



A Parent's Road Map to the — New ACT & SAT



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Chances are that, by now, you have heard a lot about the ACT and SAT. You might be thinking, "There yet another standardized test you should take, right? So what? Students take those all the time!" Well, the ACT and SAT tests aren't like any other test. They are a hefty part of your college application for the vast majority of colleges.

The only purpose these tests serve is to let colleges know what kind of student you are compared to the rest of their applicants. After all, being a great student at one high school might not mean that you'd be just as great at another. Colleges need a way to compare students and normalize applicants from across the globe.

Therefore, your SAT or ACT score is a major part of your college application, along with your grades and years of extracurricular activities. Of all these parts, your SAT or ACT score is the only part of your college application that you can significantly improve in the next few months.

You may have heard that, since 2020, several universities have moved toward test-optional admissions. This is true. However, many of them have shifted back to test-required or continue to prefer applications that include these test scores. The landscape is consistently changing.

Additionally, both tests are undergoing major changes. The new Digital SAT is a dramatically different test, and in 2025, the ACT is going digital.

Ready to learn all about the ACT and SAT world and the steps you can take to kick some ACT/SAT butt? Here we go!

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What is the ACT and SAT, and why should I care?

A Parent's Road Map to the ACT & SAT

The SAT was launched in 1926 by the College Board. The SAT became a staple for college admissions; however, it was perceived as culturally biased and somewhat elitist. To provide a testing method with similar principles that measured the aptitude of the average American student, a University of Iowa professor introduced the ACT in 1959. Fast-forward several decades and approximately 1.8 million students now take the ACT each year and about 2.2 million students take the SAT. These numbers rise and fall every year depending on which state schools offer the test for free.

What do the ACT and SAT measure?

The ACT and SAT tests act as an indicator of college preparedness. The student's GPA, class rank, course load, and extracurricular activities tell much of their academic ability. The ACT and SAT act as an added litmus test of their skills. In other words, Suzie might be an A student at Kennedy High School, but does she have a grasp on the curriculum needed to survive as a college student? The ACT and SAT serve as an additional data point to the more subjective grading systems. Other exams that provide similar information are the subject specific AP Exam from College Board. That is a topic for another time.

When should I take the test?

We recommend **most** students take either test during their junior year as most students still need to learn material on which they will be tested. Most students take the ACT or SAT during the winter and spring semester of their junior year. In fact, in many states, including our home state of Illinois, 11th graders must take either the ACT or SAT.

We have begun to see a new trend. Students who have taken Geometry by the **end of their freshman year** (particularly at rigorous high schools) are ready to do very well on their ACT or SAT. We recommend that rising 10th graders on the honors track take a diagnostic ACT/SAT to see how they would do. Summer before 10th grade can be the perfect time to prepare for and take the test. Imagine getting the ACT/SAT out of your life two years early! After that, it's all about classes and activities.

For all students, we recommend taking the actual test at least twice. The majority of students do better on their second or third tries. With superscoring, which combines the best section scores from different test dates, the potential for an improved overall score is significant.



**Now that I'm planning to take the
test, what's next?**

Do I have to prepare for the ACT or SAT test?

Most students gain tremendous confidence with test preparation. You wouldn't walk into a history final without – at the very least – studying your past tests, would you? So these tests are no different. Preparation can go a long way when it comes to performing well on a college entrance exam. There are several options when preparing to take the ACT or SAT. A student can either work on their own, join a test prep class, or hire a private tutor to get more targeted help. Whatever route your student takes, it is smart to prepare before taking the test.

Are test prep services necessary?

Test prep can be an effective way for a student to review content and get targeted help with areas of weakness from experts who know these tests well. Test prep will offer strategies, practice tests, and specific instruction to best prepare for each section of the test. The two exams require much of the same knowledge but entail very different strategies. In short, test prep is not required, but most students can benefit significantly.

How important is it that I do well on the ACT or SAT?

