

College Entrance Testing – SAT, SAT Subject Tests & ACT

The SEHS counselors and College/Career Center advise all juniors to take the SAT or ACT in the spring of their junior year. This leaves the fall of the senior year to take (or retake) and still be admissible to college. Below are answers to frequently asked questions about these tests.

- 1. Why do colleges require the SAT or ACT?** These entrance exams were designed to “level the playing field” for students applying from different parts of the United States. In the United States, we have no national education standards so the rigor of the curriculum and grading standards in School X may be very different from School Y. The tests allow colleges to use something besides GPA and class rank to compare students during the admission process. While some people argue whether these tests actually equalize or create further class distinctions, it is important to note that test scores are only one element in the admissions process. They are not aptitude or intelligence tests, but colleges believe they can reflect how hard you work and your potential for doing well in college. Test scores can also be used to award scholarships, to help determine merit aid, NCAA eligibility, and admittance to a military academy.
- 2. Which should I take – the ACT or the SAT?** We like to use the analogy of which car should I buy—Ford or Chevy. Two different companies developed these tests and they have some differences (see below). The main factor to consider is which test the college the student wishes to apply requires. Most colleges will take the SAT or the ACT. A second factor may be if the college requires SAT Subject tests. If so, it makes sense to take the SAT. A third factor may be the student’s schedule. These tests take place on Saturdays. Juniors should look at their spring activities before choosing a test. Those students in spring sports, plays, etc. may have to work around dates of their activities.
- 3. How do the ACT and SAT differ?** While both the ACT and the SAT favor students that do well in rigorous high school courses, they have some differences. The SAT aims more at general reasoning and problem solving skills while the ACT is more curriculum-based.

The **ACT** has four components: English, reading, math, & science. The ACT takes 2 hours and 55 minutes; add 30 minutes if you take the optional writing test (some colleges require it). Scores range from 1 to 36 and are averaged into a composite score.

The **SAT** has three components: math, critical reading, and writing as well as a separate essay. The math section covers material through Algebra II and the critical reading section focuses on reading comprehension and with short and long passages. It takes 3 hours and 45 minutes. Scores on each subtest range from 200-800.

A recent New York Times article (by Michelle Slatalla, 11/4/07) examined the SAT and ACT and made the following points:

- Use your scores on the PSAT and the PLAN (practice ACT) and extrapolate your SAT and ACT scores. This can give the student an idea which test most fits them.
- The ACT is slightly shorter. If the student has difficulty focusing, the ACT might be a better choice—especially if they are not required to take the writing test.
- The verbal section of the SAT focuses more on vocabulary and the ACT concentrates more on grammar, syntax and punctuation.
- The ACT has a science test and some trigonometry. Consider taking if these are subjects you have studied recently.
- One college counselor recommended the SAT for bright underachievers because they may have great reasoning skills and the ACT for students who are overachievers. Counselors report that students that work hard in school may do better on the ACT.
- Strategies for taking the SAT make it an easier test to prepare for. The best prep for the ACT is doing well in school.
- One study found that students who think they will do well on these tests usually do better—confidence helps. This is why test preparation can help raise student scores.

- 4. What are the SAT subject tests?** Formerly called SAT II's, the subject tests are one-hour tests that measure knowledge in certain subjects. Some colleges, particularly those that are highly selective, require the students to take two or three of these in addition to the SAT. Check with the schools in which you have an interest. These tests cannot be taken on the same day as an SAT and are not offered on every test date. It is best to take the subject tests after you complete that course of study. For example, take the biology test after taking biology even if it is after your sophomore year.
- 5. Do I need to take an SAT prep course?** Practice and familiarity with the test format can help students. If you have information about the overall test content and review a bank of sample questions, you are more prepared for the test. This can be done on your own without the expense of a course. There are free online resources and the SEHS College/Career Center has practice materials available. It takes a self-motivated student to practice, so enrolling in a test prep course can help structure a student's time. However, the benefits of the course are only as good as the time the student puts into it.
- 6. How do I register for these tests?** Register via the Internet or through the mail with forms available in the College/Career Center at SEHS. SAT registration can be found at www.collegeboard.com and ACT at www.actstudent.org. It takes 30+ minutes to register either by paper or online and payment must be included (check or credit card if you register online). The registration deadline is about 6 weeks prior to the test for SAT and 4 weeks for ACT. If you register late, there

are steep fees. One advantage of online registration is that scores are available online earlier and it is easier to track where scores have been sent. The SAT offers tests only 7 times a year and the ACT 6 times a year.

- 7. Where do I send my scores?** Both the SAT and ACT allow you to send scores to a limited number of schools at no additional charge if you indicate this when you register. Many juniors are still deciding where they want to apply and sometimes skip this option. Both SAT and ACT charge for all later score sends so it helps to know 3-4 schools you have an interest in and take advantage of the “free send” option with registration. Important Note: Keep track of where you send scores. In the fall, during application season, students need to be sure they have sent scores to all their schools. SAT and ACT may take 4-6 weeks to send score reports so be aware not to let this slip through the cracks. There is a charge for each score report send. See the SAT or ACT websites for details.
- 8. Do all schools require SAT or ACT tests?** Most 4-year colleges require tests, while community colleges do not. However, some 4-year colleges have decided to deemphasize standardized tests and have adopted a “test score optional” policy. They may require no test or test only in some circumstances. A list of these schools and details of their requirements can be found at www.fairtest.org
- 9. Can I take an ACT or SAT test more than once?** Yes, students can take the tests more than once. Colleges will use the highest score as they decide admission. Some colleges take the highest composite score while others will mix and match from test sittings and take the highest subtest scores.
- 10. How can I rate my score?** Use college websites, guidebooks available in the College/Career Center, our CIS web-based program or Naviance Family Connection to compare your scores, grades, etc. with schools of interest. This can give you an idea where your test scores fall. The SEHS College/Career Center can help students find this information or retrieve their passwords for CIS and the Naviance website so they can easily research from home.
- 11. What if I don't have the money to take these tests?** Students on free and reduced lunch can obtain fee waivers through their counselors. Talk to them early. One important note: Some colleges will waive the college application fee for students that received the SAT fee waiver.

Information for this article was gathered from the SAT and ACT websites; [Best Answers to the 201 Most Frequently Asked Questions About Getting Into College](#) by Mary Kay Shanley and Julia Johnston; [The Parent's Guide to College Admissions](#) by Marjorie Nieuwenhuis