

Standardized Testing

Myths about Standardized Tests

It may be wise to get some myths cleared up right from the start. Here are some common misconceptions about testing and admissions:

- **Standardized tests will make or break my chances for admission.** False! While tests are important in most college admission decisions, they are not the sole, nor even the number one, factor. Colleges are interested in much more than numbers. Grades and the level of classes taken will trump test scores in almost every case. Admissions committees know that they'll do better to take a motivated student who doesn't test well than the opposite.
- **You have to score over 1350 (Math + CR) on the SAT to get into an Ivy League.** False! A high test score like that is always great to have, but nothing is certain in admissions. Check the websites of colleges you're interested in and look for profiles of admitted students. They will usually show the middle 50% - and that means there are ones that are lower.
- **Prepping for the test is futile unless you can afford an expensive tutor.** False again! There are numerous prep resources that vary in cost from free on up. At a minimum, it is wise to take some timed practice tests from a source that explains answers. This helps you with pacing and also helps you understand what you missed and why. There are books of practice tests for sale that are very inexpensive.

So now that we've cleared all that up, let's talk about the tests themselves.

Standardized Testing

The standardized testing process causes different reactions among students. Some are petrified; some view it as a mild annoyance. Others are a little shocked when they don't do quite as well as expected. But like it or not, they're here to stay - at least for a while.

Most colleges require the SAT or ACT tests. Originally the ACT was preferred or required in the mid-west, while the SAT was preferred in the northeast and on the coasts. Now it is common for colleges to take either, which is a nice advantage. Some students take both in order to see if they do better on one style than another. This is certainly a valid idea, but can be costly if you are trying to prep for both. Some students report a significant difference in results between the SAT and ACT, while others perform about the same on both. This is a decision that is yours alone, and you should do the necessary research to make an informed choice. Again, the college websites will almost certainly indicate what they accept and/or prefer.

The Tests

Standardized testing begins early on, and this is an advantage. By the time you are taking the SAT and ACT, you should be no stranger to the pacing and general skills required for these tests. Here's what you'll encounter as you go through high school.

PLAN

This is ACT's college readiness test for 10th graders. As a "pre-ACT" test, PLAN is a strong predictor of success on the ACT. At the same time, many schools recognize the importance of PLAN testing for all students, as it focuses attention on both career preparation and improving academic achievement.

The PLAN[®] program helps 10th graders build a solid foundation for future academic and career success and provides information needed to address school districts' high-priority issues. It is a comprehensive guidance resource that helps students measure their current academic development, explore career/training options, and make plans for the remaining years of high school and post-graduation years.

In summary, PLAN is a series of achievement tests in core subjects with an emphasis on career exploration and preparation for the ACT test. It is generally offered to sophomores in the fall.

PSAT/NMSQT

This stands for Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test. It's a standardized test that provides firsthand practice for the SAT Reasoning Test. It also gives you a chance to enter National Merit Scholarship Corporation (NMSC) scholarship programs.

The PSAT/NMSQT measures:

- critical reading skills
- math problem-solving skills
- writing skills

It is designed for juniors to give them an estimate of how they will score on the real SAT Reasoning Test. It is shorter, but similar in content and approach. It is generally offered once per year in October. Some high schools offer practice PSATs and SATs as early as freshman or sophomore year. This is a good idea for high achievers or students looking to prepare ahead of time. The PSAT resembles the new SAT Reasoning Test, except that it does not include an essay. You can roughly multiply your PSAT scores by 10 and use that to guess what you might receive on the Critical Reading and Math sections of the SAT if you were to take it then.

The SAT Reasoning Test

This test is a measure of the critical thinking skills you'll need for academic success in college. The SAT assesses how well you analyze and solve problems—skills you learned in school that you'll need in college. The SAT is typically taken by high school juniors and seniors.

Each section of the SAT is scored on a scale of 200 - 800, with two writing sub-scores for multiple-choice and the essay. It is administered seven times a year in the U.S., Puerto Rico, and U.S. Territories, and six times a year overseas.

Here are some highlights of the SAT Reasoning Test:

WRITING: (60 minutes)

- The Writing section includes a student-written essay (25 minutes) and a multiple choice section (35 minutes).

