

SAT or ACT ? What's the difference?

Admissions officers and educators often describe the difference between SAT and ACT in these terms: the ACT is a content-based test, whereas the SAT tests critical thinking and problem solving. This perception is one reason many educators (off the record) express a preference for the ACT--because they believe that the ACT is closer to testing the "core curriculum" taught in most school classrooms. In fact, this contrast isn't exactly watertight. Many questions on the ACT test critical thinking, and there *is* a predictable range of material that's tested on the SAT. But the SAT and ACT reward different attributes, so performing well on each test can boil down to what kind of test taker you are.

This increased acceptance of the ACT gives today's savvy students a strategic advantage. The SAT and ACT are *significantly* different tests, and in many ways, they measure different skills. So depending on your particular strengths and weaknesses, you may perform much better on one test than the other. As a result, many students embarking on the admissions process are now considering *both* the SAT and ACT--to figure out which test provides a better showcase for their abilities.

Here are some of the factors that make the SAT and ACT very different breeds:

- The ACT includes a science reasoning test; the SAT does not.
- The ACT math section includes trigonometry.
- The SAT tests vocabulary much more than the ACT.
- The SAT is not entirely multiple choice.
- The SAT has a guessing penalty; the ACT does not.
- The ACT tests English grammar; the SAT does not.

Remember, both the SAT and ACT are important parts of your application, but they're only one of several factors--from your courses and grades to recommendations and your personal statement--that colleges consider.

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.

SAT vs ACT

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