

CLARITY GUIDES

In a world full of disinformation, get **Clarity**.

S1 TO S6 · COURSES · EXAMS · RESULTS · WHAT NEXT

A Parent's Guide to the Exam Years

S1 to S6 in Scotland, explained in plain English

◆ Free guide · Free to share · No account needed



Published by Clarity Guides · Phone edition · Facts checked October 2026 · Cover artwork drawn by Clarity Guides.

Free copy from Clarity Guides - clarityhq.uk - ID CG-563C1E27

WELCOME

About this guide

From the first day of S1 to the last exam in S6, Scottish secondary school is a six-year journey with its own words, levels, deadlines and rules. Most of it was not around when many parents and carers were at school, and some of it changed again in 2026, when a new body took over the exams.

This free guide explains the whole journey in plain English: how the years fit together, what National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher mean, how grades work, when the exams and results are, what extra support is available, and the routes open to your child after school. It is written for parents and carers, but older pupils may find it useful too.

It is about the system in **Scotland**. If you have moved from England, Wales or Northern Ireland, chapter 1 shows how the Scottish levels compare in plain terms.

How to use this guide

- 1 Child in S1 to S3?** Read chapters 1 to 4, then dip into chapter 8 (helping at home).
- 2 Child in S4 to S6?** Read chapters 5 to 7, then chapters 10 and 11 before results day.
- 3 Thinking about life after school?** Chapter 12 covers college, university, apprenticeships, work and money for staying on.
- 4 Worried about stress, extra support or scams?** Chapters 9, 10 and 13.

IN A WORLD FULL OF DISINFORMATION, GET CLARITY

Every fact, date and phone number in this guide was checked in October 2026 against official sources, mostly Qualifications Scotland, the Scottish Government, mygov.scot and Skills Development Scotland. They are listed at the back by chapter. Where we could not confirm something, we left it out. If you use everyday AI tools like Grok to look something up, check the answer against an official source like these.

PLEASE NOTE

This guide is general information, not advice about any one child. Schools and councils do some things differently, so your child's school is always the first place to check. Clarity Guides is independent and is not linked to Qualifications Scotland or any organisation named here.

© 2026 Clarity. Free to download and print for personal and classroom use. Please don't upload it to websites, shared drives open to other schools, or AI tools, or resell it.

READING THIS PHONE EDITION

The small numbers after a sentence point to the sources at the back. Tap any web address to open it.

CONTENTS

In this guide

1	How Scottish secondary school works	6
2	Who runs the exams now	10
3	The broad general education years	14

4	Choosing subjects for S4	18
5	Courses, coursework and exams	22
6	Grades, bands and the certificate	25
7	The exam year, month by month	28
8	Helping without nagging	32
9	Stress, wellbeing and getting help	37
10	Extra support and exam arrangements	40
11	Results day, appeals and what next	43
12	Routes after school, and money for staying on	46
13	Spotting bad advice in the exam years	50
●	Glossary	54
●	Useful official links	56
●	Sources	58
●	How this guide was made and image credits	64

SHORT VIDEOS TO GO WITH THIS GUIDE

Three 1 to 2 minute videos go with this guide. Type the short link into any browser: **goclarity.uk/v/parents-exam-years** (the whole journey), **goclarity.uk/v/parents-levels-explained** (the levels) and **goclarity.uk/v/parents-results-day** (results day). There are no QR codes in our guides: a typed link is easier to check.

01

CHAPTER ONE · THE BIG PICTURE

How Scottish secondary school works

Secondary school in Scotland comes in two stages: three years of broad learning, then three years when most qualifications are taken.

Two stages, six years

Scotland's curriculum is called **Curriculum for Excellence**. In secondary school it is made up of a **broad general education** (BGE) up to the end of S3, followed by a **senior phase** from S4 to S6.¹ The Scottish Government describes the senior phase as roughly from age 15, or S4, onwards, and says all young people are entitled to one.¹

STAGE	YEARS	WHAT IT IS ABOUT
Broad general education	S1 to S3	A wide range of subjects. Pupils work through curriculum "levels" (third and fourth level in most secondary schools) rather than sitting national exams.

STAGE	YEARS	WHAT IT IS ABOUT
Senior phase	S4 to S6	Pupils study for qualifications such as National 4, National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher. Many leave after S4 or S5; others stay to S6.

The qualification ladder

National Qualifications go from National 1 up to Advanced Higher. National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses are graded A to D. National 2, National 3 and National 4 are not graded: the units that make up those courses are assessed as pass or fail.² Each level sits on the **Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)**. A National 5 course is worth 24 SCQF credit points at SCQF level 5, and a National 4 course 24 points at level 4.² Qualifications Scotland's appeals policy describes National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher as SCQF levels 5 to 7.³

LEVEL	SCQF LEVEL	GRADED?	USUALLY TAKEN
National 3	3	Pass or fail	S4 (some pupils)

LEVEL	SCQF LEVEL	GRADED?	USUALLY TAKEN
National 4	4	Pass or fail	S4
National 5	5	A to D	S4, sometimes later
Higher	6	A to D	S5 or S6
Advanced Higher	7	A to D	S6

"Usually taken" is the common pattern, not a rule: schools build timetables in different ways, and some pupils take a Higher in S6 straight after a National 5, or spread courses over more years.

| If you went to school somewhere else

Families who have moved to Scotland often ask how the levels compare. In plain terms, National 5 is the main qualification at the end of S4, Highers are the main qualifications for applying to university, and Advanced Highers are a further step taken in S6. Scottish universities and colleges set out the Highers they ask for on their own course pages. Avoid exact "this equals that"

comparisons with GCSEs or A-levels: the systems are built differently, and the official framework for Scotland is the SCQF.

