

# CAT 2026

# Exam Pattern

Complete Guide

**68**

Questions

**204**

Max Marks

**120**

Minutes

**3**

Sections

Everything you need to ace the CAT — structure, strategy & scoring

Exam Date: November 29, 2026 • Conducting Body: IIM Indore (Expected)

# Table of Contents

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- Introduction** — What CAT is and why the exam pattern matters
- Chapter 1** — CAT at a Glance — Key facts & overview
- Chapter 2** — Evolution of CAT — Historical pattern changes
- Chapter 3** — Current Exam Structure — Sections & durations
- Chapter 4** — VARC — Verbal Ability & Reading Comprehension
- Chapter 5** — DILR — Data Interpretation & Logical Reasoning
- Chapter 6** — Quantitative Aptitude — Topics & difficulty
- Chapter 7** — Question Types — MCQ vs TITA
- Chapter 8** — Marking Scheme — Scoring rules & examples
- Chapter 9** — Slot System — Multi-shift & normalization
- Chapter 10** — Time Management — Sectional strategies
- Chapter 11** — Difficulty Trends — Historical analysis
- Chapter 12** — CAT vs Other MBA Exams — XAT, MAT comparison
- Chapter 13** — FAQs — Common aspirant questions answered
- Chapter 14** — Preparation Strategy — Pattern-based insights
- Cheat Sheet** — Quick-reference summary of all key rules

INTRO

## Introduction

### What is CAT?

The Common Admission Test (CAT) is India's premier national-level management entrance examination conducted annually by the IIMs on a rotational basis. It serves as the primary gateway to postgraduate MBA/PGDM programs at all 22 IIMs and hundreds of other top-tier business schools across the country.

The exam is meticulously designed to evaluate a candidate's verbal communication skills, quantitative abilities, data interpretation aptitude, and logical reasoning acumen — all under strict time pressure.

### Why the Exam Pattern Matters

CAT is not merely a test of academic knowledge — it is a sophisticated, speed-based assessment of analytical aptitude and real-time decision-making. Questions span varied difficulty levels, and without a precise understanding of the exam's structure, even well-prepared candidates risk underperforming within the time limits.

Familiarity with sectional boundaries, question distributions, and exact marking rules directly shapes how you allocate preparation time, build exam stamina, and execute your attempt strategy on test day.

#### ■ Key Insight

Pattern awareness shifts your preparation from generalized studying to targeted, high-yield practice. Knowing when to guess and when to skip is the difference between a 90th and a 99th percentile.

## Quick Facts

Parameter	Details
Exam Date	November 29, 2026
Registration Launch	First week of August 2026
Conducting Body	IIM Indore (Expected for CAT 2026)
Exam Mode	Computer-Based Test (CBT) at designated centres
Duration (Standard)	120 minutes (2 hours)
Duration (PwD)	160 minutes
Total Sections	3 — VARC, DILR, Quantitative Aptitude
Total Questions	68 questions
Total Marks	204 marks
Negative Marking	Yes — -1 for incorrect MCQs
Calculator	On-screen calculator provided

## Importance for MBA Admissions

A high CAT percentile is the critical first hurdle in the IIM selection process. Business schools use CAT sectional and overall percentiles to shortlist candidates for subsequent rounds — a Written Ability Test (WAT) and Personal Interview (PI). Without clearing initial CAT cutoffs, access to these schools remains closed.

### ■ Chapter Summary

- CAT is a national-level CBT for premium MBA/PGDM admissions across India.
- The exam lasts 120 minutes (160 for PwD) with 3 compulsory sections.
- A high score is mandatory to clear initial cutoffs for WAT/PI selection rounds.

## Chapter 2

## Evolution of the CAT Exam Pattern

The CAT has undergone several significant structural revisions over the last decade, adjusting exam duration, total question count, and sectional distributions in response to evolving testing methodologies.

### Pattern Timeline

Year(s)	Duration	Questions	Section Breakdown
2014	170 min	100	Two Sections: QA+DI (50), VA+LR (50)
2015–2019	180 min	100	VARC (34)   DILR (32)   QA (34)
2020	120 min	76	VARC (26)   DILR (24)   QA (26)
2021–2022	120 min	66	VARC (24)   DILR (20)   QA (22)
2024–2025	120 min	68	VARC (24)   DILR (22)   QA (22)
2026 (Expected)	120 min	68	VARC (24)   DILR (22)   QA (22)

#### ■ Key Milestone

TITA (Type In The Answer) non-MCQ questions were introduced during the 2015 overhaul and have remained a permanent fixture. The 2024 revision added 2 more DILR questions, raising the total to 68 and max marks to 204.

