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Guidance

# What you need to know before your exams

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**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.

# As a private candidate, how do I register for exams and assessments?

If you are a private candidate (so you do not go to school or college), you will need to register, as soon as possible, at a school or college or other exam centre to sit your exams.

If you are looking for somewhere to take your GCSE, AS and A level exams, you or your parents or carers can contact any school, college or other exam centre to ask whether they offer entries for private candidates. Not all schools and colleges accept entries for private candidates.

If you need Reasonable Adjustments or access arrangements for your exams you will need to discuss this with your chosen school, college or the exam centre as early as possible – for example, when you ask them to make your exam entry. JCQ has produced a guide to access arrangements for school and colleges accepting private candidates (https://www.jcq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/An-overview-of-the-access-arrangements-and-reasonable-adjustments-process-for-centres-accepting-private-candidates_24-FINAL.pdf) that you may find helpful.

For GCSE, AS and A level exams, JCQ has a list of schools and colleges (https://www.jcq.org.uk/private-candidates/) that accept exam entries for private candidates. This list is updated at the end of each calendar year.

If you are a private candidate studying for a VTQ, you should contact your awarding organisation to understand your options for assessment.

# 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/wp-content/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-and-timetables/).

## 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-of-student-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.

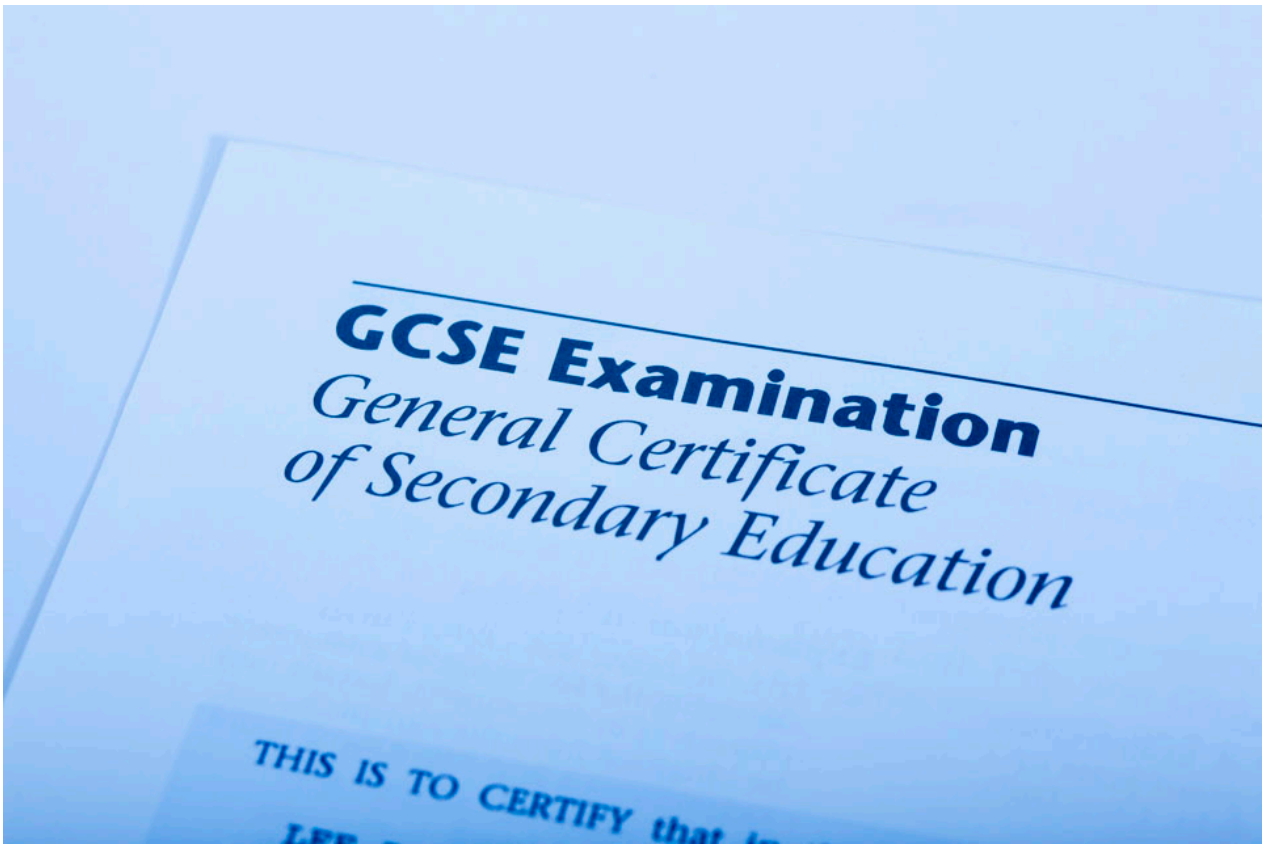
Students should expect that exams and assessments will go ahead. Further information will be provided to schools and colleges in the unlikely event that exams could not go ahead as planned.

## Private candidates

If you are a private candidate and have already registered to take your exams at a school or college, you might want that school or college to assess you during the academic year, alongside their students, in line with the published resilience guidance. The school or college may agree to do so, although they would need to make sure the assessments only cover content that you had studied.

If the government considered that national exams could not take place, the Department for Education would explore ways to encourage schools and colleges to work with private candidates.

# 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-and-assessments-in-2026/what-you-should-know-during-your-exams-and-assessments#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, word-processing 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.

If you are a private candidate, please be aware that JCQ publishes guidance (https://www.jcq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/An-overview-of-the-access-arrangements-and-reasonable-adjustments-process-for-centres-accepting-private-candidates_2025_FINAL.pdf) on access arrangements for schools and colleges accepting private candidates.

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