CLARITY TIP: TWO KINDS OF "LEVEL"

When the school mentions a "level", check which kind it means. In S1 to S3, "third level" or "fourth level" is a **curriculum level**. In S4 to S6, "level 5" or "level 6" usually means an **SCQF level**, as in National 5 or Higher. They are different scales.

► WATCH: The levels in 90 seconds

A short animated explainer of the qualification ladder, from National 3 to Advanced Higher. Type **goclarity.uk/v/parents-levels-explained** into your browser, or tap: **goclarity.uk/v/parents-levels-explained**

02

CHAPTER TWO · THE BIG PICTURE

Who runs the exams now

Since February 2026, Scotland's exams and certificates have come from a new body. Here is what changed, and what did not.

From SQA to Qualifications Scotland

On **1 February 2026** the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) was replaced by **Qualifications Scotland**, a new national awarding and accreditation body set up under the Education (Scotland) Act 2025.^{4,5} It awards the qualifications SQA used to award, including National Qualifications.⁶

When it started, Qualifications Scotland told schools: "We aren't making any changes to courses or assessments this year."⁶ Course documents are still on **sqa.org.uk**, which it says is now a Qualifications Scotland website with current information, and some downloads still

carry SQA branding while they are updated.⁵ So if you see SQA's name on a document from the school, that is normal.

Changes from 2026–27

In June 2026 Qualifications Scotland published a set of what it calls simple changes to assessments in some current National Courses, based on surveys of learners and educators. For most of the courses listed, the changes apply from **session 2026–27**, and details are being added to each course specification.⁷

COURSE	LEVELS WITH CHANGES
Biology	N5, Higher, AH
Business Management	N5, Higher
Chemistry	N5, Higher, AH
Dance	N5 (Higher from 2027–28)
Economics	N5, Higher
English	Higher
Environmental Science	N5, Higher
Human Biology	Higher
Latin	N5, Higher

COURSE	LEVELS WITH CHANGES
Media	N5, Higher
Physics	N5, Higher, AH
Politics	Higher

Source: Qualifications Scotland, June 2026.⁷ If your child takes one of these courses, ask the teacher what has changed. The teacher will be working from the updated course specification.

Longer-term reform

Qualifications Scotland's first plan, published when it started work, includes early engagement on plans to place **less reliance on high-stakes exams in several subjects**.⁸ That is a direction of travel, not a set of decisions. Nothing in this guide assumes changes that have not been announced.

IS THAT MESSAGE REALLY FROM QUALIFICATIONS SCOTLAND?

Exam bodies are a natural target for scam messages, especially around results day.

Before you click or pay, check:

- ☐ The web address is **qualifications.gov.scot** or **sqa.org.uk** (still a Qualifications Scotland site).
- ☐ Emails from Qualifications Scotland use addresses ending **@qualifications.gov.scot**, such as **customer@qualifications.gov.scot**.
- ☐ The message asks for a password, bank details or a login code, or says you must act within the hour? Treat that as a warning sign, whoever it claims to be from.
- ☐ If in doubt, ask your child's school, which deals with Qualifications Scotland directly.

Sources for the box: Qualifications Scotland pages and booklets,^{3,5,9} which use these addresses and describe the free appeals service. If you are unsure about a message, do not use the phone number or link it gives

you. Contact the school, or find Qualifications Scotland's contact details yourself on qualifications.gov.scot.

03

CHAPTER THREE · S1 TO S3

The broad general education years

The first three years are about breadth: a wide range of subjects, before choices narrow in the senior phase.

What happens in S1 to S3

In the broad general education, pupils study across all the main curriculum areas, and the Scottish Government says inter-disciplinary learning, skills development and personal achievement are emphasised.¹ There are no national exams in these years. Progress is tracked by the school against curriculum levels, and reported to parents in the school's own way.

Because schools and councils report in different ways, the most useful thing you can do is ask your child's school how it reports progress: how

often, in what form (a written report, an online system, parents' evenings) and what the terms it uses mean.

Questions worth asking in S1 to S3

ABOUT LEARNING NOW

- How will I hear about progress, and how often?
- Which curriculum level is my child working at in literacy and numeracy?
- Who is my child's guidance or pastoral teacher?
- What clubs, trips or awards are on offer?

ABOUT THE YEARS AHEAD

- When does the school ask pupils to choose subjects for S4?
- How many subjects can they take into S4?
- Can a subject be picked up later, or is it hard to change?
- When will the careers adviser meet my child?

Careers help starts early

Skills Development Scotland (SDS) delivers Scotland's careers service. It says its careers advisers work in partnership with **every state secondary school in Scotland**, giving career information, advice and guidance to young

people from S1 to S6.¹⁰ Its free website, **My World of Work**, has job profiles and tools that pupils can use throughout school and beyond.¹¹

CLARITY TIP: START WITH CURIOSITY

Sit down with your child and explore one or two job profiles on myworldofwork.co.uk together. Profiles show what a job involves and typical routes in. It is an easy, low-pressure way to start talking about subject choices.¹¹

Screens, sleep and the move up to S1

Many families notice that phones and late nights become a bigger issue in the early secondary years. We cover sleep in our [Sleep & Relaxation](#) guide, so we won't repeat that here. The one thing worth saying in a school guide is that a tired pupil learns less, so routines are worth agreeing early, before the exam years arrive.

