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Ofqual student guide to exams and assessments in 2026

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Guidance

What you need to know before your exams

Published 15 January 2026

Applies to England

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Arrangements for exams and assessments

Your school or college enters you for the exams and assessments for the qualifications you are taking.

If you are unsure about any aspects of the exams or assessments you are entered for, you should speak to your school or college.

When are my exams;

GCSE, AS and A level exam dates

GCSE, AS and A level exams will be held between 7 May and 23 June 2026. You must be available for the whole of the exam period. Key dates for the 2026 summer exam series of GCSEs, AS and A levels are available on the Joint Council for Qualifications website (https://www.jcq.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2025/05/Key_Dates_June2026_FINAL.pdf).

The exam timetable contains a contingency day on 24 June 2026. You must be available at this time. This session would be used in the unlikely event that an exam had to be moved nationally because it could not take place when planned. This session cannot be used to reschedule an exam that you have missed. If an exam must be moved to this session, your school or college will tell you.

In GCSE English language and GCSE mathematics, exams are also available in November, but only for students who are aged 16 or above on 31 August of that year.

Key dates for the 2026 November exam series of GCSEs will be available on the JCQ website (https://www.jcq.org.uk/exams-office/key-dates-andtimetables/).

VTQ exams and assessments

Assessment dates for vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) and T Levels vary depending on the qualification, with assessments throughout the year. Dates will be available on awarding organisations' websites. Your school or college will tell you when your exams or assessments are scheduled.

Exam timetable

Your school or college will give you your individual timetable for exams and assessments. You should check this carefully so that you don't miss an exam or assessment. If you think there are mistakes in your timetable or if you are not sure about the timing of any exams or assessments, check with your school or college.

For many qualifications, including GCSE, AS and A levels, there will not be another opportunity to sit the exam or assessment until the following year. So, if you miss the exam because, for example, you forget about it, you will not receive any marks from it and will not be able to take it on a different day.

For some VTQs, if you miss an assessment, it may be possible to take the assessment at a later point in the year. Your school or college will be able to advise you.

If you have missed an exam or assessment, you should speak to your school or college as soon as possible.

What happens if exams can't go ahead nationally?

It is very unlikely that formal exams and assessments would be cancelled but, just in case something does happen, there are resilience arrangements in place for GCSE, AS and A levels, Project Qualifications and Advanced Extension Awards.

Ofqual has asked schools and colleges to gather evidence (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-collecting-evidence-ofstudent-performance-to-ensure-resilience-in-the-qualifications-system) of your work during the year that could be used to determine grades for GCSE, AS and A levels, project qualifications and advanced extension awards. This evidence would be used in the unlikely event that national exams and assessments could not go ahead as planned. Schools and colleges have been told that this evidence should come from assessments that students normally take, for example, mock exams. Your teachers should tell you when you are taking assessments that could be used as evidence, but you should just approach those assessments as you normally would.

For qualifications used alongside or instead of GCSEs, AS and A levels, Ofqual has asked awarding organisations to decide if schools and colleges need to gather evidence that could be used to determine grades. Many VTQs are modular and often have a high proportion of non-exam (internal) assessment. This means that evidence will already be generated during your course of study and so no additional evidence is needed.

For other qualifications, including those assessed mainly through exams (such as T Levels), awarding organisations may decide that evidence needs to be collected. If this is the case, awarding organisations will provide guidance to your school or college. As with GCSEs, AS and A levels, your teachers should tell you when you are taking assessments that could be used as evidence.

Students should expect that exams and assessments will go ahead. Further information will be provided to schools and colleges in the unlikely event that exams could not go ahead as planned.

What is the difference between a foundation and higher paper?

Some GCSE subjects have 2 tiers of entry - foundation and higher. The subjects with tiers of entry are:

- maths
- combined science
- physics
- chemistry
- biology
- statistics
- modern foreign languages

Your school or college decides whether to enter you for foundation or higher tier.

If you are a private candidate, please discuss which tier you wish to be entered for with the school or college that you have registered with.

