

How to prepare for the ESAT

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THE SHORT ANSWER

Each module gives you 27 questions in 40 minutes, which is 89 seconds a question with no calculator. Almost nobody finishes early: in the 2024–25 cycle the median candidate used the full 40 minutes in four of the five modules. What follows is the order I would put a student through, a six-week sprint and a twelve-week plan with hours, and the warning about the specimen papers that most guides leave out.

Checked against the sources named in this guide, August 2026. British English. Free to share.

For 2027 entry · Checked against UAT-UK, August 2026 · About 14 minutes to read

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1 What the ESAT actually is

Five modules: Mathematics 1, Biology, Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics 2. Everybody sits Mathematics 1. Most courses ask for Mathematics 1 and two others, which puts most candidates through [120 minutes of testing](#) in one appointment. Which two you sit is set by the course, not by you, so read the admissions page of every course on your UCAS form before you plan a single hour of revision.

Every module has the same shape. [27 multiple-choice questions, 40 minutes, separately timed](#). Finish a module early and the spare minutes are gone; the specification says plainly that time is not carried over. The test runs on a computer, you are given an erasable booklet to work on, and calculators are not permitted.

Marking is the friendliest part of the whole exam. Each correct answer scores one mark and nothing is taken off for a wrong one. That single rule has a consequence worth acting on: a blank can only ever score zero, and a guess cannot score less than that. In the last minute of every module, fill in every empty box.

Results come back as one scaled score from 1.0 to 9.0 per module, to one decimal place. There is [no overall ESAT score](#) and no pass mark. UAT-UK fixed the scale so the median candidate lands on 4.5 and the 90th percentile on 7.0, and in October 2024 it landed almost exactly there. If you want the full picture of what a number means, we built [a page that puts any score on the real distribution](#) and a [score converter](#) that turns a mark out of 27 into the range it could be worth.

1.1 Mathematics 1 is the floor under everything

The specification lists the knowledge assumed for each module, and every one of the five assumes the Mathematics 1 content on top of its own. Biology assumes it. Chemistry assumes it. Mathematics 2 is defined as Mathematics 1 plus a second list. So Mathematics 1 is not one-fifth of your preparation. A rearrangement you have to think about, or a surd you cannot simplify on sight, costs you seconds in Physics and Chemistry too.

Read the Mathematics 1 topic list in Appendix 1 and the second surprise arrives. Units, number, ratio and proportion, algebra, geometry, statistics, probability. That is GCSE content. The difficulty is not in the syllabus; it is in having 89 seconds, no calculator, and a question that has been written to make you think rather than recall. The specification says the test is built to separate able applicants “including those who might have achieved the highest possible grades in school examinations”.

Mathematics 2 is where genuinely new material arrives: differentiating x^n and using it for tangents and stationary points, definite integration for the area under a curve, the laws of logarithms, radian measure, the sine and cosine rules, the equation of a circle, and the binomial expansion of $(1 + x)^n$ for positive integer powers.

1.2 The dates you cannot miss

For 2027 entry there are two sittings, and [UAT-UK publishes the deadlines](#) for both. The October window runs 12 to 16 October 2026, registration closes at 6pm BST on 28 September 2026, and results are released on 16 November 2026. The January window runs 4 to 8 January 2027, booking opens on 26 October 2026, registration closes at 6pm GMT on 21 December 2026, and results follow on 8 February 2027. Most Cambridge and Oxford applicants have to sit in October.

1 Two deadlines fall before the registration one

Access arrangements for the October sitting close on 14 September 2026, and bursary applications on 21 September 2026, a fortnight and a week ahead of registration respectively. If either applies to you, work back from those dates rather than from the 28 September one. [UAT-UK, key dates](#).