Phones at school are a separate question, and the answer depends on the school. The Scottish Government's updated guidance (June 2026) encourages schools and councils to restrict pupils' personal use of mobile phones, up to and

including across the whole school day, and expects each school to have a clear policy, written with pupils, parents and carers, that covers safe storage of phones and how pupils can be reached in an emergency.¹² Ask for your child's school policy before S1 starts, so home and school rules can match.

04

CHAPTER FOUR · S1 TO S3

Choosing subjects for S4

Somewhere in S2 or S3, pupils choose the subjects they will take into the senior phase. It matters, but it is rarely a once-and-for-all decision.

How "options" usually work

Each school sets its own process and timing. Typically, pupils get an options booklet, attend an options evening with parents, talk to subject teachers and the careers adviser, and then pick subjects from "columns", because the timetable

only allows certain combinations. The number of subjects taken in S4 also varies from school to school.

There are many National Qualification subjects: Qualifications Scotland's A to Z lists more than 90 subject pages, from Accounting to Urdu.¹³ No school offers them all, and some courses are offered jointly with a college or another school, or online.

A simple way to choose

- 1 Start with what they enjoy and do well in.** Pupils usually do best in subjects they like.
- 2 Keep doors open.** English and Maths are needed for many routes. A science, a social subject and a language or creative subject keep options wide.
- 3 Check a few routes.** If your child has an idea of a job or course, look at what it asks for on My World of Work or a college or university course page.
- 4 Ask about the columns.** If two subjects clash, ask whether one can be taken another way, or later.

- 5 Remember there are later chances.** Many subjects can be started at National 5 or Higher in S5 or S6, and college is another route.

OPTIONS EVENING: EIGHT QUESTIONS TO TAKE WITH YOU

- ☐ Which subjects are compulsory?
- ☐ How many subjects will my child take in S4?
- ☐ What happens if two choices clash?
- ☐ Which level will each subject be taken at?
- ☐ How much coursework does each subject have?
- ☐ Can my child change a subject after the start of S4?
- ☐ Are any courses run with a college or online?
- ☐ When can we speak to the careers adviser?

Getting the level right

In S4, a pupil might take some subjects at National 5 and others at National 4. National 4 is not graded and has no exam: the units are assessed as pass or fail.² There is **no automatic fallback**: if a pupil does not pass a National 5 course, they do not automatically get a National 4 instead.² So if a teacher suggests National 4 for a subject, ask why, and what the route onwards looks like.

Notes from the options evening

Courses, coursework and exams

In the senior phase, each course has its own mix of exam and coursework. Knowing the mix helps you know when the pressure points are.

How a course is assessed

Every National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher course has a published **course specification** from Qualifications Scotland, listing what is taught and how it is assessed.¹³ Most courses combine a **question paper** (the exam) with **coursework**, such as an assignment, project, portfolio or performance. The mix varies a lot: practical and creative subjects lean on coursework, and some subjects are mainly exam-based.

Grades are worked out from the total mark for all parts of the course assessment.¹⁴ So coursework is not an extra: it counts towards the grade.

Prelims

Most schools hold practice exams, usually called **prelims**, during the year. Prelims are set by the school, not by Qualifications Scotland. They give pupils exam practice and give teachers evidence. That evidence matters: if something serious happens on exam day (chapter 10), Qualifications Scotland's exceptional circumstances service uses evidence such as prelims, class tests, class work or performance records to decide a grade.⁹

WORTH KNOWING

Prelims do not count in an appeal. An appeal is a review of the marking of the work sent to Qualifications Scotland. Qualifications Scotland says it does not review any alternative evidence.³ So prelim results cannot be used to argue for a higher grade after results day.

Finding past papers

Qualifications Scotland publishes past papers and their **marking instructions** free on its website.¹⁵ The marking instructions show how examiners award marks, and they are one of the

best revision tools there is. Ask your child's teacher to show them how the marking instructions work for their subject.

Older past papers still show the old branding: those from 2025 and earlier carry the SQA name and logo, and the page they sit on still starts sqa.org.uk, yet they remain the official practice papers.

COURSEWORK CALENDAR

Ask each teacher for the coursework deadlines, then fill them in here, or stick this page on the fridge.

SUBJECT	WHAT IS DUE	DATE	DONE?

Grades, bands and the certificate

What does a B actually mean? Here is how grades work, in plain numbers.

Grades A to D, and No Award

National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses are graded **A, B, C or D**. A grade D means the course has been awarded, and represents a score of 40 to 49% in the course assessment. Below 40%, the result is **No Award**, meaning the course assessment was not passed.²

Qualifications Scotland designs assessments so that, if they work as intended, the notional grade boundaries are 70% of the available marks for an A, 60% for a B, 50% for a C and 40% for a D.¹⁴ If an exam turns out easier or harder than intended, the grade boundaries are adjusted so that the standard needed for each grade stays the same from one year to the next.²

GRADE	NOTIONAL BOUNDARY	BANDS
A	70% of available marks	Upper A (band 1), lower A (band 2)
B	60%	Upper B (band 3), lower B (band 4)
C	50%	Upper C (band 5), lower C (band 6)
D	40% (D is 40 to 49%)	Band 7
No Award	Below 40%	–

Sources: Qualifications Scotland results FAQ and awarding policy.^{2,14} Bands are **not** shown on the certificate. Your child's school can tell you the band and the marks for each part of the course, but this may not be available until the start of the new term.²

What the certificate shows

The certificate comes by post on results day. It lists all your child's qualifications to date, the grades, when each was achieved and the SCQF level of each.^{9,16} Keep it safe: employers, colleges and universities may ask to see it.