#### ■ Chapter Summary

- CAT transitioned from a 3-hour, 100-question exam to a focused 120-minute test.
- The modern exam has stabilized at 68 questions worth 204 maximum marks.
- Non-MCQ (TITA) formats have been a permanent fixture since 2015.

## Chapter 3

## Current CAT Exam Structure

The exam is divided into three fixed sections attempted in strict sequential order. Each section runs on an automated 40-minute countdown — you cannot pause it or transfer time between sections.

## Detailed Section Breakdown

Order	Section	Questions	Marks	Std. Time	PwD Time
1	Verbal Ability & Reading Comprehension (VARC)	24	72	40 min	53:20 min
2	Data Interpretation & Logical Reasoning (DILR)	22	66	40 min	53:20 min
3	Quantitative Aptitude (QA)	22	66	40 min	53:20 min
—	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>204</b>	<b>120 min</b>	<b>160 min</b>

#### ■ Critical Rule

The exam terminal automatically locks a section the moment its 40-minute timer expires, transitioning you to the next section immediately. Any unsaved answers are permanently recorded as unattempted.

#### ■ Chapter Summary

- Three sections in fixed sequential order — cannot be skipped or rearranged.
- Strict automated 40-minute (53:20 for PwD) cutoff per section enforced by the system.
- Standard test: 120 minutes total; PwD candidates: 160 minutes total.

## Chapter 4

**VARC — Verbal Ability & Reading Comprehension**

VARC is the opening section of the exam, featuring 24 questions worth 72 marks in a 40-minute window. It is split into two broad domains — Reading Comprehension and Verbal Ability.

**Section Composition**

Domain	Questions	% of Section	Format
Reading Comprehension (RC)	16	~67%	4–5 long passages
Verbal Ability (VA)	8	~33%	Non-passage textual tasks
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>72 marks   40 minutes</b>

**Verbal Ability Topic Breakdown**

- **Parajumbles:** Rearranging a set of sentences into a logically coherent paragraph.
- **Paragraph Summary:** Identifying the most accurate summary statement for a short text.
- **Odd Sentence Out:** Spotting the single sentence that doesn't fit the paragraph's logical flow.
- **Sentence Completion / Inferences:** Deducing logical conclusions or completing textual sequences.

**■ Important Note**

VARC does NOT test standalone vocabulary or grammar. There are no fill-in-the-blanks or synonym questions. Success depends entirely on reading comprehension depth and contextual inference ability.

**■ Chapter Summary**

- 24 questions: ~16 RC (4–5 passages) + ~8 VA (parajumbles, summaries, odd-one-out).
- No direct vocabulary or grammar testing — all comprehension and inference-based.
- Build rapid reading habits months ahead using complex literature and news.

## Chapter 5

**DILR — Data Interpretation & Logical Reasoning**

DILR is the second section, containing 22 questions worth 66 marks in 40 minutes. Questions are almost exclusively grouped into 3–4 question sets based on a common dataset or logical premise.

Sub-Domain	Questions	Common Formats
Data Interpretation (DI)	11	Tables, Bar Graphs, Line Charts, Pie Charts, Venn Diagrams, Caselets
Logical Reasoning (LR)	11	Seating Arrangements, Blood Relations, Puzzles, Syllogisms, Binary Logic, Coding-Decoding
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>66 marks   40 minutes</b>

#### ■ Strategy Alert

Set selection is the single most critical skill in DILR. Spending 12+ minutes on a deceptively complex set can derail your entire section. Scan all sets in the first 3–5 minutes and commit only to 3 high-yield sets.

#### ■ Chapter Summary

- 22 questions split evenly: 11 Data Interpretation + 11 Logical Reasoning.
- Questions appear in interconnected sets of 3–4, not standalone problems.
- Strategic set selection is the #1 factor for scoring well in this section.

