

The PBSAA Guidebook

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General

What is the Psychological and Behavioural Sciences Admissions Assessment?

The Psychological and Behavioural Sciences Admissions Assessment (PBSAA) is a pre-interview assessment for students applying to study Psychology and Behavioural Sciences at Cambridge University.

What is the purpose of the PBSAA?

The PBSAA is designed to determine your potential to achieve as a student in a demanding undergraduate Psychology course. It is therefore designed to test **how you think** rather than **what you know**. The exception is if you are taking the Maths and Biology section, in which your knowledge of each subject is being tested.

It is designed to be tough and challenging as it is a way for Cambridge Admissions to differentiate between students who otherwise have likely achieved the top grades in school.

Test Specifics

How is the PBSAA structured?

The PBSAA is composed of two sections lasting a total of 2 hours;

- Section 1: A multiple-choice assessment consisting of two parts
 - Part A: Thinking Skills- Consisting of Critical Thinking and Problem Solving questions (22 Questions- 11 of each type)
 - Part B/C: A choice of either **B: Mathematics and Biology** (30 Questions- 15 of each subject) OR **C: Reading Comprehension** (24 Questions- Split into 3 tasks)

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All questions in this section are multiple choice and of equal weighting. You will score 1 mark for every correct answer and not gain a mark for every incorrect or unanswered question. You have a total of 80 minutes for this section: it is recommended you split your time equally and spend 40 minutes on each section.

- Section 2: Written response to a quotation
You will have a total of 40 minutes to complete this section.

NB: Section 1 Part A of the PBSAA is a condensed version of Section 1 of the TSA (Thinking Skills Assessment) which is another Cambridge Admissions Test, so any Thinking Skills preparation you can do will benefit you hugely.

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What are ‘Thinking Skills’?

Thinking Skills are skills deemed necessary to excel in a demanding undergraduate course. They are designed to test your academic potential and ascertain the way in which you think. They are divided into two sections: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving.

Critical Thinking involves analysing statements and arguments, finding flaws in them, and coming up with your own arguments based on the information at hand. PBSAA Critical Thinking questions require you to understand the components of a good argument and be able to pick them apart. There are 7 key Critical Thinking skills that PBSAA questions will focus on. These are:

- Summarising the main conclusion of the passage
- Drawing a conclusion from the passage
- Identifying an assumption in the argument
- Seeing if additional evidence strengthens or weakens the argument
- Identifying flaws in the argument
- Looking for similarities within the logical structure of an argument
- Identifying a principle relied upon by the argument

Problem Solving involves looking at problems and finding creative and logical solutions within the given parameters. The questions are often numerical in nature or involve interpreting charts, diagrams or shapes. There are 3 key Problem Solving skills that PBSAA questions will focus on. These are:

- Relevant Section: requires you to analyse information to get a solution
- Finding Procedures: involves manipulating relevant information to get a solution
- Identifying Similarities: involves finding a situation with similarities to the one you were given.

For in-depth tutorials on how to tackle these types of questions, you can access a large number of FREE revision videos at: stepmaths.co.uk/free-pbsaa

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What is Reading Comprehension?

Reading Comprehension assesses your ability to understand and draw conclusions from texts through multiple choice questions. This section is not subject specific and the texts can be drawn from a wide range of sources. There are 5 key Reading Comprehension Skills that PBSAA questions will focus on. These are:

- Explore the key themes of a text
- Analyse the details and differentiate between opinions and ideas presented in the text
- Evaluate the writer's purpose and consider the intended audience
- Understand implications and implicit parts on the text
- Draw similarities and differences within the text or between a variety of texts

The Reading Comprehension section of the PBAA (Section 1 Part C) is split into 3 tasks: Understanding Short Texts, Multiple-Matching and Understanding Extended Text. There will be no overlap between sections and no question will be dependent on the answer to another.

Do I have to take Biology A-Level to take the Maths and Biology Section?

Some Colleges may require you to take Biology A-Level to apply for PBS. If the college you are applying to does not and you do not take A-Level Biology, it is advised that you take the Reading Comprehension section, but you may attempt it if you feel confident in tackling the questions with GCSE knowledge. However, given that you will be competing with students who may have taken Biology A-Level and therefore will have stronger and more in-depth knowledge, it may be unwise as it will be hard for you to score as strongly as they perhaps will. If you do not take A-Level Biology there are topics on the specification that you may not have studied before and will therefore have to teach yourself.

The topics you will need to know for the Biology portion of the Maths and Biology Section are:

- Cells: Structure and Function of Animal, Plant and Bacterial Cells.
- Movement: Diffusion, Osmosis and Active Transport.
- Cell Division and Sex Determination: Mitosis, Meiosis, Asexual and Sexual Reproduction
- Inheritance: Key terms and Monohybrid crosses
- DNA: Structure, Function of Chromosomes, Protein Synthesis and Mutations
- Gene Technologies: Genetic Modification/Engineering and Stem Cells
- Variation: Natural Selection, Evolution and Extinction
- Enzymes: Functions, Mechanisms, the Effect of Certain Factors, and Digestive Enzymes
- Animal Physiology: Respiration and the Central Nervous System
- Plant Physiology: Photosynthesis and Phototropism
- Environment: Food Chains, Population Growth, Cycles, Pollution, Variety, Biodiversity

Will I struggle with the PBSAA Maths and Biology Section if I didn't take Maths A-Level?