The Scottish Candidate Number

Every candidate has a **Scottish Candidate Number** (SCN). It appears on the certificate, pupils write it on their exam work, and it is needed to appeal or to ask Qualifications Scotland for information.^{2,9} Write it down somewhere safe.

KEEP A NOTE OF

WRITE IT HERE

Scottish Candidate
Number (SCN)

School's exams officer or
contact

Guidance teacher

My Qualifications
Scotland account set up?
(yes / no)

The exam year, month by month

The dates below are for the 2026–27 school year. The school will give you its own dates for prelims and coursework.

The 2027 exam diet

Qualifications Scotland has published the 2027 timetable. The exams start on **Monday 26 April 2027** and finish on **Thursday 3 June 2027**, and **results day is Tuesday 10 August 2027**.¹⁷ In the timetable itself, Thursday 3 June is a contingency day.¹⁸ Qualifications Scotland says more than 95% of learners have only one exam scheduled per day.¹⁹

The full timetable, with every subject, date and time, is a free PDF on the Qualifications Scotland website.¹⁸ Your child's school will give each pupil a personal timetable.

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS, AND WHAT HELPS
August–September	New courses start. Ask for coursework deadlines and the prelim dates. <i>Fill in the coursework calendar (chapter 5).</i>
October–December	Coursework under way. Some schools hold early prelims. <i>Check in about workload, not marks.</i>
January–February	Prelims in many schools. S3 options in many schools. <i>Help plan revision; go to options evenings.</i>
March	Coursework deadlines often fall around now. <i>Watch for late nights before deadlines.</i>
April	Study leave in many schools. Exams start 26 April 2027. <i>Quiet space, routine, food and sleep.</i>
May–early June	Exam diet continues to 3 June 2027. <i>One exam at a time; no post-mortems.</i>
August	Results day: Tuesday 10 August 2027. <i>See chapter 11 for the 10-minute plan.</i>

Exam and results dates: Qualifications Scotland.¹⁷

Prelims, study leave and coursework timings vary by school, so the other rows are the common pattern, not fixed dates.

Leaving dates

Pupils can leave school at 16, but the exact date depends on their birthday. If the 16th birthday is between 1 March and 30 September, they can leave after 31 May of that year. If it is between 1 October and the end of February, they can leave at the start of the Christmas holidays in that school year.²⁰

OUR FAMILY'S EXAM-YEAR WALL PLANNER

Fill in the dates the school gives you. Keep it somewhere everyone can see it.

MONTH	PRELIMS	COURSEWORK DUE	EXAMS	OTHER
Aug				
Sep				
Oct				
Nov				
Dec				
Jan				

MONTH	PRELIMS	COURSEWORK DUE	EXAMS	OTHER
Feb				
Mar				
Apr				
May				
Jun				

► WATCH: The exam years in two minutes

The whole S1 to S6 journey, with the key dates for 2026–27. Type **goclarity.uk/v/parents-exam-years** into your browser, or tap: **goclarity.uk/v/parents-exam-years**

08

CHAPTER EIGHT · AT HOME

Helping without nagging

You do not need to know the subject to help. Most of what makes a difference is about the space, the routine and the conversation around the work.

What tends to help

A place to work

A quiet, tidy corner with what they need, and the phone somewhere else. It does not need to be a desk of their own.

A rhythm

Regular, shorter sessions beat last-minute marathons. Agree a rough pattern for school nights and weekends together.

Real exam practice

Past papers done in the real time limit, then checked against the free marking instructions.¹⁵

Food, fresh air and sleep

Unglamorous, but they matter. Our [Sleep & Relaxation](#) guide has more on sleep.

Talking about school

Asking "How was school?" often gets "Fine." More specific questions tend to work better, and asking about effort rather than marks keeps the pressure lower.

PHRASES THAT TEND TO HELP

- "What was the hardest bit of today?"
- "What's due this week?"

- "Want me to test you on that?"
- "What would help right now?"
- "You put the work in. That counts."

PHRASES THAT TEND NOT TO

- "Why aren't you revising?"
- "Your cousin got straight As."
- "If you fail this, that's it."
- "I never needed help."
- "What did you get?"
(first thing)

Both lists are our own suggestions from common experience, not research findings. Every family is different.

Free help you can point to

WHERE	WHAT IT OFFERS	COST
Qualifications Scotland past papers	Past papers and marking instructions for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher. ¹⁵	Free
BBC Bitesize (Scotland)	Online revision for National 4, National 5 and Higher in many subjects. ²¹	Free
Scholar (Heriot-Watt University)	Online courses for N5, Higher and Advanced Higher, available where the council or school subscribes. ²² Ask the school.	Paid by subscribing councils and schools
My World of Work	Careers information and job profiles from Skills Development Scotland. ¹¹	Free
Your child's teachers	Supported study, revision classes and feedback. Ask what is on offer.	Free

BEFORE YOU PAY FOR ANYTHING

Paying for tutoring is a personal choice. Before paying anyone, ask the school what free help is already available, and see chapter 13 for the warning signs of a poor deal.

A NOTE ON EVERYDAY AI TOOLS

Pupils can use everyday AI tools like Grok to explain a topic or quiz themselves. Qualifications Scotland lists presenting someone else's work as your own, or failing to reference sources, including AI-generated information, as breaking the exam rules.⁹ So it should help them learn, never write coursework for them. From session 2026–27, Qualifications Scotland says learners should check with their teacher before using everyday AI tools in an assessment, and must always say so whenever such use is allowed.²³

Stress, wellbeing and getting help

Some worry before exams is normal. Knowing when it has gone further, and who to call, is what this chapter is for.

Ordinary nerves, or something more?