## Chapter 6

## Quantitative Aptitude (QA)

QA is the final section with 22 questions worth 66 marks in 40 minutes. It tests mathematical concepts taught in Classes 9–10 but applied at an advanced, multi-step level under time pressure.

### Topic Distribution

Topic Area	Typical Questions	Difficulty
Arithmetic (% , P&L, Interest, Ratio, TSD, Work)	8–10 questions	Moderate–High
Algebra (Equations, Inequalities, Log, Functions)	5–7 questions	Moderate–High
Modern Maths (PnC, Probability, Sets)	2–4 questions	Moderate–High
Geometry & Mensuration	1–3 questions	Moderate–High
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>22 questions</b>	<b>Moderate–High</b>

Arithmetic and Algebra together comprise the majority of QA questions. While foundational concepts come from school-level math, CAT tests them through creative, multi-step problems that demand both formula mastery and lateral thinking.

#### ■ Chapter Summary

- 22 questions — Arithmetic and Algebra are the dominant categories.
- Foundational school math applied at advanced conceptual and multi-step level.
- Memorize formulas thoroughly; practice speed and accuracy under timed conditions.

## Chapter 7

## Question Types — MCQ vs TITA

CAT features two distinct question formats across all sections. Understanding the mechanics and strategy for each is critical to protecting and maximizing your score.

Feature	MCQ (Multiple Choice)	TITA (Type In The Answer)
Answer Format	Select 1 of 4 options (mouse click)	Type numeric answer via keyboard
Options Shown	Yes — 4 choices displayed	No — blank text field
Correct Answer	+3 marks	+3 marks
Wrong Answer	<b>-1 mark (negative marking)</b>	<b>0 marks (no penalty)</b>
Unattempted	0 marks	0 marks
Guess Strategy	Only if 2+ options eliminated	Always attempt — no risk

#### ■ Golden Rule

On TITA questions, ALWAYS attempt — there is zero risk. Even a calculated guess is better than leaving it blank. On MCQs, only attempt when you are reasonably confident — random guessing can significantly lower your raw score.

#### ■ Chapter Summary

- MCQs: 4 choices, +3 correct, -1 wrong. Precision matters — avoid random guessing.
- TITA: No options, type the answer. +3 correct, 0 wrong. Always attempt.
- Smart strategy: maximize TITA attempts; maintain high accuracy on MCQs.

## Chapter 8

## Marking Scheme &amp; Score Calculation

## Scoring Formula

$$\text{Raw Score} = (\text{Total Correct Answers} \times 3) - (\text{Incorrect MCQs} \times 1)$$

## Worked Examples

	Scenario A — Controlled Risk	Scenario B — High Risk
Total Attempted	45 questions	60 questions
Correct Answers	40	40
Wrong MCQs	3	18
Wrong TITA	2 (no penalty)	2 (no penalty)
Correct Marks	$40 \times 3 = +120$	$40 \times 3 = +120$
MCQ Penalties	$3 \times (-1) = -3$	$18 \times (-1) = -18$
<b>FINAL SCORE</b>	<b><math>120 - 3 = 117</math> marks</b>	<b><math>120 - 18 = 102</math> marks</b>

#### ■ Key Takeaway

Both candidates got the same 40 correct answers, but Scenario A scores 15 more marks because they controlled incorrect MCQ attempts. Even with zero extra right answers, precision alone adds significant marks.

#### ■ Chapter Summary

- Every correct answer (MCQ or TITA) = +3 marks.
- Incorrect MCQ = -1 mark. Incorrect TITA = 0 marks. Unattempted = 0 marks.
- High accuracy on MCQs is the single most important factor in your raw score.

## Chapter 9

## Slot-Based System & Score Normalization

With over 3 lakh candidates, CAT is administered in three distinct time slots on exam day. Each slot uses a different question paper to maintain security.

Slot	Time Window	Shift
Slot 1 — Morning	8:00 AM – 10:00 AM	First
Slot 2 — Afternoon	12:00 PM – 2:00 PM	Second
Slot 3 — Evening	4:00 PM – 6:00 PM	Third

### How Normalization Works

Because each slot uses a unique paper, slight difficulty variations between shifts are inevitable. The IIMs apply a statistical normalization process that maps each candidate's raw score to a unified scaled score, accounting for difficulty differences across all three slots.

