



CAREER  
CHOICE  
360

Common Admission Test (CAT)

# CAT EXAM HANDBOOK

2026 Edition



Career Choice 360 Mentors

# COMPLETE CAT EXAM HANDBOOK

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The Common Admission Test (CAT) is India's most prestigious national-level MBA entrance examination, conducted annually by the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) on a rotational basis.

It is your golden ticket to the top business schools in the country , not just the 21 IIMs, but over 1,200 MBA colleges that accept a valid CAT score.

## Key Highlights

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Feature	Details
Full Name	Common Admission Test (CAT)
Conducting Body	Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) — on rotational basis
CAT 2025 Conducted By	IIM Kozhikode
Exam Mode	Computer-Based Test (CBT)
Frequency	Once a year (typically November)
Total Questions	68 Questions
Total Marks	204 Marks
Exam Duration	120 Minutes (40 min per section)
Sections	VARC, DILR, Quantitative Ability
Eligibility	Bachelor's degree with 50% marks (45% for SC/ST/PwD)
Age Limit	No age limit
Colleges Accepting CAT	21 IIMs + 1,200+ MBA colleges

## Eligibility Criteria

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- A Bachelor's degree (any discipline) with at least 50% aggregate marks from a recognized university.
- SC/ST/PwD candidates need a minimum of 45% aggregate marks.
- Final-year undergraduate students are also eligible to apply.
- There is no upper age limit for CAT

## Marking Scheme

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Each correct answer fetches +3 marks. Each wrong answer (MCQ only) carries a penalty of -1 mark. TITA (Type-In-The-Answer) questions carry no negative marking. Unattempted questions also carry no penalty.

# BLUEPRINT : EXAM PATTERN AND SYLLABUS

CAT tests three core competencies across three sections. Understanding this blueprint is the first step to cracking the exam. Each section has a strict 40-minute time limit, and you cannot switch between sections during the exam.

## SECTION WISE BACKGROUND

Section	Questions	Marks	Time Limit	Key Focus
Verbal Ability & Reading Comprehension (VARC)	24	72	40 mins	Reading speed, grammar, verbal reasoning
Data Interpretation & Logical Reasoning (DILR)	22	66	40 mins	Analytical thinking, data sets
Quantitative Ability (QA)	22	66	40 mins	Mathematics, arithmetic, algebra
TOTAL	68	204	120 mins	—

### Section 1: Verbal Ability & Reading Comprehension (VARC)

- 4-5 Reading Comprehension passages (500–700 words each) on economics, science, history, or literature
- Para Jumbles , rearranging sentences into logical order
- Para Summary , identifying the best summary of a paragraph
- Odd Sentence Out , identifying the sentence that does not fit
- Sentence Completion & Grammar Correction

### Section 2: Data Interpretation & Logical Reasoning (DILR)

- Graphs, Charts, Tables, and Caselets
- Puzzles and Seating Arrangements
- Blood Relations, Direction Sense

- Syllogisms and Statement-Conclusion sets
- Data Sufficiency

### Section 3: Quantitative Ability (QA)

- Arithmetic : Percentages, Profit & Loss, Time & Work, Averages, Ratio
- Algebra : Equations, Functions, Inequalities
- Geometry & Mensuration : Triangles, Circles, Areas, Volumes
- Number Systems : Factors, Divisibility, Remainders
- Modern Maths : Permutations, Combinations, Probability, Sets

#### **Pro Tip:**

MCQ-type questions carry negative marking; TITA (non-MCQ) questions do not. When unsure, prefer TITA attempts over risky MCQ guesses.

# PREPARATION STRATEGY AND HOW TO CRACK IT

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CAT is not just a test of knowledge, it is a test of time management, mental stamina, and strategy. Here is a battle-tested roadmap to help you prepare smart, not just hard.

## Phase 1: Foundation (Months 1–3)

- Build conceptual clarity for all three sections, especially QA basics (NCERT Class 6–10 Maths).
- Start reading The Hindu, The Economist, or Aeon daily to sharpen reading speed for VARC.
- Study one topic per day from QA, do not rush. Clarity > Speed at this stage.
- Solve previous year CAT questions topic-wise to understand question depth.

## Phase 2: Skill Building (Months 4–6)

- Begin timed sectional practice, 40 minutes per section daily.
- Dedicate extra time to your weakest section without ignoring strengths.
- Introduce mock tests, at least 1 full mock every 2 weeks.
- Maintain a 'mistake journal' to track recurring errors in QA and DILR sets.

