

From the SAT and ACT Expert: When to Schedule and Take Standardized Test

Your Junior year and the Fall of your Senior year can seem like a minefield of important tests that stretches between you and your objective: COLLEGE. In this article you'll find a map that will let you navigate through Preparation and Testing without anything EXPLODING in your face!

What tests?

There are three 'sets' of tests that most students in the USA need to prepare for and take.

Preliminary tests are made available by BOTH the College Board [producers of the SAT] and ACT, Inc. [producers of the ACT]. These preliminary tests are important. Each is a chance to practice test-taking skills in the 'live' environment. Your scores on these tests give you a good measure of how well prepared you are for the ACTUAL SAT and ACT.

The preliminary tests from ACT are called EXPLORE and PLAN. EXPLORE is given to 8th and 9th grade students, while PLAN is given in 10th grade. If they are given at your school, be sure not to miss the practice opportunity!

The PSAT, on the other hand, is a MUST-DO! Not only is it good practice, but it is also the NMSQT (the qualifying test for the National Merit Scholarship Program). The National Merit[®] Scholarship Program is an academic competition for recognition and scholarships that began in 1955 and screens more than 1.5 million entrants each year. Recognition as a National Merit Semi-Finalist, even without winning one of the scholarships, would be an enhancement to any college application.

Entrance Exams are the 'famous' SAT and ACT tests. These are the highest-stakes tests you are likely ever to take. Your scores on these tests draw a line in the sand that college admission committees look at first. They do not by any means constitute your ENTIRE application, but each produces numbers that cannot be ignored. Until recently, many colleges specifically required either the SAT or the ACT, but today most colleges that require a test will accept either one.

The SAT I Reasoning Test tests the subject matter learned by students in high school and how well they can apply that knowledge, i.e., the critical thinking skills necessary to succeed in college. The SAT I consists of 10 sections:

- Three writing
- Three critical reading



- Three mathematics
- One variable (unscored)

The first section is always the essay, and the last section is always a writing section. In between, the academic content areas may come in any order.

The ACT assesses high school students' general educational development and their ability to complete college-level work.

- The four multiple-choice tests cover four skill areas: English, mathematics, reading, and science.
- The Writing Test, which is optional, measures skills in planning and writing a short essay.

Subject-Matter Tests specifically focus on what you have learned in one class or another. Some colleges and universities expect or even require them, while some do not. Regardless of requirements, good scores on these tests are a way to add luster to the application by demonstrating that your grades are well-earned, not just the result of rampant 'grade-flation'.

AP Tests culminate AP Courses. Through AP college-level courses and tests you can earn college credit and advanced college placement, stand out in the admission process, and learn from some of the most skilled, dedicated, and inspiring teachers in your school. During each year of high school you should take as many AP Courses as you can manage and be SURE to prepare for and take the corresponding AP Tests.

SAT II Subject Tests are the admission tests that measure students' knowledge and skills in particular subject areas, and their ability to apply that knowledge. They are closely linked to the high school curriculum and have a proven track record of providing colleges with a highly reliable, objective assessment of student readiness for college-level work. The SAT Subject Tests give students an additional opportunity to distinguish themselves and showcase their skills in a particular subject area.

When to PREP, When to TEST?

Here are testing times and estimates of how far ahead a good student should plan to prepare. There are many options for preparation, but working closely with a test-prep expert is your best bet. Expect to put in at least four or more hours of work each week specifically on your test preparation.

9th Grade – EXPLORE - no particular prep
PSAT - no particular prep



10th Grade – PLAN – no particular prep
PSAT – no particular prep

11th Grade – Fall – PSAT – prep 4 weeks

11th Grade – Late Winter – SAT I – prep 10-12 weeks
ACT – prep 10-12 weeks

11th Grade – Late Spring – SAT I – re-take if needed prep 4-6 weeks
ACT – re-take if needed prep 4-6 weeks

12th Grade – Fall – SAT I – re-take if needed prep 4-6 weeks
ACT – re-take if needed prep 4-6 weeks
SAT II – prep 8-10 weeks

AP Tests are taken in the spring of each year at the end of each AP Course.

Your job as a student is to do what you have always done: work hard and do your best. Use all the resources you can to prepare: the internet, books, and, FOR SURE, a live test preparation expert. Give yourself enough time; last minute preparation will make little difference on your scores! And on test day be focused and confident of your success!

Larry Brown

