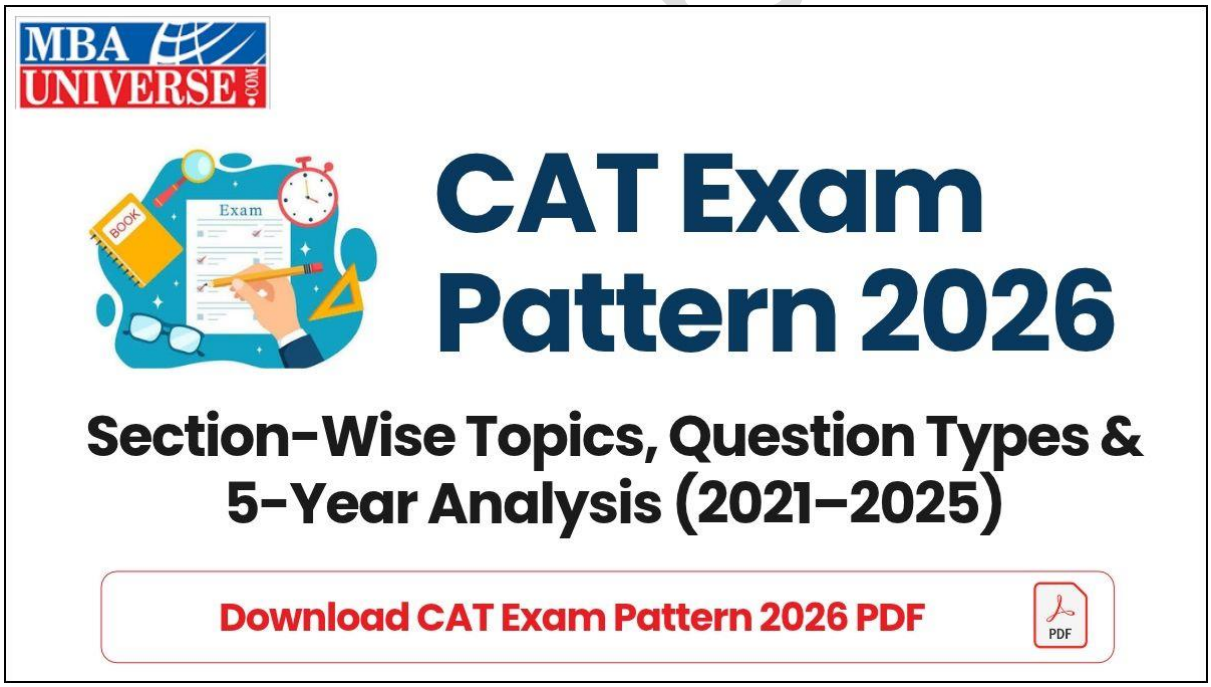
CAT Exam Pattern 2026: Section-Wise Questions, Marking Scheme, Total Marks and Duration

CAT 2026 Exam Pattern is expected to follow the CAT 2025 structure with 68 questions across three sections (VARC, DILR, QA) to be completed in 120 minutes with a strict sectional time limit of 40 minutes per section. Each correct answer carries +3 marks, each incorrect MCQ attracts –1 negative marking, and TITA (Type in the Answer) questions carry no negative marking. As per expected CAT Pattern 2026, the total marks for CAT 2026 is 204 (68×3). The MCQ-to-TITA split is approximately 45 MCQs and 23 TITA questions, though minor variations occur slot-to-slot. CAT 2026 will be held on November 29, 2026.This article covers the complete CAT 2026 Exam Pattern and Syllabus including section-wise breakup for VARC, DILR, and QA, marking scheme, types of questions, last 5 years' pattern changes, and free PDF download. Also know full CAT Syllabus 2026 for each section.