2 What it is not

The ESAT took over from the NSAA and the ENGAA, and it is a different exam rather than the old ones under a new name. The [2023 NSAA Section 1](#) gave you 60 minutes on paper for Part A Mathematics, which everyone sat, plus one part chosen from Physics, Chemistry or Biology, 20 questions each, and there was a written Section 2 afterwards. The [2023 ENGAA Section 1](#) used the same hour for Part A Mathematics and Physics and Part B Advanced Mathematics and Advanced Physics, again 20 questions each. The ESAT keeps the multiple-choice format, the no-calculator rule and the no-penalty marking, drops the written section, moves onto a computer, and cuts the unit of work down to a 40-minute module that is scored on its own. One thing barely moved: 40 questions in 60 minutes is 90 seconds each, and 27 in 40 minutes is 88.9. That near-identical pace is why the old papers are still the best free practice you can get, and the difference in structure is why an NSAA total tells you nothing about an ESAT score. There is no ESAT total to compare it with.

3 The path, in five moves

The reason most ESAT preparation goes wrong is not effort. It is that people start at step two. They open a topic they half remember, work through it because it feels like progress, and never find out that the thing costing them six marks a module was somewhere else entirely. Do these in order.

- 1. Diagnose before you revise.** Sit one timed set per module before you open a single textbook. You are not trying to score well; you are trying to find out which topics are slow and which are simply missing. Then read the Appendix 1 list for your modules with a pen and mark every line you could not do cold in 90 seconds. Those two lists together are your syllabus for the next six weeks.
- 2. Fix the biggest gap, not the nicest one.** Rank what the diagnosis found by how many marks it is worth and start at the top. This will be uncomfortable, because the top of that list is usually the thing you have been avoiding since Year 12. Work one topic at a time, untimed, with the working written out in full. You are buying accuracy here; speed comes later and only works on things you can already do.

- Interleave once the gap closes.** Blocked practice makes you feel fluent and hides the hardest skill the ESAT tests: working out what kind of question you are looking at. When you do twenty questions on moments in a row, question twenty is free. Mix modules and topics into every set from here on, so that recognising the problem is part of the work.
- Mock under the real clock.** A full mock means every module you are sitting, back to back, 40 minutes each, no pauses, no phone, no calculator, working on one sheet of scrap paper because that is what you get. Sit it at the time of day your appointment is booked for. The first one will be worse than your practice sets, and that gap is the useful part.
- Review the misses harder than you did the questions.** Reading a solution is not reviewing. Rework each wrong question from a blank page, then write down which of four causes it was, because each one has a different fix.

2 The four causes of a wrong answer

Keep this list beside your mock paper. The count in each column after two mocks tells you what to do with the next fortnight better than any score does.

- You did not know it.** A topic gap. This one is cheap to fix and the only one worth revising for. Find the line in the specification, learn it, do three questions on it a week later.
- You knew it and were too slow.** A fluency gap. You can do the algebra, but not in 89 seconds without a calculator. Fix it with repetition against a clock, not with more theory.
- You misread the question.** Usually a units or a wording slip: newtons for kilonewtons, per second for per minute, “not” in a stem. Write the units down before you start the arithmetic.
- You knew it and picked the wrong option.** The distractor was the answer to the question you were expecting. Work out which wrong step produces that option, because the same step will be waiting for you next time.

4 The six-week sprint

For the person who has just worked out that the test is in six weeks. This is about 41 hours of work, which is seven hours a week on top of school. It is enough, and it is enough only because nothing in it is wasted on topics you can already do.

Six weeks, roughly 41 hours in total

Week	Focus	The work	Hours
Week 1	Find out where you actually are	Read the Appendix 1 topic list for each module you are sitting and mark every line you could not do inside 90 seconds. Sit one timed set of 27 questions per module. Do not revise yet.	6 h
Week 2	Biggest gap, first module	Take the worst topic from week 1 and work it until you can do a fresh question cold. Then the second worst. Untimed, working written out in full, one topic at a time.	7 h
Week 3	Biggest gap, second module, plus the clock	Same again on your other weak module. Add a 10-minute no-calculator arithmetic drill every day and one 27-question set against a 40-minute timer.	7 h
Week	Focus	The work	Hours
Week 4	Interleave, then mock	Stop doing topics in blocks. Mixed sets where you have to work out what a question is asking before you can start. End the week with a full mock: every module you are sitting, back to back, 40 minutes each.	8 h
Week 5	Second pass on the misses	Rework every question you got wrong in week 4 from a blank page, and write down which of the four causes it was. Mixed sets on those causes. Second full mock at the end.	8 h
Week 6	Taper	Two half mocks early in the week, arithmetic drill daily, then stop adding material. Re-read your own miss log rather than new questions. Nothing new in the last three days.	5 h

If you have four weeks rather than six, cut weeks 2 and 3 to one week each and keep both mocks. Never cut the diagnosis or the review; they are what make the rest of the hours land somewhere useful.

