

ACT/SAT/PSAT

Frequently Asked Questions

When should I start taking the tests?

Some high-achieving students start taking the college entrance tests as early as middle school (e.g. via Northwestern University's Midwest Talent Search). The middle school scores can provide a baseline score for future testing needs.

It is important to know that all middle school scores are not reported. Once a student begins taking the SAT in high school, those scores are included in the score summaries sent to colleges. Both ACT and SAT now allow students to choose scores that will be reported. As well, some high schools list all test scores on the transcripts and students should ask schools whether or not those scores are included and whether or not they have the option of declining test score information.

Most educators recommend taking the ACT or SAT at least once during the junior year, although many high-achieving students take both tests at least once a year throughout high school. A college-bound student should take at least one of the tests no later than by the end of the 11th grade. Students who plan to apply to highly selective or selective schools will need to look ahead at testing requirements. They may need the end of the junior year for SAT II subject tests. Many students need the time in the fall for college applications. It can become stressful for a student wanting to improve his or her test scores while in the middle of college applications.

Some students do better on one test over the other, so taking each test at least once is a good idea.

What time of the year should I take the tests?

This is entirely up to the student. No test date is considered "easier" than others, but many college counselors recommend taking the SAT in March because more students test on that date than any other. Scores and percentile ranks are based on how a student compares with all others on that specific testing day but both ACT and SAT norm the tests over time, so taking the test on a popular testing date does not necessarily enhance your chances for a better score. Some students perform better in June since the school year is almost over and they are more relaxed.

If you have a jam-packed schedule in a particular month, registering for a test is probably not wise. A student should be well-rested before taking tests that matter so much for college admissions.

How many times should I take the tests?

In high school, a student should take the tests at least once by the end of the junior year. If the student is not satisfied with the scores, another testing is probably a good idea. Scores tend to be pretty consistent over time, unless the student has not had critical coursework (e.g. algebra, geometry) and tests before and after that important coursework.

Many college counselors do not recommend taking the tests more than three times because it may appear that the student is desperate or obsessed with test scores. Some colleges require that all test scores be submitted rather than allowing students to select one test administration to send. So, in essence, the number of times a student tests depends on the individual needs or desires.

Why are the ACT and SAT tests important?

With so many student applying to schools, colleges like to have something that is nationally recognized to help identify how strong candidates are in comparison to others. However, a student who has a perfect 2400 on the SAT may not gain admission to a highly selective school if s/he has no activities or poor teacher recommendations. Schools look at the total application for students and test scores are just one part.

Many schools award significant scholarships based on test scores. Schools may or may not advertise what scores are needed for certain scholarships. Some schools may identify the top 5% of their applicant pool and award scholarships based on who qualifies for that pool, with test scores being something easy to differentiate one candidate from another.

What about the PSAT?

This is the test that matters in 11th grade for qualifying for National Merit scholarship consideration. Since the scores are not reported to colleges unless the high school includes them on the transcripts, college-bound students should take these tests beginning in 9th grade or earlier if desired.

Students who do well in 11th grade on the test are notified by their high schools, usually in April of the junior year that they are in consideration for advancing to semifinalist status in the competition. Early in the senior year, generally in early September, students are notified whether or not they have made semifinalist status. Semifinalists then complete an application for scholarship consideration. Finalists are announced in February of the senior year. Scholarship recipients are announced in March.

Why is being a National Merit Finalist important?

Many colleges award significant scholarship monies to National Merit Finalists. Some schools offer full-rides while others may only offer \$2000 a year. Highly selective schools may not offer any National Merit scholarships, but being a National Merit Finalist can enhance one's chances for admission.

Some schools require that National Merit Finalists indicate a first choice college before awarding scholarship monies and they may have deadlines associated with that first choice selection.

That being said, most colleges recognize that the PSAT is "one test, one day" and they know that some students do not do well under pressure. Chances are the colleges will look more at the pattern of achievement and whether or not the ACT or SAT is a fair representation of how the student has achieved in the classroom.

I had a higher score in 10th grade on the PSAT than in 11th grade. Can I count the higher score?

No.

How do I report scores to colleges for the ACT and SAT?

