

ACT NOW!

It's standardized-testing season! Here is what you need to know.

By DONNA BOYLE SCHWARTZ

STANDARDIZED tests are a fact of life for American students, and none may be as consequential—or feared—by college-bound students as the SAT and ACT. The SAT, which originally referred to “Scholastic Aptitude Test,” and the ACT, which formerly stood for “American College Testing,” are a pair of standardized tests that are administered to college-bound students every year as an integral part of the college-application process.

Colleges use SAT and ACT test scores to level the playing field for students from different parts of the country, by giving college admissions committees a uniform standard of measurement. While curriculums, courses, sports, and community service requirements differ from school to school, and region to region, the idea behind standardized testing is that the SAT and ACT tests provide a set of academic skills that all students should have in order to succeed in college; the tests also are widely used to determine scholarship eligibility.

Most colleges accept either the SAT or ACT. Because most colleges have no preference for either test, it may be better to focus on one that suits a particular student’s learning style and test-taking ability. According to tutoring and test preparation service The Princeton Review, “The best way to decide if the SAT or ACT is right for you is to take a timed full-length practice test in each. Since the content and style of the SAT

and ACT are very similar, factors like how you handle time pressure and what types of questions you find most challenging can help you determine which test is a better fit.”

Anecdotally, students who are traditionally better at test-taking do better on the SAT; those who have a knack for studying and memorization generally turn in a superior performance on the ACT. The two tests cater to different learning styles, which is one of the main reasons why two different tests are accepted by colleges.

Both tests are designed to evaluate an assortment of essential ingredients that comprise a “recipe for success” in college. No matter which test you take, it is best to begin preparing for the college admissions process as early as possible by taking the most challenging high school courses available. This ensures that the tests themselves become less stressful and also presents a better student profile to the college admissions committee.

College-bound students also can take practice tests for free online, take test-prep classes with other students, and purchase books of past tests to identify any areas of weakness prior to taking the test. And don’t worry if you turn in a less-than-optimal performance on test day—you can re-take both the SAT and the ACT and submit the higher score as part of your college application.

SAT vs. ACT

	SAT	ACT
Why Take It	Colleges use SAT scores for admissions and merit-based scholarships.	Colleges use ACT scores for admissions and merit-based scholarships.
Test Structure	Reading, Writing & Language, Math, Essay (Optional)	English, Math, Reading, Science Reasoning, Essay (Optional)
Length	3 hours (without essay) 3 hours, 50 minutes (with essay)	2 hours, 55 minutes (without essay) 3 hours, 40 minutes (with essay)
Reading	5 reading passages	4 reading passages
Science	None	1 science section testing your critical thinking skills (not your specific science knowledge)
Math	Arithmetic, Algebra I & II, Geometry, Trigonometry and Data Analysis	Arithmetic, Algebra I & II, Geometry and Trigonometry
Calculator Policy	Some math questions don't allow you to use a calculator.	You can use a calculator on all math questions.
Essays	Optional. The essay will test your comprehension of a source text.	Optional. The essay will test how well you evaluate and analyze complex issues.
How It's Scored	Scored on a scale of 400–1600	Scored on a scale of 1–36

SOURCE: The Princeton Review