



## What does “Optional” Really Mean in College Admissions?

More and more colleges in recent years have begun describing some of the traditional elements of the application as “optional,” leaving families to wonder if they really mean it. The answer is, “It depends.”

**When schools adopt a “test optional” policy,** meaning they don’t require applicants to submit SAT or ACT scores, they really don’t want you to submit scores below their median range. Not only could the lower scores hurt rather than help your chances of admission, but they could potentially lower the median score the college reports. (Some few schools report median scores of all the enrolled students including those who didn’t submit them along with the application, but most never ask for them, opting instead to omit them from their reporting.) Be advised, though, that in the absence of test scores, the other components of your application (transcript, letters of recommendation, and essays) will be scrutinized more carefully.

**A number of colleges have “test flexible” policies.** In these cases, you will need to read the website to see what you can submit in lieu of SATs or ACTs. Sometimes you can substitute several SAT Subject tests, AP tests, or IB tests. NYU, Brandeis, and Middlebury are among the colleges that offer some sort of test flexibility.

Students applying to an arts program that requires an audition or portfolio are frequently exempt from certain test requirements. However, policies may differ for international and home-schooled students.

**What about SAT Subject tests?** Most colleges have dropped this requirement over the past few years although the most selective engineering programs continue to require SAT subject tests in Math 2 and either Chemistry or Physics. Combined programs like BA/MD programs usually require them as well.

The confusion enters for students applying to programs that “recommend” subject tests but don’t “require” them. Generally speaking, applicants to the nation’s most selective colleges continue to submit as many high scores as they can. These colleges and universities dropped their subject test requirements mostly because they wanted to level the playing field for first generation students who were less

likely to know about the subject tests, let alone have access to targeted preparation for them.

The majority of applicants to top tier colleges and universities also report multiple Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate scores on their applications, so students are expected to take advantage of any opportunities they have to take these tests. They report the scores on their applications even though they need not send them officially until they know where they will be matriculating, in which case the scores go not to the admissions office, but rather to the registrar's office for a decision regarding the awarding of course credit or advanced standing. For these highly selective schools, nothing is gained by reporting a score below 4 or 5 on an AP test even though 3 is technically considered college level work.

Applicants may be reluctant to take subject tests if they are already reporting a number of other tests like APs, but the scoring of the subject tests may help them shine better than the AP's. That's why I generally advise students sitting for AP tests in May to take subject tests the same month if they're offered in the same subject.

**The optional writing section of the SAT and ACT** is increasingly falling out of favor with colleges, some of which are now requiring a graded school paper instead. However, before skipping the test essay, students should check if the colleges they're interested in applying to recommend or require it. Among those that continue to require it are a number in the University of California system, University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and the U.S. Coast Guard Academy.

**When colleges have optional essays on their supplements**, it's always safest to write them, mostly because that's a way of demonstrating interest in a school and convincing the admissions officers that the applicant is a good fit for the school. This is not to say that colleges reject all students who don't write those essays, but the essays will enhance your chances of being admitted.

**Some colleges also offer optional interviews.** If an alumna or alumnus contacts you and offers to meet with you, it doesn't look good to turn down the offer. However, if the interviews are only on campus and you didn't sign up for one when you visited a year earlier, you probably won't be expected to return to the campus for an interview, especially if the college says that their interviews are informational rather than evaluative.

To gauge how much importance an admissions office places on the interview or any other component of the application, it's best to read their website carefully.