

ABRSM Clarinet Grade Exams: Complete Guide to the 2026 Syllabus, with Mock Aural Tests, Sight-Reading Drills and a 12-Week Plan

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Quick answer: ABRSM Clarinet Practical Grades run from Grade 1 to Grade 8 and have four sections: **three pieces** (30 marks each, 90 in total), **scales and arpeggios 21 marks**, **sight-reading 21 marks** and **aural tests 18 marks** — 150 marks in total. Results are banded **130–150 Distinction**, **120–129 Merit** and **100–119 Pass**. To enter Grades 6 to 8 you must already have passed Grade 5 (or above) in Music Theory, Practical Musicianship or a Jazz Practical Grade. Candidates who would rather not take scales or sight-reading can enter a video-recorded **Performance Grade** instead, playing four pieces.



A grade exam is not a race to play fastest; it rewards a candidate who holds all four sections steady in front of the examiner.

The exam at a glance (ABRSM clarinet, 2026 syllabus)

Section	Content	Marks	Share
Pieces (three)	One from each of syllabus Lists A, B and C; live accompaniment required unless the syllabus says otherwise	$30 \times 3 = 90$	60%
Scales and arpeggios	The examiner asks for a selection from the requirements in the syllabus — majors, minors, arpeggios, chromatic scales and other patterns	21	14%
Sight-reading	An unseen short piece, played after a short preparation time	21	14%
Aural tests	Listening tests covering pitch, pulse, rhythm, melody, harmony and other musical features	18	12%
Total		150	—

Result bands: Distinction 130–150, Merit 120–129, Pass 100–119. **Entry requirements:** none for Grades 1 to 5; for Grades 6 to 8 you must have passed Grade 5 (or above) in Music Theory, Practical Musicianship or a Jazz Practical Grade, or hold an accepted equivalent such as Trinity Grade 5 Theory.

The alternative: Performance Grades (a digital exam assessed from a video recording). You play four pieces — three from the syllabus lists and one own-choice — and there are **no scales, sight-reading or aural tests**. The focus is on the performance as a whole: communication, interpretation and delivery. You cannot use the same recording or performance for both routes.

Syllabus validity — the detail candidates most often get wrong: the 'from 2022' syllabus is **valid for exams until 31 December 2026**, while the new '**from 2026**' syllabus **applies from 1 January 2026**. Both are therefore in use during 2026, and from 1 January 2027 only the new syllabus is accepted. Check which syllabus your printed music belongs to before you book.

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How this practice paper was designed, and its copyright status

The exercises below were written by TutorZone tutors from publicly available information in ABRSM's *Practical Music Grades: Woodwind Syllabus from 2026* qualification specification (which contains the syllabus and marking criteria) and the HKEAA's ABRSM exam pages. They are **not ABRSM past or specimen papers**. ABRSM's repertoire lists, sheet music and syllabus content are ABRSM copyright and **no music or list content is reproduced here**; the assessment facts quoted are public, and every exercise and answer is original to this paper. In any conflict, the ABRSM syllabus and Exam Regulations govern.

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The four sections, and how to practise them

Section	How to practise	What the examiner hears
Pieces, 90 marks	Choose before you drill: at least one of the three should feel comfortable in your hands. List A is usually classical, List B lyrical, List C rhythmic or modern — contrast the three characters, but do not pick three pieces that all fight your technique.	Pitch and tone, steadiness of time, shape and dynamics, and the persuasiveness of the performance as a whole. Unstable tempo and drifting against the piano are the most common losses.
Scales and arpeggios, 21 marks	Ten minutes daily with a metronome, slow to fast (for example ♩ = 60 → 80 → 100). Build evenness first, then add slurs and rhythmic variants. Breath and the start of each note should be consistent — and never get faster as you go.	Accuracy, evenness, fingering and breath control, and whether the tempo holds from first note to last. The exact keys and patterns for your grade are set out in Section 3 of the syllabus.
Sight-reading, 21 marks	Use the preparation time for three things: check the time and key signature, tap the pulse while "playing" silently, then find the one or two hardest bars. Once you start, do not stop and do not restart .	Whether the pulse survives, how you handle the unfamiliar, and whether the whole thing stays connected. Sight-reading tests the ability to keep going, not perfection.
Aural tests, 18 marks	Five minutes a day: sing back intervals, clap rhythms, listen for cadences and chord quality. Record yourself on a phone and check.	Pitch accuracy, sense of pulse and musical perceptiveness. Mark bands: 17–18 accurate throughout, 15–16 secure, 12–14 cautious (pass), and below that a below-pass response.