The essay measures your ability to:

- *Organize and express ideas clearly*
- *Develop and support the main idea*
- *Use appropriate word choice and sentence structure*

You'll be asked to develop a point of a view on an issue, using reasoning and evidence — based on your own experiences, readings, or observations — to support your ideas. The essay will be scored by trained high school and college teachers. Each reader will give the essay a score from 1 to 6 (6 is the highest score) based on the overall quality of the essay and your demonstration of writing competence.

- *The multiple-choice writing questions measure your ability to:*
 - *Improve sentences and paragraphs*
 - *Identify errors (such as diction, grammar, sentence construction, subject-verb agreement, proper word usage, and wordiness)*

CRITICAL READING: (70 minutes) (This section may be compared to the old Verbal section)

- *Analogies have been eliminated*
- *Grammar and usage multiple choice are added*
- *Short and long reading passages as well as sentence completion remain*

MATH: (70 minutes) (This section may be compared to the Math section on the old SAT)

- *New content from third-year college preparatory math - some Algebra II questions such as absolute value, exponential growth, negative and fractional exponents, linear functions, scatter plots*
- *Quantitative comparisons have been eliminated*
- *Students can use a four-function, scientific, or graphing calculator. The College Board recommends that students use at least a scientific calculator for the SAT, although it's still possible to solve every question without a calculator.*

The bottom line – it's LONG! Be sure to get plenty of sleep the night before and bring snacks and water. Concentrate on staying focused and watch your pacing.

Scoring and Comparing the SAT Reasoning Test

Each section uses the familiar 200-800 scale. So the “perfect score” is 2400. You also receive two writing sub-scores: a score of 20-80 for the multiple choices and 2-12 for your essay. You are able to access your score report on-line along with a copy of your essay. Sometimes you are offered a QAS (Question and Answer Service) for a fee (certain dates only). This gives you the questions, correct answers, and your answers. For others, the SAS (Student Answer Service) is available, which provides less detail but gives summaries by difficulty levels and how you fared in each. So check as you register to see if your dates offer QAS or SAS.

To compare old (pre class of 2006) SAT scores to current, you can roughly equate the Math sections, and you can equate the Critical Reading section to the old Verbal. To convert a total old SAT score to a total current Sat score, multiply the old times 1.5 and that will roughly approximate it. Many colleges are not using the Writing Section for admission decisions. Visit the College Board website www.collegeboard.com for more detailed information.

Tips for the SAT Essay

The essay seems to really intimidate a lot of students. Here are some tips that may help ease the stress when that essay question comes into view.

- There are no tricks. Don't try to "win" by making it extra long, using large words or lots of examples. They are looking for good writing.
- Read the entire assignment. Don't rush through it. There is information in the short paragraph that can actually help you. Imagine you are talking to the person who wrote the paragraph. Would you agree with them? Disagree? What would you say to sway him or her? You are developing your own point of view. Now you just need to write about it.
- Don't oversimplify your point of view. You need to explain each example well and also include some substance. Two well-developed examples is better than three or four superficial ones.
- It's OK to use "I" – just not in every sentence. It is your point of view, so "I" makes sense within reason. Express your opinion along with examples drawn from personal or other experience. Support your ideas. Relax and do so in your own tone, not someone else's.

The Online SAT Score Report

This option offers personalized feedback that can be very helpful when developing your skills. You can go online and view:

- Your SAT Scores – range, percentile rank, average scores, detail, how they might do if they retake the SAT
- A printable copy of your actual essay response and detail about how it was scored
- Useful information about scores

The SAT Online Score Report is available free of charge to every student who takes the SAT. All you need is a collegeboard.com account. Here's how to access it:

- Sign into collegeboard.com and go to My SAT
- Select View My Score Report next to one of your test dates to the Online Score Report for that test.

The SAT Subject Tests

These are subject tests that measure knowledge or skills in a particular subject. Each test is one hour, and many subjects are offered. Not all colleges require the SAT Subject Tests, and some don't even consider the scores. Those that do will generally want two or three in different subject areas and will probably weight them equally to the SAT Reasoning Test. So once again, research pays. Find out what your prospective colleges require or recommend, and watch for changes. Take the SAT Subject Tests whenever you peak in that particular subject. For instance, if you've taken AP Biology, take the Biology test that May or June.

