

# 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 SAT questions increase in difficulty each section)
- Draft a study plan
- Gather my study materials: flash cards, books, practice questions, etc.
- Assess myself and take timed practice tests
- 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 a test to show their English proficiency.

Below is a brief description of the different college entrance exams. Check with the school you plan to attend to determine which exam is required for admission.

## The SAT

The SAT includes three tests: math, reading, and writing and language, divided into two sections: **evidence-based reading and writing** and **math**. 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 and Passport to Advanced Math. The math test also draws on geometry and trigonometry most relevant to college and career readiness.

2. The reading test includes short and long reading passages to test reading comprehension. Information graphics are also included.
3. The writing and language test includes questions about punctuation, sentence structure and graphic to text translations. The SAT is available with and without an essay component. Some schools require the SAT essay, so be sure to check with the colleges and universities you're interested in attending.

Effective March 2016, the highest score possible on the SAT is 1600 (800 per section). Incorrect answers do not count against you. You may take the SAT more than once to try to improve your test scores.

Some schools require prospective students to take one or more SAT subject tests for admission. SAT subject tests are college admissions exams on subjects that you choose to best showcase your strengths and interests.

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## The ACT

The ACT is a multiple-choice test. The questions on the ACT measure how much you have learned in your high school English, math, reading and science courses. The ACT also includes an optional writing test.

ACT test scores are based on the number of correct answers. The advantage of this scoring method is that you are not penalized for guessing. The average of the four test area scores is used to give a composite score ranging from 1–36. You may take the ACT more than once to try to improve your test scores.

## Should I take the SAT, the ACT or both?

The SAT and ACT are very different tests, each with its own way of measuring your skills. Some students find that they score much higher on one or the other; some students score about the same on each.

Most colleges and universities accept test scores from either the SAT or the ACT. Check with the schools where you are applying to determine if there is an exam preference. Taking both tests can be beneficial because most colleges only use your highest standardized test score when deciding on admission. Practice tests are also 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 the college your best academic ability.

## The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)

If you speak English as a second language, some colleges may require you to take the TOEFL as part of the admissions process. This test measures 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 would allow you to take the SAT and ACT for free or the TOEFL at a discounted rate.

**Test-optional colleges and universities**—Many colleges and universities have moved to a test-optional admissions policy for some or all applicants. Typically, applicants who do not submit SAT or ACT scores must have very strong grades, a healthy dose of extracurricular activities and a very impressive essay to be competitive among the applicant pool. For a list of these colleges, go to [www.fairtest.org](http://www.fairtest.org).

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

The SAT and SAT Subject Tests:  
[www.collegeboard.org](http://www.collegeboard.org)

The ACT: [www.actstudent.org](http://www.actstudent.org)

TOEFL: [www.ets.org/toefl](http://www.ets.org/toefl)

Number 2: [www.number2.com](http://www.number2.com)

March 2 Success:  
[www.march2success.com](http://www.march2success.com)

Khan Academy's SAT Test Prep:  
[www.khanacademy.org/test-prep/sat](http://www.khanacademy.org/test-prep/sat)

ACT Online Prep: [onlineprep.act.org](http://onlineprep.act.org)

## Need more information?

The College Place is here to help you with free college-planning resources and personal advice. Visit our website at [www.ecmc.org](http://www.ecmc.org).