CAT Pattern Evolution: Year-Wise Changes (2019–2025)

CAT Exam Paper Pattern has gone through significant changes over the last seven years. Understanding the evolution helps CAT 2026 aspirants benchmark expected difficulty and structure. The table below tracks year-wise changes in CAT Paper Pattern from 2019 to 2025. CAT exam pattern 2026 is expected to follow last year’s exam pattern.

CAT Exam Pattern Evolution 2019–2025

CAT Year	Total Questions	Duration	Conducting IIM	Major Change
CAT Exam Pattern 2026	68 (Expected)	120 min	IIM Indore	Stable pattern expected to continue
CAT Exam Pattern 2025	68	120 min	IIM Kozhikode	Stable pattern continued
CAT Exam Pattern 2024	68	120 min	IIM Calcutta	Question count increased from 66 to 68
CAT Exam Pattern 2023	66	120 min	IIM Lucknow	No major change
CAT Exam Pattern 2022	66	120 min	IIM Bangalore	No major change
CAT Exam Pattern 2021	66	120 min	IIM Ahmedabad	Questions reduced from 76 to 66
CAT Exam Pattern 2020	76	120 min	IIM Indore	Duration cut from 180 to 120 min (COVID format)
CAT Exam Pattern 2019	100	180 min	IIM Kozhikode	Last year of 100-question, 3-hour pattern

Three Distinct Eras in CAT Pattern History:

1) The 100-Question Era (Until 2019): CAT had 100 questions in 180 minutes with 60 minutes per section. This was the longest and most comprehensive CAT format, testing endurance alongside skill.

2) The Compressed Pattern Era (2020–2023): The COVID-19 pandemic forced IIMs to cut exam duration to 120 minutes. Questions were reduced first to 76 (in 2020) and then to 66 (from 2021 onwards). This era emphasised speed and accuracy over volume.

3) The Stable 68-Question Era (2024 onwards): From CAT 2024, IIMs settled on 68 questions in 120 minutes. CAT 2025 retained this exact pattern, signalling that 68 questions is the stable format. **CAT 2026 is expected to follow the same 68-question, 120-minute pattern.**

Key Trends across the Last 5 Years:

- **TITA Question Share:** TITA (non-MCQ) questions have stabilised at 25–34% of the total paper, with CAT 2025 having 23 TITA out of 68 questions.
- **Sectional Time Lock:** The strict 40-minute-per-section rule (no switching) has been unchanged since CAT 2020.
- **VARC Composition:** RC has consistently remained at 16 questions (4 passages × 4 questions) since CAT 2021.
- **DILR Sets:** Each slot has 5 sets of 4–5 questions each, totalling 22 questions per slot.
- **QA Topic Mix:** Arithmetic dominates 35–40% of the QA section consistently across recent years.

MBAUniverse.com Insight: With 4 consecutive years (2021–2024) of pattern stability followed by a single change in 2024, IIMs have signalled that the 68-question, 120-minute format is the new norm. CAT 2026 aspirants should plan their preparation around this format with high confidence.

CAT Exam Pattern 2026

Looking at previous years' trends, CAT Paper Pattern 2026 is expected to be similar to previous year's paper with only minor changes in number of questions per section. The expected CAT 2026 Exam pattern is given below. CAT Exam Duration is 120 minutes, with equal time allotted for each section.

CAT Exam Pattern 2026 (Expected)

Section No.	Section Name	Duration	MCQs	TITA	Total
I	VARC	40 min	20	4	24
II	DI and LR	40 min	11	11	22
III	QA	40 min	14	8	22

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Section No.	Section Name	Duration	MCQs	TITA	Total
Total		**120 min**	**45**	**23**	**68**

CAT Exam Pattern 2026 PDF Download

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CAT Marking Scheme 2026

An important part of understanding the CAT Paper Pattern 2026 is knowing the CAT exam marking scheme 2026. The CAT marking scheme for 2026 is expected to follow the CAT 2025 pattern, and it is the same across all three sections: VARC, DILR and QA.