5 The twelve-week plan

With a term to work in, the shape changes. The extra six weeks go into Mathematics 1 and into legacy papers, and the mocks spread out to four rather than two, which is the number where you stop learning about the format and start seeing a trend. About 74 hours, six a week.

Twelve weeks, roughly 74 hours in total

Weeks	Focus	The work	Hours
Weeks 1–2	Diagnose, and fix Mathematics 1	The specification audit and a timed set per module, as in week 1 of the sprint. Then everything into Mathematics 1, because every other module assumes it. Rearranging, surds, standard form, index laws, ratio, all without a calculator.	10 h
Weeks 3–4	Weakest science module, from the ground up	Work the whole topic list for your weakest module, marking off the lines you audited in week 1. Untimed. One 27-question timed set at the end of week 4 to see whether the floor moved.	12 h
Weeks 5–6	Second science module, plus first mock	Same treatment for your other module. Add the daily arithmetic drill from week 5. Full mock at the end of week 6, and treat the result as data rather than a verdict.	14 h

Weeks	Focus	The work	Hours
Weeks 7–8	Interleaving, and legacy papers	Mixed sets only. Start on the NSAA and ENGAA archive parts that map to your modules, 20 questions in 30 minutes each. Second full mock at the end of week 8.	14 h
Weeks 9–10	Speed on the things you can already do	Your accuracy is roughly set by now; the marks left are the ones the clock is eating. Timed sets slightly faster than test pace, 27 questions in 36 minutes. Third full mock.	14 h
Weeks 11–12	Sharpen, then taper	One more mock in week 11, then the week-6 taper: miss log, arithmetic, no new material in the last three days.	10 h

Counting back from the October 2026 window, twelve weeks means starting in the third week of July and six weeks means starting at the very end of August. Both land before the 28 September registration deadline, so neither plan asks you to register on faith.

6 89 seconds, and how to train for it

Do the division once and it changes how you practise:

$$\frac{40 \times 60}{27} = 88.9$$

seconds per question, including the time you spend reading the stem, the time you spend on the two you get stuck on, and the time you spend filling in the answer.

39:51	40:00	90%+
Mean time spent on Mathematics 1 out of the 40 minutes available, across 11,523 candidates.	Median time for four of the five modules. Biology, the exception, came in at 39:53.	Share of candidates who used between 35 and 40 minutes on a module.

All three from the [UAT-UK ESAT technical report 2024–25](#), section 5.2 and Table 19, page 34.

Read those numbers again, because they kill a common plan. Nobody is finishing with ten minutes to check. The marginal mark is not sitting in the questions you failed to understand; it is sitting in the questions you understood and ran out of time to reach. So timing is a skill to train on its own, and here is how.

6.1 Train the clock separately from the content

Give yourself sets of 27 questions and 40 minutes, and score two things: how many you got right, and how many you never reached. Those two numbers pull in different directions and need different fixes. If you are leaving five unreached, more theory will not help you.

6.2 Take two passes, not one

On the first pass, answer everything you can see a route through inside about a minute and flag the rest without agonising. That usually takes 25 minutes and banks most of the marks. Come back for the flagged ones with what is left. The trap in a fixed-time, no-penalty test is spending four minutes on question 6 and never seeing question 24, which you could have done in forty seconds.

6.3 Ten minutes of arithmetic a day

No calculator means arithmetic sits between you and every answer, and it is the cheapest speed you will ever buy. Drill squares to 25, primes under 100, the fraction to decimal to percentage conversions, standard-form multiplication, index laws, and two-significant-figure estimation so you can rule out three options before you have finished the sum. Ten minutes daily beats an hour on a Sunday.

