



High School Sophomores: It's Time to Start Thinking about SATs and ACTs

How and when is it best to start preparing for these exams? My thinking on this question has evolved as several successful tutors have convinced me of the advantages of starting (and ending) the process earlier rather than later. School coursework remains more important than standardized tests in college admissions, but a majority of colleges still use the SAT or ACT, and students with stronger scores nearly always end up with more options than those with weaker ones.

1. Although many students are now taking both the SAT and ACT, it is preferable to figure out early on which test you are likely to do better on and then prepare for and take only that test. The SAT and ACT are different enough that you need to prepare for them differently, but your coursework and grades junior year and the first semester of senior year are the most important part of your profile, too important to jeopardize by devoting excessive amounts of time to test preparation.
2. Disregard rumors that the ACT is easier than the SAT. At first glance it looks that way to many students, but the truth is that many of these same individuals will ultimately find the SAT more suited to their strengths, especially if speed and memorization are not their strong suit.
3. Some tutors and tutoring services provide an opportunity to take a diagnostic test to figure out which test will be best for you personally. Alternatively, you can simply take both tests and score them on your own to see which one you do better on. Download a copy of the SAT by going to <http://sat.collegeboard.org/practice/sat-practice-test> and a copy of the ACT by going to <https://www.test-guide.com/free-act-practice-tests.html>.
4. If you're self-motivated, you can then purchase either *The Official SAT Study Guide* or *The Real ACT Prep Guide*, take practice tests, check your answers, and see from your mistakes what you need to work on to do better. Familiarity with the types of questions and tricks you'll need to recognize will make a major difference in your score. Good tutors have analyzed the test and can provide tips to help you recognize the most

common traps as well as your particular areas of confusion, but you can certainly get started on the test preparation on your own.

5. If you can finish your standardized testing by the end of junior year, you'll be in a better position to focus your energies senior year on maintaining good grades in the most challenging courses you can handle while working simultaneously on your college applications.
6. Also, if you'll be taking SAT subject tests or A.P. tests in the spring of your junior year, you will be busy enough without having to worry about the regular SAT or ACT, and planning to re-take the SAT or ACT in the fall of your senior year means you'll have to avoid burning out when you resume preparation closer to the date of the test.
7. The ideal time to begin test preparation, whether you're doing it on your own, on line or with a tutor, is the summer before junior year. This will give you a leg up with the PSAT that's used to determine National Merit Scholarship awards and letters of commendation, but more important, it will enable you to take your first (and perhaps only) test in December or January, a wonderful time to get it out of the way. If you want to re-take the test, you will have multiple opportunities to do so.
8. Don't worry if you haven't yet taken Trigonometry when you begin preparing for the test. One semester of Algebra 2 is usually sufficient for the ACT, which has only a small number of trig questions, several of which you can easily learn to do before taking the course.
9. The Science section of the ACT depends extremely little on knowledge you've acquired from science courses in high school. It's almost entirely about interpreting charts and graphs, which you can learn how to do when preparing for the test.
10. Reading skills are critical for both the SAT and ACT, not to mention success in college, so students who love to read will have a clear advantage, but anyone can learn to be a more focused reader by simply applying him or herself. Connecticut tutor Sam Rosensohn advises students to spend 25 minutes each night reading the homework they're least interested in with tremendous focus as if it were test material, and then, he says, they should try to re-state the main points. Even highly successful students are often unaccustomed to doing their homework this way because the standardized tests are more challenging than most of their tests in school.