



Lessons Learnt from the First NEAs: Part 1

There have been several lessons learnt from the first outing of the GCE Geography NEAs (Non-Examined Assessment, or coursework). This Factsheet will take you through, step by step, the different stages of the enquiry process, and consider potential areas for improvement and highlight best-practice. This bumper edition Factsheet is split into two main parts: “getting started” and the final push on the “home stretch”.

Part 1: “Getting Started”

- 1) The All-Important Title
- 2) The Literature Review & Wider Geographical Context
- 3) Choosing a Location: Understanding Timescales & Space

The Highlights: Reports from 2018

The majority of projects submitted in 2018 were very successful with students performing better in this part of the GCE compared to the written exam. Data released from AQA, Pearson / Edexcel, OCR and EDUQAS shows that the mean for the coursework was between 65% and 68%. A recent joint Awarding Body update (2019), along with other published information, has identified several reasons why some projects were less successful:

- 1) Titles that were too broad or unmanageable in terms of the geographical scale and/or the time available.
- 2) Titles that explored issues where the student already knew the answer (e.g. ‘Does the quality of the environment vary between areas X and Y?’ or ‘The size of beach material varies with distance from the low-water mark on Beach A’). If students develop descriptive titles that are truisms, there is the risk that the investigation becomes very descriptive and uninspiring for the student. They offer only limited scope for meaningful data collection and evaluation.
- 3) Questionable geography. Remember your focus must be linked to the specification and you need to be able to collect at least some primary data.
- 4) Fieldwork and data collection that did not allow the answering of each of the sub-questions/hypotheses and therefore the student was unable to make an overall judgement
- 5) Fieldwork which did not show individuality – instead relying on generic group data. You need to show ownership and personalisation of your techniques and methods. It is a skill extracting relevant individual data from your group fieldwork.
- 6) Limited linkage to the wider geographical context or lack of a personal connection to the location and / or topic being studied.

In this Factsheet, you will find **Examiner Comments** which include additional comments and messages from Awarding Bodies.

1) The All-Important Title

How you phrase and develop a title is very much down to personal choice, but it’s worth saying that there are lots of different “types” of title. Some examples of these are shown in **Table 1**.

Examiner Comment: All the evidence suggests that the title and focus is very important for a successful NEA. You must make the title match what you intend to do and the type of data that you are going to collect. Your title must be both manageable and answerable (although it should not be a simple “yes” “no” question).

Table 1 Different title types, and a short commentary on each

Example 1	Commentary
To what extent...	This is likely to force you to evaluate the importance of some processes or factors, then consider the inter-relationships between those factors and a place.
Why does....	Is this title going to allow you to make a judgement? It could lead to a simpler “this is caused by this” type outcome which may not related to the complexity of the system being investigated.
How and why...	Should be okay, as long as you are prepared to be reflective and discuss both parts and link together processes and evidence.
Investigating the success...	Can work well, but there needs to be a clear and tight definition of “success”, and it needs to be measurable using a combination of primary and secondary data. These projects can fail if there not good enough criteria in place upon which to make judgements.
A comparison of...	Really needs a subtle or minor difference of one factor (e.g. geology, etc.) that might make two places similar, yet different. Comparisons of two very different places can be troublesome as they are simply too different and therefore difficult to compare.

Titles which attempt too much and which are at too big a scale are really going to cause problems down the line, so you need to be rigorous in this part of the planning.

Your title will likely be followed by a series of smaller aims, key questions, objectives or even mini-hypotheses. The intention of these is that they split the overarching title up into more manageable chunks. Ensure that your titles and sub-aims match well and are geographically linked. Also make sure that they don't widen the project away from the focused aim. In this example (box below), the third and fourth key questions are certainly moving far away from the original aim and making the project too big and unmanageable as well as not being fully focused.

Does the perception of Taunton High Street vary according to gender?

- 1) How do men view different aspects of the high street?
- 2) How do women view different aspects of the high street?
- 3) Does perception vary by both age and ethnicity?
- 4) How can the high street be improved for tourists?

It's at this stage that you will also likely be introduced to the proposal form, which is really part of the planning stage. In this form, you will be required to finalise your draft title and complete the proposal form before doing any data collection. Your teacher at this stage will be able to give you general guidance rather than specific feedback. Proposal forms are works in progress and sometimes you will need to revisit and refine what you have originally planned.