6.4 Practise in the real setup

Questions on a screen, working on paper, no scrolling back through your own notes. Reading a diagram off a monitor and writing the algebra on a separate sheet is a physical skill, and doing it for the first time on test day costs you seconds on every question. If you want a timed drill built for this, our [free timing gym](#) runs eight real questions against the clock and shows you where the seconds went.

7 Why the specimens feel easy

This is the complaint that comes up more than any other after test day: the specimen and sample tests went fine, and the real thing was a different exam. The complaint is fair, and the reason is not a secret. It is written down in UAT-UK's own documents.

The preparation page says that “[performance on a practice test will not necessarily be indicative of performance under exam conditions](#)”, and that candidates “should not expect to score as highly on these tests as they have in their school exams”. The specimen tests exist to show you the interface, the question styles and the format. They are a fixed demonstration set. They are not equated against the live cohort, and no scaled score comes out of them, so a good run on one tells you that you understand the format rather than that you are ready.

The live forms are a different animal. The technical report says the 2024–25 forms for Physics and Mathematics 2 “[were too difficult for many candidates](#)”, and adds that “the maximum raw scores in some cases were below the full mark”. Read that last clause slowly. On some live forms, out of thousands of candidates, nobody scored 27 out of 27.

3 The rule this gives you: your practice should hurt

If you are clearing 80% on a practice set with minutes to spare, the set is too easy to be telling you anything. Move up: the harder halves of the legacy papers, ENGAA Part B for maths and physics, and questions that make you combine two ideas rather than recall one. Practice run at real difficulty produces a bad afternoon in September instead of a bad morning in October.

There is a second reason to build practice above specimen level, and it is about what you learn rather than what you score. An easy question tests whether you know a fact. A hard one tests whether you can apply a principle you know in a place you have not seen it before, which is what the specification says the test is asking for. You cannot train that on questions that never ask for it.

8 Which resources are worth your time

The ESAT has only run since October 2024, so the free official library is small and the paid market rushed in to fill the gap. Work down this list in order. Everything on it is free.

- **The content specification.** Twenty-five pages of what is assessed, module by module, and the only document that settles an argument about whether a topic is on the test. [Read Appendix 1 with a pen](#) in your first week and mark the lines you cannot do at speed. Nothing else you do this month will save you as much time.
- **The five ESAT Guides.** UAT-UK publishes one per module, covering the science and mathematics the test assumes, plus a set of notes on the Mathematics 2 material. [All free on the preparation page](#). Use them to fill the gaps your audit found, rather than reading them cover to cover.
- **The specimen and sample tests.** Five specimen tests and five sample exams, one per module, delivered through [Pearson VUE](#). Sit these early and once, for the interface and the question styles. Do not save them for the week before as a confidence check; see the section above for why that goes wrong.
- **The ENGAA and NSAA archives, 2016 to 2023.** Sixteen papers with answer keys, free from UAT-UK. This is the biggest bank of genuinely ESAT-like questions in existence, and the mapping below tells you which parts train which module.

8.1 How the legacy papers map onto your modules

Both archives are organised by part, and the parts line up onto ESAT modules cleanly enough to plan with. UAT-UK says the papers “[contain questions of the type found in the ESAT](#)”, and answers the off-syllabus worry in the next sentence: “We have indicated in the papers where questions are not in the ESAT specification.” The flagging is done for you, so the fear of practising off-spec is one you can put down.

Legacy paper parts by ESAT module, from the archive papers themselves

ESAT module	What to work through	Worth knowing
Mathematics 1	NSAA Part A Mathematics, 2016–2023 · ENGAA Part A, the mathematics questions	The closest match in the archive. Both were sat by every candidate, both are GCSE-shaped content under time pressure.
Mathematics 2	ENGAA Part B, the Advanced Mathematics questions	The only legacy source for the MM topics. ENGAA Part B ran to a wider list than the ESAT specification in places, and the archive papers mark where that happens.
Physics	NSAA Part B Physics · ENGAA Part A physics questions · ENGAA Part B Advanced Physics	Two archives feed this one, so Physics has the deepest legacy bank of the five. ENGAA Part B is the harder half and reaches past the ESAT list in places.