Download "SAT Subject Tests Preparation Booklet" from www.collegeboard.com (Subject Tests Preparation Center). It contains sample questions and sample test instructions so you can prepare. Become very familiar with the test instructions so you don't have to waste time on them during a real test. Know the scoring: you get one point for each correct answer and lose a fraction for incorrect ones. You neither lose nor gain for omitting a question. This means that intelligent guessing (where you can positively eliminate one or more answers) is a good idea, but random guessing (where you have no idea) is not. Scratch out answers you know are wrong. But be careful making marks on

the answer sheet. It's machine scored so it can count a scribble as an answer. A calculator may be used on Math Level 1 and 2 only.

Visit <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/about/SATII.html> for more info.

The ACT Test

The American College Testing (ACT) Assessment is designed to test your skill levels in English, Math, Reading, and Science reasoning. On the test, you will have 2 hours and 55 minutes to complete a variety of multiple choice questions divided into four sections – one for each tested subject area. The English, reading, and science sections each include several reading passages with anywhere from 5 to 15 questions per passage. The Math section includes 60 questions – each with 5 possible answer choices.

ACT has an optional 30-minute Writing Test as a component to the ACT Assessment. Prompts used for the ACT Writing Test describe an issue relevant to high school students and ask students to write about their perspective on the issue. As a starting place, two different perspectives on the issue are provided. Examinees may choose to support one of these perspectives or to develop a response based on their own perspective. They will need to clearly state their position and provide reasons and examples. The ACT Writing Test will be required by some colleges and adds \$14.50 to the \$30 fee for a total of \$44.50 if you take both. (as of this printing – fees may change at any time)

There is a detailed ACT breakdown for 2007-2008 at: www.act.org/aap/pdf/glance.pdf

You will actually receive 12 separate scores on the ACT: 1 composite, 4 subject scores, and 7 sub-scores. However the composite – or scaled – score is the most important. It ranges from 1-36. Nearly half of those who take it fall in the 17-23 range.

The ACT test has traditionally been more content-based than the SAT, which focuses more on critical thinking and problem solving skills. The ACT more closely reflects core curriculum taught in high school classes, although the new SAT does more of the same. Some other significant differences are that the ACT has a science reasoning section while the SAT does not. The ACT has trigonometry while the SAT does not. The SAT penalizes you for incorrect answers; the ACT does not. Finally, the SAT is not entirely multiple choice – the ACT is. ACT provides a comprehensive 80-page prep booklet free of charge at www.act.org/aap/pdf/preparing.pdf and one to help you interpret your scores at www.act.org/aap/pdf/uyar.pdf . Visit www.actstudent.org for more info.

See the next page for a rough ACT/SAT Comparison.

A rough ACT/SAT Comparison

<i>ACT if you score a...</i>	<i>SAT it's about the same as a...</i>
36	2400
35	2340
34	2260

33	2190
32	2130
31	2040
30	1980
29	1920
28	1860
27	1820
26	1760
25	1700
24	1650
23	1590
22	1530
21	1500
20	1410
19	1350
18	1290
17	1210
16	1140
15	1060
14	1000
13	900
12	780
11	750

AP Exams

Advanced Placement exams are taken in order to earn college credit in a particular course. AP tests are administered in early May and scored on a point system, 1-5. Obtaining a 3, 4 or 5 may earn you college credit at some colleges, but you will need to confirm this. AP tests taken junior year or earlier may be reported on applications but are not required as are the SAT Reasoning or ACT tests. Each AP test has a registration fee of \$83, with fee reductions of \$22 available based on need. There are 37 classes and tests across 22 subject areas. Over a million students per year take these exams, and there is little doubt that they bolster your admission package. Find out more at:

www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/about.html and download their booklet at www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/student/testing/ap/AP-bulletin.pdf (available in Spanish also)

TOEFL (test of English as a Foreign Language) - visit www.ets.org/toefl to learn more if English is not your primary language. (TOEFL may be taken on line in the US.) Over 6,000 institutions and agencies in 110 countries rely on TOEFL scores to select students with the English skills needed to succeed in US colleges and universities. The TOEFL test covers all facets of English proficiency, including a test of spoken English and grammar exercises.