You should also make sure that you need to look carefully at the marking criteria and understand the balance of marks between the sections. Also, it's a requirement to demonstrate certain competencies in each section and level to get a particular mark.

In this extract from the AQA GCE mark scheme, for example, you need to be aware of both the meaning and significance of some of the key words which have been emboldened as examples in **Figure 1**. If unsure, then it's time to start a conversation with your teacher(s).

Figure 1 "Strand 1" of the AQA NEA mark scheme extract

Assessment criteria	Level 4 10-9 marks
To define the research questions which underpin field investigations. (AO3)	A research question(s) is effectively identified and is completely referenced to the specification .
To research relevant literature sources and understand and write up the theoretical or comparative context for a research question. (AO3)	Well-supported by thorough use of relevant literature sources . Theoretical and comparative contexts are well-understood and well-stated.

2) The Literature Review & Wider Geographical Context

Examiner Comment: All Awarding Body feedback reports suggested that the research and or a literature review is integral to a high-quality piece of project work.

There is a clear message that you need to try and embed research throughout the project and not to just use it as simply extra information that tells you a "narrative" about the place centred around the introduction / purpose. It is central in giving you the most up-to-date ideas linked to theory, concepts and geographical understanding.

Remember that literature comes in a range of formats (**Figure 2**) and from a variety of places and sources which are increasingly available electronically. It is these sources and documents that are so often vital to help "kick-start" the ideas that surround the investigation.

Figure 2 Examples of the range of literature that can use used to "kick-start" the investigation (many more are on offer and you need to get into some research early on in the project)

Technical reports: These are available on the internet often as '.pdf' files but can be very useful if they match your topic area. Good for concepts, theories and ideas and process that need to be explained.

Local newspapers and forums. These are good starting points especially for thinking about the local issues and conflicting views in an area.

Specialist Magazines. Publications such as *Geography Review* and *Geo Factsheets* have searchable archives. May give ideas on topics that can form a worthwhile investigation.

The literature can also help you as part of the investigation conclusions and evaluation. In this extract from a piece of work looking at the perceptions of crime, the student has managed to link the research directly to their findings.

"There are a number of important limitations to this study and to the evidence (both primary and secondary) on which it is based.

As Holmes (2015) states "all researchers recognise that official statistics do not represent the total or actual crime figure". Many crimes go unreported to the police (especially assaults) and some offences are more likely to be reported than others. He also indicates that figures are likely to fluctuate over time as police give different priorities to different crimes. So, the secondary evidence from Norfolk constabulary on which this investigation is partly based may be misleading..."

The role of the literature survey, along with a guide to using geographical concepts and ideas, will be the focus for another *Geography Factsheet* being produced later this year.

3) Choosing a Location: Understanding Timescales & Space

Examiner Comment: The correct selection of a location(s) is an important decision. Feedback from several of the Awarding Bodies indicated that many students had not given enough consideration to this aspect, and instead selected areas based on somewhat doubtful criteria.

So how do you select an area? Well, really the first question is whether to base your NEA locally, or farther away – perhaps where you have already done some fieldwork. There are a couple of considerations:

Staying local is a low-cost option

- You know the place and everything going on there.
- Access to local people, local communities and local resources (e.g. newspapers).
- There is a chance to update / revisit your data if you don't collect enough, and makes time considerations straight forward.
- Likely that your study will show more independence because it'll be focused on a place you know and it won't be the "big-group" approach.
- But is it exciting and is it a place that interests and inspires you to follow the type of geography project that you want to do? Most local areas are surprisingly good for a variety of physical and human options.

Going distant (where you did your fieldwork)

- You'll know that what you're doing is geographical – it's been planned that way.
- You can use group data (but you need to individualise it – see later).
- You can make sure your work is unique – your teacher double-checks titles.
- But you might need to return for more data – so how might this happen?

