

College Entrance Exams

When it comes time for you to take your college entrance exams, you will most likely need to look at two testing services:

- The Scholastic Aptitude Test, or SAT (collegeboard.com); and
- The American College Testing Assessment, or ACT (act.org).

Most accredited colleges and universities in the United States, and many in other countries, accept scores by either service. Some accept both. Until recently, the ACT was required by colleges in the Midwest, while the SAT was the test of choice for schools in the Northeast and on both coasts. Now, however, most schools accept both. This increased acceptance of both exams gives students a strategic advantage. The ACT is a content-based test, whereas the SAT tests critical thinking and problem solving skills.

Depending on your particular strengths and weaknesses, you may perform significantly better on one test than the other. Regardless, you should check with each of your target schools before taking either exam. To learn which test is required for each school you are considering, visit the "Admissions" section on the Web sites of the schools you want to attend, or call their admissions office.

SAT

The SAT is the most widely taken college entrance examination. It is designed to test your skill level in math, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. The test is divided into seven sections: 3 math, 3 verbal, and 1 experimental section. The math and verbal sections each have their own distinct question types, including quantitative comparisons, sentence completions, grid-ins, and more. The experimental section, used by the test developer to try out new questions, is not scored and can be either math or verbal. You will not know which section is experimental.

The SAT is scored on scale of 200-800 for both the math and verbal sections. The College Board sets the average for all test takers at 500 for each. A perfect score on the SAT is 1600. However, in recent years, fewer than 20% of all test takers achieve a math score of 600 or better. Fewer than 10% score higher than 600 on the verbal section.

ACT

The American College Testing Assessment (ACT) is designed to test your skill levels in English, math, reading, and science reasoning. On the test, you will have 2 hours and 55 minutes to complete a variety of multiple choice questions divided into four sections – one for each tested subject area. The English, reading, and science sections each include several reading passages with anywhere from 5 to 15 questions per passage. The math section includes 60 questions – each with 5 possible answer choices.

You will actually receive 12 separate scores on the ACT: 1 composite, 4 subject scores, and 7 subscores . However the composite – or scaled – score is the most important. It ranges from 1-36. Nearly half of all test takers fall in the 17-23 range.

How to prepare

There are several things you can do now to start getting prepared. Here are a few ideas:

- Pick up a test packet from your counselor, and review the sample questions. Get help for those questions you don't understand.
- Visit the Web sites of the two largest services (the SAT at collegeboard.com and the ACT at act.org) and explore some of the helpful tools available for students. This may include sample tests, tip sheets, and other resources.