

The TSA Guidebook

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General

What is the TSA?

The TSA is a pre-interview assessment that tests your Critical Thinking and Problem Solving skills and which is required for a complete application to some universities for select courses. It is a test designed to see **how you think** rather than **what you know**.

What is Critical Thinking?

Critical Thinking involves analysing statements and arguments, finding flaws in them, and coming up with your own arguments based on the information at hand. TSA Critical Thinking questions require you to understand the components of a good argument and to be able to pick them apart.

What is Problem Solving?

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.

Find out more about the different types of questions that can be asked by getting out FREE TSA taster videos here: stepmaths.co.uk/free-tsa

Why is the TSA needed?

The ability to think logically and intuitively when faced with a problem and the ability to analyse a given argument are essential to many university courses. The TSA is

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used by the university tutors to judge whether or not you are capable and have the skill and aptitude to succeed in the course you want to apply for.

What universities ask for the TSA?

At the time of writing, the universities asking for the TSA are Oxford, Cambridge and UCL.

What university courses require me to take the TSA?

At Oxford, the following courses will require you to take the full TSA (Sections 1&2):

- Economics and Management
- Experimental Psychology
- Human Sciences
- Philosophy and Linguistics
- Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE)
- Psychology and Linguistics
- Psychology and Philosophy

Candidates applying to study **Chemistry** and **History and Economics** will be required to take Section 1 of the TSA as part of their application.

At Cambridge, the following courses will require you to take Section 1 of the TSA:

- Land Economy

*Additionally, for Geography you will take the **GAA** (Geography Admissions Assessment) and for Psychological and Behavioural Sciences you will take the **PBSAA** (Psychological and Behavioural Sciences Admissions Assessment). Each of those exams has a first section with Thinking Skills questions taken from Section 1 of the TSA.*

*For Economics, you will take the **ECAA** (Economics Admissions Assessment), which features Problem Solving questions from the TSA.*

More information about these tests can be found at stepmaths.co.uk

At UCL, the following courses will require you to take Section 1 of the TSA:

- European Social and Political Studies
- European Social and Political Studies: Dual Degree

If in doubt as to whether you need to sit the TSA or not, it is best to contact the relevant university's admissions office well before the application deadline.

What if two of the universities I am applying to require the TSA?

Given that the TSA is only sat on one day, you will still only have to sit the TSA once - the relevant sections will just be sent to each university. It is, however, highly unlikely that two universities will require the TSA from you, given the universities and courses that request it. If in doubt, speak to the Examination Officer at your test centre.

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Test Specifics

What is the structure of the TSA?

The TSA is composed of two sections:

- Section 1: Thinking Skills Assessment
- Section 2: Writing Task

For UCL and Cambridge you will only have to complete Section 1 but for TSA Oxford you will have to complete both sections.

Section 1 is a 90 minute test consisting of 50 multiple choice questions which will test:

- Problem Solving skills
 - Numerical and spatial reasoning
- Critical Thinking skills
 - Understanding argument and reasoning using everyday language

There will be a stimulus, a question, and 5 options for each question in Section 1. The stimulus may be a diagram, a table, a graph, or a passage of text.

There will be 3 types of Problem Solving question:

- 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.

There will be 7 types of Critical Thinking question:

- 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

The questions are roughly in order of difficulty but with different types of questions interspersed throughout the paper to ensure you are exposed to a variety of questions even if you don't finish the test on time.

You have 108 seconds per question which includes time to read/understand the stimulus material (analysing passages or graphs) and time to examine the options presented to you before picking the correct one. Time can be tight, so you must work quickly and succinctly. Each question has equal weighting, so it is advisable not to spend a disproportionate amount of time on any one question - you are better off spending that time answering three questions than focusing on one hard one. The students who fail to complete this section are often those who get bogged down with a particular question rather than continuing to move through the section at a steady pace.

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STEP Maths has video tutorials covering how to approach each style of TSA question most efficiently; you can create an account and download FREE videos here: stepmaths.co.uk/free-tsa

Section 2 is a writing task in which you will be given 4 essay titles and 30 minutes to write **one** of the essays.

This will test your ability to organise ideas in a clear and concise manner and communicate them effectively in writing. The questions will not be subject specific. You will only be required to complete Section 2 of the TSA if you are applying for one of the Oxford courses listed earlier. The essay you write will be reviewed by the Admissions Tutor of the Oxford College that you have applied to; it is not marked centrally. Therefore, it is a great way to impress the person who will eventually decide whether or not you receive an offer.

How to Apply

Where can I take the TSA?

The TSA 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.

When can I take the TSA?

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

How do I apply for the TSA?

You cannot register yourself to take the TSA for any of the universities; 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 TSA. 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 TSA?

Cambridge and UCL do not charge candidates registered at an official test centre, but some test centres may charge an administration fee to candidates sitting the TSA Oxford.

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Results

How will the TSA be graded?

Each question on Section 1 will be worth one mark and the marking process for Section 1 is automated. You must clearly mark your answers on the provided multiple choice answer sheet.

Standardised scores are calculated on the TSA scale to one decimal point (the scale for scoring goes from 0 to 100). The scale takes into account the questions and the overall difficulty of the paper. As such the scale changes each year. The scale allows candidates' scores from different versions of the TSA to be compared.

Will I be penalised for wrong answers?

