

SAT vs. ACT: Just the Facts

Virtually all colleges (there are a few exceptions) require students to take the SAT or the ACT to apply. Thus, it is important to explore the nuances of these two tests during the admissions process. The ACT is an achievement test whereas the SAT is seen primarily as an aptitude test. The ACT measures what you know and the SAT measures your ability. Both tests are offered multiple times throughout the year but the structure and content of the tests differ.

Structure & Content: The SAT is composed of ten sections (three math, three writing, three critical reading and one experimental section which is unmarked); whereas, the ACT contains five sections (English, Math, Reading, Science Reasoning, and Writing – optional). The ACT does include experimental sections occasionally, but they are clearly marked when they are added. The SAT’s math section only covers up to geometry and algebra II whereas the ACT addresses up to trigonometry. In addition, the ACT’s science section explores charts, graphs, and data interpretation. Generally speaking, individuals who do not historically “test” well will perform better on the ACT because its testing structure is more curriculum-based. Many colleges do require that you take the Writing portion of the ACT, so be certain to check with the admissions office prior to registration.

Scoring: In addition, the ACT lacks a guessing penalty but the SAT deducts $\frac{1}{4}$ of a point for each wrong answer on the multiple-choice questions. The SAT is scored out of a total 2400 points (200-800 points per section) and 2-12 for the essay. The ACT also scores 2-12 for the essay but 1-36 for each subject and then all of those are averaged for a composite score. When choosing to send one’s scores to colleges, the SAT will send all the scores a student receives to the school. The ACT offers a “score choice” option allowing the students to pick and choose which schools receive which scores. Most colleges will select your highest combined score; therefore, it is in your best interest to sit for the tests more than once (generally once in the spring of your junior year and once again in the fall of your senior year). Your scores are very important to college admissions because standardized tests are one of the primary ways colleges compare students from a wide array of backgrounds and school conditions.

Testing: Like most things in life, one of the best ways to prepare for these two tests is to practice, practice, and practice. At our school, in the fall of our students’ sophomore years, they take practice versions of the ACT and SAT respectively: the PLAN and the PSAT. The students receive a detailed description of their test results and a qualified individual walks through their strengths and weaknesses in a conference. Both tests send the student the actual test book so the student understands exactly which questions were missed. If there are major gaps in the student’s learning then additional coursework or tutoring is recommended, but for most students it is best to wait for the junior year results of the PSAT (taken in the fall). At that point, students are better prepared for the tests because of the higher level math and English courses. What if your scores are not as high as you had hoped? What do you do to improve your scores prior to taking the test in the spring of your junior year?

Preparation: Due to the rigors accompanied with the junior year, I would be wary of taking any prep courses during the normal school year. Although the standardized test scores are important, colleges still undeniably proclaim that a student's academic record is the most important piece to the student's application. Most test prep courses are fairly time consuming and involve outside homework. Again, keep in mind that most colleges will accept your highest combined score. Most individuals' scores rise each time they sit for the test. The summer between your junior and senior year is the best time to hone your testing skills. Here are a few of the more popular options for improving your score:

- *Test Websites* - First, if you do not have the opportunity to take practice tests at your school, go online and familiarize yourself with the various tests. Both tests have a bevy of free online guides, practice questions, and information that will be very helpful: SAT (www.ets.org and www.collegeboard.com) and ACT (www.actstudent.org).
- *Books/Software* – For most people, the biggest challenge with standardized tests rests in understanding the format of the tests. Take practice tests. Check your answers. Most workbooks offer detailed description of the answers as well as rationale for each answer. If you are computer savvy, there are excellent computer programs available. It is important to know thyself. Practice books and software are excellent thrifty resources but completely worthless if they are never used.
- *Prep Classes* – Although generally pricey, prep classes offer built-in accountability. Most programs suggest a money back guarantee if your score does not rise at least one hundred points. Two of the more popular nationally recognized classes are Kaplan (www.kaplan.com) and the Princeton Review (www.princetonreview.com). Although class sizes are relatively small, for some learners still a smaller setting may be a better fit.
- *Tutoring* – In reviewing your test results there may be one or two areas which are perennial problems. Instead of spending weeks in a structured class, you may be better suited addressing the problem areas with a specialist. Focused instruction may prove more beneficial.
- *Read* – For most individuals the verbal portions of testing prove the most daunting. Unfortunately, this section requires the most time and energy to improve. Those individuals who perform well on the verbal read unceasingly. Read. Read. Read. It does not have to be *Atlas Shrugg*, just pick up the sports page or your favorite magazine, but do so often. Improving reading comprehension takes time.
- *Counselor* – The best free resource is your college counselor. Your college counselor should know you well enough as well as your goals in order to direct you accordingly.

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