ESAT module	What to work through	Worth knowing
Chemistry	NSAA Part C Chemistry	One legacy source only, eight papers deep. Work through the ESAT Chemistry guide alongside it, because the ESAT list has its own boundaries.
Biology	NSAA Part D Biology	One legacy source only. Biology is also the smallest ESAT cohort: 1,429 candidates in the 2025 cycle against 11,919 for Mathematics 1.

Section 2 of both legacy papers was written, long-form and marked by hand. It has no ESAT equivalent, so skip it unless you want the physics practice for its own sake.

8.2 Turning a legacy part into ESAT practice

Each legacy part is 20 questions and the paper advised 30 minutes on it, so the pace is already within a second and a half of ESAT pace. To make a part feel like a module, take a 20-question part and give yourself 30 minutes, or stitch a part and a half together into 27 questions and set the timer to 40 minutes. Mark it with the answer key the same day, and put every miss through the four causes above.

8.3 What is not worth paying for yet

A question bank bought before you have read the specification, and a tutor booked before you have sat a diagnostic. Both are fine purchases later and expensive ones now, because neither can tell you which of your topics is the six-mark hole. Find that first. It costs an evening and it changes what everything else is for.

9 Sources

Every claim above about the exam comes from one of these. Where the official documents give no figure, this guide says so rather than filling the gap.

UAT-UK, ESAT Content Specification for assessment in October 2026 and January 2027 (PDF)

Module list, 27 questions and 40 minutes per module, separate timing, computer-based delivery, erasable booklet, no calculators, one mark per correct answer with no deduction, knowledge assumed per module, and the Appendix 1 topic lists. [Read the specification.](#)

UAT-UK, about the ESAT

Most courses require Mathematics 1 and two further modules, 120 minutes for most candidates, the four universities that use the test. [Read the page.](#)

UAT-UK, key dates

2027 entry registration, access arrangement and bursary deadlines, both test windows, results dates, and the October requirement for most Cambridge and Oxford applicants. [Read the dates.](#)

UAT-UK, test results

The 1.0 to 9.0 scale, one score per module, no grade boundaries and no pass mark. [Read the results guidance.](#)

UAT-UK, prepare

What the official materials are for, and the warning that practice-test performance need not indicate performance under exam conditions. [Read the preparation guidance.](#)

UAT-UK, ESAT preparation materials

The five ESAT Guides, and the ENGAA and NSAA archives for 2016 to 2023 with the note that off-specification questions are marked in the papers. [Open the materials.](#)

Pearson VUE for UAT-UK

The specimen tests and sample exams, one of each per module. [Open Pearson VUE.](#)

UAT-UK ESAT Technical Report 2024--25, Pearson VUE (PDF)

Candidate numbers and module combinations (Table 4, page 8), scaled score statistics (Table 5, page 9), the scaling anchors at 4.5 and 7.0 (page 7), the difficulty finding for Physics and Mathematics 2 (page 33), and module timing (section 5.2 and Table 19, page 34). [Read the report.](#)

NSAA 2023 and ENGAA 2023 Section 1 question papers

The legacy structures described above, taken from the instructions to candidates on each paper. [Read NSAA 2023.](#) [Read ENGAA 2023.](#)

UniGenius is an independent study resource. We are not affiliated with UAT-UK, Pearson VUE or any of the universities named here.

10 Where we fit

Step one of the path is a diagnosis, and it is the step people skip because sitting a test before you have revised feels like a waste of an evening. So we made ours free and short. Ten minutes of real ESAT questions that adapt as you go, and at the end a level for each topic you sat and the first gap worth closing, which is the ranked list step two needs. No account and no card. We also sell a full course with the question bank and the worked solutions, and you are welcome to use everything free here and never look at it.

- [Start the free diagnostic](#)
- [Free timing gym](#)
- [Score converter](#)
- [What is a good ESAT score?](#)