

SAT, ACT, Both, or Neither? What's right for YOU?

Do I have to take the SAT or ACT to apply to colleges?

No. Most colleges are “test optional” meaning that they will accept your application even if you don't take the SAT or ACT. Even better, most colleges say that not submitting test scores will not disadvantage you in admissions decisions. Many even say that you can still receive merit aid without submitting test scores. Because of all this, not taking the test at all is the best strategy for some students.

What colleges require the SAT or ACT?

Schools that require test scores include MIT, Georgetown, UNC Chapel Hill, Georgia Tech, and Florida State University. Furthermore, some schools require test scores for their most competitive programs, especially nursing. Some schools may also require test scores for homeschooled or international students. Colleges frequently update their policies, so make sure to carefully read the testing policy for each school you're applying to.

Should I take the SAT or ACT even if I don't have to?

For most students, taking the SAT or ACT will not be a requirement. However, submitting competitive test scores with college applications can lead to new opportunities.

High test scores can make you stand out from the crowd. Although GPAs are not standardized or tracked, it is quite common for students to graduate from high school with a GPA over 4.0, especially when you consider the population of students who are applying to competitive colleges. However, only 10% of students will receive a 1290+ on the SAT or a 28+ on the ACT, and only 5% of students will receive a 1360+ on the SAT or a 31+ on the ACT. Furthermore, it's been demonstrated that high school GPAs have been increasing over the years at a greater rate than SAT and ACT scores, an effect referred to as grade inflation. What it comes down to is that an admissions officer at a competitive university will see many applications with GPAs of 4.0 or above, but an applicant with a GPA of 4.0 *and* a high test score is much less common.

Submitting test scores can compensate for low GPAs. Sometimes students have a medical issue, personal situation, or just a rocky start to high school that brings down their GPA. If you have more ability than is reflected by your GPA, taking the SAT or ACT is a good way to demonstrate that on your college applications.

Above average test scores can result in more merit aid at some colleges. Some colleges (especially “The Ivies”) don't give merit aid at all, and others don't use test scores as a part of the merit aid calculation. However, there are many schools that do take your test scores into account when offering merit aid. If you are willing to apply to multiple schools and shop around for a good deal, your test scores may end up saving you thousands of dollars.

How do I decide which test to take?

Every college in the US will accept the SAT and ACT interchangeably, so you can select the test you prefer. The SAT and ACT are both standardized, multiple-choice tests that assess college readiness in the areas of reading, writing, and math. Because of the commonalities, most students do about the same on both tests. However, if you take the time to explore your options, you might find that one of the tests is a better match to

your personal strengths. The best way to determine this is to take a practice test of each type and compare the scores. If you don't have the time for two practice tests, the advice below may be helpful.

One of the biggest differences between the tests is that the ACT is more speeded than the SAT, meaning that you have a lot more time pressure on the ACT. Students who don't like to be rushed usually prefer the SAT. However, if you qualify for extended time, the ACT is almost definitely the better test for you. This is because additional time is a bigger advantage on the ACT than on the SAT.

The other deciding factor may be your math ability: the SAT is 50% math and has a "no calculator" section, while the ACT is only 25% math and allows you to use your calculator on every question. If you are strong at math, you should lean toward the SAT, and if math is your weak area, you're likely to do better on the ACT.

Can I take both tests?

You certainly don't have to, but the most ambitious students take both the SAT and ACT. Sometimes they take both tests multiple times. Taking more tests gives them more opportunities to get their peak score on the official test day. Once the scores come in, they can select which ones to send with their college applications.

Should I study for the SAT and ACT?

Just like for every other test you take, if you study, you will do better. The best resources to use are the official practice tests that the College Board and ACT have released to the public, which can be found online for free. You can also sign up for local classes, online classes, or hire a private tutor. What matters the most isn't the cost of the program, but that you put in the time and effort to learn and practice. Students who study a few hours each week for about 3 months can increase their SAT scores by 100-200 points and their ACT score by 3-6 points, sometimes even more. One reason to sign up for a class or tutoring is that a structured program will help motivate you to keep working consistently. Be wary of any program that "guarantees" a higher score.

How do I register for the tests?

Register for the SAT at collegeboard.org and for the ACT at act.org. You may also be able to register for a school day administration through your guidance office.

When should I take the tests?

Each test is offered approximately 7 times each year, and you can take it as often as you like. Most students take the SAT or ACT in the spring of their junior year, and then again in the summer or fall of their senior year. It's fine to take the test earlier; however, it's recommended that you wait until you've completed geometry and most of Algebra 2.

Is the SAT switching to a digital test?

Yes, the current, paper version of the SAT will be retired in December of 2023, and the March 2024 test will be the first administration of the digital SAT. The PSAT will be administered digitally starting in October of 2023. The ACT will remain a paper test for the foreseeable future.

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