Mock aural tests (10 questions, with answers)

Original practice for this paper, played by a teacher or fellow student. Early grades work mainly on clapping and singing back; higher grades add intervals, chords and cadences. The formats actually used in the exam are set out in the syllabus section on aural tests.

1. (Pulse) Your teacher plays a short phrase. Clap the strong beats — is it in two, three or four?
2. (Rhythmic memory) Your teacher plays two bars of rhythm. Clap it back immediately, then clap it again and name the time signature.
3. (Pitch) Two notes are played. Is the second higher or lower, and is the interval a major second, a minor third or a perfect fifth?
4. (Melodic memory) A four-bar melody in C major is played. Sing it back on "lah" and say whether it moves up, down, or up then down.
5. (Singing from notation) A starting note is given after the tonic chord. Sing the phrase from that note.
6. (Chords) A triad is played. Is it major or minor, and how does the colour differ?
7. (Cadences) A phrase ending is played. Is it a perfect or an imperfect cadence, and does it sound finished or unfinished?
8. (Speed and dynamics) The same melody is played twice. Which time was faster or louder, and where did the change happen?
9. (Style) Two short extracts are played. Which is closer to dance style and which to a singing line? Give one musical reason, such as dotted rhythm or slurred phrasing.
10. (Combined) Listen to eight bars, then state the time signature, whether the key is major or minor, and which phrase was the loudest.

Answers and marking points

1. Correct time signature (1 mark); steady strong beats (1). 2. Rhythm accurate — within an eighth note is acceptable. 3. Direction first, then the interval name; direction alone earns half marks. 4. Accurate pitch and correct shape; a deviation of more than a semitone scores nothing. 5. Getting the starting note right matters most, then interval accuracy. 6. Quality correct (major or minor); describing the colour (bright, dark) earns credit. 7. Cadence named correctly plus the finished/unfinished impression. 8. Identify which time and which bar changed. 9. Style judgement plus one concrete musical reason (dotted rhythm, slurs, staccato). 10. All three correct for distinction level; one error can still be a pass-level response.

Sight-reading drills (three levels, easy to harder)

A (Grades 1–2 level) C major, 4/4, eight bars, only crotchets and minims; target ♩ = 72, with one slur and one staccato passage.

Purpose: build the order of operations — time signature, count the pulse, play the first note — and keep the whole thing moving.

B (Grades 3–4 level) G major, 3/4, twelve bars, adding quavers and dotted rhythm, with one dynamic change (mp → mf).

Purpose: hold the pulse steady through rhythmic change instead of dragging at every dot.

C (Grade 5 and above) F major, 6/8, sixteen bars, with accidentals, syncopation and a brief shift towards the relative minor and back.

Purpose: keep the whole shape when the notes are unfamiliar — better to drop an ornament than to stop and start again.

A suggested 20-second preparation routine

(1) Read the time and key signature and count two bars in your head; (2) look at the first and last bars to decide how to start and finish; (3) scan the one or two hardest bars and decide how to handle them (slower? omit an ornament?); (4) breathe and begin. **Once you start: no going back, only going on.**

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A twelve-week preparation plan (Grade 3 shown; scale up or down by grade)

Weeks	Pieces	Scales and technique	Sight-reading and aural
1–3	Run all three pieces end to end, fixing tempo and phrasing; slow-practise the two hardest bars daily	Ten minutes daily, slow, even tone from the first note	Five minutes of rhythm clapping daily
4–6	Add rehearsals with the accompanist; record and listen back to fix intonation and unsteady tempo	Raise the speed (♩ = 60 → 80), add slurs and variants	One sight-reading passage daily, taken at random from old music
7–9	Mock exam: three pieces back to back with no break	Random selection — have someone call keys and patterns	Full ten-question aural mock (section 04)
10–11	Only the error-prone passages; settle the running order on the day	Maintain, do not increase, to avoid fatigue	Drill the habit of never restarting a sight-reading
12	Taper: one play-through a day, focused on breathing and stage presence	Light maintenance	Warm-up and rhythm work only