## Phase 3: Mock & Refinement (Months 7–9)

- Take 1–2 full-length mocks per week.
- Analyse every mock in detail, time taken per question, accuracy percentage, section-wise performance.
- Work on your attempt strategy: how many questions to attempt, in what order.
- Focus on accuracy over attempts, a 70% attempt with 90% accuracy beats 90% attempt with 60% accuracy.

## Phase 4: Final Sprint (Last 4 Weeks)

- Revise formulas, shortcuts, and grammar rules daily.
- Solve 1 full mock every 2 days. Simulate exact exam conditions.
- Prioritize high-weightage topics: RC in VARC, Caselets/Puzzles in DILR, Arithmetic in QA.
- Avoid starting new topics. Consolidate and refine.

## SMART ATTEMPT STRATEGY ON EXAM DAY

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**VARC** : Start with RC passages — attempt 3 out of 4-5 passages. Spend 7-8 mins per passage. Do Verbal Ability questions last.

**DILR** : Quickly scan all 4-5 sets in the first 3-4 minutes. Pick the 2-3 easiest sets and go all-in. Do NOT waste time on a set that feels stuck.

**QA** : Attempt easy and moderate questions first. Skip lengthy geometry problems if time is short. Never guess blindly on MCQs.

## CUT OFF : WHAT SCORE DO YOU NEED ?

CAT cut-offs vary by institute, category, and the year's difficulty level. There are two types: a qualifying cut-off (minimum to be considered) and a final cut-off (the actual percentile needed for a PI/WAT call). Always aim higher than the minimum.

### IIM CUT OFF (GENERAL CATEGORY)

Institute	Overall Percentile	Sectional Percentile
IIM Ahmedabad	99.97+	~85+ per section
IIM Bangalore	99.95+	~85+ per section
IIM Calcutta	99.97+	~85+ per section
IIM Lucknow	97-99+	~80+ per section
IIM Kozhikode	97-99+	~80+ per section
IIM Indore	97-98+	~80+ per section
New IIMs (Trichy, Rohtak, etc.)	94-97	~75+ per section
Baby IIMs	90-94	~70+ per section

### NON IIM CUT OFF

College	CAT Percentile (General)
FMS Delhi	98-99+
MDI Gurgaon	95-97+
SPJIMR Mumbai	85-95+ (profile-dependent)
IIFT Delhi/Kolkata	95-97+
JBIMS Mumbai	99+ (via MH-CET also)

IMT Ghaziabad	90-93+
NITIE Mumbai	95-97+
Tier-2 B-Schools	70-85

## IIM SELECTION CRITERIA WEIGHTAGE

College	CAT	Interview	WAT/ GD	Acads	Work Ex
IIM Ahmedabad	25%	50%	10%	10%	5%
IIM Bangalore	25%	40%	10%	15%	10%
IIM Calcutta	30%	48%	8%	9%	5%
IIM Lucknow	30%	40%	10%	10%	10%
IIM Kozhikode	35%	35%	20%	5%	5%
IIM Indore	40%	45%	NA	10%	5%
IIM Shillong	40%	40%	NA	10%	10%
IIM Udaipur	55%	25%	NA	10%	10%
IIM Trichy	52%	20%	NA	18%	10%
IIM Raipur	33.33%	26.66%	NA	25%	15%
IIM Ranchi	65%	12.50%	2.50%	10%	10%
IIM Rohtak	60%	20%	NA	10%	10%
IIM Kashipur	41%	25%	NA	20%	14%
IIM Nagpur	45%	25%	NA	20%	10%

IIM Amritsar	Pre+Post PI composite	—	—	—	—
IIM Vizag	25%	48%	NA	17%	10%
IIM Sambalpur	40%	25%	NA	20%	15%
IIM Sirmaur	35%	20%	NA	30%	15%
IIM Jammu	42%	30%	NA	18%	10%
IIM Bodhgaya	50%	25%	NA	15%	10%
IIM Mumbai	60%	20%	NA	12%	8%

### Important:

Meeting the cut-off only earns you a PI/WAT call. Final selection considers your academic profile, work experience, gender diversity, and interview performance.

## RESERVED CATEGORY CUT OFF

SC/ST/PwD candidates enjoy lower cut-offs. For top IIMs, SC candidates typically need 85–90 percentile, ST candidates 70–80 percentile, and PwD candidates around 70+ percentile for the qualifying round.

## BEST COLLEGES ACCEPTING CAT SCORE

A great CAT score opens doors far beyond the IIMs. Here are the top institutions you should set your sights on , grouped by tier so you can build a smart college list.

