

College entrance exam basics

My to-do list

- ☐ Research the range of test scores accepted at my colleges of choice and set my goal accordingly
- ☐ Become familiar with the exam's design (e.g., the questions on the SAT increase in difficulty within each section)
- ☐ Draft a study plan
- ☐ Gather my study materials: flash cards, books, practice questions, etc.
- ☐ Assess myself and take timed practice tests
- ☐ Research test dates and locations, and sign up to take the test by the registration deadline
- ☐ Think positively!

Colleges use many criteria to make an admissions decision. Your high school transcripts, essay and/or personal statement, letters of recommendation and standardized test scores are considered during the admissions process. The information colleges gather about you from these sources gives them a full picture of the type of student you are and how well you will fit with the school's academic culture.

Plan to take at least one standardized college entrance exam if you are thinking of attending a four-year college or university. The different exams measure your knowledge and skill in a variety of subjects. Students who speak English as a second language may be required to submit a score from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or take an alternative test.

Many colleges are eliminating the requirement for SAT/ACT test scores. Check www.fairtest.org/university/ optional for a current list of test-optional colleges. This list is ever-changing. Always verify test requirements with the college's admissions counselor.

Below is a brief description of the different college entrance exams.

The SAT

The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) includes three tests: math, reading, and writing and language, divided into two sections: **evidence-based reading and writing** and **math**. The total time for the SAT is three hours, not including breaks; the optional essay is an additional 50 minutes. The questions are geared towards measuring what you've learned in high school and what you need to succeed in college.

1. The math test includes questions on Heart of Algebra, Problem Solving and Data Analysis, Passport to Advanced Math and Additional Topics in Math. The math test also draws on geometry and trigonometry most relevant to college and career readiness. Most math questions are multiple choice, but some will require you to determine the answer and enter it into a grid on the answer sheet. One portion of the math test allows a calculator and the other part does not.
2. The multiple-choice reading test includes passages from literature, history, social science and science. Some passages may include informational graphics. You will be asked to find and analyze evidence, use context clues, consider the author's word choice and interpret data.
3. The multiple-choice writing and language test includes passages from various academic subjects. Informational graphics may accompany some passages. You will be asked to improve word choice, sentence structure and punctuation as well as the way the passage expresses and develops information and ideas.

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4. The optional essay asks you to read a passage, explain how the author builds a persuasive argument and support your explanation with evidence from the passage. The essay will only be available in states where it's required as part of SAT School Day administrations.

The SAT is scored from 400 to 1600: 200 to 800 for evidence-based reading and writing plus 200 to 800 for math. Essay results are reported separately and divided into three dimensions: Reading, Analysis and Writing. Each dimension is scored on a scale of 2 to 8 points. Incorrect answers do not count against you. You may take the SAT more than once to try to improve your test scores.

The ACT

The American College Test (ACT) consists of four multiple-choice tests—English, math, reading and science—and an optional writing test (essay). The total time for the ACT is two hours and 55 minutes plus 40 minutes for the optional essay. Like the SAT, the ACT questions are intended to measure what you've learned in high school and how ready you are for college-level classes.

1. The English test uses a variety of passages and questions to assess your understanding of the production of writing, knowledge of language and conventions of standard English.
2. The math test assesses skills that students typically acquire in math classes through junior year. Most questions are about single problems, but some may come in a set of questions about the same graph or chart. Calculators are allowed.
3. The reading test includes long and short passages similar to first-year college texts. You will be asked to find main ideas and themes, analyze information, consider word choice and evaluate evidence.
4. The science test covers biology, chemistry, physics and Earth and space sciences. Basic knowledge acquired in high school science classes is needed for some questions, but science skills and practices are more important. You

will read scientific information in the form of graphics, research summaries and conflicting viewpoints in order to answer the questions.

5. The optional essay provides three different perspectives on an issue and asks you to analyze and evaluate them, develop your own perspective and relate it to one or more of the perspectives given. The essay is available on all testing dates but is not required by most colleges. Check your colleges' admissions websites before deciding to take it.

Each of the four subject tests is scored from 1 to 36, and the composite score is an average of the four tests. The writing test is scored from 2 to 12 in each of four writing domains: Ideas and Analysis, Development and Support, Organization, and Language Use and Conventions. The four scores are averaged to produce the single subject writing test score. Incorrect answers do not count against you. You may take the ACT more than once to try and improve your test scores. When students retest, ACT will take the average of the four best subject scores from each ACT test attempt to create a new official score (called "superscoring").

Should I take the SAT, the ACT or both?

All colleges and universities accept both SAT and ACT scores. Check with the schools where you are applying to determine if there is an exam requirement and, if so, preference. Taking both tests can be beneficial because most colleges only use your highest standardized test score when deciding on admission. Practice tests are available for studying purposes or to use as a guide. Use the scores you earned on the practice tests to determine which one will show colleges your best academic ability.

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)

If you speak English as a second language or attended a foreign high school where English was not the language of instruction, some colleges may require you to take the TOEFL (or an alternative English-language test) as

part of the admissions process. These tests measure how well you read, listen, speak and write in English. Check with the admissions office of your prospective colleges for more information.

Additional information

Fee waivers—There are fees associated with all of these college entrance exams. If you and your family will have difficulty paying the fees, talk to your school counselor about fee waivers. The fee waivers allow you to take the SAT and ACT for free or the TOEFL at a discounted rate.

Online resources—Visit these websites for other resources and practice tests:

The Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) and the SAT:
www.collegeboard.org

Khan Academy's SAT Test Prep:
www.khanacademy.org/test-prep/sat

The Preliminary American College Test (PreACT) and the ACT:
www.act.org

ACT Test Prep:
www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act/test-preparation/free-act-test-prep.html

March 2 Success:
www.march2success.com

TOEFL: www.ets.org/toefl

Need more information?

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