Foundation tier: students may be awarded grades 5 to 1 (5-5 to 1-1 in combined science).

Higher tier: students may be awarded grades 9 to 4 (9-9 to 4-4 in combined science). Students who just miss a grade 4 (4-4 for combined science) may be awarded a grade 3 (4-3 for combined science).

If you do not get enough marks to get a grade, you will receive a ‘U’.

Before your exams you should make sure you know which tier you are taking so that you can prepare for, and take, the correct exam paper.

Support materials for GCSE mathematics, physics and combined science

In 2024, the Department for Education (DfE) confirmed that students taking exams in 2026 and 2027 will not be expected to memorise all the usual formulae and equations for GCSE mathematics, physics and combined science.

You will be provided with support materials in the form of formulae and equation sheets for these exams in 2026, like students were in 2025. An extra formulae sheet will be provided for the Level 3 free-standing mathematics qualification.

The support materials will set out the formulae and equations that students must memorise in a normal year, as set out in the DfE's subject content.

What is an access arrangement?

Access arrangements is a term often used to describe changes made to an assessment, or to the way the assessment is taken, that allow students with specific needs, such as disabilities, special educational needs or temporary injury or illness, to access the assessment without changing the demands of the assessment.

Access arrangements provided for disabled students, to address the disadvantage caused by their disability, are **Reasonable Adjustments**. Disabled students are entitled to Reasonable Adjustments under the Equality Act 2010. Reasonable Adjustments seek to enable disabled students to show their knowledge, skills and understanding in assessments. The exam or assessment must still test the same knowledge, skills and understanding for that qualification.

Awarding organisations may also provide access arrangements where a student experiences a temporary illness or injury, or some other event outside of their control at the time of the assessment. This type of access arrangement is provided as **Special Consideration**. There are other forms of Special Consideration – see the section in 'What you should know during your exams and assessments' (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofqual-student-guide-to-exams-andassessments-in-2026/what-you-should-know-during-your-exams-andassessments#what-if-i-am-ill-or-something-else-affects-my-exams-or-assessments).

What type of access arrangements (including Reasonable Adjustments) are available?

Awarding organisations can make a wide range of adjustments to their exams or assessments. Some of the most common access arrangements are:

- changes to exam papers, for example, large print or Braille help with
- specific tasks, for example, another person might read questions to you or write your dictated answers
- extra time or supervised rest breaks to complete assessments changes to how the
- assessment is completed, for example, wordprocessing rather than handwriting answers

Different access arrangements are available depending on the needs of individual students. If you think you need an access arrangement, it is important that you speak to your school or college as soon as possible.

Your school or college will have someone who organises these arrangements - a special educational needs and disabilities co-ordinator (SENDCo) in schools, and a named

person in colleges. They can give you more information about access arrangements and Reasonable Adjustments and whether they apply to you.

Where, in exceptional circumstances, your school or college cannot make suitable access arrangements or Reasonable Adjustments so that you can take your examinations, the awarding organisation may be able to consider alternative assessment arrangements. You should speak to your school or college as soon as possible so they can discuss your individual circumstances with the relevant awarding organisation. Only the relevant awarding organisation can decide whether to consider alternative assessment arrangements based on individual student circumstances.

You can find more information about access arrangements and Reasonable Adjustments for GCSEs, AS, A levels and some VTQs in this JCQ guidance. (https://www.jcq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/JCQ-AARA-2025_FINAL.pdf)

Awarding organisations offering other VTQs and T Levels provide information about Reasonable Adjustments and access arrangements on their websites.

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What you should know during your exams and assessments

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What if I am ill or something else affects my exams or assessments?

What happens if you cheat?

How should I prepare for my exams and assessments?