The Best Testing Schedule

There is no one test plan or schedule that is best for everyone. It depends on your schedule, your ability to prep, the classes you're taking, and many other factors. But since we are always pressed for an answer, we will tell you one schedule that works well for many students. Consider taking the SAT Reasoning test in March and June of your junior year. Reserve May for AP tests and SAT Subject tests in the same subjects. If you are taking the ACT, consider April and June. The advantage of this plan is that if you are satisfied with your scores, and have "peaked" in terms of prepping effort, you might be able to consider yourself "done". This reserves the fall of senior year for getting your applications in early. However, if you aren't satisfied and have additional time to prep, you still have the fall to give it another try. We don't recommend taking the SAT or ACT more than three times, but the testing strategy is obviously your decision.

Prepping and Registering for the Tests

The sad reality is that prepping for the SAT Reasoning, ACT and SAT Subject tests has become the rule, not the exception. You must face the fact that students competing with you are probably prepping for these tests in some way.

Our advice is to prep for the test one way or another, by the best method you can afford. At least purchase a book of real practice SATs and take them at home. Time yourself. Check your answers and go over ones you answered incorrectly. A good book will have explanations along with the answers. Don't pay too much attention to "guarantees" of raising your SAT score 300+ points (or ACT equivalent). However, prepping probably will raise your score by some amount and it is reasonable to TRY for a 200+ point SAT improvement. Here are the ways to prep in order of least expensive to most:

- *Internet resources at no cost (sample tests, practice questions, etc)*
- *Books and CDs (go to amazon.com or other on-line book stores and search on SAT Prep or Test Prep)*
- *On-line courses*
- *Classes*
- *Private Tutors*

Here are some resources for test prep at all levels:

www.testprep.com - by Stanford Testing Systems
www.actstudent.org - online registration and prep for ACT
www.Number2.com - free SAT coaching
www.cavhs.org and www.uccp.org (free prep)
www.revolutionprep.com – a relatively new class program
www.princetonreview.com - a popular service – test prep and more
www.kaplan.com – another popular service for test prep
www.ivywest.com – another popular service for test prep
www.collegeboard.com (this is also where you register)
www.testu.com - free coaching for SAT
www.ets.org - Sample questions
www.EurekaReview.com – a newer service
www.freevocabulary.com - 5000 vocabulary words that may be on SAT

Registering on-line at the College Board website www.collegeboard.com has several advantages. You can get your scores on-line sooner, can check back to review your scores later, and can send copies to colleges more conveniently. Be careful to keep an eye on the registration deadlines for the test(s) you plan to take. The website also has the current SAT calendar: www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/calenfees.html

Sending Your Test Scores

You are able to send your scores to some schools free each time you take the test. Keep track of which ones you've sent to! After the LAST time you take a test, be sure you've reported your scores to every school you are applying to. In the case of the SATs, all your history will go. You cannot select one test to send and omit the "bad ones". With ACT, you can choose which to send. Some colleges take your best single sitting. Others take your best from each section. None average them. For SAT Subject Tests, colleges use your highest scores from each test. Call SAT Services at (609) 771-7600 if a college indicates that they did not receive your SAT tests, to verify where your scores have been sent, or for any other problems with the sending of SAT scores.

General Test-taking Tips

- Get plenty of sleep the night before (8 hours). That's not the night to party.
- Eat a healthy breakfast. You will need energy as the tests are long.
- Dress comfortably and with layers. There can be extreme temperatures in the test taking facility.
- Bring the necessary items: admission ticket, proper ID, three #2 pencils, watch, and a calculator if allowed.
- You may also be allowed water and a snack bar. If not in the testing room, at least have them in your car for the ride home.
- Read the questions carefully.
- Relax on your way to the test. Play some music that settles you down.
- Watch pacing. Have checkpoints to see that you're moving along at a pace that will allow you to finish.
- Don't spend too much time on any one question. Mark it on the booklet and you may be able to come back to it later.
- If you omit a question (sometimes a wise idea), be sure having that blank on the answer form doesn't cause you to inadvertently move all your subsequent answers up by one! What a disaster that would be! So if you skip one or more, be careful.
- Use intelligent guessing where guessing is wise. Try to eliminate one or more answers that you know are wrong. (The ACT will not penalize you but the SAT will) Answer every question on the ACT for sure – not so on the SAT.
- If you have any time left, return to the hard questions or perhaps your essay.