Most pupils feel nervous before exams, and a little nervousness can help focus. It is worth getting help if worry is stopping your child sleeping, eating or going to school, if they seem low for weeks rather than days, if they withdraw from friends and things they used to enjoy, or if they talk about harming themselves.

Start with the school

Ask the school who looks after pupils' wellbeing: in most secondary schools this is a guidance or pastoral care teacher. Tell them what you are

seeing at home. They know your child's timetable and workload and can arrange support in school. If health is affected, speak to your GP.

FREE HELP, ANY TIME

For health worries, including mental health, contact your GP, or call NHS 24 on 111 in Scotland, NHS 111 in England and Wales, or your GP out-of-hours service in Northern Ireland.²⁴ **In an emergency, or if someone is in immediate danger, call 999.**

Childline (for young people): call 0800 1111, free, or chat online.²⁵

Samaritans (any age): call 116 123, free, any time.²⁶

Breathing Space (Scotland): 0800 83 85 87, Monday to Thursday 6pm to 2am, and from 6pm Friday to 6am Monday.²⁷

If something goes wrong on the day

Qualifications Scotland says **exam nerves, being distracted or losing concentration are not valid reasons** for its exceptional circumstances service.⁹ But a medical issue or another serious

circumstance beyond your child's control can be. Chapter 10 explains how that works, and why you should tell the school straight away.

WHO TO CONTACT AT SCHOOL

Fill this in at the start of the year, so you are not searching for it when you need it.

ROLE	NAME	PHONE OR EMAIL
Guidance or pastoral teacher		
Year head		
Exams officer		
Support for learning teacher		
Careers adviser (SDS)		
School office		

Extra support and exam arrangements

Pupils with a disability or additional support needs can get help in their exams. And if something serious happens on exam day, there is a service for that too.

Assessment arrangements

Qualifications Scotland offers **assessment arrangements** to support disabled learners and those with additional support needs, so they can show what they know. Examples include extra time, a reader or text-to-speech software, and a scribe or a laptop for writing.²⁸

- **The school applies, not the family.**

Qualifications Scotland says it cannot accept requests directly from learners, parents or carers, and encourages families to discuss needs with the school.²⁸

- **The arrangements should match how your child is supported in class.** Qualifications Scotland only puts arrangements in place when the need is identified by the school and the arrangement is similar to the support used in class.²⁸
- **They may differ by subject.** A pupil might use a laptop for a writing-heavy subject but not need it in a practical one.²⁸
- **A reader reads, but does not explain.** A reader can only read the exact wording, and cannot rephrase or interpret anything.²⁸

BEFORE YOU MEET THE SCHOOL ABOUT SUPPORT

- ☐ Write down what you notice at home: homework time, reading, writing, stress.
- ☐ Ask what support your child already gets in class.
- ☐ Ask whether that support will be requested for exams, and in which subjects.
- ☐ Ask when your child will practise with it (it should be familiar before the exams).

- ☐ Ask who in the school is responsible, and when you will hear back.

If something serious happens on exam day

If your child cannot sit an exam, or there is a serious disruption, Qualifications Scotland tells learners that **they, or a parent or carer, should contact the school immediately**. The school will discuss whether the **Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS)** can be used.⁹

- It can apply if your child could not attend or complete the exam because of circumstances beyond their control (such as a medical issue), was affected by a disruption reported by the chief invigilator, or had their performance on the day affected by a personal circumstance or unplanned incident beyond their control.⁹
- The school must request it **within 10 days of the exam**, with your child's permission.⁹
- Your child must have completed the compulsory parts of the course that are not in the exam (such as performances and

portfolios) and have an estimated grade from the school. Examiners review the school's evidence, such as prelims and class work, and the grade may differ from the estimate.⁹

11

CHAPTER ELEVEN · RESULTS

Results day, appeals and what next

Results day is in August. A little planning beforehand makes the morning much calmer, whatever the envelope says.

How results arrive

On results day, certificates are posted to the home address by first-class post. Pupils who sign up for and activate a **My Qualifications Scotland** account also get their results by text, email or both that morning.¹⁶ The 2026 *Your Exams* booklet says results by text or email arrive from 8am.⁹ The school, and UCAS if your child has applied to university, also receive the results.⁹

The next results day is **Tuesday 10 August 2027**.¹⁷ In 2026, more than 148,000 learners received results on results day.¹⁶

Appeals: free, and you can do it yourself

Qualifications Scotland runs a **free appeals service** for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher.³ A learner can appeal directly, or ask the school, college or training provider to appeal for them.¹⁶

- An appeal is a **review of marking** by a senior marker. It covers the work Qualifications Scotland marked, including exam papers and coursework sent to it. Alternative evidence such as prelims is not reviewed.³
- After an appeal, the grade can **go up, go down or stay the same**, and the outcome is final.^{3,16}
- **Priority appeals** are for learners who need a result to secure a conditional place at university or college, or a training or job offer.^{3,16}

- A grade A cannot normally be appealed, because there is no higher grade. The exception is a conditional university offer that needs an upper A (band 1); those appeals must come from the school.³

In 2026 the service opened at 9am on results day, with deadlines in August for priority and other appeals.¹⁶ Qualifications Scotland publishes each year's dates before results day, and they can change, so check its website then rather than relying on last year's dates. It advises learners to speak to their teacher before appealing.¹⁶

RESULTS DAY: THE 10-MINUTE PLAN

- 1 Breathe.** Read the whole certificate before reacting.
- 2 Check the details.** Name, subjects and levels. Tell the school about any error.
- 3 Got the grades needed?** Check the college, university or employer has received them, or what you need to do.
- 4 Missed a grade?** Phone the school or the college or university. There are often other options.