These days the competition to get into top schools is fiercer than ever before. Thanks to the Common App, the number of applications each school receives is staggering. There are many schools that do not require a student's test results—referred to as "test optional." Most college admission experts agree that students should take the ACT or SAT. The common understanding is that without test scores, applicants can find themselves at a disadvantage. Additionally, many scholarships are based primarily on ACT/SAT scores. In the end, students choose which test scores to submit—if any. Taking the ACT or SAT won't hurt you. You control who sees your scores.

What if I am not sure I want to go to college yet?

There are many students who do not plan to go to college right away. Our advice would be to take either the ACT or SAT while you are in high school and the material is fresh in your mind. Plus, many high schools offer one of the tests for free during school hours.



What's the difference between the ACT and SAT, and which test should I take?

What do the ACT and SAT measure?

Both tests aim to measure a student's college preparedness and the knowledge they have learned in high school. Can a student show that they are able to apply what they have learned to critical thinking questions? Curriculum varies from state to state, town to town, and even school to school. The ACT and SAT attempt to nationally norm student capabilities against a uniform standard.

Are the same subjects found on both tests?

Not exactly. The ACT evaluates knowledge in English, Math, Reading, and Science, with an optional writing section. The English section tests grammar, punctuation, and rhetorical skills. The Math section covers pre-algebra, algebra, geometry, and a little trigonometry. The Reading section assesses comprehension through passages from various genres, while the Science section evaluates critical thinking through data analysis, research summaries, and conflicting viewpoints.

The science section, unique to the ACT, focuses more on interpretation, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, and problem-solving rather than testing specific scientific knowledge.

The new digital SAT, which started in spring 2024, is taken online and composed of two main sections: Reading and Writing, and Math. The Reading and Writing section tests reading comprehension, English grammar, expression of ideas, and logical reasoning. Key areas include understanding short passages, summarizing content, interpreting charts, and answering grammar questions on subject-verb agreement, punctuation, verb tense, and more. The Math section, divided into two modules, allows the use of a calculator throughout and covers algebra, advanced math, problem-solving, data analysis, geometry, and trigonometry. Notably, the digital SAT places more emphasis on geometry and trigonometry than the previous version.

How do I choose a test?

Since every college accepts either test, it's best for a student to take the test on which they will perform best. If your student excels in mathematics, the SAT may be the best test for them. If your student has stronger verbal skills and struggles in math, the ACT may be better. A good way to decide is to have your student take both an ACT and SAT diagnostic test and compare the scores. More than 50% of the time, a student ends up in the "Judgment Call Zone," which means both test scores are comparable. The student should then consider which practice test they felt most comfortable and confident taking. It's best to focus preparation on one of the tests, not both, to maximize improvement.

What are the major changes in each test?

SAT

Starting in spring 2024, the SAT transitioned to a digital format, bringing several significant changes. The new digital SAT has two main sections: Reading and Writing, and Math. The Reading and Writing section tests reading comprehension, English grammar, expression of ideas, and logical reasoning through shorter reading passages and single-question prompts per passage. The Math section continues to cover algebra, advanced math, problem-solving, data analysis, geometry, and trigonometry, with the notable addition that calculators are allowed throughout the entire section.

The test duration has been reduced to about two hours instead of three, and it employs adaptive testing, which means the difficulty of the second module in each section adjusts based on the student's performance in the first module. This new format aims to provide a more streamlined and efficient testing experience. Additionally, students are able to use the built-in Desmos graphing calculator and an online notepad for scratch work. The digital SAT is designed to better measure a student's college preparedness while adapting to technological advancements and changing educational needs.

ACT

In 2025, the ACT will transition to a digital format while still offering the traditional paper test, providing students with more flexible options. The digital ACT will maintain the same content and structure as the paper version, covering English, Math, Reading, and Science, with an optional writing section. Testing centers will provide devices for the digital test, ensuring a standardized testing environment. Students will benefit from various accessibility features, including text-to-speech, zoom, answer masking, and a built-in calculator, which aim to accommodate diverse needs and reduce test-related anxiety.

