



SAT or ACT: Which Should You Take?

Since colleges truly have no preference for one exam over the other and both are now widely available everywhere, students are wise to figure out early on which exam will better showcase their particular strengths. While many students are likely to receive equivalent scores on the two exams, that is not the case for everyone.

Tutors generally recommend taking a full-length practice test of each type and then focusing your preparation on only the one you did better on. Most test prep companies administer practice tests in a setting that simulates actual test conditions, and many will then analyze the results for a separate fee even if you don't sign up for their tutoring. This analysis can help you figure out what specifically you need to work on and which weaknesses will be most amenable to remediation.

Understanding some of the differences between the two tests can also help you decide which you would prefer. Although the SAT and ACT have grown increasingly similar to one another over the years, the ACT remains a more straightforward test that requires you to move through the questions with considerable speed, whereas the SAT allows more time per question but is trickier.

The math sections are where the two tests differ the most. The SAT math section, which covers fewer topics, has a heavier emphasis on algebra. It is approximately 60% algebra and less than 10% geometry. However, it is more rigorous than the ACT math section insofar as it links concepts taught in different grades and tests your understanding of the deeper mathematical concepts that underlie the problems you have learned to solve. Furthermore, one part of the SAT requires you to put away your calculator and do the computations mentally.

In contrast, 30% of the ACT math questions are algebra and many more are geometry than on the SAT. You are allowed to use a calculator throughout the ACT math section, where the questions more closely resemble those on your classroom tests, but you must be facile enough to move through them quickly.

For students less comfortable with math, the ACT may be the test of choice simply because the math score is only 25% of the composite score, whereas for the SAT it is 50%.

The ACT has a Science section, which sounds more frightening to many students than it should because only three or four of its questions test basic science concepts. The rest test your ability to interpret graphs and charts. Although the SAT has no comparable section, it incorporates science questions into its reading section. Following these readings on scientific subject matter, you may be shown several graphs or charts and asked which best supports what you have just read. In other words, the science questions on the two tests are mostly similar, designed primarily to test deductive reasoning. They can frequently be answered accurately even when students don't fully understand them.

The other two sections of the ACT (not counting the optional essay to be discussed later) are English and Reading, each worth 25% of the composite score. The SAT has similarly labeled sections, but they are combined to produce a single ELA (English Language) score worth 50% of the composite. Both exams ask you to correct the grammar of some reading passages, testing your knowledge of sentence structure, punctuation, usage and organizational and rhetorical skills. However, the diction in the SAT passages is harder than in the passages on the ACT.

The SAT was recently re-designed so that the reading passages range in difficulty from a ninth grade level to an early college level, and the questions require deeper, more nuanced analytical responses than those on the ACT. The readings come from a work of literature, social science, science, and a founding document from American history or from "the great global conversation." You will have approximately 13 minutes to answer the questions on each passage, many of which require you to make inferences based on what you have read.

In contrast, the ACT reading section allows a little less than 9 minutes for you to read and answer the questions on each passage. The passages, none of which are quite so hard as the hardest ones on the SAT, come from works of fiction, social science, humanities and natural science, and the questions mostly test your ability to find supporting evidence within the text. There are no graphs or charts in this section, as there are in the SAT reading section.

The writing section is now optional on both exams. Although it is required for the most selective colleges, they account for only 13% of schools; the rest do not require it. However, it can't hurt you because schools that don't use it simply won't look at that part of your score. Keep in mind, though, that if you take it once, you should take it each time you sit for that exam again because some schools will only Superscore (use your highest score for each section of the test across different test dates) if you take the test the same way each time.

The essay section of both exams tests your ability to read as well as to write. The ACT presents you with a question and then three reading passages that present differing perspectives on the issue. Your task is to write an argument essay promoting your own position but incorporating references to the readings that you either agree or take issue with. The SAT writing section is now very similar to what is on the A.P. English Language and Composition test. After reading a single passage, you are asked to analyze the rhetorical strategies the author used and discuss their effectiveness in promoting the author's point of view.

Overall, difficulty handling the rapid pacing of the ACT is the most common reason cited by those students who prefer the SAT. Since your speed is a much more significant factor on the ACT than on the SAT, students who qualify for extended time usually find that accommodation more beneficial on the ACT. Furthermore, you may move through the ACT at your own pace, deciding for yourself where to use the extra time, whereas on the SAT, the proctor tells you when you must stop one section and move on to the next, regardless of whether or not you get extended time. The most common accommodation is 50% extra time, so students who qualify are usually administered the test in a separate room where the proctor simply stops and starts them accordingly.