- 5 **Think an appeal might help?** Talk to the teacher first, and check the priority deadline if an offer depends on it.
- 6 **Celebrate effort.** Whatever the grades, a year of work deserves recognition.

► **WATCH: Results day without panic**

What arrives, when, and what to do next, in under two minutes. Type **goclarity.uk/v/parents-results-day** into your browser, or tap: **goclarity.uk/v/parents-results-day**

12

CHAPTER TWELVE · WHAT NEXT

Routes after school, and money for staying on

There is more than one good route after school. Here are the main ones, and the official places to find out more.

The main routes

ROUTE	WHAT IT IS, AND WHERE TO LOOK
Staying on at school	Taking further Highers or Advanced Highers in S5 or S6. <i>Your school</i>
College	Courses from introductory levels to HNC and HND. Students can search and apply directly on college websites. ²⁰ <i>mygov.scot; college websites</i>
University	Applications for full-time undergraduate courses go through UCAS. ²⁹ <i>UCAS; university websites</i>
Foundation Apprenticeship (at school)	Taken as a subject in S5 or S6 at SCQF level 6, the same level as a Higher, with real industry experience. ^{30,31} <i>apprenticeships.scot</i>
Modern Apprenticeship	A real job with training, for between 1 and 4 years, with more than 100 types from SCQF level 4/5 up to level 11. ³⁰ <i>apprenticeships.scot</i>
Graduate Apprenticeship	A paid job while studying part of the week at university for an Ordinary or Master's degree, SCQF level 9 to 11. ³² <i>apprenticeships.scot</i>
Work, training or volunteering	Starting a job, with or without training. The SDS careers adviser can help. <i>My World of Work</i>

Money for staying on: EMA

Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is a weekly payment of **£30** for young people aged 16 to 19 (past school leaving age) from lower-income households who stay on at school or on a non-advanced college course, or take part in an action plan with the council. It depends on attendance and a learning agreement.³³

In 2026–27, household income must be **£24,421 or less** for a household with one dependent child, or **£26,884 or less** with more than one, and residency rules apply.^{33,34} School pupils apply through their local council each school year; college students apply through the college.³⁴

University and college costs

The Scottish Government says it provides **free tuition** for eligible students in higher and further education, plus bursaries and loans for living costs based on household income and circumstances.³⁵ Education Scotland's Parentzone says eligible full-time students resident in Scotland pay no tuition fees, and students on HNC, HND or degree courses should apply to the **Student Awards Agency Scotland**

(SAAS) for help with funding.²⁹ Eligibility rules apply, and you have to apply: funding is not automatic.

Two useful cards

The **Young Scot National Entitlement Card** is free for 11 to 26-year-olds living in Scotland.³⁶ Everyone under 22 who lives in Scotland can travel free on the bus; from age 5 they need a National Entitlement Card.³⁷ That can make college courses, work placements and part-time jobs much easier to reach.

CAREERS HELP DOES NOT STOP AT SCHOOL

Skills Development Scotland says its careers advisers engage with parents throughout secondary school, and that beyond school its advisers work from a network of SDS centres and community locations, offering careers information, advice and guidance to people of all ages.¹⁰ If your child leaves without a plan, or changes their mind later, they can still get free careers help.

SEE ALSO

Moving out for college or university? Our free [*Cooking on a Budget*](#) cookbook has cheap, simple recipes your child can make for themselves on a student budget.

13

CHAPTER THIRTEEN · STAY SHARP

Spotting bad advice in the exam years

Worried families are a target. Here are the warning signs that apply to exams, results and tutoring.

"Guaranteed A"

No tutor, course or app can guarantee a grade. Grades come from the marks your child earns in the assessment.

"Leaked" exam papers

Real exam papers are confidential until the exam. Anything sold as a "leak" is a scam, or could get your child into serious trouble.

Pay to see or fix results

Results and appeals are free. Nobody official will ask for payment to release, speed up or upgrade a grade.

Coursework written for you

Services that write essays or assignments put a pupil's result at risk. Plagiarism breaks the exam rules.

Fake certificates

Your child's official certificate comes from Qualifications Scotland by post. Ignore any site selling "replacement" or "verified" certificates.

Pressure to decide now

"Only two places left" or "the price goes up tonight" is a sales tactic. Good tutors and courses can wait a day while you check.

The exam rules come from Qualifications Scotland's *Your Exams* booklet, which lists plagiarism, collusion and having prohibited items as breaking the rules.⁹ The free appeals service is described in chapter 11.³

Phones and smartwatches in the exam room

Pupils must not have **mobile phones (even if switched off)**, smartwatches, earbuds, tablets or any device that stores information or connects to the internet at their seat or desk, unless it has been approved as an assessment arrangement. This includes devices with AI software, such as smart glasses. Taking one to the desk could mean the exam entry is cancelled and no result is given, or a lower grade.⁹

CLARITY TIP

On exam mornings, agree where the phone and watch will go before your child leaves the house. It is an easy mistake to make, and a costly one.

Checking a tutor or course

- ☐ Ask what qualifications and experience they have in the Scottish course (not just GCSEs or A-levels)
- ☐ Ask how they will use past papers and marking instructions
- ☐ Agree the price, the number of sessions and how to stop in writing
- ☐ Check reviews from more than one place
- ☐ Ask the school whether free support covers the same ground

Glossary

Advanced Higher

The highest level of National Qualification, at SCQF level 7, usually taken in S6.

Appeal

A free review of the marking of work sent to Qualifications Scotland. The grade can go up, down or stay the same.