- Each correct answer earns **+3 marks**.
- Each incorrect MCQ (Multiple-Choice Question) carries **–1 mark** as negative marking.
- TITA (Type in the Answer) questions carry **no negative marking**.
- Unattempted questions score zero.

CAT Exam Marking Scheme 2026

Question Type	Correct Answer	Incorrect Answer	Unattempted
MCQ (Multiple-Choice Question)	+3 marks	–1 mark	0 marks
TITA (Type in the Answer / Non-MCQ)	+3 marks	0 marks	0 marks

CAT Exam Total Marks 2026: With 68 questions of 3 marks each, the total marks in CAT 2026 exam are 204. The CAT exam pattern total marks of 204 are split across the three sections as follows:

CAT Total Marks, TITA Qs, Negative Marking Scheme

Section	Duration	MCQs	TITA	Total Questions	Maximum Marks	Maximum Negative Marks
VARC	40 min	20	4	24	72	–20
DILR	40 min	11	11	22	66	–11
QA	40 min	14	8	22	66	–14
Total	**120 min**	**45**	**23**	**68**	**204**	**–45**

VARC carries the highest marks (72) and also the most negative-marking risk, since 20 of its 24 questions are MCQs. DILR carries the least risk, because half its questions are TITA.

CAT Negative Marking Scheme: How It Works

Candidates often ask: Is there negative marking in CAT, or does CAT have negative marking? This section provides accurate answer to this question based on CAT 2026 notification. CAT exam negative marking applies only to MCQs. A wrong MCQ answer costs 1 mark, which is one-third of the value of a correct answer. TITA questions, where you type in the answer instead of choosing an option, carry no penalty. That makes them worth attempting whenever you have a reasonable chance of solving them.

How to Calculate Your CAT Score: Example

Suppose a candidate attempts 40 MCQs (32 correct, 8 incorrect) and 18 TITA questions (12 correct, 6 incorrect).

- **MCQ score:** (32 × 3) – (8 × 1) = 96 – 8 = 88 marks
- **TITA score:** (12 × 3) – (6 × 0) = 36 marks
- **Total CAT score:** 88 + 36 = **124 marks out of 204**

What CAT Marking System Means for Your Strategy

- **Attempt every TITA question you can reasonably solve.** A wrong TITA answer costs nothing.
- **Don't guess blindly on MCQs.** With 4 options, a pure guess scores zero marks on average: a 1-in-4 chance of +3 against a 3-in-4 chance of –1.
- **Eliminate at least one option before guessing.** With 3 options left, a guess gains about +0.33 marks on average. With 2 options left, it gains +1 mark on average.
- **Accuracy matters more than raw attempts.** Every wrong MCQ wipes out one-third of a correct answer's value.

How Do CAT Toppers master CAT Exam Pattern? Section-Wise Strategies

How do CAT toppers understand and master the CAT exam pattern? MBAUniverse.com has interviewed 50+ CAT toppers, from CAT 2019 to CAT 2025, now studying at IIM Ahmedabad, IIM Calcutta, SPJIMR, MDI Gurgaon and other top B-schools. Here is how they handle the complexity of the CAT exam pattern, in their own words. Read full CAT Toppers interviews.

How CAT Toppers Use the 40 Minutes in Each Section

Section	CAT Toppers Strategies	Topper
VARC	"I imposed a time limit of 7.5 minutes per RC, regardless of difficulty."	Sanjiv Kumar, CAT 2024, 99.99
VARC	"For VARC, I had the strategy of attempting the RC's first and then the VA part in last 10 mins."	Shubham Bajaj, CAT 2020, 99.98, IIM Calcutta