The TSA is marked positively and, therefore, there are no penalties for incorrect answers - you will receive one mark for each correct answer. However, if you answer a question incorrectly or miss out a question, you will receive 0 for that question. Given that it is multiple choice, it is to your advantage to guess answers if you are unable to find the correct solution and are feeling the time pressure. If you are stuck on a question, it may be wise to eliminate answers you know are definitely wrong and guess from the remaining answers. This will increase your chances of guessing the right answer and gaining a mark.

When will I receive my score?

For Oxford: results are released at midnight on 15th January via the Results Online System- you will need the PIN you received when taking the test to access your score. Keep this PIN safe as you may not be able to get another copy of it.

For Cambridge: the date will vary from college to college, but will likely be in January.

For UCL: they will let you know when results are due to be released - there is no set time by which they will be released.

How will I receive my score?

The results for the TSA Section 1 will be issued in the form of a PDF via the Results Online system.

Can I request feedback on my TSA score?

You may request feedback from the relevant college as part of the usual feedback process.

How important is my TSA score in the admissions process?

The TSA 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

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applicants will have received high numbers of A and A* grades, the TSA helps differentiate students who may otherwise appear very similar. Given the recent scrapping of AS exams, the TSA is even more important as a way to highlight your academic capabilities to Admissions 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 TSA is only one of the parts.

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

What is a 'good' TSA score?

In general, the average TSA score (on the TSA scale) for an applicant to Cambridge is in the high 50s, with only 10% of students scoring above a 70. The distribution of marks is like a bell curve or normal distribution, with the majority of students scoring within the 50s and 60s. Whether or not you will be called to interview is dependent on the subject you are applying for. For instance, applicants for PPE at Oxford are, as a rule of thumb, only called for interview if they attain a TSA score over 60. (This of course varies from college to college and year to year.) A score in the 70s is considered very strong and only a very small proportional of exceptional candidates score over 80.

Revision

How do I prepare for the TSA?

The TSA is a test of the skills and aptitude the student already has. While extra knowledge isn't required, extra practice will definitely come in handy, since the test is highly time pressured. You can practice the types of question that will be asked by attempting the practice papers found on the admissions testing website.

Section 1 does not test Maths too heavily but you will be required to be fluent with:

- Addition
- Subtraction
- Division
- Multiplication
- Percentages
- Place Value
- Simple Fractions

Be aware that the marking process for Section 1 is automated, so, before the time ends, you should check you have marked the correct answer on your answer sheet clearly.

Read each question carefully so that you are less likely to spend time correcting a mistake. The questions for Problem Solving are mainly numerical, so the ability to approximate numbers will save a lot of time with calculations. Another method to bear in mind is elimination, given that it is a multiple choice test.

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To prepare yourself for questions on Critical Thinking, you can begin to read articles and journals to understand different ways to structure an argument and the various components of a well-structured argument.

STEP Maths has video tutorials covering each style of question that can be found on the TSA; you can create an account and download FREE videos here: stepmaths.co.uk/free-tsa

Section 2 is an essay-based question that is not subject-specific. To prepare for this you should be able to structure a full argument in a 30 minute sitting and be able to communicate your point clearly through writing. It is a good idea to have strong general knowledge and to be up to date with current affairs to use as relevant examples. The Admissions Tutors will be looking for your ability to structure an essay well and communicate key points efficiently. They want to see how you engage with the question, explore key themes and offer different perspectives and arguments.

When should I start revising for the TSA?

It is advised that you start your preparation well in advance; ideally before you start Year 13. It is much easier to prepare for the test if you practise little and often and so the summer holiday is an ideal opportunity to get to grips with the style of questions. It is counterproductive to cram just before the test given that it is skills based and requires practice and test-taking skills, rather than simply knowledge. However, don't panic if you haven't started yet - any practice you can put in now will be immensely helpful.

What is the best way to revise for the TSA?

The best way to revise is to get familiar with the types of question asked and the timings of the test. It is unlikely you will have encountered the types of question on the TSA previously and so familiarising yourself will put you at ease and make you feel more comfortable tackling the questions asked. There is an emphasis on cognitive (thinking) skills rather than knowledge as such, so it is important to focus on exam technique and how to approach the test.

Each type of question has 'tricks' or 'formulas' that can be applied to speed up the process of answering the question and eliminating incorrect options.

STEP Maths has video tutorials covering each style of question that can be found on the TSA, and you can create an account and download FREE videos here: stepmaths.co.uk/free-tsa

Where can I find past papers?

You can find all the past papers on our website: stepmaths.co.uk/tsa-past-papers Here you can also access full video solutions to a large number of past papers.

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To get **FREE** access to some video solutions, please follow this link:
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It is recommended to work through past papers until you are familiar with the format and style of the test. It is best to work through past papers under timed conditions given that time pressure is a large part of the test.

Other

What equipment can I use for the TSA?

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 allowed for such candidates.

What do I do if I require 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 TSA. 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. The word limit for each writing task is 1,200 words for the TSA. 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,

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

Can I use TSA Oxford from a previous year as part of a new application?

Sadly not. You must take TSA Oxford in the year you are applying to university, regardless of whether you're re-applying or deferring your offer. If you take the test again, your score from one year will not affect your chances if re-applying in later years, as each application is considered afresh.

What should I do on the day of the TSA?

The TSA is an intensive test, so it is essential you are prepared for it well in advance. Like you would for any other exam, ensure you are well-rested and don't skip breakfast. Do not stay up all-night cramming, as it is unlikely to help your score. Take water into the exam with you, but, given it is highly time-pressured, try to avoid the need for toilet breaks.

Good luck for your TSA preparation; if you have any questions, please go to stepmaths.co.uk and contact us!

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