

The ACT: Understanding (what we like to call) the Alternate College Admissions Test

The ACT, like the SAT, is a standardized test used for college admissions. Currently, most schools accept either ACT or SAT scores for admissions. Some schools require the SAT specifically, and some schools require both.

Although the tests ultimately serve the same purpose, they are fundamentally different exams. Some of the content does overlap, but the strategies that guarantee success on the SAT do not guarantee success on the ACT.

The ACT is less predictable and patterned than the SAT, and involves a bit of “luck.” A student may roll out of bed, show up for the ACT in April and score a 24, and then without any preparation show up for the test again in June, and score a 28. The true difficulty of the ACT lies not in the questions (as is the case with the SAT), but in the timing. Each section of the ACT becomes a race against the clock, and many students simply do not have enough time to get through all of the questions, and therefore score lower than they may have expected.

Because of this, tutoring for the ACT is not always as rewarding as tutoring for the SAT. Students should practice on their own, completing timed sections from practice material.

ACT Overview

The ACT is a 4-sectioned multiple-choice test given over 3 hours. The test is divided into English, Math, Reading and Science components, with the option of a 5th section, the Essay Component. Each section, with exception to the essay, is strictly multiple-choice and is scored out of a possible 36 points. The individual section scores are then averaged to calculate a student’s overall score – the composite score. This composite score is the score that colleges consider when reviewing admissions criteria.

Scoring

Scores are calculated solely on the number of correct answers. Incorrect answers do not result in any additional point penalties, and unanswered questions are marked as incorrect. Therefore, **students should always guess on questions they are unsure of.**

The raw scores are then translated to a 36 point scale. This converted score is used when calculating a student’s composite score. (Each point translates roughly into 60 points on the SAT)

The essay portion of the test receives a separate score out of a maximum 12 points. The essay is graded by two readers, each of whom score the essay out of 6. These two scores are then combined for the total essay score, out of 12. The essay is optional, and is not factored into a student's composite score.

The ACT is considered a "score-choice" test. Students may take the test as many times as they choose, and report **ONLY** their highest composite score to the colleges of their choice. Colleges do not see any taken, but unreported, scores.

ACT Format

Section 1 – English: 45 Minutes

75 multiple-choice questions testing all areas of English grammar and writing

Section 2 – Math: 60 Minutes

60 multiple-choice questions testing the understanding of pre-algebra thru pre-calculus

Section 3 – Reading: 35 Minutes

40 multiple-choice questions taken from 4 long reading passages

Passage 1: Prose – 10 questions

Passage 2: Social Science – 10 questions

Passage 3: Humanities – 10 questions

Passage 4: Natural Science – 10 questions

Section 4 – Science: 35 Minutes

40 multiple-questions that test the ability to read and interpret graphs and charts, understand experimental design and draw conclusions from data presented. Minimal science knowledge is required for this section.

The math on the ACT is very straight forward math. It goes in order of difficulty, and focuses on algebra, trig, geometry and exponents.

Section 5 – The Essay (optional)

30 minute persuasive essay in response to a given high-school related controversy.

Tests reasoning, organization and mechanics of writing.

Please note that although the essay is optional, **we recommend all students register for the ACT with writing.** Some colleges will only consider a student's ACT composite score if the score is submitted with writing.