Assessment arrangements

Support in assessments, such as extra time or a reader, for disabled learners and those with additional support needs.

BGE

Broad general education: S1 to S3 (and before).

Course specification

The official document setting out what a course covers and how it is assessed.

Coursework

Assessed work done during the course, such as an assignment, project, portfolio or performance.

Curriculum for Excellence

Scotland's curriculum, from age 3 to 18.

EECCS

Examination Exceptional Circumstances

Consideration Service: for serious problems on exam day. The school must apply within 10 days.

EMA

Education Maintenance Allowance: £30 a week for eligible 16 to 19-year-olds staying in learning.

Exam diet

The period when the national exams are held: 26 April to 3 June in 2027.

Grade boundary

The mark needed for a grade. It can be adjusted if an exam was harder or easier than intended.

Higher

A National Qualification at SCQF level 6, the main qualification for university entry.

Marking instructions

The published guide examiners use to award marks. Free with past papers.

National 5

A National Qualification at SCQF level 5, graded A to D.

No Award

The result when the course assessment is not passed (below 40%).

Prelim

A practice exam set by the school.

Qualifications Scotland

The national body that replaced SQA on 1 February 2026.

SAAS

Student Awards Agency Scotland, for help with funding for HNC, HND and degree study.

SCN

Scottish Candidate Number, on the certificate and used for appeals.

SCQF

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, the 12-level framework for Scottish qualifications.

SDS

Skills Development Scotland, which runs the careers service and My World of Work.

Senior phase

S4 to S6, when most qualifications are taken.

REFERENCE

Useful official links

Every address here is printed in full and is clickable in the digital edition. We do not use QR codes.

Exams, past papers, results, appeals	qualifications.gov.scot and sqa.org.uk/pastpapers
2027 exam timetable	sqa.org.uk/sqa/1439.html
Assessment arrangements	sqa.org.uk/sqa/103011.html
Leaving school and EMA	mygov.scot/leave-school-options · mygov.scot/ema
Careers and job profiles	myworldofwork.co.uk
Apprenticeships	apprenticeships.scot
Student funding	saas.gov.uk
Young Scot card and free bus travel	young.scot · transport.gov.scot
Health	See 'Free help, any time' in chapter 9. Emergency: 999.

Notes for parents' evening

Jot down questions before you go, and the answers while you are there.

SUBJECT OR TEACHER	QUESTION	WHAT THEY SAID
-----------------------	----------	----------------

REFERENCE

Sources

Every fact in this guide was checked on 21 October 2026 against these sources. Each is listed under the chapter where it is first used, and each web address is clickable.

HOW SURE ARE WE?

- **Dates for 2027** (exams 26 April to 3 June, results 10 August) are from Qualifications Scotland and can change. Check its website.

- **Appeals deadlines** are set each year. We describe how the 2026 service worked and do not give 2027 deadlines, which were not published when we checked.
- **Prelims, study leave, options and coursework timings** vary by school. Where we describe them, it is the common pattern, not a rule.
- **The “phrases” lists and tips** are our own suggestions, not research findings.

HOW SCOTTISH SECONDARY SCHOOL WORKS

1. Scottish Government. School curriculum: Curriculum for Excellence (policy page). · www.gov.scot/policies/schools/school-curriculum/
2. Qualifications Scotland. Results: frequently asked questions (grades, bands, No Award, SCQF credit points). · www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/96422.html
3. Qualifications Scotland. Appeals Service for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher Courses at SCQF Levels 5 to 7: Policy. · www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/appeals-policy.pdf

WHO RUNS THE EXAMS NOW

4. Scottish Government (2025). Public appointment: chair and members appointed to the inaugural board of Qualifications Scotland. · www.gov.scot/publications/public-appointment-chair-and-members-appointed-to-the-inaugural-board-of-qualifications-scotland/

5. Qualifications Scotland. Launching our new digital service. · www.qualifications.gov.scot/launching-our-new-digital-services/
6. Qualifications Scotland. What Qualifications Scotland means for you. · www.qualifications.gov.scot/about/what-qualifications-scotland-means-for-you/
7. Qualifications Scotland. Rebalancing assessment: Improving assessment in National Courses (June 2026). · www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/117428.html
8. Qualifications Scotland (2 February 2026). Qualifications Scotland starts work and sets out early priorities. · www.qualifications.gov.scot/news/qualifications-scotland-launched/
9. Qualifications Scotland. Your Exams 2026: what you need to know (school edition). · www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/your-exams-2026-school-edition.pdf

THE BROAD GENERAL EDUCATION YEARS

10. Skills Development Scotland. Scotland's Career Service (careers service in schools). · www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/what-we-do/scotlands-career-service
11. Skills Development Scotland. My World of Work. · www.myworldofwork.co.uk/
12. Scottish Government (30 June 2026). Mobile phones: guidance for Scotland's schools, updated 2026. · www.gov.scot/publications/guidance-mobile-phones-scotlands-schools-update-2026/

CHOOSING SUBJECTS FOR S4

13. Qualifications Scotland. A to Z of National Qualification (NQ) subjects. · www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/45625.html

COURSES, COURSEWORK AND EXAMS

14. Qualifications Scotland. Awarding and Grading for National Courses Policy. · www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/files_ccc/awarding-grading-national-courses-policy.pdf
15. Qualifications Scotland. Past papers and marking instructions (including conditions of use). · www.sqa.org.uk/pastpapers/findpastpaper.htm

GRADES, BANDS AND THE CERTIFICATE

16. Qualifications Scotland (28 July 2026). Support and information ahead of results day. · www.qualifications.gov.scot/support-and-information-ahead-of-results-day/

