

SAT vs ACT: Which Test Should You Take?

A Complete Comparison

Choosing between the **SAT and ACT** ranks among the biggest decisions high school students face on the road to college. Both tests measure your readiness for higher education, and nearly every college in the United States accepts either one equally.

So the real question isn't which test colleges prefer. It's the test that fits your strengths and helps you earn your best score.

This guide compares both tests side by side, breaks down their key differences, and helps you pick the one that plays to your advantages.

The Big Picture: Do Colleges Prefer One Over the Other?

Let's clear up the biggest myth right away. Colleges do not favor the SAT over the ACT or the other way around. Every college that requires test scores accepts both equally, with no bonus points for picking one.

According to guidance from the [College Board](#), which runs the SAT, and [ACT](#), which runs its namesake test, admissions officers treat scores from both fairly. Your job is simply to earn the highest score you can on whichever test suits you best.

How the SAT and ACT Differ?

While both tests cover similar ground, they take different approaches. Knowing these differences helps you spot which one matches your skills.

Here's a quick side-by-side comparison.

Feature	SAT	ACT
Format	Digital, adaptive	Digital and paper options
Total time	About 2 hours 14 min	About 2 hours 5 min

Sections	Reading & Writing, Math	English, Math, Reading, Science
Science section	No separate section	Yes, separate section
Math on a calculator	Allowed throughout	Allowed throughout
Scoring range	400 to 1600	1 to 36
Pace	More time per question	Faster pace

The SAT now runs fully digital and adapts to your performance, meaning the second section adjusts based on how you do in the first. The ACT recently updated its format too, offering a shorter test and making the science section optional in some cases.

Breaking Down the SAT

The digital SAT splits into two main areas: Reading and Writing, plus Math. It runs shorter than the old paper version and gives you more time per question.

What the SATs:

- **Reading and Writing:** Short passages followed by questions on grammar, vocabulary in context, and comprehension
- **Math:** Algebra, problem-solving, data analysis, and some advanced math

The SAT leans toward giving you more time to think through each problem. If you work carefully and don't love racing the clock, this pace may suit you.

The digital SAT also uses **adaptive testing**. Your performance on the first module shapes the difficulty of the second, which the College Board says gives a more accurate score in less time.

Breaking Down the ACT

The ACT covers four core areas, with an optional writing section. It moves faster, giving you less time per question, which rewards students who think quickly.

What the ACTs:

- **English:** Grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure
- **Math:** Covers a slightly wider range, including some trigonometry
- **Reading:** Longer passages with comprehension questions

- **Science:** Reading charts, graphs, and interpreting data

That science section stands out as the ACT's signature feature. It doesn't test deep science knowledge but rather your skill at reading data and drawing conclusions quickly.

Which Test Matches Your Strengths?

Picking the right test comes down to your personal skills and comfort. Ask yourself these questions.

The SAT might suit you if you:

- Prefer more time to work through problems
- Feel confident with vocabulary in context
- Like a shorter test with fewer sections
- Do well with adaptive, tech-based testing

The ACT might suit you if you:

- Work quickly and stay calm under time pressure
- Enjoy reading charts, graphs, and data
- Feel strong in scientific reasoning
- Prefer a straightforward, predictable format

The smartest move? Take a practice test for each. Your scores and how you felt during each test tell you far more than any comparison chart.

Scoring: How the Two Compare

The SAT scores from 400 to 1600, combining your two section scores. The ACT scores range from 1 to 36, averaging your four section scores into a composite.

Since the scales differ, colleges use concordance tables to compare them fairly. A strong score on one test lines up with an equally strong score on the other. So don't stress about which scale looks better. Focus on hitting a competitive score for your target schools.

How to Prepare for Either Test?

Once you pick your test, solid prep makes all the difference. The right study plan can raise your score by a meaningful margin.

Smart prep habits include:

- Taking a **diagnostic practice test** to find your starting point

- Focusing extra time on your **weakest sections**
- Practicing under **real-time conditions**
- Reviewing every wrong answer to learn from mistakes
- Studying consistently instead of cramming

A quality prep course keeps your study organized and covers every question type. Grab a [30% off Magoosh coupon code](#) to access video lessons and practice questions built for both the SAT and ACT.

Save Money on Your Test Prep

Good prep tools cost money, but smart timing helps you save. Deals pop up throughout the year, especially during major sales.

Curious how much you can save during big sales? Check out [how much you can save on Magoosh test prep during the Black Friday Sale](#) to grab quality prep at the lowest price of the year. Timing your purchase around these deals stretches your budget further.

A strong test score can unlock scholarships and admission to top programs, so smart spending on prep pays off many times over.

Can You Take Both Tests?

Yes, and some students do. Taking both lets you see which one earns you a higher score, then submit only your best result.

That said, prepping for two tests splits your time and energy. For most students, picking one test and focusing all their effort there works better. Take a practice version of each first, then commit to the one where you scored higher and felt more comfortable.

How Many Times Should You Take Your Test?

Most students take their chosen test two or three times. Scores often improve on a second attempt once nerves fade, and you know what to expect.

Plan your test dates by:

- Leaving time to retake before application deadlines
- Spacing attempts so you can study between them
- Registering early to lock in your preferred dates

Both the SAT and ACT let you retake them multiple times, and many colleges use your highest scores through a process called superscoring. This means you can send your best section scores across different test dates.

Final Thoughts on SAT vs ACT

The **SAT vs ACT** debate has no universal winner. Both tests open the same college doors, so the right choice depends entirely on your strengths, your pace, and your comfort with each format.

The SAT gives you more time and adapts to your skills, while the ACT moves faster and rewards quick, sharp thinking with its unique science section.

Take a practice test for each, compare your scores, and pick the one that feels right. Then commit to focused prep, grab a discount to save on quality tools, and study with purpose. Do that, and you'll earn a score that helps you reach the college of your dreams.