

Standardized Testing

Along with financial aid, probably the most stress-inducing part of the college preparation process is standardized testing. Unfortunately for some, this stress actually affects their ability to do well on the tests, thus affecting admission and/or scholarship decisions at some schools. The information presented here is intended to familiarize you with the two most commonly used college admission tests (SAT and ACT) and provide helpful hints to ensure that your score is a more accurate reflection of your knowledge and abilities. It is intended only as a supplement to other test preparation materials and programs. But I do think if a student reads this information and follows the suggestions presented, they will be eliminating many of the pitfalls that are known to negatively affect students' scores. The two most commonly used college admission tests are the SAT, produced by The College Board, and the ACT, produced by the ACT Corporation. Neither is an intelligence or IQ test, and their scores do not indicate how smart a student is. The tests are designed to measure knowledge in areas determined to predict academic success in college. Colleges use them alongside high school performance (grades) and a variety of other factors to try to select the students with the highest potential or probability for success. Students should realize the importance of the tests, but not place undue burdens on themselves to achieve because of that importance. Each year, students across the country are admitted to schools in spite of lower scores than they would have liked. Such students usually did very well in high school, wrote an excellent application essay, were a leader among their peers and/or had exceptional talents in other areas. Conversely, students whose applications may be lacking in other areas but have exceptional test scores are also admitted regularly. Students who fare the best around college decision time and have the most options are those who work hard, take a solid, college preparatory curriculum and perform well, become active in their school and community, prepare for and do well on college admission tests, and pursue outside interests. The "hard work" part also includes taking the time to prepare for standardized testing. Below you will find general test preparation information common to both tests and answers to frequently asked questions. Information specific to each test is best left to the experts — the people who put the tests together in the first place (SAT — <http://www.collegeboard.org/> and ACT — <http://www.act.org/>). This chapter was written using information from both of those web sites. Where do I start? Two places: Your high school counselor will have test registration booklets for both tests. These booklets include example test questions you should review. Your counselor may also have additional books, videos, computer programs, or other resources for your use. The Internet is home to tons of useful resources. The first web sites to visit are the homes of SAT (<http://www.collegeboard.org/>) and ACT (<http://www.act.org/>). Both provide a great deal of specific information and sell their own preparation products, as well as recommend additional resources. You can also sign up for each test on that company's web site. When are the tests offered? During the 2007-2008 academic year, the SAT is offered seven (7) times, starting in October, while the ACT is offered six (6) times, starting in September. Specific dates, as well as any changes are available on the SAT and ACT web sites. How much do the tests cost? While there are a variety of additional services, as well as additional tests you can sign up and pay for, the basic cost of the tests are; SAT - \$41.50 and ACT - \$29.00 (as of 3-24-07) What is a good score? There is no good answer to this one. Perfect scores (ACT=36, SAT=1600) are achieved only rarely, and are the result of extremely good preparation over a long period of time. Depending on your age, year in school, the high school you attend, how many times you have taken the test, and many other factors, what you would consider only an "okay" score might be a "very good" score in someone else's eyes. Try to avoid comparing yourself to others based on these test scores. Don't attach any more significance to your score than is necessary — and don't do it to others' scores either (whether "high" or "low"). How can I make sure I do my best on the SAT/ACT? Relax. Get plenty of rest the night before the test. Eat breakfast. Dress comfortably and in layers — in case the room is hot or cold. You need to be prepared for either extreme, regardless what the weather outside is like. Arrive 15 minutes early but not more (testing centers are rarely open earlier). Pace yourself, and don't spend too much time on any one question. Know the instructions and format for each section — do this by taking practice tests or reading the information available on the ACT/SAT web site (whichever is appropriate). Answer the questions you know the answers to first. Check over your work if time allows. Be careful on the answer sheet — mark answer ovals completely, erase changes completely. Read information on individual tests about guessing and — As of March, 2007; ACT recommends you answer every question because there is no penalty for incorrect answers (<http://www.actstudent.org/testprep/tips/index.html>); SAT recommends skipping questions you don't know the answer to and making "educated guesses" when you can eliminate one or more of the available choices (http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/prep_one/test_tips.html). On reading sections of both tests, read the questions before reading the passage. You will then know what to look for in the passage. Be cautious of questions or possible answers that contain superlatives or extreme answers (e.g. always, never, all, only, etc.) Absolute words such as "always", "never", and "all of the following except", demand an absolute answer.

Can I use a calculator?

Yes. You do not have to have a calculator and certain restrictions do apply, so check the ACT or SAT web site before bringing one. You should also be familiar with how to use the specific calculator you bring. Nothing is worse than wasting test time figuring out how to use your calculator.

Can I take the test more than once?

Yes. Most schools will accept your highest score, and most if not all will accept either test, regardless of how many times

you take it.

College Board lists preparing for the SAT as one of the most common reasons for taking the PSAT/NMSQT (<http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/psat/about.html> . And ACT says "taking PLAN as a 10th grader is a great way to prepare for the ACT" (<http://www.actstudent.org/plan/index.html>). Start at least during your junior year (earlier if you can). This gives you time to improve on any weak areas and make the schools you are interested in aware of your interest.

How long do the tests take?

Both the ACT and SAT will take around four hours. However, testing will not be quite that long as there are a number of breaks between sections of the test. What should I take to the test? Take a watch, digital if possible. Set at 12:00 (or 00:00 if you have a timer) at the start of each section (this makes it easier to tell when time is up). Make sure it is silent and no alarms will go off. Take a calculator, but only one you're familiar with and one that is approved by the testing agency (ACT or College Board) Take an official photo ID and your test admission information/slip Take several sharpened #2 lead pencils, not mechanical pencils. Take plenty of Kleenex if you have a cough or runny nose Take snacks for breaks between the test sections. SAT encourages this (<http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/testday.html>), and I was unable to find information on how ACT feels about it. Of course, you'll have to ask if it's okay when you arrive to take the ACT. If it's not okay, don't snack. How long will it take to get my score back? You will receive a score report from SAT or ACT a little over a month after the date you take your test. However, College Board makes most scores available for viewing online around 19 days after the test, and ACT has most online 2 ½ weeks after the test date. You may also be able to receive your score more quickly if you are willing to pay an extra fee. Check the SAT or ACT web site for availability and details. What about the new writing sections/scores? Not all schools require these additional sections of the test. For example, Gwynedd Mercy College in Pennsylvania, uses them only "as needed", while Princeton University requires the all sections (including writing), AS WELL AS two SAT Subject Area test scores. You should talk to your high school counselor and visit the ACT and SAT web sites for the latest information in maximizing your writing scores. What if I want help with preparing for the SAT and I live in Canada? Canadian students applying to schools in the US: If you're worried about having a lack of helpful resources, don't be - Canada has several SAT preparation services available. Ask your teachers and guidance counselors and do some research online to find ones local to your area.