



An Overview of the ACT

The ACT, like the SAT, is a standardized test used for college admissions. The ACT was created in 1959 as a competitor to the SAT and has since risen in popularity, changing from an exam used predominantly by Midwest and west coast students to an exam used as regularly (if not more so) as the SAT across the nation. Today, colleges accept either the ACT or SAT scores for admission.

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.

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.

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. Yet, many schools will not accept an ACT composite score unless the essay component is included. Therefore, we recommend all students take sit for the essay.

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. Recently, some schools are "superscoreing," cutting and pasting the top section scores from all exams submitted.

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-choice 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.

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.

What is tested in the English Section?

The ACT English section is composed of 75 multiple-choice questions and assesses your understanding of general grammar, including sentence structure, punctuation and composition.

This section presents you with five passages, each with various sentences or portions of sentences underlined. These underlined sections are numbered to correspond with the questions. Students are to pick the answer that is grammatically “best.” (Sometimes there are several grammatically correct answers but one will be better in context than the others.) Students have nine minutes to complete each passage, for a total of 45 minutes testing time.

The English questions can be grouped into “rhetoric” (style) questions and “mechanics” (grammar) questions. The rhetoric questions ask that students rearrange paragraphs, insert or delete various sentences, and choose the most logical transitions throughout the passage. Style questions focus on the cohesiveness and fluidity of the passage as a whole. Mechanics questions assess a student’s understanding of punctuation, sentence composition and sentence structure.

What is Tested in the Math Section?

The 60-minute ACT Math section is composed of 60 multiple-choice questions that assess a student’s understanding of mathematics through the pre-calculus level. Unlike

the SAT math questions, the math questions on the ACT are very classroom-oriented, asked in a direct fashion, and require little, if any, critical reasoning.

The questions are arranged in order of increasing difficulty, 1 being the easiest and 60 being the most difficult. Calculators are permitted on the test, but formulas are not provided, so students should be sure to review basic geometry and trigonometry formulas (these formulas are given on the SAT). Timing is important in this section, because even though students are allotted a minute a question, they must be careful not to spend too long on the easier (first 30) questions, as the second half of the test is more difficult and often more time consuming. Students who are not yet at the pre-calculus level in school can still attain high scores, as only the last few questions of the section will touch upon pre-calculus mathematics.

What is Tested in the Reading Section?

The ACT Reading section consists of four long passages in the following order: a short story (prose), a historical piece (social science), a humanities piece and a science piece (natural science). Ten multiple-choice questions follow each of the passages. These questions are detail oriented and very specific. There are few tone, main idea or inference questions, as opposed to the SAT reading questions. This is an extremely time-intensive section. Students are given only 35 minutes to read all four passages and answer all 40 questions (approximately 8.5 minutes per passage). Just think about it...an 800 word passage, 10 questions relating to this passage and only 8.5 minutes! Ouch!

What is Tested in the Science Section?

The ACT Science section is composed of 40 multiple-choice questions that assess students' ability to read and interpret scientific charts, graphs and data. The 35-minute Science section contains seven passages, so students can only spend approximately five minutes per passage.

In most cases, six of the seven passages will be strictly chart/graph interpretation. The seventh passage is a reading comprehension passage that we like to call the "Fighting Scientists." In this passage, two opposing viewpoints, theories or hypotheses will be presented, and questions will ask students to compare and contrast the underlying ideas of each. Some assume that because this section is called "Science," extensive understanding of science is necessary. False! The science section DOES NOT require extensive outside scientific knowledge. Information necessary to answer the multiple-choice questions will be presented graphically or in tables, and students must simply find it. Many questions require that students extrapolate data or notice patterns within the charts (i.e. as temperature increases, metabolism increases).