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Guidance

National Reference Test 2023 - information for schools

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Applies to England

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Approved and published by the Secretary of State, this guidance is made by NFER on behalf of Ofqual as delegated supplementary provisions in accordance with The Education (National Curriculum) (Key Stage 4 Assessment Arrangements) (England) Order 2016.

Purpose of the National Reference Test

The National Reference Test (NRT) was introduced to provide additional information to support the awarding of GCSEs. The design of the NRT means that it provides robust national data on student ability in a specific year as well as evidence of how performance has changed over time.

Each year the results of the NRT are considered by Ofqual and the exam boards prior to GCSEs in English language and maths being awarded. Results from the NRT may be used to inform standard setting in these subjects. This happened for the first time in 2019. [More information about the NRT is available here.](#)

Ofqual has appointed NFER to develop, administer and analyse the test on its behalf.

Your school has been selected as part of a sample to participate in the statutory NRT, which will take place in the spring term of 2023. To reflect the importance of the test and to ensure high participation rates, the [government introduced legislation](#) that requires the participation of most schools. For maintained schools, this obligation is placed on the school directly through legislation. For academies and free schools, it is a requirement of your funding agreement to comply with The Education (National Curriculum) (Key Stage 4 Assessment Arrangements) (England) Order 2016 and the relevant guidance as they apply to maintained schools, to ensure that students at the school take part in assessments, and in teacher assessments of students' performance. These supplementary provisions, approved by the Secretary of State, form 'that guidance'.

When testing will take place at your school

The NRT will take place in schools in a 2-week period decided by NFER between 13 February and 17 March 2023. This testing window is in spring to avoid the main GCSE exam period, but also chosen to be at a time when students are likely to have completed most of their course of study so that the test will give a good indication of GCSE performance. You are asked not to provide any additional teaching or revision for those students who will take part in the test.

You are asked to indicate which dates are convenient for your school on the reply form supplied by NFER who will choose one of the dates you indicate and write back to you by late January to inform you of the selected date and the name(s) of NFER's administrator(s) who will be visiting your school.

Please contact NFER as soon as possible if the selected date is no longer convenient. The time of the testing is to be arranged with your NFER administrator at a time that is convenient to you. However, NFER strongly encourage you to hold the test at the beginning of the morning or afternoon session to prevent students from having to leave lessons part way through.

Please ensure that students who have been selected to take the test are not asked to attend other school activities at the same time, e.g. mock GCSEs.

How students will be selected

You will be asked by NFER to provide the number of students in year 11 who will be aged 16 by 31 August 2023 and who will be entered for either or both of GCSE English language and GCSE maths in summer 2023. (Note: students may not take part if they are only entered for the International GCSE, sometimes referred to as a level 1/level 2 certificate, in that subject.)

NFER will then ask you to provide a list of all these students comprising forename and surname, gender, date of birth and subjects for which they are entered. From this list, NFER will randomly sample up to 30 of your students to sit the English test and a separate group of up to 30 students to sit the maths test. Students will only be selected to take the test if they are entered for the GCSE in that subject. Please note that 30 students is the upper limit of the number of students NFER will sample for each subject; there is no lower limit. Instructions on how to access a list of the students selected to take the test and the subject they have been allocated will be provided to your school in January 2023. Each student will be assigned to either the English or maths test; no student will take both subjects.

All selected students are expected to take part

It is important that all students in the selected group of students take the test in order to avoid any bias in the sample. The legislation passed by the government allows the test provider to specify the reasons for which the headteacher may decide under article 3(6) that a pupil should not take an NRT.

In NRT 2023 a headteacher may withdraw a student from the test only for one of the following reasons:

- a student requires an access arrangement when taking their GCSE in English language or maths that is not available to the student for the NRT either because it is not included in JCQ's [Access Arrangements and Reasonable Adjustments](#) or it is not permitted by NFER for use in this test for confidentiality reasons
- a student has exceptional, temporary circumstances which, had they occurred during a student's GCSE exams, would have resulted in the student not taking a GCSE exam or being eligible for special consideration, for example:
 - personal illness
 - bereavement of a close family member or friend shortly before or at the time of the assessment
 - serious domestic crisis shortly before or at the time of the assessment which results in the student being emotionally affected at the time of the assessment
 - participation in sporting events or other competitions at an international level at the time of the assessment
- other circumstances which the headteacher assesses, and NFER agrees, could cause significant distress for the student were they to take the test, such as exacerbation of an existing medical condition

If you are unsure whether a student's particular circumstances warrant withdrawal, please contact NFER for guidance.

The role of NFER's test administrator

One or two representatives from NFER will come to your school to administer the test. All of NFER's test administrators are trained teachers and have enhanced DBS checks. One of NFER's administrators will telephone your nominated school contact before they visit to arrange the most convenient time of day for the testing to take place and to confirm all arrangements. They will bring all the materials required for testing along with them on the day and they will take away with them the completed tests for NFER to mark. Please arrange for a teacher or another member of school staff also to be present throughout the session.

The composition and timing of the test

The English test comprises a reading and a writing component. For both English and maths, the test lasts one hour. Schools should plan for a total test administration time of at least one hour and 30 minutes, to allow for students to be seated and have instructions read to them by the test administrator. After the test, students will be asked to complete a five minute survey about their experience of the NRT and their preparation in general for their GCSE exams.

The test has been carefully designed to be accessible to all eligible students. Students will be asked to make their best attempt at the whole test. The test has a look and feel that is similar to the GCSEs, with the content of the test based on the GCSE curriculum.