### TIER 1 : DREAM COLLEGES

College	Location	Avg. Package (LPA)	Min. Percentile
IIM Ahmedabad	Ahmedabad, Gujarat	35–38 LPA	99.97+
IIM Bangalore	Bangalore, Karnataka	33–36 LPA	99.95+
IIM Calcutta	Kolkata, West Bengal	32–35 LPA	99.97+
IIM Lucknow	Lucknow, UP	28–31 LPA	97–99+
IIM Kozhikode	Kozhikode, Kerala	26–29 LPA	97–99+
IIM Indore	Indore, MP	25–28 LPA	97–98+
FMS Delhi	Delhi	25–30 LPA	98–99+

### TIER 2 COLLEGES : STRONG ALTERNATIVES

College	Location	Avg. Package (LPA)	Min. Percentile
MDI Gurgaon	Gurgaon, Haryana	22–25 LPA	95–97+
SPJIMR Mumbai	Mumbai, Maharashtra	28–32 LPA	85–95+
IIFT Delhi/Kolkata	Delhi & Kolkata	18–22 LPA	95–97+
NITIE Mumbai	Mumbai, Maharashtra	20–24 LPA	95–97+
IMT Ghaziabad	Ghaziabad, UP	14–17 LPA	90–93+

New IIMs (Trichy, Rohtak,  
etc.)

Various

15–20 LPA

94–97

Build your college list strategically: 2 dream colleges (99%ile+), 3 target colleges (95-99%ile), and 3 safe colleges (80-94%ile). This ensures you never walk away empty-handed.



## BEST BOOKS TO STUDY FROM

The right books can make or break your CAT preparation. Here is a carefully curated, topper-recommended reading list section by section. Do not buy everything, pick one primary book per section and master it.

### Quantitative Ability (QA)

Book Title	Author	Best For
How to Prepare for Quantitative Aptitude for CAT	Arun Sharma	Comprehensive coverage, level-wise practice sets
Quantitative Aptitude for CAT	Nishit K. Sinha	Concept-based approach, strong theory + practice
Quantitative Aptitude for Competitive Exams	R.S. Aggarwal	Beginners — strengthening fundamentals
NCERT Maths (Class 6–10)	NCERT	Basic concept building before advanced books

### Verbal Ability & Reading Comprehension (VARC)

Book Title	Author	Best For
How to Prepare for VARC for CAT	Arun Sharma & Meenakshi Upadhyay	Both basics and advanced; covers all question types
Verbal Ability & Reading Comprehension for CAT	Nishit K. Sinha	Strong reading strategies and vocab building
Word Power Made Easy	Norman Lewis	Vocabulary enhancement — must-read for all aspirants
High School Grammar & Composition	Wren & Martin	Grammar foundation — excellent for beginners

## Data Interpretation & Logical Reasoning (DILR)

Book Title	Author	Best For
How to Prepare for Data Interpretation & Logical Reasoning for CAT	Arun Sharma	Tiered difficulty — beginner to advanced; topper favourite
Logical Reasoning and Data Interpretation for CAT	Nishit K. Sinha	Modern approach, mirrors CAT difficulty well
Modern Approach to Verbal & Non-Verbal Reasoning	R.S. Aggarwal	Logical reasoning fundamentals

### Golden Rule:

1 good book + 50 mocks > 10 books + 5 mocks. Solve previous CAT papers religiously, they are the best indicator of what to expect.

## WHAT TO TAKE ON THE DAY OF EXAM ?

The night before CAT, thousands of aspirants frantically Google 'what to carry to CAT exam.' Do not be one of them. This chapter is your complete play-by-play ,from what to pack the night before, to what to do the moment the clock starts ticking on screen.

### Documents (Non-Negotiable)

Item	Details	✓ Done?
CAT Admit Card	Printed clearly — both sides if double-sided. Carry 2 copies.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Photo ID (Original)	Aadhaar / PAN / Passport / Driving Licence / Voter ID. Must match your admit card name exactly.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Photo ID (Photocopy)	One photocopy of the same ID , some centres ask for it.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recent Passport Photograph	2 identical photos (same as uploaded on the form). Some centres paste it.	<input type="checkbox"/>
PwD Certificate	Only if applicable. Original + photocopy.	<input type="checkbox"/>

### What to Wear & Carry

Item	Notes
Comfortable clothing	Layers work best , exam halls can be cold or warm. Avoid full metal accessories.
Wristwatch (analog only)	Simple analog watch allowed. Smart watches are strictly prohibited.
Water bottle (transparent)	Plain, transparent bottle , no label, no opaque cover. Some centres provide water.

Light snack (for the break)	A banana, biscuits, or dry fruit. You get a short break between sections at some slots.
Pen (optional)	You will get rough sheets at the centre. Carry your own pen just in case.