One significant advantage of the digital format is the faster turnaround time to receive scores. Digital test-takers can expect to receive their results within a few days, compared to the several weeks typically required for processing paper test scores. This quick feedback can be crucial for students facing early application deadlines. Unlike the new digital SAT, the digital ACT will not use adaptive testing. Each student's exam will be predetermined, ensuring consistency in the difficulty level of the test.

Are these tests scored the same way?

The ACT and the new digital SAT differ significantly in format and scoring, reflecting their distinct approaches to assessing college readiness.

ACT Overview

The ACT consists of four sections: English, Math, Reading, and Science, each scored on a scale from 1 to 36. The composite score is the average of these four section scores. An optional Writing section is scored separately on a scale from 2 to 12 and does not affect the composite score. The ACT is known for its straightforward question style and strict time limits, emphasizing content knowledge and test-taking speed.

New Digital SAT Overview

The new digital SAT, introduced in 2024, comprises two main sections: Reading and Writing, and Math. Each section is divided into two modules, adapting the difficulty of questions in the second module based on performance in the first. The Reading and Writing section tests reading comprehension, grammar, and logical reasoning, while the Math section covers algebra, advanced math, problem-solving, data analysis, geometry, and trigonometry. Both sections are scored from 200 to 800, combining for a total score ranging from 400 to 1600.

Scoring Comparison

ACT: Each of the four sections is scored individually on a 1-36 scale. The composite score is the average of these scores, providing a single overall score. The optional Writing section is scored separately and does not impact the composite score.

Digital SAT: Each section (Reading and Writing, Math) is scored from 200 to 800. These scores are combined to form a total score ranging from 400 to 1600. The adaptive nature of the digital SAT's modules allows for a more tailored assessment of a student's abilities, potentially providing a more accurate reflection of their skills and knowledge.

In summary, the ACT provides a straightforward, average-based composite score, while the digital SAT offers an adaptive, module-based scoring system that combines section scores for a total score. This new format aims to better measure students' readiness for college by adapting to their performance level throughout the test.

How many colleges accept ACT or SAT scores?

Every school in the United States, and most overseas, accepts both the ACT and SAT. However, each school has different criteria for their application process. Some schools place significant weight on the test score, while others put little emphasis on it, and some schools don't consider it at all. If you intend to apply to a Tier I or a ranked school, you will most likely need an ACT or SAT score.

Can you get a scholarship from ACT or SAT scores?

Many schools offer scholarships ranging from \$5,000 to \$10,000 or even full-ride tuition for a good test score, often in tandem with a strong GPA. Some schools offer scholarship incentives for students who score 25 or above on the ACT or 1200 or above on the SAT. Additionally, many private scholarships base their selection in large part on test scores. Spending some time and money preparing for the test can be a worthwhile investment, especially if a student achieves a high score.



ACT & SAT Test Planning: When, where, how?

It's time to target a test date.

How do I pick a test date? The ACT and SAT are available to take seven times throughout the year on separate dates. Do students have to take it multiple times? No, many students only take it once, but the majority of students take it twice. A student can actually take the ACT up to 12 times, but at about \$50 per test and 3 hours at each sitting, that wouldn't be the best use of your money or time. Most students take the ACT or SAT during the spring of their junior year in high school. Taking the test a second time (in the fall of a student's senior year) is also quite common.

Am I required to take my test as a junior?

In some schools and in some states, yes. But even for those students who are not required to take it then, we recommend it. As a junior, a student will receive their scores in time to check against potential college options and whether they need to take the test again. According to ACT, most students increased their composite score after retaking the test. College Board reports that most students who took the SAT saw their score increase on a second attempt. Another consideration is if a student will be applying for early decision or early action for a given school. Since early decision takes place in the fall of senior year, waiting to take a test senior year could present timing issues for applying to a college. Many students take their first test as incoming juniors to get an idea of how close they may be to their score goal. For students with test anxiety or those who want to get a head start, this is a viable option.