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Section	CAT Toppers Strategies	Topper
VARC	"My aim in the exam was to attempt 3 RCs and all 8 VA questions."	Anmol Gupta, CAT 2025, 99.96, SPJIMR Mumbai
VARC	"One key tip was to spend 10–15 seconds quickly skimming through all RCs before choosing which ones to attempt."	Srishti Vazirani, CAT 2024, 99.00, SPJIMR Mumbai
DILR	"I spent the first 4 to 5 minutes selecting sets."	Pranshav Shah, CAT 2025, 99.80
DILR	"I skipped sets that took more than 3 minutes to structure and prioritized sets with minimal data points."	Sanjiv Kumar, CAT 2024, 99.99
DILR	"I completed the DILR section in 32–35 minutes and was sure of scoring 50+." (He scored 100 percentile in DILR.)	Anmol Gupta, CAT 2025, 99.96, SPJIMR Mumbai
DILR	"I would first give 3-4 mins to scan the entire section to identify what type of sets are there in the section."	Nandan Goel, CAT 2020, 99.95, IIM Calcutta
QA	"Have a check on my number of attempts after every 10 mins and start skipping few questions if I am slower than the speed of 5 questions/10 minutes."	Shubham Bajaj, CAT 2020, 99.98
QA	"I did one particular thing for QA and that was to simply open each question, read a word or two, and get an idea what the question was asking."	Paarth Jaitly, CAT 2024, 99.51, SPJIMR Mumbai

How Toppers Handle Negative Marking in CAT Exam

- "I had to constantly remind myself to ignore unsure questions to avoid negative marking," says Sahiti Potnuru, CAT 2023, 98.23, SPJIMR Mumbai
- Shubham Bajaj (99.98) recommends: **"Attempt 80% Questions with 80% accuracy. It is much better than 100% attempt with 50% accuracy."**

CAT Exam Pattern Surprises: How Toppers Handle

The number of questions per DILR set or per section can change from year to year. Toppers advise against fixed attempt targets.

- "We got a little surprise to see 5*4 questions instead of 6-4-6-4 questions of previous years. But I knew that there will always be an element of surprise in CAT," says Soumik Banerjee, CAT 2022, 99.95, IIM Calcutta.
- "I didn't have any particular test taking strategy and was flexible because I believe the ones you see online like 9/9/9 questions is a very cookie cutter approach," said Paarth Jaitly, CAT 2024, 99.51.

CAT Exam Pattern 2026 for VARC Section: Question Paper Break-up & Marking Scheme

To understand CAT Exam Pattern for VARC section, candidates should review the pattern of this section in CAT 2025 paper. Last year, the CAT 2025 VARC section consisted of 16 Reading Comprehension questions and 8 Verbal Ability questions. Check slot wise details below.

CAT 2025 VARC Slot 1: RC Passages, Topics, and Weightage

Area / Questions	No of Qs.	Type
Reading Comprehension	**16**	**MCQ**
RC 1: Alienists and the art of diagnosing mental disorders	4	MCQ
RC 2: Income inequality and economic growth	4	MCQ
RC 3: Objections to Electronic Music as a musical genre	4	MCQ
RC 4: Complex Systems and the dynamics of tail events	4	MCQ
Verbal Ability	**08**	**MCQ & TITA**
Paragraph completion	2	MCQ
Summary	2	MCQ
Odd Sentence Questions	2	TITA
Jumbled Paragraphs	2	TITA

CAT 2025 VARC Slot 2: RC Passages, Topics, and Weightage

Area / Questions	No of Qs.	Type
Reading Comprehension	**16**	**MCQ**
RC 1: How tetrafish adapted and evolved	4	MCQ
RC 2: Biases of AI	4	MCQ
RC 3: The role of "Place" in literature	4	MCQ
RC 4: Science and culture	4	MCQ
Verbal Ability	**08**	**MCQ & TITA**

Area / Questions	No of Qs.	Type
Paragraph completion	2	MCQ
Summary	2	MCQ
Odd Sentence Questions	2	TITA
Jumbled Paragraphs	2	TITA

