

ACT and SAT

Admissions officers use SAT and ACT scores to gauge your academic potential in college. They are standardized paper-and-pencil tests that measure critical thinking skills – in other words, your ability to analyze and solve problems in math, critical thinking, and writing. While very different tests both fulfill the same role in the admissions process. The tests are designed to provide college admissions with two things: a predictor of first-year academic achievement in college and a common basis to use in comparing students from a wide range of educational backgrounds.

As a college guidance counselor I have spent a whole bunch of time familiarizing myself with the college admissions process. At one time my standard rule had been that a student only needed the SAT, then I began suggesting that every student take both tests at least twice during the fall and spring of their junior year, ((College Board's own published research and a study done at UC Berkley indicate that there's no appreciable increase in scores that warranted taking test(s) more than twice)); today my thoughts are leaning towards taking the SAT and/or the ACT depending on the student's doing their own research and deciding which test is a better fit. Keep in mind there a lot of very good schools who don't require the SAT **or the ACT** ([FairTest](#)).

Admissions officers and educators often describe the difference between SAT and ACT in these terms: the ACT is content-based and the SAT tests critical thinking and problem solving. In fact, this contrast isn't quite exact: the ACT has many critical thinking questions and there is a predictable range of content-based material that's tested on the SAT. But the SAT and ACT reward different attributes so performing well on either test can boil down to what kind of test taker you are. Depending on particular strengths or weaknesses you may do better on one test than the other and if your target colleges accept both this is important information. *Food for thought: with SAT adding the new component to their test the word is that is circulating amongst college admissions offices is that they are "waiting" to see how accurately these "new" SAT scores reveal the information they need when making decisions about admitting students.*

The ACT is a more straightforward exam than the SAT, which can benefit students who aren't naturally good test-takers. And while the ACT is now a shorter (time-wise) than the SAT, the ACT covers science and more math than the SAT. Before you decide which test you can do better, do a few sample tests of both SAT and ACT and compare the results. Be sure that the sample tests cover all sections of the "new" SAT and ACT.

While there may still appear to be a benefit to take both in that it you'll have two test scores and that way a college can "super-score" a student's SAT for admission purposes (highest Critical Reading + highest math from all test dates) and "super-score" the ACT as well (which they are beginning to do / ACT + ACT Writing). In my opinion a college will be able to come to the same conclusion using either the SAT or the ACT score, one or the other.

One good reason for considering the ACT is that it may save you from having to take two, three, maybe four SAT tests. Many competitive colleges require applicants to take both the SAT Test and SAT Subject Test(s) (Yale requires three subject tests). However, some great schools don't require you take SAT Subject Tests if you take the ACT with Writing. So taking the ACT might save you hours of testing (and more hours of preparation), and a lot of money at the same time.

The important answer to the "SAT / ACT" question is finding out what test(s) your target school requires. If you have a college in mind, do research and find out which test(s) it wants. While all colleges in the United States accept both test's policies vary between schools so it's absolutely essential that you double (triple) check your target college's requirements because it may be looking for a "combination" of scores, e.g.: SAT Subject Test(s) regardless of their ACT or SAT requirements *or* the ACT Writing even if you submit a SAT score. You need to do tons of research to make sure everything's crystal clear before making any decisions about your test choice.

Choosing the tests can be quite a completed process. So, spend time doing the research. Ask your high school teachers; talk to your classmates; think about your own particular situation. You keep spending time on this matter until you get everything clear for a smart choice. Your research time will be well worth it.

Of course...cost is a factor in deciding which test(s) to take and how many times, they aren't cheap. College Board & ACT make BIG money testing and they, along with innumerable other entities, make even more on test prep. This is a great idea that has morphed into a many-headed monster. Unfortunately, rumors of the death of the SAT / ACT are wildly exaggerated. The end game isn't to hope they will go away, rather, learn how to use them to your advantage.

Who should take the SAT and/or ACT?

