

The 1.5-minute rule

The short answer

$40 \times 60 / 27 = 88.9$ seconds per question. That is a **budget, not an instruction** to spend exactly 89 seconds on every item. Win the fast marks, bank expensive questions early, and reserve two minutes so every box contains an answer.

Why the average can mislead

$$\frac{40 \text{ min} \times 60 \text{ s}}{27} = 88.9 \text{ s per question.}$$

The arithmetic is correct; question times vary. One item may take 25 seconds; another can swallow four minutes and still give the same single mark. Force every question into a 90-second box and you either leave easy work unseen or abandon a nearly solved hard item because a timer beep told you to.

The published 2024-25 data show the pressure is real. The median candidate used the full 40:00 in Mathematics 1, Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics 2. Biology's median was 39:53. More than 90% used 35 to 40 minutes. Running out of time is not evidence that you are uniquely slow; it is the design problem everyone receives.

1 The tell

Your clock problem is usually not "I cannot do 27 questions". It is "I donated four minutes to two questions before seeing the final six". Track the longest three attempts in every set. They are where the paper disappears.

A pacing plan you can actually remember

Clock	You should have seen	What it means
13:00	Questions 1 to 9	Three blocks of three. Bank anything that has not produced a route.
26:00	Questions 10 to 18	You are on average pace with the back third untouched.
38:00	Questions 19 to 27	Every question has been read and every fast mark had a fair chance.
40:00	Every answer filled	Use the last two minutes for blanks first, then one flagged check.

This spends 38 minutes reaching every item, about 84 seconds each on average, and protects two minutes at the end. Create that margin with several 30-second wins, not by shaving exactly five seconds off every question.

When to bank a question

"Bank" means choose your current best option, flag the item and move. It is not surrender. Return only after the whole module has been seen.

- After roughly 35 seconds, you still cannot name an executable first step.
- At 80 to 90 seconds, the answer is not within one clean operation.

- Your working branches into several cases and the options do not collapse them quickly.
- You repeated a calculation without learning anything new.
- The next checkpoint is due and unseen questions remain in the block.

Stay when the route is clear and one short piece remains. Leaving $12\sqrt{P} = 60$ because 89 seconds arrived is overly rigid pacing.

2 Try it

On your next 27-question set, draw boxes labelled 13, 26 and 38 minutes. Tick each only if you reached questions 10, 19 and 27 respectively. Your score matters; your reach matters too.

Elimination is a solution method

Multiple choice lets you solve the question that was printed, not the longer textbook exercise hiding behind it.

1. **Check scale.** If a speed rises slightly, an answer ten times larger is probably dead before algebra.
2. **Check sign and units.** Negative mass, metres instead of square metres, or joules where watts are required can remove options.
3. **Substitute options.** For a parameter question, testing two strategic answers may beat solving a full equation.
4. **Use boundary cases.** Ask what happens at zero, one, or as a variable becomes very large.
5. **Stop when only one survives.** Completing a derivation after finding the answer wastes time.

Elimination improves a banked guess. Crossing out two impossible answers converts a blind choice into a reasoned one. With no penalty for a wrong answer, an empty box is never strategically better than your best remaining option.

Approximation is not sloppy arithmetic

Approximation is controlled: you know what moved, in which direction, and whether the options are far enough apart for the movement not to matter.

Worked example Estimate before you calculate

Without a calculator, estimate $\frac{39.8\sqrt{63}}{2.01\pi}$. The options are 5, 20, 50, 100, 500.
Round to friendly nearby values:

$$39.8 \approx 40, \quad \sqrt{63} \approx 8, \quad 2.01 \approx 2, \quad \pi \approx 3.$$

$$\frac{39.8\sqrt{63}}{2.01\pi} \approx \frac{40 \cdot 8}{2 \cdot 3} = \frac{320}{6} \approx 53.$$

The only plausible option is 50.

Correct: the options are widely separated, so a deliberately rough estimate is decisive.

Trap: finding $\sqrt{63}$ to three decimal places creates work the question never asked for.

Direction matters. Replacing 39.8 by 40 raises the numerator slightly; replacing 2.01 by 2 and π by 3 lowers the denominator. The estimate is likely a little high, but nowhere near 20 or 100. That is enough.

Two passes, with a job for each

Pass one, 0:00 to 38:00: coverage. Take direct routes, eliminate aggressively, bank on the rules above, and protect the checkpoints. Flag only when a return could plausibly change the answer.

Pass two, 38:00 to 40:00: risk control. Fill blanks, then return to the flagged item with the highest chance of resolution, not the one that offended your pride. Check units, sign and copied numbers before restarting algebra.

A better scorecard

score, question reached at 38:00, blanks at 40:00, attempts over 150 s.

The last three explain the first. If score rises while long attempts fall, pacing is becoming a skill. If you reach question 27 but accuracy collapses, the banking rule is too aggressive or the arithmetic floor is not ready.

The seven-day timing reset

1. Day 1: one untimed mixed set; label every slow step.
2. Days 2 and 3: three blocks of nine questions in 13 minutes each, a 39-minute training drill rather than the 38-minute exam coverage target.
3. Day 4: approximation and option-substitution drills only.
4. Day 5: a full 27-in-40 set with checkpoint recording.
5. Day 6: rework every banked question untimed; decide whether the bank was correct.
6. Day 7: another full set, aiming for fewer 150-second attempts, not frantic clicking.