If a student is confident that s/he will apply to particular schools and s/he is equally confident of how s/he may perform on the tests, then listing the colleges for scores to be sent to can occur before actually taking the test. Many students do not send any scores to schools until after they know what the scores are and where they have decided to apply.

However, scores requested after the testing involve a fee for colleges. Rush reports can be fairly costly if applying to several schools. The ACT and CollegeBoard sites have "get and send scores" links where students can request scores to be sent to colleges. Some colleges will accept scores on high school transcripts, but most want the official test scores directly from ACT or CollegeBoard. Students should check with their high school guidance counselors to see if this is the case before paying money for score reports.

ACT or SAT?

Some students do better on one than the other. The ACT is based on achievement in school more than the analytical skills measured on the SAT. The ACT does not penalize for guessing, while the SAT does. The SAT measures not only analytical skills but the critical thinking skills necessary for success in college.

If a student looks at the testing requirements of colleges of interest, many schools will say SAT or ACT with writing. If one elects to focus on the ACT, be sure to take the optional writing test. Some colleges will require SAT II's and even though a student may have taken the ACT and want to use those scores, SAT II's may still be needed in order to complete an application.

Sometimes the best way to choose between the ACT and SAT is to take a practice test for both and see which one offers better scores for the individual. Another strategy is to look at what scores are usually submitted to a college and focus on the test that is more prevalent.

Should I take a test prep course?

This is a personal decision depending on your circumstances. Because colleges often award scholarship money based on test scores, it may be wise to spend some money up front for a bigger return later. Test prep companies vary as do the costs. Some test prep companies will offer greatly reduced fees to

students when classes are offered on-site at high schools. Some high schools offer free test prep and students should take advantage of those opportunities.

Sometimes a student only needs to buy a test prep book (e.g., Princeton Review) and go through the book. There are also books with previously used tests available (e.g. Real SATs) which can be of value. It really depends on the student whether a classroom prep course is needed.

According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling, more students raise scores from test prep when taking the SAT rather than the ACT. ACT and CollegeBoard do not recommend test prep, but both companies offer valuable resources that are free on their sites. For example, if a student takes the PSAT, extensive resources are offered on the CollegeBoard site for the student to improve his or her scores.

What other options are there for test prep?

Some counselors recommend sites such as [Number2](#) which offers free on-line prep. Additionally, the [Cuyahoga County Public Library](#) offers many resources on its web site for students:

What does “superscore” mean?

This term refers to college admissions offices selecting the highest scores from different test administrations for applicants. Almost all colleges specify standardized testing requirements and procedures on their admissions sites.

How do I know if I did better on the ACT or SAT?

Conversion charts vary for the ACT and SAT comparisons and the jury is still out on how the new SAT writing test fits in the mix. ACT and CollegeBoard joined to derive a concordance tables which compare the SAT critical reading and math sections to the ACT composite scores as well as the ACT combined English/Writing score with the SAT writing score. Those tables may be found on the ACT and CollegeBoard web sites. There is no single conversion chart used by all schools. This chart was used in the past by the University of California schools:

SAT (Prior to Writing Test Addition)	SAT (With Writing Test Addition)	ACT Composite Score
1600	2400	36
1560-1590	2340-2390	35
1520-1550	2280-2330	34
1480-1510	2220-2270	33
1440-1470	2160-2210	32
1400-1430	2100-2150	31
1360-1390	2040-2090	30
1320-1350	1980-2030	29
1280-1310	1920-1970	28
1240-1270	1860-1910	27
1200-1230	1800-1850	26
1160-1190	1740-1790	25
1120-1150	1680-1730	24
1080-1110	1620-1670	23
1040-1070	1560-1610	22
1000-1030	1500-1550	21
960-990	1440-1490	20
920-950	1380-1430	19

SAT (Prior to Writing Test Addition)	SAT (With Writing Test Addition)	ACT Composite Score
880-910	1320-1370	18
840-870	1260-1310	17
800-830	1200-1250	16
760-790	1140-1190	15
720-750	1080-1130	14
680-710	1020-1070	13
640-670	960-1010	12
600-630	900-950	11

What is interesting is to look at a student's scores retrospectively and see if the conversion charts that are out there are accurate. Again, many students do better on one test than the other, so the conversion table may be more of a curiosity than anything else.

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