Most high school students take these tests for the first time in the spring of their junior year. This gives them enough time to complete classes they are taking and benefit from the content of those classes and it gives them enough time to retake the test(s) the fall of their senior year if they think they can / need, to improve their scores.

Since you are probably wondering here are a few of the things you may want to consider when thinking about the SAT and/or ACT tests; the information is broken into four section:

- 1. SAT, basic information and a breakdown of the SAT**
- 2. ACT, basic information and a breakdown of the ACT**
- 3. Side-by-side comparison of the two tests**
- 4. FAQs and answers to questions you may not have thought of or even known existed.**

I. SAT

How is the SAT Structured and Timed?

The SAT is three hours and 45 minutes long and is divided into these sections:

Section	Length	Question Types	No. of Questions
Critical reading	Two 25-minute sections	Sentence Completion	19
	One 20-minute section	Reading Comprehension	48
Math	Two 25-minute sections	Multiple choice	44
	One 10-minute section	Grid-ins	10
Writing	One 25-minute section	Identifying Sentence Errors	18
	One 10-minute section	Improving sentences	25
		Improving paragraphs	6
	One 25-minute essay	Essay	
Experimental	One 25-minute section	It can be a Critical Reading, Math, or Writing section. Does not count toward score.	

What Order are the Sections of the Test Given?

The 25-minute essay is always the first section of the SAT, and the 10-minute multiple-choice writing section will always be last. The other eight sections (including the unscored, experimental section) can appear in any order.

How Can I Register for the SAT, and How Much Does It Cost?

If you taking the basic SAT, with no SAT Subject Test, and register on time (no late fees) the cost is \$45.00 and you register on-line at www.collegboard.com or by calling 866-756-7346.

What is the Range of Possible SAT Scores?

Each section is scored from 200-800 each, giving a total range of possible 600-2400 points. The essay is scored from 0-12 and is included as one-fourth of the total Writing score.

2. ACT

How Is the ACT Structured and Timed

The ACT lasts two hours and 55 minutes (if you do not take the optional Writing test) or three hours and 25 minutes (if you do take the Writing Test).

Section	Length	Question Types	No. of Questions
English Test	45 Minutes	Usage / Mechanics	40
		Rhetorical Skills	35
Mathematics	60 Minutes	Arithmetic	14
		Elementary Algebra	10
		Intermediate Algebra	9
		Coordinate Geometry	9
		Plane Geometry	14
		Trigonometry	4
Reading Test	35 Minutes	Social Studies	10
		Natural Sciences	10
		Prose Fiction	10
		Humanities	10
Science Test	35 Minutes	Data Reproduction	15
		Research Summery	18
		Conflict Viewpoint	7
Writing Test (Optional)	30 minutes		1
	You are asked to respond (Optional Essay) to a question about your position on the issue in a writing prompt.		

How Can I register for the ACT and How Much Does It Cost?

You can register online at www.act.org. You can only register by phone if you have registered for the ACT at least once before.

* Test fee: \$32, which includes having your scores sent to four colleges.

* Test fee (with the Writing Test): \$47, which includes having your scores sent to four colleges.

What is the Range of Possible ACT Scores?

Each of the four multiple-choice ACT test sections (English, mathematics, reading, and science) is scored on a scale of 1-36. You will also receive a composite score, which is the average of your four test scores (1-36 possible points on each section).

If you take the Writing Test, you will receive a Writing Test subscore (ranging from 0 to 12) and a combined English/Writing score (ranging from 1 to 36), along with comments about you essay.

Keep in mind that you must take both the English and Writing tests to receive a Writing score. The combined English/Writing score is created using a formula weighing the English Test score as two-thirds and the Writing Test score as one-third forming a combined score that is reported on a 1-36 scale.

Taking the Writing test **does not** affect your subject area scores on you composite score.

3. SAT and ACT Score Comparison

This chart shows comparative scores for the ACT, the Old SAT, and the New SAT.