**⚠ Do NOT carry:**

Mobile phones, smart watches, earphones, calculators, notes, books, bags (leave in car or locker), wallet with excess cash, any electronic device.

## Exam Day Morning — The Golden Hours

- 1. Wake up early, eat a real breakfast.** Eat a proper, familiar meal, not something heavy or experimental. Oats, eggs, toast, or whatever your body is used to. Avoid sugar spikes. Your brain needs stable energy for 2 hours of intense focus.
- 2. Leave home with a 90-minute buffer.** If your slot is 8:30 AM, leave home by 7:00 AM at the latest. Account for traffic, parking, and finding the exact hall inside the building. Being early calms you. Being late destroys you.
- 3. Reach the centre at least 60 minutes early.** CAT centres typically open 60–90 minutes before the slot. Early arrival means: no rush during biometric verification, time to settle, and a familiar environment before the clock starts.
- 4. Keep your phone off and stored away before entry.** You will be asked to deposit your phone before entering the exam hall. Switch it off before you hand it over, saves time and avoids any issues.

## The Reporting & Login Process — Step by Step

Here is exactly what happens when you walk into a CAT examination centre:

Step	What Happens	What You Do
1. Document Check	Staff verifies your admit card + ID at the gate.	Hand over both. Smile. Stay calm.
2. Biometric Verification	Fingerprint scan and photograph are taken.	Place finger firmly. Look at the camera.

3. Frisking & Belongings	Metal detector frisking. Bags/ phones deposited.	Cooperate quickly. Don't argue about minor items.
4. Seat Allotment	You are directed to a specific computer terminal.	Note your seat number. Find it without rushing.
5. System Login	You log in with your CAT registration ID and password (given on admit card).	Type carefully. Raise hand if login fails — don't panic.
6. Tutorial / Demo	A 15-minute demo of the exam interface is shown before the exam starts.	Use this time to understand the interface — timer, next/previous, flag for review buttons.
7. Exam Starts	Timer begins. Section 1 (VARC) is loaded automatically.	Take one deep breath. Read the first question calmly.

## Inside the Exam — The On-Screen Interface

The CAT interface is clean but unfamiliar to first-timers. Here is what you will see:

- **Section Timer:** A countdown shows the remaining time for the current section (40 minutes). You cannot see time for other sections.
- **Question Palette:** A grid of question numbers on the right. Colours indicate: Not Visited (grey), Answered (green), Not Answered (red), Marked for Review (purple), Answered & Marked (purple-green).
- **Flag for Review Button:** Mark a question to revisit it. It does NOT save your answer — you still need to click 'Save & Next.'
- **Save & Next:** This button saves your answer and moves to the next question. Always click this after answering.
- **No Back-Navigation Between Sections:** Once a section ends, you CANNOT go back. Time your section well.

### ✓ Strategy Tip:

In the first 3 minutes of each section, quickly skim ALL questions. Identify the easy ones. Attempt them first. Flag tough ones and return.

**⚠ Do NOT click 'Submit Section' accidentally.**

The system will warn you — read every pop-up carefully before clicking OK.

## CAT Slot Timings (Reference)

Slot	Reporting Time	Exam Starts	Exam Ends
Slot 1 (Morning)	7:30 AM	8:30 AM	10:30 AM
Slot 2 (Afternoon)	11:30 AM	12:30 PM	2:30 PM
Slot 3 (Evening)	3:30 PM	4:30 PM	6:30 PM

Slot timings can vary slightly by year and centre. Always confirm from your official admit card. The above is based on recent CAT patterns.

# WHAT TOPPERS WISH THEY HAD KNOWN : TOPPER MISTAKES , REAL LESSONS

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There is no shortage of advice on how to prepare for CAT. But the most valuable lessons are not in textbooks , they come from people who sat in that exam hall, made costly mistakes, and still found a way to succeed. What follows are the most common, most honest mistakes shared by CAT toppers who are now at IIMs. Learn from them so you do not repeat them.

## Mistake 1: Starting with Mocks Too Late

The most common regret. Most aspirants spend 6–7 months building 'concepts' and start taking full mocks only in the last 4–6 weeks. By then, there is no time to correct the errors the mocks reveal.

⚠ **The Trap: Thinking 'I am not ready for mocks yet.' You will never feel fully ready. That is exactly why you need mocks early.**

✓ **What They Would Do Differently: Start full-length mocks by Month 3. Use early mocks as diagnostics, not performance tests. The errors you find in Month 3 give you 5 months to fix them.**

## Mistake 2: Reading Mocks Without Analysing Them

Taking 50 mocks and reviewing only the score is worse than taking 20 mocks and dissecting each one. Many toppers admitted spending 20 minutes on the mock and 5 minutes on the analysis , exactly backward.