Quite possibly. Although only some colleges require Maths A-Level, if you do not take Maths A-Level it is advised you do the Reading Comprehension section. Should you wish to, you can tackle the Maths section with GCSE-level knowledge. However, do be aware that there may be some topics you have not covered before on the syllabus (particularly in areas like Probability) and will have to teach yourself. It is also important to remember that you will be competing with people that have taken Maths A-Level and may have a stronger understanding of the topics on the syllabus. The topics you need to know to sit the PBSAA include:

- **Number:** Basic Functions (Addition, Subtraction, Multiplication and Division), Factors and Multiples, Squares and Roots, Index Laws, Standard Index Form, Fractions Manipulation, Direct and Indirect Proportions, Percentages, Ratio Notation, Surds, Pi, Upper and Lower Bounds, Approximations, and BIDMAS
- **Algebra:** Expression Manipulation, Index Laws, Linear Equations, Simultaneous Equations, Factorisation, Derive and Substitute Formulas, Solving Inequalities, Changing the Subject, Cartesian Coordinates, Straight Line Equations and Gradients, Graph Intersections, and Real-Life Problems
- **Geometry:** Properties of Angles, Sum of Interior and Exterior Angles, Properties of Quadrilaterals, Reflection and Rotational Symmetry, Geometric Proof, Circle Theorems, 2D and 3D Shape Manipulation, and Vector Notation
- **Measures:** Perimeters and Areas, Circumferences and Areas, Volume and Surface Area, Vectors, Interpreting Maps, Convert Units, Standard Index Prefixes, Compound Measures, and Recognising Inaccuracies
- **Statistics:** Bias and Flaws, Interpret Discrete and Continuous Data, Extract Data from Graphs and Tables, Interpret Cumulative Frequency, Interpret Averages and Ranges, Average Rates, Recognise Correlation, and Compare Data using Statistical Measures
- **Probability:** Relative Frequency and Theoretical Models, List All Outcomes, Identify Mutually Exclusive Outcomes, Venn Diagrams, Add/Multiply Probabilities, Tree Diagrams, and Compare Experimental and Theoretical Probabilities

If you have not studied Maths since GCSE and would like to sit the Maths and Biology Section, it is advised that you spend some time prior to sitting the assessment revisiting topics you may have struggled with and learning those you may not have encountered before.

If I take Maths/Biology A-Level, do I have to do the Maths and Biology Section?

No, although it may be worth it if you're confident with the subject content. Taking the section based on content you already know and are already preparing for A-levels on may be easier than learning new skills to tackle the Reading Comprehension section. Given that much of the content should already be part of your Year 13 revision, it allows you to spend more time getting familiar with the types of questions asked on the PBSAA and focusing on exam technique to maximise your marks.

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Do I need to know subject specific content to sit Section 2 of the PBSAA?

No. Although Section 2 is loosely Psychology-based, you are not assumed to have background knowledge on any specific subject area. They are looking for how you interpret the quotation presented and can link it to cases you have studied previously, rather than a display of your specific knowledge on the subject. The Examiners want to see that you can think analytically and produce a well-structured and coherent argument. That being said, it is a good idea to read around the content in your A-Level course to gain a broader understanding of the subject and provide you with examples to further strengthen your argument.

Will there be a choice of question in Section 2?

Yes. You will be presented with 4 quotations and you must write an essay discussing **one**. It is recommended that you do not pick the quotation that is the easiest but perhaps one that prompts a lot of discussion to allow you to show the examiner how you formulate an argument.

How should I structure my Section 2 answer?

There is no set structure for how to answer this question, but it is advisable you follow a usual essay structure with an introduction, a conclusion, and a number of main body paragraphs. Ensure that throughout your essay you are carrying on a coherent argument and providing an analytical evaluation of the quotation. It is recommended that you spend a few minutes at the start of the test analysing the quote, planning your essay before you start writing it.

What is the mark scheme for Section 2 of the PBSAA?

There is no formal mark scheme for the essay section of the PBSAA and the exam board has not created model or ideal answers. They are assessing your ability to think analytically, produce a coherent argument with evidence that is relevant, and write succinctly under time pressure.

Luckily for you, we have created a number of essay plans on our website to help you write a well-reasoned response. To download a FREE essay plan tutorial, visit: stepmaths.co.uk/free-pbsaa

How to Apply

Where can I take the PBSAA?

The PBSAA can only be taken at an authorised test centre. You can ask the Examinations Officer of your current school or college to register you and you will be able to take the exam on site. If you have already left school or college, you could go back to your old school and sit the paper there. If neither of these options are available to you then you will have to search for an authorised test centre to register you.

