



Guidance

The National Reference Test: teachers' and headteachers' guide

Published 23 February 2026

Applies to England

[Contents](#)

[Overview](#)

[What is the National Reference Test used for?](#)

[Why the National Reference Test matters](#)

[2025 National Reference Test results](#)

[Why the 2025 results did not change grade boundaries](#)

[How schools and students are selected for the NRT](#)

Overview

The National Reference Test (NRT) is an annual assessment taken by a representative sample of year 11 students in England during February and March. It helps Ofqual monitor whether national performance in GCSE English language and maths is changing over time.

Key facts:

- Taken in over 300 schools across England each year
- Features questions similar to GCSE English language and maths exams
- Results published on GCSE results day in August
- Running since 2017, when current GCSE specifications began
- More than 13,000 students participated in 2025

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) develops, delivers and analyses the NRT on behalf of Ofqual.

What is the National Reference Test used for?

The NRT provides Ofqual with evidence to:

- monitor year 11 performance trends in GCSE English language and maths over time
- support the setting of GCSE English language and maths grade boundaries each year, focusing on grades 7/6, 5/4 and 4/3

The NRT is a “no-stakes” test. There are no individual student results or school-level results. It measures national attainment only and is not used for school accountability.

Why the National Reference Test matters

The NRT helps ensure standards in GCSE English language and maths remain consistent from year to year. By comparing results against the 2017 benchmark, Ofqual can identify whether national attainment is rising, falling, or stable.

If sustained changes in national attainment are detected, NRT results could lead Ofqual to adjust how grade boundaries are set in GCSE English language or maths. This has not yet happened, but the test remains an important safeguard for

maintaining qualification standards over time.

2025 National Reference Test results

The 2025 results showed:

English language:

- Performance at grade 4 level remained slightly lower than in 2017, consistent with 2024 findings.
- Performance at grade 7 level remained stable.

Maths:

- Performance at grade 4 level stayed consistent with previous years.
- Performance at grade 7 level continued to show statistically significant improvement compared with 2017, as seen in 2024.

Why the 2025 results did not change grade boundaries

Although the 2025 NRT results indicated some differences in performance, Ofqual did not adjust GCSE English language or maths grade boundaries because:

1. there was insufficient confidence that the differences were solely due to changes in cohort attainment
2. the results did not show a sustained move away from previous years over a consistent period

Ofqual is cautious and consistent when interpreting NRT results. Any adjustment to grade boundaries based on NRT evidence would require clear, sustained evidence of change.

You can read more about the 2025 NRT results in our [annual statement](#).

How schools and students are selected for the NRT

Most secondary schools in England can be selected to participate in the NRT. Exempt schools include:

- special schools
- studio schools
- pupil referral units
- further education colleges
- schools with 15 or fewer students

Up to 3 replacement schools are identified for each original school. These are used only in exceptional circumstances, such as if major building works are taking place in a selected school.

Schools are selected based on previous GCSE achievement in English language and maths, and school size. A two-stage sampling process selects schools first, then randomly selects students within each school.

The target sample is at least 330 schools per subject, with 30 students per school taking either the English or maths test.

[↑ Back to top](#)

Help us improve GOV.UK

To help us improve GOV.UK, we'd like to know more about your visit today. [Please fill in this survey \(opens in a new tab\)](#).



Services and information

[Benefits](#)

[Births, death, marriages and care](#)

[Business and self-employed](#)

[Childcare and parenting](#)

[Citizenship and living in the UK](#)

[Crime, justice and the law](#)

[Disabled people](#)

[Driving and transport](#)

[Education and learning](#)

[Employing people](#)

[Environment and countryside](#)

[Housing and local services](#)

[Money and tax](#)

[Passports, travel and living abroad](#)

[Visas and immigration](#)

[Working, jobs and pensions](#)

Government activity

[Departments](#)

[News](#)

[Guidance and regulation](#)

[Research and statistics](#)

[Policy papers and consultations](#)

[Transparency](#)

[How government works](#)

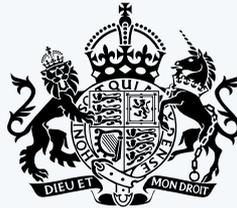
[Get involved](#)

Terms and conditions Rhestr o Wasanaethau Cymraeg

Government Digital Service

OGL

All content is available under the Open Government Licence v3.0, except where otherwise stated



© Crown copyright