The Rule: Spend at least as much time analysing a mock as you spent taking it. For a 2-hour mock, spend 2+ hours in analysis. Analysis should include: Why did I get each wrong answer wrong? Was it a concept gap, a careless error, or a time panic? Which question types consistently drain my time without correct answers? What is my actual accuracy per section, not just attempts?

✓ **What They Would Do Differently: Maintain a mock tracker. Date, score, section-wise accuracy, time per question, and one key learning from each mock.**

### Mistake 3: Neglecting One Section Entirely

Engineers who ignored VARC. Non-engineers who avoided QA. The sectional cut-offs at IIMs mean you cannot afford a section below 70–75 percentile, even with a 99.5 overall. One weak section can block every IIM call.

⚠ **The Trap: 'I will compensate with my strong sections.' You cannot. Sectional cut-offs are non-negotiable filters at all top IIMs.**

✓ **What They Would Do Differently: Identify the weakest section in Month 1. Allocate 50% of preparation time to it for the first 3 months. A strong section gets stronger on its own. A weak section needs active attention**

### Mistake 4: Chasing Attempts Over Accuracy

The instinct to attempt as many questions as possible is wrong for CAT. Unlike board exams, CAT's negative marking punishes over-attempting. Many aspirants chase 55–60 attempts with 60% accuracy, when 42 attempts with 88% accuracy would yield a significantly higher score.

Scenario	Attempts	Accuracy	Correct	Wrong (MCQ)	Score	Percentile (Approx)
Chasing Attempts	55	62%	34	21	102 - 21 = 81	~85-88
Accuracy-First	44	88%	39	5	117 - 5 = 112	~94-96
Topper Approach	48	90%	43	5	129 - 5 = 124	~98-99

✓ **What They Would Do Differently: Set an accuracy-first target. In mocks, aim for 85%+ accuracy first. Increase attempts only once accuracy is stable**

## Mistake 5: Letting the Last Week Become Wasted

Two failure modes in the final week: some aspirants over-study — taking mock after mock until the night before, exhausting themselves mentally. Others completely stop and lose sharpness. Both are wrong.

Day Before Exam	DO	AVOID
The Week Before	1 light mock every 2 days. Revise formula sheets. Sleep 7–8 hours.	Starting new topics. Heavy mocks daily. Comparing with peers.
2 Days Before	One quick revision of key formulas and strategies. Light reading.	Any new practice. Staying up late. Stressful conversations about the exam.
Night Before	Pack your bag (see Chapter 7). Sleep by 10 PM. Gentle reading.	Taking a mock. Watching lecture videos. Cramming. Social media.
Morning of Exam	Light breakfast. Arrive 60 min early. Stay offline.	Discussing the exam with fellow aspirants. Revising anything.

## Mistake 6: Treating CAT as the Only Path

Some aspirants go all-in on CAT and apply to only 3–4 colleges. When results are disappointing, they have no backup. The CAT score is valid for most top non-IIM institutes too. Build a broad, well-thought-out college list.

✓ **What They Would Do Differently: Apply to at least 10–12 colleges spanning 3 tiers. Dream (99%ile+), Target (94–99%ile), and Safe (80–94%ile). Also register for XAT, SNAP, IIFT, and NMAT — these run parallel to CAT season and open entirely different doors.**

## LAST NOTE : BEFORE YOU BEGIN ALL

CAT is not an intelligence test. It is a test of preparation, persistence, and presence of mind. Every year, thousands of students who once scored below 70 percentile go on to crack 99+ after structured effort. The difference is never raw intelligence, it is consistent practice and smart strategy.

Here is what the data tells us: Most CAT toppers started preparing 10–14 months before the exam. They gave 40–60 mocks before the actual test. They failed many mocks and still showed up the next day. The journey is supposed to be hard. That is the point.

*Your percentile is not fixed. It is built question by question, mock by mock, revision by revision.*

Here are five rules to carry with you on this journey:

- Start early and stay consistent : 2 hours every day beats 10 hours twice a week.
- Analyse every mock : not just the score, but why you got things wrong.
- Do not compare your preparation with others : CAT is a personal journey.
- Protect your accuracy above all : negative marking kills more dreams than low attempts.
- Take care of your mind and body : sleep, eat well, and take breaks. Burnout is a real risk.

The IIM you walk into is not your ceiling, it is your launchpad. But first, you have to get there. This handbook is your compass. Now, it is time to walk the path.

**Best of luck. You have got this.**

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