CAT 2025 VARC Slot 3: RC Passages, Topics, and Weightage

Area / Questions	No of Qs.	Type
Reading Comprehension	**16**	**MCQ**
RC 1: Ill-effects of dams	4	MCQ
RC 2: AI and ethical decision-making	4	MCQ
RC 3: The Forest Act 1982	4	MCQ
RC 4: Tribal art	4	MCQ
Verbal Ability	**08**	**MCQ & TITA**
Paragraph completion	2	MCQ
Summary	2	MCQ
Odd Sentence Questions	2	TITA
Jumbled Paragraphs	2	TITA

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CAT Exam Pattern 2026 for DILR Section: Question Paper Break-up & Marking Scheme

Data Interpretation for CAT section tests a candidate's ability to analyze, interpret, and draw conclusions from a given numerical data. The questions in CAT Data Interpretation section are typically based on tables, bar graphs, line charts, pie charts, caselets, and mixed data sets.

Logical Reasoning for CAT section evaluates a candidate's ability to analyze patterns, identify relationships, and solve complex problems using logical reasoning. Common Logical Reasoning questions in CAT exam include arrangements, puzzles, blood relations, syllogisms, Venn diagrams, and logical sequences.

To better understand CAT Exam Pattern for DILR section, candidates should review the pattern of this section in CAT 2025 paper. Last year, the CAT 2025 DILR section consisted of

36 Data Interpretation questions and 30 Logical Reasoning questions. Check slot wise details below.

CAT 2025 DILR Slot 1 Analysis: Set-wise Distribution & Question Types

Area	Set Description	No. of Questions	Question Type
1. Data Interpretation	Performance rating of 6 employees	5	4 TITA
2. Data Interpretation	Import-Export data of 5 countries	4	4 MCQ
3. Logical Reasoning	Circular arrangement set involving 4 persons and 7 chairs	5	4 MCQ 1 TITA
4. Logical Reasoning	Five persons tapping yes and no	4	2 MCQ 2 TITA
5. Logical Reasoning	Train movement from stations A to E	4	4 TITA
Total No of Questions		**22**	

CAT 2025 DILR Slot 2 Analysis: Set-wise Distribution & Question Types

Area	Set Description	No. of Questions	Question Type
1. Data Interpretation	Pollution Index – Weighted average	5	1 MCQ 3 TITA
2. Data Interpretation	Authors and Number of Books (2 Bar Graphs)	4	2 MCQ 2 TITA
3. Data Interpretation	Scatter Plot (Index calculations of 3 years)	4	4 MCQ
4. Logical Reasoning	Ranking (6 balls and 4 holes)	4	2 MCQ 3 TITA

Area	Set Description	No. of Questions	Question Type
5. Logical Reasoning	Musicians	5	2 MCQ 3 TITA
Total No of Questions		**22**	

CAT 2025 DILR Slot 3 Analysis: Set-wise Distribution & Question Types

Area	Set Description	No. of Questions	Question Type
1. Logical Reasoning	6 friends calling each other	4	1 MCQ 3 TITA
2. Data Interpretation	Four friends solving puzzles – chart	4	2 MCQ 2 TITA
3. Logical Reasoning	Circular Arrangement (7 students)	4	4 MCQ
4. Data Interpretation	Currency Exchange – 4 countries	5	2 MCQ 3 TITA
5. Data Interpretation	Trade Balance – Import & Export	5	2 MCQ 3 TITA
Total No of Questions		**22**	

CAT Exam Pattern 2026 for Quantitative Aptitude: Arithmetic, Algebra Weightage

Quantitative Aptitude (QA) for CAT section assesses a candidate's mathematical skills, problem-solving ability, and numerical aptitude. The questions in Quantitative Aptitude test the conceptual clarity, logical application, and time management skills. CAT Quantitative Aptitude section covers topics from arithmetic, algebra, geometry, number systems, and modern mathematics. Read CAT Quantitative Ability exam pattern.