These scaled scores are then used to compute final sectional and overall percentiles, ensuring candidates are evaluated on completely equal footing regardless of which slot they were assigned.

#### ■ Common Misconception

No slot is intentionally easier or harder than others. Difficulty varies randomly each year. The normalization process exists precisely to neutralize these variations — there is no 'best slot' to aim for.

#### ■ Chapter Summary

- CAT is administered in 3 slots (Morning, Afternoon, Evening) on a single day.
- Each slot has a unique paper; statistical normalization ensures fair comparison.
- Final percentiles are based on scaled scores, not raw scores.

## Chapter 10

## Section-Wise Time Management

## Suggested Time Distribution Strategy

Section	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
<b>VARC (40 min)</b>	Scan VA questions (2–3 min)	Read & answer RC passages (30 min)	Review & check saved answers (7–8 min)
<b>DILR (40 min)</b>	Scan & select best sets (4–5 min)	Solve 3 target sets (30 min)	Quick attempt remaining TITA (5–6 min)
<b>QA (40 min)</b>	Scan for easy picks (3–4 min)	Core rounds — high confidence Qs (28 min)	Safe TITA submissions (8–9 min)

## Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Spending 8–10 minutes on a single complex problem — this derails your entire section pacing.
- Forgetting to click 'Save and Next' — the platform records the question as unattempted even if you selected the right option.
- Not scanning the full section first — you may miss several easy wins at the end.
- Treating all DILR sets equally — always pick sets that play to your strengths.

#### ■ Chapter Summary

- Strict 40-minute automated timer per section — no pausing or time-sharing.
- Use a 3-phase approach: Scan → Prime → Review for every section.
- Always click 'Save and Next' to confirm your answer is registered.

## Chapter 11

## Difficulty Level Trends

Year	Overall Difficulty	VARC	DILR	QA	Notable Characteristic
CAT 2023	Very High	Hard	Hard	Hard	One of toughest papers in recent history
CAT 2024	Moderate–Easy	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Accessible formats; higher attempt counts
CAT 2025	Moderate	Moderate–Easy	Hard	Moderate	VARC scored well; DILR was tough
<b>CAT 2026</b>	<b>Moderate–High</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Moderate–Hard</b>	<b>Moderate–High</b>	<b>Expected to follow recent trend</b>

## Section-Wise Difficulty Profiles

**VARC:** Moderate to Difficult. Long, dense academic passages demand deep contextual interpretation rather than simple fact-retrieval. The challenge is sustained comprehension speed.

**DILR:** Frequently acts as the critical bottleneck. Sets often appear simpler than they are and conceal complex logical traps. Poor set selection can destroy your score.

**QA:** Consistently Moderate-to-High. Requires strong conceptual grounding and multi-step calculation speed. Creative problem formulations distinguish it from school-level math.

#### ■ Chapter Summary

- Overall difficulty ranges from moderate to high — perfect scores are extremely rare.
- DILR is widely considered the most variable and strategically challenging section.
- Top percentiles come from smart question selection, not attempting everything.

## Chapter 12

## CAT vs Other MBA Entrance Exams

Parameter	CAT	XAT	MAT
Sections	3 (VARC, DILR, QA)	4 (VARC, DM, QA, GK)	Multiple components
Duration	120 minutes	Varied / longer	Standard layout
Negative Marking	-1 per wrong MCQ	Standard penalties	Standard rules
Non-MCQ (TITA)	Yes — in all sections	Rare/Absent	Absent
Calculator	On-screen provided	Not allowed	Not allowed
Unique Feature	Strict sectional limits	Decision Making section	Speed-based format
Top Colleges	All 22 IIMs + 100s	XLRI, SP Jain, XIMB	AICTE-approved schools

### ■ Chapter Summary

- CAT is the gold standard for IIM admissions — most competitive and widely accepted.
- XAT adds Decision Making + GK; no calculator allowed.
- Preparing for CAT builds strong fundamentals applicable to XAT and MAT as well.

## Chapter 13

## Frequently Asked Questions

**Q Has the CAT pattern changed frequently?**

Yes. CAT moved from a 180-minute, 100-question format to a 120-minute, 68-question exam in stages between 2020 and 2024. The pattern has now been stable for two consecutive years.