Speak to your teachers or exams officer before your exams and assessments to make sure you know what will happen and what you need to do. For example:

- make sure you have your own timetable and know where and when your exams or assessments will be, including when you need to arrive
- know what equipment you're allowed to take in for each exam or assessment – this includes approved calculators that are only allowed in some exams and assessments
- use a clear pencil case and, if you need a water bottle, remove the label
- don't take a mobile phone, watch or any other electronic device into an exam, even if it is switched off, as you could lose marks or be disqualified
- when you receive your exam paper, check it has the correct information on it, for example, date, name and tier of exam
- if you are not sure about anything, raise this immediately with the exam invigilator
- listen carefully and follow all instructions given by the exam invigilator

What if I am ill or something else affects my exams or assessments?

Special Consideration is any adjustment given to a student who has experienced a temporary illness, injury or event outside of their control at the time of the exam or assessment, which significantly affects their ability to take an exam or assessment.

Special Consideration is only for things that happen immediately before or during an exam or assessment that have a significant effect on a student's ability to take that exam or assessment, or on how they perform. It is important that qualification results reflect what students know, understand and can do at that time.

To be eligible for Special Consideration you must have been fully prepared for the assessment and have covered the whole course. You will not be eligible for Special Consideration because you did not cover the course due to joining the class part way through, or if your education was disrupted due to staff shortages, planned building work or a lack of facilities.

The 3 types of Special Consideration are:

- changes to the way assessments are taken if a student has temporarily experienced an illness or injury, referred to as 'access arrangements' - for example, a student with a broken arm may have someone write their dictated answers

- a small number of extra marks may be awarded if your exam performance is affected by temporary illness, injury, or other unforeseen circumstance
- awarding a grade if you unavoidably missed an exam or assessment, as long as you have completed at least one other exam or assessment for that qualification

If you think you might be eligible for Special Consideration, you should talk to your school or college as soon as possible.

There is further information available for GCSE, AS, A level and some VTQs in the JCQ publication: A guide to the special consideration process (https://www.jcq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/JCQ-A-guide-to-the-specialconsideration-process-FINAL_2025_26.pdf).

What happens if you cheat?

Malpractice involves cheating or some form of wrongdoing. Examples include:

- sharing answers
- impersonation
- leaking exam papers or other assessment materials or using leaked materials swapping scripts
- inappropriate use of artificial intelligence (AI)
- smuggling information to help you in your exam into exam halls taking mobile
- phones and communication devices into exam halls
- You must not wear a watch in the exam or take a mobile phone into the exam hall with you, as doing so will also be treated as malpractice.

All work submitted as part of exams and assessments must be in your own words, you must reference any sources you use, including any AI tools. Check with your teacher before using AI tools as rules vary by qualification. If AI use is allowed it must be referenced correctly. Incorrect use of AI tools or failing to reference its use is malpractice.

You may see websites or individuals offering leaked exam papers or other assessment materials before your exams or assessments. Do not look at any papers or materials offered in this way. They are probably fake. Attempting to look at exam papers before the exam, even if they are fake, can be considered malpractice.

If you cheat or commit malpractice you could face serious consequences, including being disqualified from your qualifications.

How to report suspected malpractice

If you see or suspect malpractice in exams and assessments, you should report it to a teacher or exams officer. Your school or college must report any potential malpractice to the awarding organisation.

All allegations of malpractice are taken extremely seriously and will be investigated.

If you would rather not talk to your school or college, you can contact the relevant awarding organisation or Ofqual (https://complaints.ofqual.gov.uk/).

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How are my exams and assessments marked?

After you have taken your exam or assessment, your work will be marked. Awarding organisations decide how this is done. Your work could be marked on paper or online and could be marked by several different markers. Awarding organisations check markers' work at every stage to make sure it is consistent and high quality.

Marking of exam papers

After you have taken your exams, your scripts are sent to the awarding organisations for marking.

Typically, exam scripts are split up into individual questions. An individual examiner marks different students' responses to the same question, using a mark scheme that they have been trained on.

Awarding organisations check markers' work as they progress through their allocated scripts to make sure marking is consistent and high-quality.

Exam scripts are marked completely anonymously - the marker doesn't know who the student is, or what school or college they're from.