Can I take the test at other times?

Absolutely. Many students take the ACT/SAT during their gap year after high school. Additionally, students fitting certain criteria have started taking the test earlier. Students who complete Geometry by the end of freshman year (particularly at rigorous schools) excel on the ACT or SAT. We recommend rising 10th graders on the honors track take a diagnostic ACT/SAT. The summer before 10th grade is ideal for preparation and taking the test. Imagine finishing the ACT/SAT two years early! Afterwards, focus shifts to classes and activities.

We recommend all students take the test at least twice. Most students improve on their second or third attempts. With superscoring, combining the best section scores from different dates, the chance for a higher overall score is significant.



Preparing for the ACT or SAT

Not sure where to start?

Take a practice exam! Taking a practice exam early on is one of the best ways to prepare for these tests. Think of it as a try-out. You might not be the star player yet, but it will serve you well to find out how well you will compete. Take a practice exam to get an idea of what your score would be. You can access a test through many ACT or SAT prep books. Another option is to visit ACT.org or Collegeboard.org and take it online.

At **The House Tutoring & Test Prep**, we can administer one for you, free of charge. We will give you your base score, a comprehensive and detailed score report, and you will learn how much you may need to prepare for the test. If you are still undecided on which test to choose, take both practice tests to compare your scores. Our team is happy to complete an analysis and comparison for you, free of charge!

Set Realistic Goals

If you know you need to work on specific skills, set realistic goals to help you prepare. Set a realistic score you hope to achieve and specific, attainable goals to help you get there. Separate the test skills and work on each section until you feel you have mastered them all. Don't attack the test all at once; each part needs individual attention. Decide what kind of preparation technique works for you.

Start looking into colleges and universities to see what their average ACT and SAT scores are to help you set realistic goals for yourself.

Studying Alone

Studying alone has advantages: its cheap, no one to answer to, and a flexible schedule. However, it can also be difficult. Studying alone means disciplined time management, reviewing various texts, and staying motivated. Accountability is critical when it comes to preparing for the ACT or SAT. If setting goals and sticking to study schedules is challenging for you, then preparing for this test on your own may be difficult.

Private Tutor

A private tutor provides a tailored, strategic, and supportive approach to ACT/SAT preparation. Personalized learning focuses on the student's specific needs, targeted strategies, enhancing test-taking skills, accountability that keeps students on track, and flexible scheduling making the process convenient. This makes private tutoring the best solution for many students aiming to achieve their highest potential scores.

Personalized Learning

One of the key benefits of private tutoring is the ability to customize instruction to meet the specific needs of the student. Unlike group classes, a private tutor can focus exclusively on the student's strengths and weaknesses, tailoring lessons to address gaps in knowledge and reinforce strong areas.

Targeted Strategy Development

Private tutors are not only educators but also strategists. They help students develop specific strategies tailored to their unique learning styles and challenges. This includes time management techniques, methods for tackling difficult questions, and strategies for maximizing scores across different sections of the test.

Accountability and Motivation

Maintaining motivation and staying on track with study plans can be challenging for many students. A private tutor provides the necessary accountability, ensuring that students stick to their study schedules and complete their practice tests and assignments. This consistent support helps students maintain their focus and dedication.

Class Preparation

Many schools and private companies offer classes for ACT and SAT test preparation, which can be a great way to stay on task, discuss concerns, and learn from peers. If a student operates well in a class setting, then this is a viable option. ACT/SAT classes are typically structured to ensure that all students' skills and abilities are taken into account. As such, a class may be less customized than working with a private tutor, but it will still cover the bulk of the information that will be on the test.



Stressed Out About the Act or Sat?

We can help you! The House Tutoring & Test Prep is dedicated to serving families around the world as a source of guidance and educational support. We maintain a roster of exceptional private tutors and class instructors for individualized tutoring and test prep in-person and virtually. There's no experience like The House!

Learn more

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