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Entering in Hong Kong (administered by HKEAA)

Item	Arrangement
Local administrator	The Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) administers ABRSM theory, practical and digital performance exams in Hong Kong; clarinet is among the instruments available

Item	Arrangement
	here.
Booking	Since 2021 (except group choirs and ensembles), applicants book and pay through ABRSM's online booking system ; details are on ABRSM's Hong Kong pages.
Exam sessions	Several sessions run each year. In 2026, practical and digital performance exams were held in batches between late February and early August; dates and fees are published on ABRSM's site each year.
Grades 6–8 extra step	You must already hold Grade 5 (or above) in Music Theory, Practical Musicianship or a Jazz Practical Grade (or an accepted equivalent). If ABRSM asks, email the certificate or mark form to HKEAA for verification.
Certificates	Results and certificates are issued through your ABRSM account (digital); a paper certificate can be ordered and is posted within about four months of ordering.

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Where marks are most often lost

- **Unsteady tempo:** nerves push the speed up, especially in scales and fast passages. Practise with the metronome set against you — deliberately even at a slow tempo.
- **Drifting from the piano:** rehearsing only alone. Book at least three sessions with your accompanist before the pieces are set.
- **Treating scales as warm-up, not as an exam:** scales are 21 marks, the same as sight-reading, yet are often practised casually. Train them by random request, and unify breath and attack.
- **Stopping or restarting in sight-reading:** the examiner is assessing whether you can keep going; one halt is visible loss.
- **Singing too quietly in aural tests:** hesitant, inaudible responses score lower. The aural section rewards a confident answer.
- **Using the wrong syllabus year:** both syllabuses run through 2026, but only the new one is accepted from 2027 — preparing the wrong one wastes months.

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FAQ

What age can my child take an ABRSM clarinet grade?

Entry is open at any age, with no requirements for Grades 1 to 5. In practice, clarinet needs enough breath support and the right dental development, so most students begin grading around age 8 to 10.

Can we skip grades?

Yes — ABRSM does not require you to take every grade, but Grades 6 to 8 require Grade 5 (or above) Music Theory, Practical Musicianship or a Jazz Practical Grade, or an accepted equivalent.

Do pieces have to be played from memory?

No. Music may be used in the pieces (and the examiner may look at your copy to check the edition). Scales and sight-reading are asked for on the day and need no music.

Can we use a backing track for the pieces?

No. Where the syllabus requires an accompaniment, it must be played live (unless the syllabus states otherwise for a particular piece); arriving without an accompanist affects the pieces marks.

What if we would rather not do scales and sight-reading?

Enter a Performance Grade instead: digital, assessed from a recording, four pieces (three from the lists plus one own-choice), with no scales, sight-reading or aural tests.

Do grades help with school applications?

Grades 6 to 8 are regulated qualifications (Level 2 and Level 3) and some UK universities include higher-grade certificates in their UCAS points tariff. In Hong Kong, grades are mainly used as staged goals and as evidence for school orchestras and music scholarships.

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Official sources to check against

Source	What to use it for
ABRSM — Clarinet exams page	Syllabus, repertoire lists, qualification specification downloads and exam requirements
ABRSM — Woodwind Syllabus from 2026 qualification specification (PDF)	Confirming the marks for each section, marking criteria, exam timings and syllabus validity
ABRSM — Practical Grades	The 150-mark scheme, Distinction/Merit/Pass bands and the Grades 6–8 entry requirement
HKEAA — ABRSM practical and digital performance exams in Hong Kong	Local booking arrangements, exam sessions, the Grade 5 theory requirement and certificates

See more practice material: [Exam practice questions](#). To arrange clarinet or music theory tuition, start with the [subject guides](#) and then get matched with a tutor.