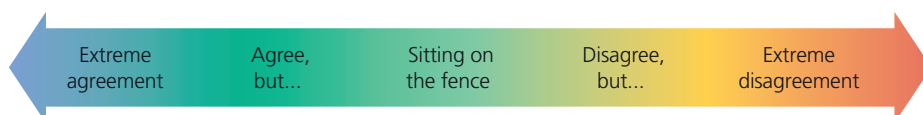
- **'Vulnerability to tectonic hazards has risen over time.' Discuss this viewpoint.**
- **To what extent do you agree with the view that global governance of Antarctica has been successful?**

When writing a conclusion for either of these titles, it is vital that a final judgement is provided. Do not just sit on the fence. Draw on all the arguments and facts you have already presented in the main body of the essay, weigh up the entirety of your evidence and say whether — on balance — you agree or disagree with the question you were asked. To guide you, here are some simple rules that it is worth adhering to:

- Never sit on the fence completely. The essay titles you will encounter in geography examination papers have been created purposely to generate a discussion that invites a final judgement following deliberation. Do not expect to receive a high mark if you end your essay with a phrase such as: 'So, all in all, the governance of Antarctica has been both successful and unsuccessful.'
- Equally, it is best to avoid extreme agreement or disagreement. In particular, you should not begin your essay by dismissing one viewpoint entirely, for example by writing: 'In my view, the global governance of Antarctica has been entirely unsuccessful and this essay will explain all of the reasons why.' It is essential that you consider different points of view. The answers that score highest are likely to be well balanced insofar as roughly half of the main body of the essay will consider ideas and arguments supporting the statement; the remaining half will deal with counter-arguments.
- An 'agree, but...' or 'disagree, but...' judgement is usually the best position to take. This is a mature viewpoint, which demonstrates that you are able to take a stand on an issue while remaining mindful of other views and perspectives.

### ✓ Exam tip

Mark schemes for evaluative essays in human geography will often state that AO2 credit can be given to answers that acknowledge the existence of **contrasting perspectives** on the issue under discussion. This is particularly true of the 'Changing places' core topic (across all exam boards). Management decisions affecting cities or rural settlements are often controversial; it may be difficult to evaluate the overall balance of winners and losers, especially as time passes. In particular, gentrification is a process of change that divides public opinion. Many people may benefit from the gentrification of a place, particularly home owners and new property developers. However, poorer residents who rent their homes are often displaced from a place when gentrification occurs. They are far less likely to view its effects positively. The OCR exam board in particular puts great emphasis on students' ability to view issues from varying perspectives.



**Figure 4.1** The spectrum of judgements

### Take it further

Review some of the levels-based mark schemes for essays in the geography specification you are following. You may see words like 'balanced' or 'unbalanced' featuring in some of the levels. This indicates that students are expected to give *equal consideration* to different viewpoints about the statement they have been asked to write about (and so must not entirely dismiss one viewpoint out of hand).