THE EXAM YEAR, MONTH BY MONTH

17. Qualifications Scotland. Exam timetable and learner apps (2027 National Qualifications exams). · www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/1439.html
18. Qualifications Scotland. National Qualifications 2027 Exam Timetable, version 02 (published August 2026). · www.sqa.org.uk/files_ccc/nq-2027-exam-timetable.pdf
19. Qualifications Scotland (31 August 2026). Qualifications Scotland publishes 2027 exam timetable following consultation. · www.qualifications.gov.scot/news/qualifications-scotland-publishes-2027-exam-timetable-following-consultation/
20. mygov.scot. Leaving school: your options. · www.mygov.scot/leave-school-options

HELPING WITHOUT NAGGING

21. BBC Bitesize. Scotland secondary levels (National 4, National 5, Higher). · www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/secondary
22. Heriot-Watt University. Scholar: Why Scholar and available courses. · scholar.hw.ac.uk/available-courses/
23. Qualifications Scotland. Generative artificial intelligence (AI) in assessments (stance from session 2026–27). · www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/107507.html

STRESS, WELLBEING AND GETTING HELP

24. NHS 24. When to phone 111. · www.nhs24.scot/
25. Childline (NSPCC). Contacting Childline. · www.childline.org.uk/get-support/contacting-childline/
26. Samaritans. Contact a Samaritan. · www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/
27. Breathing Space (Scotland). Helpline opening hours. · breathingspace.scot/

EXTRA SUPPORT AND EXAM ARRANGEMENTS

28. Qualifications Scotland. Assessment arrangements guide for learners. · www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/103011.html

ROUTES AFTER SCHOOL, AND MONEY FOR STAYING ON

29. Education Scotland, Parentzone Scotland. Higher education (post-16 opportunities). · education.gov.scot/parentzone/curriculum-in-scotland/post-16-opportunities/higher-education/

30. Skills Development Scotland, apprenticeships.scot.
Modern Apprenticeships. · www.apprenticeships.scot/become-an-apprentice/modern-apprenticeships/
31. Skills Development Scotland, apprenticeships.scot.
Foundation Apprenticeships. · www.apprenticeships.scot/become-an-apprentice/foundation-apprenticeships/
32. Skills Development Scotland, apprenticeships.scot.
Graduate Apprenticeships. · www.apprenticeships.scot/become-an-apprentice/graduate-apprenticeships/
33. Scottish Government. Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) (policy page). · www.gov.scot/policies/young-people-training-employment/education-maintenance-allowances/
34. mygov.scot. Who can get EMA. · www.mygov.scot/ema/who-can-get-ema
35. Scottish Government. Financial support for students (policy page). · www.gov.scot/policies/universities/student-financial-support/
36. Young Scot. Young Scot National Entitlement Card. · young.scot/
37. Transport Scotland. Under 22s free bus travel. · www.transport.gov.scot/concessionary-travel/under-22s-free-bus-travel/

How this guide was made

This guide was researched and written by Clarity Guides in October 2026. Facts were checked against Qualifications Scotland, the Scottish Government, mygov.scot, Education Scotland, Skills Development Scotland, Transport Scotland, Young Scot and the helplines named. If anything here differs from what your child's school or Qualifications Scotland tells you, follow their advice.

Clarity Guides is independent. We are not linked to Qualifications Scotland, any council, school, tutoring company or website named here, and we earn nothing from any link.

Image credits

Cover and worksheets: original artwork and designs drawn in code by Clarity Guides (Scottish hills, a yellow six-step staircase, thistles and a loch). No people, no faces, and no third-party images or photographs of real people are used.

SPOTTED SOMETHING OUT OF DATE?

Exam rules, dates and payments change from one school year to the next. If anything in this guide no longer matches what Qualifications Scotland or your child's school says, follow them, and let us know at goclarity.uk/report so we can check it and update the guide. It helps us most if you tell us:

- ☐ the page number and what the guide says
- ☐ what the school or Qualifications Scotland now says
- ☐ a link to the official page, if there is one

Found it useful? You are welcome to print it, pass it to another family, or share it with your school's Parent Council.

Key dates at a glance

WHEN	WHAT
1 February 2026	Qualifications Scotland replaced SQA · qualifications.gov.scot
Session 2026–27	Assessment changes in some courses (chapter 2) · sqa.org.uk

WHEN	WHAT
Christmas holidays	Earliest leaving date for pupils whose 16th birthday is between 1 October and the end of February · mygov.scot
Monday 26 April 2027	2027 exams start · sqa.org.uk
After 31 May	Earliest leaving date for pupils whose 16th birthday is between 1 March and 30 September · mygov.scot
Thursday 3 June 2027	2027 exams finish (contingency day) · sqa.org.uk
Tuesday 10 August 2027	Results day; appeals dates published by Qualifications Scotland · sqa.org.uk

Planned dates can change. Always check with the school or Qualifications Scotland.

A CLARITY GUIDE

A Parent's Guide to the Exam Years

Making the confusing clear.

PUBLISHED BY CLARITY GUIDES

*In a world full of disinformation, get **Clarity**.*

This guide is general information and education only, not advice about any individual child. Dates and figures were correct when checked in October 2026 and can change; always check with your child's school or Qualifications Scotland. Clarity Guides is independent and is not linked to any organisation named here. **Free to share.** © 2026 Clarity. Free to download and print for personal and classroom use. Please don't upload it to websites, shared drives open to other schools, or AI tools, or resell it. Find more Clarity guides at **goclarity.uk**.