To better understand CAT Exam Pattern for Quant section, candidates should review the pattern of this section in CAT 2025 paper. Last year, the CAT 2025 Quantitative Aptitude section was dominated by Arithmetic (8 questions), followed by Algebra (4 questions) and Numbers (4 questions). Check slot wise details below.

CAT 2025 Quant Slot 1 Analysis: Topics, Weightages

Sub-section & Module	Description	No. of Questions
Number System	Factors 1, Digits Based 1, Set Based 1	3
Algebra	Log 1, Linear Equations 2, Functions 2, Inequality 1	6
Arithmetic	TSD 1, T&W 1, SI CI 1, Percentage 1, Ratio 1, PLD 1, Mixture 1, Maxima & Minima 1	8
Modern Math	P&C 1	1
Geometry & Mensuration	Circle 1, Polygon 1, Coordinate Geo 2	4
Total		22

CAT 2025 Quant Slot 2 Analysis: Topics, Weightages

Sub-section & Module	Description	No. of Questions
Number System	Digit 1, Remainder 1, Divisors 1	3
Algebra	Log 1, Linear Equations 2, Functions 1, Sequence & Series 1, Algebraic Expression 1, Maxima/Minima 1, Quadratic Equation 2	8
Arithmetic	TSD 1, T&W 1, SI CI 1, Percentage 0, PLD 2, Mixture 1, Averages 1, Ratio 1	8
Modern Math		0
Geometry & Mensuration	Circle/Tangent 1, Polygon (Hexagon Based) 1, Triangle 1, Coordinate Geo 0	3
Total		22

CAT 2025 Quant Slot 3 Analysis: Topics, Weightages

Sub-section & Module	Description	No. of Questions
Number System	Digit Based 2, Calculation Based 1	3
Algebra	Log 1, Functions 2, Max. Min. 2, Exponent 1	6

Sub-section & Module	Description	No. of Questions
Arithmetic	TSD 2, T&W 1, Ratio 2, PLD 1, Mixture 1, Averages 1, Pipes & Cisterns 1	9
Modern Math	Set Theory 1	1
Geometry & Mensuration	Triangle 2, Trapezium 1	3
Total		**22**

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CAT vs XAT vs SNAP vs NMAT 2026: Exam Pattern Comparison

Most MBA aspirants take 2–3 MBA entrance exams to maximise admission options. Understanding how CAT exam pattern 2026 compares with other major MBA entrance exams helps in planning preparation strategy and managing exam-day expectations. The table below compares CAT 2026 with XAT, SNAP, and NMAT exam patterns.

MBA Entrance Exams Pattern Comparison

Parameter	CAT Exam Pattern 2026	XAT 2026	SNAP 2025	NMAT 2025
Conducting Body	IIM Indore (expected)	XLRI Jamshedpur	Symbiosis International (SIU)	GMAC
Total Questions	68	95 (75 + 20 GK)	60	108
Duration	120 minutes	180 minutes (170 + 10)	60 minutes	120 minutes
Number of Sections	3	4	3	3
Sectional Time Limit	Yes — 40 min each	No (single time block)	No	Yes — sectional
Correct Answer	+3 marks	+1 mark	+1 mark	Adaptive scaled
Negative Marking (MCQ)	–1 mark	–0.25 mark	–0.25 mark	None
TITA / Non-MCQ Penalty	None	N/A	N/A	None

Parameter	CAT Exam Pattern 2026	XAT 2026	SNAP 2025	NMAT 2025
Unattempted Penalty	None	–0.10 after 8 unattempted	None	None
Total Marks	204	95	60	36–360 (scaled)
Mode	Computer-based at test centre	Computer-based at test centre	Computer-based at test centre	Test centre OR Online Proctored at Home
Number of Test Cities	~170	~70	~79	100+
Difficulty Level	High	Very High (DM unique)	Moderate	Moderate

Key Observations for CAT 2026 Aspirants:

- **The examination pattern of CAT exam is the most time-pressured exam pattern** with only 1.76 minutes per question (120 min ÷ 68 Qs).
- **CAT and XAT are the only exams with strict negative marking.** SNAP also has –0.25 but on far fewer questions. NMAT has zero negative marking.
- **CAT is the only major exam with strict sectional time limits.** Most aspirants struggle with the inability to return to a section.
- **NMAT exam offers maximum flexibility.** Three attempts per cycle, no negative marking, and home proctoring option.
- **XAT's Decision Making (DM) section is unique** — has no equivalent in CAT, SNAP, or NMAT; requires separate preparation.

For complete pattern details of each exam, read CAT 2026 Pattern, XAT 2026 Pattern, SNAP 2025 Pattern, and NMAT 2026 Pattern on MBAUniverse.com.

Experience CAT Exam Pattern 2026: Mock Tests, Previous Papers & Sample Papers

Reading about CAT 2026 exam pattern is one thing but “experiencing it” under real exam conditions is what truly builds exam readiness. The most effective way to really understand the 68-question, 120-minute format with strict sectional time limits is to attempt actual CAT-style papers in a simulated environment. MBAUniverse.com offers three free practical resources that let you experience the CAT exam pattern 2026 first-hand. Check linked below.

- **CAT Mock Tests 2026** Free full-length CAT mock tests built on the latest 68-question, 120-minute pattern. Each mock simulates the actual CAT exam interface with sectional time locks, +3/–1 marking, and detailed performance analysis.

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- **CAT Previous Year Question Papers** Free downloadable CAT question papers from 2017 onwards, with detailed solutions for VARC, DILR, and QA sections. The most authentic resource to understand real CAT difficulty level and question framing.
- **CAT Sample Paper 2026** Free CAT 2026 sample papers designed on the expected exam pattern. Ideal for early-stage aspirants who want to get a feel of CAT-style questions before attempting full mocks.

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CAT 2026 Exam Syllabus

CAT exam pattern 2026 syllabus: CAT exam pattern and syllabus are related to each other. CAT Syllabus is based on important topics in three sections as in exam pattern that were covered in last 10 year's papers. CAT Verbal Ability Syllabus includes Para Jumbles, Para Summary, and Odd One Out. CAT Reading Comprehension Syllabus includes passages from literature, business, science, philosophy, and social sciences areas. CAT Data Interpretation syllabus includes questions on Charts and Graphs. CAT Logical Reasoning syllabus includes questions on arrangements, puzzles, blood relations, syllogisms, and Venn diagrams. CAT Quantitative Aptitude syllabus topics from arithmetic, algebra, geometry, number systems, and modern mathematics. Check complete details about CAT 2026 Syllabus.

Summary: CAT Exam Pattern 2026 at a Glance

CAT 2026 Exam Pattern is expected to retain the CAT 2025 structure with **68 questions across three sections.** CAT Exam Time Duration is 120 minutes, with equal 40 minutes allotted for each section. Candidates cannot switch between sections during the exam. The marking scheme awards **+3 for correct** answers and –1 for incorrect MCQs, with no negative marking for TITA questions. CAT Exam Total Marks 2026 are 204, based on last year's pattern. CAT negative marking scheme is applicable to MCQ question only**.** CAT 2026 will be held on November 29, 2026. Read the complete article above for CAT 2026 exam pattern section-wise breakup, year-wise pattern evolution, comparison with other MBA entrance exams, and free PDF download. Also read these articles for better understanding of CAT pattern: CAT Preparation 2026, CAT 2026 Verbal Ability Pattern, Best Books for CAT Preparation 2026, CAT 2026 Verbal Ability Pattern, CAT 2026 Data Interpretation Pattern, CAT 2026 Logical Reasoning Pattern, CAT 2026 Quantitative Aptitude Pattern, CAT 2026 Reading Comprehension Pattern.

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