Having narrowed down the broad location, it then becomes a question of scale. Generally, the bigger your area the choose the more complex the decisions are in terms of sample size, timing, frequency, etc. (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3 The relationship between scale, sample size and complexity of decisions

Small area site, e.g. a few streets/output area within a single town	Decisions will be more straightforward in terms of design since the focus should be based on smaller sample spacing and frequency	Increasing complexity of sampling decisions and more samples for reliability
Intermediate area site, e.g. small sub-catchment scale	In addition to the above, decisions will also need to select suitable areas for study, e.g. a consideration of access, time between sites, health and safety etc.	
Largest area, e.g. 10's of km² with a mixture of land-use and land type	In addition to both the above, decisions may also need to consider nature and type of data (linked to a broader focus) as well as perhaps temporal decisions	

Adapted from David Holmes / Pearson Edexcel (2017)

You can use secondary data and research to also help with site decisions at more of a local scale. Say for example you are working in a coastal area doing some comparative physical-process geography. A local large-scale geology map or even shoreline management plan may help you understand the workings of the littoral or sediment cell

and from that you can select areas to work in that might be different, but similar. Alternatively, you may select an area based more on geological comparison of similar micro-features. Again, this is useful for comparisons. **Figure 4-6** show alternative examples of GIS maps that help you to define and understand "purposeful boundaries". In the urban setting, census output areas are very important since much of the secondary data (e.g. population counts, deprivation indices, etc.) are available (and therefore comparable). Using these boundaries, you will more easily be able to analyse data and use GIS for instance.

Figure 4 BGS online geology map – can help to determine similar areas to study (<http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html>)

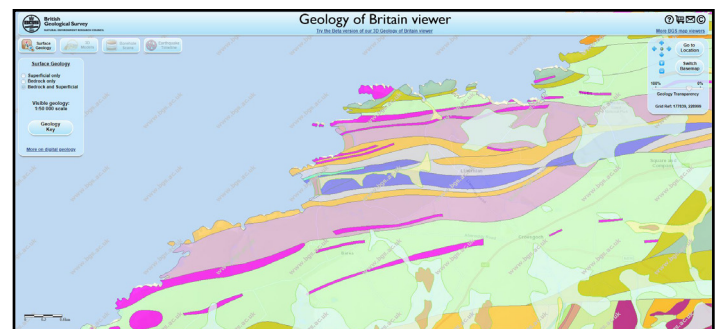


Figure 5 Magic.gov.uk – a local landscape map showing the boundaries of a woodland which can help define the local study area (<https://magic.defra.gov.uk/MagicMap.aspx>)

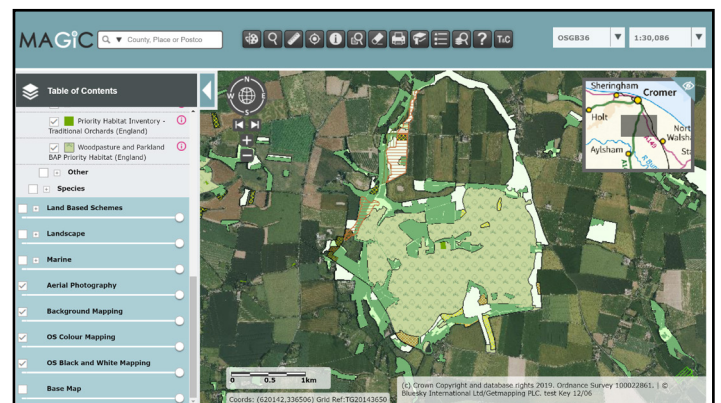
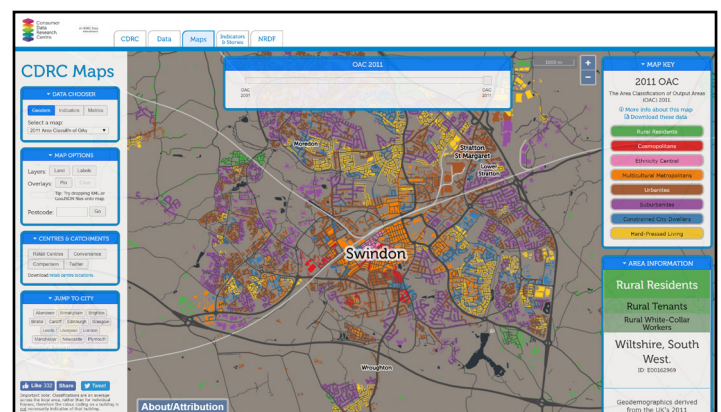


Figure 6 A local GIS map showing output area classifications for example, can be useful in site selection to give you a purposeful boundary" (<https://maps.cdrac.ac.uk/#/geodemographics/oac11/default/BTTTTFT/12.99936683046468/-1.7893/51.5644/>)



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It's important to recognise that in your methodology you will need to show that you have thought about where you have collected data, how often and at what times. All these considerations have an impact on the quality of outcome, and ultimately how much you trust your conclusions

Another aspect to consider might be timescales. You might think about a study based on different time intervals, since the places you visit and investigate are constantly changing, often minute-to-minute and day-to-day.