**Q Is there negative marking?**

Negative marking applies only to MCQs: a wrong answer deducts  $-1$  mark. TITA questions carry no penalty at all for incorrect entries.

**Q What exactly are TITA questions?**

TITA stands for 'Type In The Answer'. No options are displayed. You must solve the problem and type your final numeric answer into an on-screen text field. Zero risk of negative marking.

**Q Can I switch between sections during the exam?**

No. The system enforces strict sequential navigation. Once the 40-minute timer for a section expires, it locks permanently. You cannot revisit it.

**Q How many questions are in the modern CAT?**

68 total: VARC (24) + DILR (22) + QA (22), worth a combined maximum of 204 marks.

**Q How does score normalization work?**

IIMs apply a statistical model that converts raw scores from each of the three exam slots into a unified scaled score, accounting for difficulty variation across slots. Percentiles are then derived from these scaled scores.

**Q Is an on-screen calculator available?**

Yes. CAT provides an integrated on-screen calculator during the exam. Unlike XAT, no physical calculator is allowed inside the exam hall.

**Q What is the best attempt strategy?**

Aim for approximately two-thirds of questions in each section with very high accuracy. Maximize TITA attempts (no risk) and be selective with MCQs to minimize negative marking.

## Chapter 14 Preparation Strategy

The CAT's design reveals exactly what skills to build. Use the pattern itself as your preparation blueprint.

### Pattern-Driven Study Plan

#### → Practice in Strict 40-Minute Blocks

Never practice sections without a timer. The entire exam is 3 × 40-minute sprints. Simulate this in every mock session to build pacing instinct and mental stamina.

#### → Master TITA — Attempt Every One

TITA questions have zero risk. Build the habit of always attempting them. Even a rough estimate can yield +3 marks with no downside.

#### → Build RC Speed for VARC

Daily reading of dense material (The Economist, academic essays, editorial columns) is non-negotiable. RC is 67% of VARC — speed-reading is the core competency.

#### → Develop Set Radar for DILR

In mocks, practice identifying 'friendly' vs 'toxic' sets within 60 seconds. This instinct, built over months, is your biggest DILR advantage.

#### → Formula Drill for QA

Build a personal formula sheet covering Arithmetic, Algebra, and Geometry. Time-pressure makes recall speed critical — formulas must be instinctive, not looked up.

#### → Analyse Every Mock Deeply

After each mock, spend as much time analysing your errors as the exam itself. Identify: which questions should you have attempted? Which wasted time? Where did negative marking hit?

### The Success Equation

**Success Score = High Accuracy + Smart Question Selection + Controlled Pacing**

#### ■ Chapter Summary

- Practice in strict 40-minute blocks to replicate real exam conditions.
- Always attempt TITA; be selective and precise on MCQs.
- Deeply analyze every mock — performance review is where real improvement happens.

## CHEAT SHEET Quick Reference — All Key Rules

### Complete Section Summary

Section	Qs	Marks	Time	Key Sub-topics
VARC	24	72	40 min	RC: 4–5 passages (16 Qs)   VA: Parajumbles, Summary, Odd Sentence (8 Qs)
DILR	22	66	40 min	DI: 11 Qs (tables, graphs)   LR: 11 Qs (arrangements, puzzles, logic)
QA	22	66	40 min	Arithmetic (8–10)   Algebra (5–7)   Modern Maths (2–4)   Geometry (1–3)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>204</b>	<b>120 min</b>	<b>All sections sequential — no switching   PwD: 53:20 per section</b>

### Scoring Rules at a Glance

Situation	Marks
Correct answer (any question type)	<b>+3 marks</b>
Wrong answer — MCQ	<b>-1 mark</b>
Wrong answer — TITA	0 marks (no penalty)
Unattempted question	0 marks (no penalty)

### Must-Remember Rules

- ✓ Sections are SEQUENTIAL and LOCKED — no going back once the timer expires.
- ✓ Always click 'Save and Next' — unsubmitted answers are treated as unattempted.
- ✓ TITA questions: ALWAYS attempt — zero penalty for wrong answers.
- ✓ MCQs: High accuracy only — random guessing costs marks.
- ✓ On-screen calculator available — no external devices permitted.
- ✓ Score normalization ensures fairness across all 3 exam slots.
- ✓ Target ~2/3 of questions per section with very high accuracy for competitive percentile.