Marking of non-exam assessments

If your qualification includes non-exam assessment, for example course work or a performance, this may be marked by the awarding organisation or by your teacher, depending on the awarding organisation's requirements. If you have concerns about how your non-exam assessment has been marked or how your provisional grade has been worked out, speak to your school or college.

Where assessments for GCSE, AS, A levels and T Levels are marked by your teacher, you must be told the marks given. If you do not think your mark is correct, you can ask your school or college for a review of your teacher's marking before your marks are given to the awarding organisation. Someone not previously involved in the marking will review your work. Speak to your school or college for information about how to do this.

The awarding organisation then checks your school or college's marking meets its expectations. Some awarding organisations call this moderation, while others might call it standards verification.

Awarding organisations check teachers' marking of non-exam assessments so that marking is consistent across all schools and colleges. Awarding organisations might look at a sample of work from your school or college to check that the marking is in line with the national standard. If the marking of the sample is in line with the national standard, then no change will be made to the marks given. However, if marking is found to be too strict or too generous, marks will be adjusted to make sure you receive an accurate mark. Your work might be included in that sample.

How are grade boundaries decided?

It is no more difficult to achieve a grade in a subject from one year to the next, or between different exam boards. This means that the standard of work to achieve a particular grade in 2026 will be comparable to summer 2025.

Grade boundaries often vary year to year, to reflect fairly any changes in how difficult the exam is that year. The quality of your work in your exams determines the grade you get, and no-one is advantaged or disadvantaged by the year in which they happen to sit an exam.

Awarding organisations set grade boundaries after exam papers or assessments have been marked. There are no quotas for the number of students who must pass or fail a subject each year, and no cap on the number of students that can get each grade. The proportion of students receiving different grades does vary a little each year. But the standard of work required to receive a particular grade remains comparable.

More information about how grading works in GCSE, AS and A levels can be found in Ofqual's Understanding grading toolkit for schools and colleges (https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/understanding-grading-toolkit-forschools-and-colleges? utm_source=2026+student+guide&utm_medium=2026+student+guide).

For some VTQs, each piece of assessed work will be given a grade, and these will be combined to give your final overall grade.

Where qualifications are new, and in the first years they are awarded, we ask awarding organisations to take into account the fact that teachers and students may be less familiar with new assessments when setting grade boundaries.

This will be the case for some Technical Qualifications within T Levels, and new Alternative Academic Qualifications.

When is results day?

The date you receive your results will depend on the qualification you are taking, the way it has been assessed, and the awarding organisation.

You will receive A level, AS and T Level results on **Thursday 13 August 2026**.

If you are studying a Level 3 VTQ and are planning to use your results to progress to higher education, you will receive your results on or before **Thursday 13 August 2026**.

You will receive GCSE results on **Thursday 20 August 2026**.

If you are studying a Level 2 or Level 1/2 VTQ and are planning to use your results to progress to further education, you will receive your results on or before **Thursday 20 August 2026**.

Some VTQs are taken on-demand and results for these will be available at different times throughout the year. You can find the date you will receive your qualification results on the website of the relevant awarding organisation, or you can ask your school or college.

Results for GCSEs taken in November 2025 were released to students on **Thursday 8 January 2026**.

If you have concerns about when you will receive your results or what your results are, you should speak to your school or college who will be able to help you.

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How do I request a review of my results?

If you think there has been a mistake in the marking of your exams or assessments, you should talk to your school or college.

Your school or college can use the relevant awarding organisations' Access to Scripts service to request a copy of your marked assessment or exam paper – this can help them decide whether to request a review of marking.

Your school or college can ask the awarding organisation to check if there were any errors in how your exam or assessment was marked (known as a review of marking). Most awarding organisations do not accept requests directly from students. Your school or college will need your permission to request a review of marking, and the awarding organisation may charge a fee for a review of marking.

Schools and colleges must give students the opportunity to appeal against any decision they take not to ask the awarding organisation to review its marking. If a school or college (or a student, where the awarding organisation allows them to) requests a review, the awarding organisation must do this in line with Ofqual's rules and communicate the outcome of the review to the school or college or student.