- * **First ACT with Writing Test:** February 12, 2005
- * **Last “Old” SAT:** January 22, 2005
- * **First “New” SAT:** March 12, 2005

<u>ACT</u>	<u>Old SAT</u>	<u>New SAT</u>
36	1600	2400
35	1560-1590	2340
34	1510-1550	2260
33	1460-1500	2190
32	1410-1450	2130
31	1360-1400	2040
30	1320-1350	1980
29	1280-1310	1920
28	1240-1270	1860
27	1210-1230	1820
26	1170-1200	1760
25	1130-1160	1700
24	1090-1120	1650
23	1060-1080	1590
22	1020-1050	1530
21	980-1010	1500
20	940-970	1410
19	900-930	1350
18	860-890	1290
17	810-850	1210
16	760-800	1140
15	710-750	1060
14	660-700	1000
13	590-650	900
12	520-580	780
11	500-510	750

The road to college can be a confusing and hectic one. Choosing the right admissions test to take - SAT or ACT - doesn't have to be. **All colleges across the country accept scores from either test**, the SAT and ACT are significantly different, and in many ways, they measure different skills. Check with your guidance counselor and preferred colleges and then use the information below to decide which test is right for you.

Differences at a Glance:

SAT

no science section
no trigonometry section
vocabulary emphasized
non multiple-choice questions included
guessing penalty
no English grammar
math accounts for 50% of your score
questions from easy to hard in most sections
all your SAT scores reported to colleges

ACT

science reasoning section
math sections include trigonometry
vocabulary less important
entirely multiple choice
no guessing penalty
English grammar tested
math accounts for 25% of your score
easy and hard questions mixed in sections
report scores only test dates you choose

SAT

ACT

Preferred by?	All Public Schools & Private Schools	All Schools
How Questions Appear	Order of difficulty	No order of difficulty
Score Choice?	No	Yes
Highest Math Level	Algebra/Basic Geometry; test booklet supplies all formulas	Trigonometry (only 4 questions); test booklet rarely provides formulas
Skills Heavily Tested	Vocabulary and Reading; Math	Grammar and Reading; Math
Penalty For Wrong Answers?	Yes	No
Based on School Curriculum?	Less	More
Style of Test	Tricky, with many distracters	More straightforward, fewer distracters
Structure of Test	<p>Critical Reading: two 25-min. sections, one 20-min. section</p> <p>Math: two-25 min sections, one 10-min. section</p> <p>Writing: one 25-min, one 10-min, one 25-min section</p> <p>Experimental: one 25-min.</p>	<p>English: one 45-min. section Math: one 60-min. section</p> <p>Reading: one 35-min. section</p> <p>Science Reasoning: one 35-min. section</p> <p>Experimental: added to tests on certain dates; clearly added on</p>
When it's Offered	<p>Seven times per year:</p> <p>Late January Late March or early April Early May Early June Mid October Early November Early December</p>	<p>Six times per year:</p> <p>February April June September (in 13 states only) October December</p>
Scoring	200-800 for Critical Reading, Math, and Writing to get a composite score; median score roughly 1500.	1-36 for each subject, averaged together for a composite score; median about 21
When You Should Register	At least six weeks before the test date	At least four weeks before the test date
For More Information	<p>Educational Testing Service (ETS) (609) 771-7600 www.ets.org The College Board www.collegeboard.com</p>	<p>ACT (319) 337-1000 www.act.org</p>

4. FAQs

Which Tests Should I Take?

Although most of this has been covered it can't be stressed too much. Which test to take is really the question you're asking isn't it? So, let's go over it again remembering how much better off you'll be reading this once again and saving a measurable time, money, anxiety, and inevitable mistakes which all will ultimately lead to heartache.

As you know by now all four-year [U.S. colleges now accept SAT and ACT test](#) (USA Today), so essentially you could take just one. So how do you choose? You've done your research and memorized the graphs above. You have figured out that if you're strong in English, you may want to take the SAT...if you're awesome in math and science, but quite as strong in English, then the ACT may be a better option.