The questions in the English and maths test are aimed mostly at grades 3 to 7 but also include some questions aimed at grades 1 and 2 to help make them accessible to all students. Unlike the GCSE maths exams, the maths test is not a tiered assessment. In the maths test most of the questions are based on the GCSE content that all GCSE maths students have to study and includes some more straightforward questions at the start to help encourage students. A few questions drawing on higher tier content are at the end of the test booklet.

Keeping the tests secure

The security of the test materials is paramount. The NFER administrator is responsible for the security and confidentiality of the test materials. No photocopies of the test may be made by anyone. Test materials must not be taken out of the room during the administration of the test. All teachers or other adults who are present in the test room (for example those providing support with access arrangements) will be required to sign a statement of confidentiality, declaring that the content of the test will not be discussed with any other person.

Arrangements the school needs to make for the test

As the students sampled to take part in the test are likely to be from various classes, please ensure that preparations have been made for all the selected students to be brought to the test room at the time you have agreed with NFER's test administrator. Late arrivals can be disruptive for all students taking the test, so it is important that all possible measures are taken to ensure that all students arrive on time. Please prepare a seating plan in advance of the test date, as you do for GCSE exams, so students know exactly where to sit when they enter the examination room and which test should be given to them.

The test will be administered under exam conditions similar to those at GCSE. Please ensure any relevant displays and posters in the test room are covered and desks are positioned an appropriate distance apart and so students cannot see each other's test papers. Mobile phones and other smart devices are strictly prohibited in the room where the testing is taking place.

For the test, students require a black pen or sharp HB or 2B pencil. Students must not use gel pens. If the student is using a pencil, they must write firmly.

Access arrangements

NFER will apply access arrangements similar to those used at GCSE. The following access arrangements and reasonable adjustments can be used for any student who is expecting to receive the arrangement/adjustment in their GCSEs:

- extra time
- rest breaks and the use of a prompter to help students progress through the test
- a reader (for the English reading test, a reader can only be used for the instructions at the beginning of the test)
- a scribe
- a sign language interpreter
- read aloud
- examination reader pen – only the following two JCQ approved pens are acceptable:
 - C-Pen Exam Reader
 - WizCom Exam Pen

Reading pens are only suitable for assisting with reading one or two words in a sentence and are not suitable for all candidates who qualify for a reader. Candidates should be familiar and experienced with using these pens in order to get an accurate reading.

The following modifications to the test and computer based arrangements can be used:

- word processors
 - NFER will provide students expecting to use a word processor for their GCSE exams with access to a secure tool in order to type their answers to the test. For this access arrangement, schools will need to provide laptops with internet access for each student. If internet access is not available NFER can supply a laptop for the student to use. Under no circumstances should a student use their own laptop to type answers into any software or tool other than the secure tool provided by NFER, as this could compromise the security of the test.
- enlarged or modified large print papers
 - an enlarged paper will be an enlargement of the original paper from A4 to A3, which does not specify font size
 - the modified large print papers available are:
 - 18pt or 24pt on A4 paper
 - 24pt or 36pt on A3 paper
- test printed on coloured paper - NFER will endeavour to provide the requested colour or as close a match as possible
- Braille versions of the test - a Unified English Braille (UEB) version of the test will be available

Translated versions of the test will not be available. The use of a dictionary is not permitted in the English test. The use of a bilingual dictionary is permitted in the

maths test for students for whom English is not their first language and provided that it only provides a translation of the mathematical term, not the definition or illustration.

Responsibilities for providing the access arrangements

NFER will ask you to provide details of any selected students requiring a modified test or the use of a word processor no later than 23 January 2023. Instructions will be provided to schools on how to make these requests.

The school is responsible for the provision of other arrangements such as the provision of a scribe or reader. Please advise NFER's test administrator if any students will be given extra time.

You should also discuss any access arrangements with your lead test administrator to allow sufficient time for the preparation of these arrangements.

Students that require access arrangements should ideally be accommodated in the main examination room under the supervision of the administrator. If this is not possible due to the specific requirements of the student, please discuss this with NFER's test administrator or with NFER staff ahead of the test date.

Recognising schools' and students' participation

In recognition of the time and resource required to participate in the NRT, each participating school will be paid £190 on completion of the NRT. Participating students will be entered into a national draw with a prize of a tablet computer. In January NFER will provide an information sheet for students that have been selected to participate in the NRT. It will give students an overview of the test and why it is important they take part.

We know that schools would like to receive feedback on how their students have done in the test. However, the test is not designed to measure the performance of individual students. It provides information about the overall performance of the national sample of students who take it. So we cannot provide scores or marks for individual students. The test is not used to compare schools' performance and we therefore cannot provide an overall result for individual schools. Also, we cannot provide feedback on how students have responded to individual questions because we have to keep the test questions confidential to be able to re-use them in the future.

Confidentiality

The data collected by NFER will be shared with Ofqual for the purposes of analysis. All data relating to this project will be kept confidential by NFER and Ofqual, and no individual school or student will be identified in any way in any ensuing reports about the analysis. Ofqual will publish national measures of performance each year. The test is designed in such a way that the results cannot be used in any measure of school performance and cannot be used to influence or determine any student's individual GCSE award. All data collected on access arrangements for individual

students will be securely destroyed after the testing has been completed.

Additional information about how Ofqual and NFER will process personal data that is collected during the NRT is available in the document [National Reference Test – your information and your privacy](#). If NFER is alerted to a potential safeguarding concern based on the responses given by a student during the NRT, NFER will contact your school.

Contact information

If you have any questions or queries about the test, please contact NFER by telephone on 01753 637 383 or by email to NRTkeystage4@nfer.ac.uk.

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