If you are a private candidate, you can contact the awarding organisation directly to ask for your marked paper or a review of marking. Or you can ask the school or college you took your exam at to put in a request for you.

If your school or college asks for a review of marking and the awarding organisation does not find any mistakes, your mark will not change, so your grade will not change. If the awarding organisation finds a mistake, your mark could go up or down. If your mark changes, this could mean that your grade stays the same, goes up or goes down.

An awarding organisation cannot give you extra marks just because your mark was close to a grade boundary or because you did not get the grade your school or college predicted. It is important to remember that, in most years, only around 20% of students accepted to university meet or exceed the grades they were predicted. If you don't get the grade your school or college predicted, it does not automatically mean something has gone wrong with the marking or grading of your exam.

For GCSE, AS and A level and T Levels, your school or college can apply for a review of moderation of non-exam assessment that was marked by your teacher, if marks were changed by the awarding organisation following moderation. This review would apply to all students taking the qualification at your school or college, not just to you.

If the awarding organisation finds a mistake with the moderation, your grade could stay the same or go up, but it cannot go down.

The awarding organisation may charge fees for reviews of marking or moderation if your grade does not change. There will be no fees if your grade changes following a review. Your school or college will be able to tell you about any fees that you may need to pay.

If you are not sure whether this would apply to the qualification you are taking, you should speak to your school or college.

Deadlines

Awarding organisations publish details of the deadlines for requesting access to scripts, seeking reviews of marking or moderation, and appeals, on their websites.

Your school or college can request a priority review of marking if you need the outcome of the review to get your higher or further education place. Awarding organisations will aim to complete priority reviews by 3 September 2026, which is UCAS's advisory deadline for higher education providers to hold places open for students.

If you are a private candidate, you should make your request for a priority review directly to the awarding organisation.

Can I appeal over the review of my marks?

For all qualifications, if you and your school or college still have concerns after a review of marking or a review of moderation, your school or college can challenge the review decision through an appeal. If you are a private candidate, you can submit an appeal about a review of marking (not moderation) directly to the awarding organisation. The possible outcomes of an appeal are the same as for reviews of marking or moderation, explained above. Your school or college will be able to tell you about any fees you may need to pay.

Your school or college can also challenge awarding organisations' decisions about Reasonable Adjustments, Special Consideration, other administrative decisions and malpractice sanctions. If you have concerns about any of these decisions, speak to your school or college.

What if I still have concerns about my results?

If your qualification is a GCSE, AS or A level, Level 3 Project (EPQ) or Technical Qualification within a T Level, and your school or college thinks the review of marking or moderation and/or appeal were not completed properly, they can ask Ofqual to review the case. This is called the exam procedures review service (EPRS). An application can only be made to EPRS after your case has been considered at the awarding organisation's final appeal stage. There is no fee for the EPRS.

The EPRS will look at whether the awarding organisation has followed its own procedures and Ofqual's rules. Ofqual will not review your work or change your grade. Your grade will only change if the awarding organisation decides your grade was wrong and needs to be corrected. It is important to remember that a new grade could be higher or lower. Ofqual can ask the awarding organisation to look at your appeal again if we

think the awarding organisation has made a mistake when it completed the review of marking or moderation, or when it considered your appeal.

See guidance on the EPRS (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/exam-proceduresreview-service) for more information.

When can I resit my exams?

For GCSE English language and GCSE maths, exams are available in November, but only for students who were aged 16 or above on 31 August of that year.

As most exams for GCSEs, AS and A level take place in May or June each year, students who want to resit these exams would need to wait until the following summer to do so.

Students who resit exams for GCSEs, AS and A level would need to resit all exam components. Students can either retake or carry forward their nonexam assessments.

Some VTQs have assessments throughout the year. Students may be able to take their assessment again, at the next available opportunity.

You should talk to your school or college if you would like more information about resits.