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When can I take the PBSAA?

You will have to register for the PBSAA by 15th October in Year 13. You will sit the test just after the October half-term.

How can I apply for the PBSAA?

You cannot register yourself to take the PBSAA; the test centre is responsible for registering you. If you are currently attending a school or college, you could possibly ask the Examinations Officer to register you.

If, however, you are not attending a school or college, then you can visit your old school and talk to the Examinations Officer there and they may register you for the PBSAA. If not, you may need to look for other test centres nearby and ask them to register you.

Will I be charged to take the PBSAA?

Cambridge University does not charge candidates registered at an official test centre.

Results

When will I get my PBSAA score?

Exact dates will vary from college to college, but you will usually hear back in January.

Can I receive feedback on my PBSAA score?

Yes, feedback will be provided as part of Cambridge's usual feedback process.

How important is my PBSAA score?

The PBSAA is fairly important as it is one of the few quantitative measures of a student's academic potential used in the admissions process. Given that most applicants will have received high numbers of A and A* grades, the PBSAA helps differentiate students who may otherwise appear very similar. Given the recent scrapping of AS exams, the PBSAA is even more important as a way to highlight your academic capabilities to Admission Tutors. Alongside your personal statement and references, it helps provide a more holistic view of you as a student and your potential at university. However, it is important to remember that there are other indicators of your academic capability throughout your application and the PBSAA is only one of the parts.

A strong PBSAA score is often a good indicator of whether or not you will be called to interview.

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How is the PBSAA graded?

The GAA is graded on a scale from 1.0-9.0. The test is graded so that the average candidate scores a 4.0.

What is a 'good' PBSAA score?

Generally speaking, around 60% or a score of 5.0+ is seen as a respectable score. There is no set score necessary to gain an interview, but some Admissions Tutors may set specific base scores for their college when calling applicants to interview. Obviously, the stronger your score the better, but it is designed to be difficult and for few applicants to achieve a score higher than 7.0.

Can I re-sit the PBSAA if I am not happy with my score?

Given that the PBSAA is only sat once a year, there is no opportunity to re-sit the paper for application in the same year. If you desperately feel a re-sit is necessary, you will have to re-apply to Cambridge the following year.

Revision

Where can I find past papers?

Past Papers can be found here: stepmaths.co.uk/free-pbsaa

It is recommended you do as many as possible before the test so you are familiar with the types of questions asked and the time pressure faced.

When should I start revising for the PBSAA?

It is recommended you start revising for the PBSAA in the summer before Year 13. The PBSAA is unlikely to be similar to any test you have sat in the past and it will take time to familiarise yourself with the format and the skills necessary to sit the exam. Given that it is largely skills based (particularly Section 1 Part A) you need time to learn and perfect the skills. This makes cramming just before the test largely unhelpful and, to an extent, counterproductive.

How should I revise for the PBSAA?

The best way to revise for the PBSAA is to sit [past papers](#) in timed conditions. It is a highly time-pressured test and so it is necessary to get used to the timings before you sit the exam. This is particularly useful for Section 1 of the PBSAA.

It is also a good idea to read Psychology research papers and stay up-to-date with current affairs in the field of study. Although you are not expected to have any prior subject-specific knowledge, academic papers are helpful to provide you with examples to formulate and strengthen your argument for Section 2.

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Other

What equipment is needed to sit the PBSAA?

To take Section 1 of the test, a soft pencil is required, and a rubber is also recommended. The use of a dictionary, even a bilingual one, and a calculator are not allowed.

For Section 2, a black ink pen is recommended.

The use of correction fluid is not allowed, so get comfortable with crossing out!

Is extra time allowed for candidates whose first language is not English?

No. Extra time is not permitted for candidates whose first language is not English.

What do I do if I need Access Arrangements?

Access Arrangements are available if you have a disability or a special requirement entitling you to support for other exams.

You will need to inform the test centre of your condition before they register you for the PBSAA. You may need to provide details and medical evidence of your disability or special requirement.

What are the guidelines for laptop use?

A candidate using a laptop must not be able to disturb the other candidates and the laptop screen must not be visible to them.

If the candidate requiring a laptop is taken to a separate room, then they will require an individual invigilator.

Candidates using a laptop should format their work in Arial font, size 11, single-spaced. There is no word limit for the writing task for the PBSAA. Automatic spell checkers and grammar checkers must be disabled.

At the end of the test, the candidate using the laptop must be present when their script is printed off, to confirm that the work is theirs. The candidate's name, candidate number, candidate initials, and centre number should be clearly written on the printout.

Can I apply for Special Consideration?

Should you feel that temporary illness, injury, or other issues affected your test score, you can ask for this to be taken into account as special consideration. A special consideration form must be completed within seven days of sitting the test. If

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you want to apply for special consideration, talk to the Examinations Officer at your test centre as soon as possible.

Good luck with your PBSAA preparation; if you have any questions, please visit stepmaths.co.uk and contact us!

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