Table 2 Different types of timescales and examples for the NEA

Time interval	Examples
Minute-to-minute	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pedestrian flows (e.g. changes in footfall outside certain areas or shops counting / "clicking" for one minute). • Wave height and frequency over 5 minutes. • Wind speed as part of a micro-climate survey in an urban landscape.
Daily or weekly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in day time and night time economy in a town. • Before and after a storm on a beach. • Traffic flows for big sporting events (e.g. football matches).
Seasonally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beach gradients and shape (influenced by wave type). • Cliff shape and gradients. • Tourism flows (e.g. high season vs low season in a resort).
Over a few years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes on a high street in terms of shops and retail (use Google Street-view to "go back in time"). • Use oral histories (interviews) to ask people how a place has changed, say the last 5 – 10 years. • Local census data which is collected every 10 years (e.g. 1991, 2001 and 2011).
Historical period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use GIS to calculate historic rates of coastal erosion using old OS maps and digital measuring tools. • Using old postcards and images to see the evidence for change in a coastal resort. • Archive weather and climate data to see if patterns, events and trends are different to the present day.

Acknowledgements: This *Geography Factsheet* was researched and written by **David Holmes**, who works as a Geography consultant and author, and is a former Geography teacher. He has a particular interest in technology and fieldwork. He can be contacted on david@david-holmes-geography.co.uk. This Factsheet was published in April 2019 by Curriculum Press. Geo Factsheets may be copied free of charge by teaching staff or students, provided that their school is a registered subscriber. No part of these Factsheets may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any other form or by any other means, without the prior permission of the publisher. **ISSN 1351-5136**

It's important to see that fieldwork observations spread over a number of days for instance *may* yield much more reliable evidence and stronger conclusions in many situations. You will know more about a place and how it operates. This approach could also be combined with a pilot survey, or "practice run" to test any equipment and methodologies that need to be used. A pilot survey should give a clear insight into the feasibility and timings of your investigation, as well offering a practical opportunity to trial.

Examples of how a pilot survey can help before the main data collection event

- Pre-test questionnaires.
- Find out when there are most visitors (days and times).
- Talk to the bike shop owner and find out if they can be interviewed at a convenient time.
- Take some photographs in case the weather is poor at a later date.
- Complete a brief risk assessment and consider ethical issues.
- Try to work out the best places (sites) to collect data.
- Collect any leaflets and look for links to online supporting resources.
- Find out whether you can contact managers of the mountain-bike facility.



Conclusions

The evidence produced from the different Awarding Bodies stresses the importance of careful planning and research. It's also clear that the topic studied must be something that ignites your interest but is also manageable and achievable. If you can find a piece of published research or a technical document that contains an adaptable methodology as well as a comparable context then you should be well on the way to individuality and a successful outcome.

In Part 2 we will look at the later stages of enquiry, with a focus on the lessons learnt from data collection, presentations, analysis, conclusions and evaluation.

References and Further Reading

- Autumn 2018 Update from Awarding Organisations – A Level geography 2016. Independent Investigation Report and Written Report. Download from the different Awarding Bodies, such as: <https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/geography/AQA-7037-NEA-UPDATE-AO.PDF>.
- Magic map can be found here <https://magic.defra.gov.uk/MagicMap.aspx> and CDRC Maps and data here <https://www.cdrc.ac.uk/>.
- The BGS (British Geological Survey) online geology map viewer can be accessed here: <http://mapapps.bgs.ac.uk/geologyofbritain/home.html>
- The Edexcel Fieldwork Planner and guide (in most part, useful for all Awarding Bodies) is here: <https://qualifications.pearson.com/content/dam/pdf/A%20Level/Geography/2016/teaching-and-learning-materials/Fieldwork-Planner-and-Guide.pdf>