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Ofqual

You can find the most up to date information about the arrangements for 2025 to 2026 on Ofqual's latest updates page (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-rolling-update?utm_source=2026+student+guide&utm_medium=2026+student+guide).

Ofqual's grading toolkit (https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/understanding-grading-toolkit-forschools-and-colleges?utm_source=2026+student+guide&utm_medium=2026+student+guide) explains how GCSE and A level qualifications are graded, from exam marking to the setting of grade boundaries.

Ofqual's YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/@ofqual/videos) contains videos about exam and assessment arrangements.

Contact Ofqual (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/contact-ofqual?utm_source=2026+student+guide&utm_medium=2026+student+guide) - click on the 'enquiries' option.

Telephone: 0300 303 3344

Our phone line is normally open from 9am to 5pm on weekdays – please check our website for opening times on and after results days.

If you want to complain to Ofqual about an exam board or awarding organisation, for example, because you think they have not followed their own policies or Ofqual's rules, see our complaints procedure (https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual/about/complaints-procedure?utm_source=2026+student+guide&utm_medium=2026+student+guide). We would usually expect you to give the awarding organisation a chance to resolve your complaint by using their complaints process before coming to us.

Queries about your qualifications

If you have any questions about the qualifications you are taking, or about preparing for your exams and assessments, you should talk to your school or college first. Your school or college will then contact the relevant awarding organisation on your behalf if necessary.

Details of all awarding organisations that deliver qualifications that Ofqual regulates are available via Ofqual's find a regulated awarding organisation (https://www.gov.uk/check-awarding-body-recognised) service.

Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ)

JCQ (https://www.jcq.org.uk/) is the membership organisation for exam boards (AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC). Exam boards use JCQ to set common policies and procedures that schools and colleges must follow.

JCQ has published information for students (https://www.jcq.org.uk/examsoffice/information-for-candidates-documents/) on the 2025 to 2026 arrangements.

JCQ's members also include CCEA, City and Guilds, NCFE and SQA, developing and delivering many vocational and technical qualifications (including T Levels) in England.

Information and contact: JCQ website (https://www.jcq.org.uk/)

National Careers Service

The National Careers Service (https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/) provides free and impartial careers advice, information and guidance, including on T Levels and VTQs (https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/explore-your-educationand-training-choices).

UCAS

UCAS (https://www.ucas.com/), the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, is the UK's shared admissions service for higher education.

For any questions about higher education application and admissions, you should contact the relevant institution directly.

Telephone: 0371 468 0 468

Lines are open Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 6pm.

Equality Advisory and Support Services (EASS)

Equality Advisory and Support Service (EASS) (https://www.equalityadvisoryservice.com/) advises and assists individuals on issues relating to equality and human rights, across England, Scotland and Wales.

Telephone: 0808 800 0082

Textphone: 0808 800 0084

Mental health support

Always make sure you speak to somebody if you are feeling anxious or struggling with your mental health. This might be a parent, carer or someone else you trust.

You may find it helpful to read our resources on preparing for exams (https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2022/02/10/what-sorts-of-things-might-help-you-preparefor-exams/?utm_source=2026+student+guide&utm_medium=2026+student+guide) – including Ofqual's guide to coping with exam pressure (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coping-with-exam-pressure-a-guidefor-students?utm_source=2026+student+guide&utm_medium=2026+student+guide) and our blog on what schools can do about exam and test anxiety (https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2019/03/15/what-can-schools-do-about-examination-andtest-anxiety/? utm_source=2026+student+guide&utm_medium=2026+student+guide).

Other organisations

Childline (https://www.childline.org.uk/) is a service provided by the NSPCC offering confidential support and advice to children and young people.

Mind (https://www.mind.org.uk/) is a charity providing mental health support for anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

Young Minds (https://www.youngminds.org.uk/) is a charity working to improve emotional well-being and mental health amongst children and young people.

NHS - Mental health support for children and young people (https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/mental-health-services-foryoung-people/children-young-people-mental-health-services-cypmhs/) are services that work with children and young people who have difficulties with their mental health or wellbeing.