With that in mind...well, what test(s) you take will, or course, for the most part will be first decided by the test you feel the most able to be most successful at and school you intend to apply to.

Another particularly important thing to remember that while every school in the United States will accept either the SAT and/or the ACT each school may have a unique "combination" of requirements.

SAT Subject Tests are not required at the majority of colleges and universities in the United States. However, many of the country's best colleges -- the Ivy League, for example -- do require two or more SAT subject tests. The list changes of schools that require SAT Subject Tests, and the specific tests each school may require usually changes from year to year. Many schools only "recommend" the SAT Subject Tests, and strong scores will certainly strengthen an application.

Be sure to get more information from a college's website. In some cases the ACT with Writing can substitute for the SAT Subject tests, and colleges change their admissions criteria all the time.

Since the list of colleges and universities requiring the SAT Subject Tests, ACT with Writing, possibly no tests at all, etc is constantly changing, so be sure to check with the schools to which you are applying. Just when this starts to make sense...keep in mind that many colleges will allow an applicant to substitute AP scores or ACT scores for SAT subject test scores.

For the most up-to-date information and resources on these exams, including timelines for when to take the tests and test prep options, I really encourage you to visit, and bookmark, www.kaptest.com. While you will find a wealth of valuable information there you will also see a number of "study guides" and/or "classes" you can purchase or subscribe to. I am not necessarily advocating you do this; on the contrary, this decision is totally up to you.

Should I take the SAT and/or ACT more than once?

You can take the SAT or ACT more than once – in fact; it is probably a good idea!

Take the test(s) for the first time in the spring of your junior year, and then take them, or it, again the fall of senior year.

Chances are you will perform BETTER the second time around (don't bother with three). Why you may ask?

- You already did it once, and so you you're not as likely to be as nervous.
- You have identified your weaknesses and had time to strengthen them.
- You will be further along in your relevant classes, completed more course work, and literally know more.
- You are more familiar with the ins and outs of the test, as well as the strategies you need to ace it.
- You'll probably remember any number of factors that could be in your favor, e.g.: a better night's sleep, eating a good breakfast, getting up early enough to arrive early and find a parking place without having to panic, etc...

Who should retake the exam(s)?

- Students who receive low scores
- Students who just missed the score(s) numbers required by the colleges of choice.
- Students who think that their mind set, i.e.: freezing up, during the test hurt their performance and they know they can do better.

It's TRUE that some schools combine your test scores (SAT **OR** ACT) if you retake the test, 80 percent of schools evaluate only your top number. So, while unlikely, if you do worse the second time, it probably won't hurt you.

DISCLAIMER: check very carefully what each college's policy is on this issue so use the information accordingly.

What can I do to help ensure I will do my best on the test?

By now you must know how much I like to distribute to-do-lists, like the “Freshman – Senior To-Do-List” that I’m sure every Steller student has enlarged and taped to their bathroom mirror. Here’s another that will prove invaluable:

Test Taking To-Do List

- ❶ Study, study, study, and when you think you studied enough...study some more!
 - ☑ Create a study plan, use the resources on the web (free), buy some books (not too expensive), take a class (very expensive).
- ❷ Make sure you pay attention to registration deadlines and then REGISTER!
 - ☑ Wouldn’t it be awful if you spent mad time and maybe mad money studying and preparing, and then forgot to register! It happens and you will be abruptly introduced to the real world of no “deadline extensions” and “no excuses” (regardless of how sick you and/or your pets were).
 - ☑ Sure there is “late registration” which costs a bundle more, or you could just take it during your senior year. Believe me it will be a huge relief just not to forget to register in time and know you can retake it at your convenience in the future to make improvement your score.
- ❸ A week before the test:
 - ☑ Use Goggle Maps: know exactly where you’re going & exactly how long it takes to get there, (then add 1/2 hour). Drive there at least once to figure out the parking situation, how to get to the building / testing room, etc. While a map may seem elementary...show up a second after the doors close and you’re out of luck.
- ❹ Three days before the test:
 - ☑ Take a full-length practice test under timed conditions. Approach this like the real thing, work out the links, and come up with the game plan you plan to use on test day...strategize.
 - ☑ It’s probably not a good idea to take a full practice SAT if you have fewer than 48 hours left before the test. Doing so will be too exhaustive and could hurt your score on the actual test. Remember, the SAT is a marathon, and as the runner you don’t want to run a tiring practice race the day before the real one.
- ❺ The day before the test:

Just as its not a great idea to take a practice test right before the real one, studying the day before is not the best use of your time. At this point, don’t do any studying! You may not hear anything like this for several years so enjoy the moment! Instead, use your time preparing in other ways, like:

 - ☑ Organize everything you’ll need and put them into a “Test Day Pack” with the following essential items:
 - ❶ Your glasses - maybe even an extra pair,
 - ❷ An “approved” calculator (see test’s web site for current list) with fresh batteries. There’s no reason at all you’ll be allowed to plug calculator into a wall socket, leave the adaptor at home,
 - ❸ A watch without an alarm – or at least remember that you can’t use the alarm during the test,
 - ❹ A few kind of dull No. 2 pencils (slightly dull fill in bubbles better). Don’t bring your fancy, super lucky, mechanical pencil your grandfather used through medical school...you can’t use it; just those cheap ones is all they want,
 - ❺ Erasers, good ones, “Pinkies” seem to work best. Definitely don’t take those really hard ones that end up digging a hole through the paper or an old one that leaves big smudges,
 - ❻ Photo ID card, e.g.: passport, driver’s license, Tribal ID, State ID; although usually accepted student ID shouldn’t be your 1st choice...don’t try a Costco card - absolutely not allowed!,
 - ❼ Kleenex, handkerchief - don’t use your shirtsleeve or waste time going to the restroom for tissues,
 - ❼ A snack...often forgotten, always missed if you do. There are breaks and you will get hungry,
 - ❼ Your admission ticket, don’t bother trying to get in without one.

- ☑ Relax - there is no way you can do better if you allow yourself to worry and stress; read a magazine, go see a movie, watch something on TV, do anything to help get your mind off the next day.
- ☑ Have your mode of transportation well figured out. If you plan on carpooling be certain whomever you are counting on for a ride is at least as responsible as you are (maybe more if you think it will help)
- ☑ Get a good night's sleep; this cannot be emphasized enough. Regardless of how many tests you passed in the past with little sleep or pulling all-nighters...this is not the test to prove it again.
- ☑ Use a clock with a battery backup, set your alarm, check the time on the alarm twice...GO TO BED!

⑥ The morning of the test:

☑ First, wake up! Yes it sounds silly...some students regret to master this skill and suffer the consequences. Some students even organize a phone tree to check up on one another.

☑ After that:

- ① Eat breakfast, a real breakfast, something substantial, but not greasy or heavy (Pop Tarts and doughnuts are not considered real breakfast foods). This isn't a good time to practice carb loading either; maybe its time to actually eat some fruit, maybe even something like oatmeal...God forbid!
- ② Don't drink a lot of coffee. While a little won't hurt, too much of a good thing will be counterproductive. Bathroom breaks cut into your test time, too much caffeine will make you jittery, and the ultimate "caffeine crash" will only cause you problems.
- ③ Dress in layers of comfy clothes so you can make adjustments based on your comfort level.
- ④ Wear your comfortable shoes – even slippers are allowed.
- ⑤ Read something, warm up your motor and take your brain out for a test drive with a magazine or newspaper...don't let the test be the first thing you read that day!
- ⑥ Again, and this can't be stressed enough, get there early. Allow yourself extra time for warming up the car, traffic, moose in the road, etc.
- ⑦ Have a positive attitude...at this point you've done everything possible...you'll do great.

As always, if you have any questions please let me know and I will be happy to help in any way I can,

John Stahl
Steller Secondary
Guidance & Counseling
stahl_john@asdk12.org
907-742-4950