



**TEXAS
GEAR
UP**

**ALL ABOUT THE
ACT/SAT TESTS**

*PARENT
SPOT*



ALL ABOUT THE ACT/SAT TEST

It's officially time to talk about the big tests! As your student prepares to go to college, one of the things she must do is take a college entrance exam. These particular tests are called "college entrance exams" because they're one of the factors considered by most four-year colleges and universities when they select students for admission.

Your teen will more than likely take either the **SAT**, offered by the College Board, or the **American College Test (ACT)**, offered by ACT, Inc. to meet the application requirements of colleges and universities. Both of these tests measure overall academic knowledge and evaluate a student's readiness to do college-level school work.

While your child can always count on help with the ACT/SAT from her GEAR UP advisor and high school counselor, we know it's important to you to support and help your student with preparing for, applying to, and enrolling in college. That's where this guide comes in!

This packet is not meant to be a totally comprehensive "how-to" on the ACT/SAT. It does present information and *consejos* (advice) for you to help and motivate your teen. You'll learn about the differences and similarities between the ACT and SAT, determining which test is best for your student, the registration process, how to send scores to colleges, and how to prepare for the tests. The last section will also offer you some tips on how to best help your student when they're ready to tackle the ACT/SAT.



HOW ARE THE ACT/SAT DIFFERENT FROM OTHER TESTS?

The ACT and SAT are the only tests needed for admission to most colleges and universities—and they're very different from the other tests teens take during high school:

THE STATE OF TEXAS ASSESSMENTS OF ACADEMIC READINESS (STAAR), END-OF-COURSE (EOC) ASSESSMENTS

These exams, required by the state for students to graduate from high school, measure what teens have learned in their classes. Your student must pass the following End-of-Course assessments: Algebra I, Biology, English I, English II, and U.S. History

TEXAS SUCCESS INITIATIVE (TSI)

An exam that tests reading, writing, and math used by colleges in Texas to determine if students are ready for college-level work. Based on the results, your child may be placed in either college-level courses or in developmental courses designed to prepare them for college-level courses when they enroll in college. Note that some students may be exempt from the TSI based on their ACT/SAT scores.

ADVANCED PLACEMENT (AP) EXAMS

College-level tests taken by teens who are enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school. The exam is used to determine if a student should receive college credit for a specific class.



WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE ACT AND SAT?

As a parent, one way to support your student with college entrance exams is by getting a general sense for the tests so you know the choices he's facing. Start by figuring out the differences and similarities between the two tests...

	SAT	ACT
TEST COMPONENTS	Evidence-Based Reading and Writing (which is made up of the Reading and the Writing + Language sections), Math, and Optional Essay (though most schools want your essay result, so it's important to not skip the essay section)	Reading, English, Math, Science, and Optional Essay (though most schools want your essay result, so it's important to not skip the essay section)
SCORING	Between 200-800 for each section » Composite score is sum of the two sections (so range is 400-1600)	Between 1-36 for each section » Composite score is the average of the four sections
NUMBER OF QUESTIONS	154	215
LENGTH OF TEST	3 hours (+50-minute optional essay)	2 hours, 55 minutes (+40-minute optional essay)
ORDER OF SECTIONS + TIMING	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reading, 65 minutes, 52 questions 2. Writing + Language, 35 minutes, 44 questions 3. Math (no calculator), 25 minutes, 20 questions 4. Math (with calculator), 55 minutes, 38 questions 5. Essay (optional, but recommended), 50 minutes 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. English, 45 minutes, 75 questions 2. Math, 60 minutes, 60 questions 3. Reading, 35 minutes, 45 questions 4. Science Reasoning, 35 minutes, 40 questions 5. Essay (optional, but recommended), 40 minutes



WHICH TEST SHOULD MY STUDENT TAKE?

Most colleges and universities accept both tests, so your teen can actually decide which to take. It's important to keep firmly in mind that the ACT/SAT is a factor that the schools use in deciding whether to admit your student. Also, some universities and organizations may use the ACT/SAT as a factor in awarding scholarships—which is all the more reason to shoot for the absolute best scores possible (especially if your student already has guaranteed admission through high school rank). Your teen can check the ACT/SAT requirements for the colleges/universities he's interested in by visiting the "Student Admission" sections of their websites, under headings like "first-time students" or "future students."



THERE ARE A COUPLE OF THINGS YOUR STUDENT CAN DO TO HELP HIM DECIDE WHICH TEST MIGHT BE THE BEST FIT.

One recommendation is to have your teen actually take both tests. This'll help him determine which one he liked best and, more importantly, which one he did better on.

Another (less expensive) suggestion is to have him take practice tests for both types of exams. With this approach, your student may not learn his test score, but he can still find out what the real test feels like and the type of questions asked by the ACT or the SAT.

The handy table below gives you specific details about the content of the tests (including how they differ) to help you discuss with your student what the winning option might be for him.

SAT

ACT

READING	Longer passages written at 9 th -grade level or higher	Somewhat shorter passages written at about 9 th -grade level
	(Called “Writing + Language”)	
ENGLISH	Questions focus on writing style and selecting the correct words—the Reading and Writing + Language sections make up your Evidence-Based Reading and Writing section score	Questions focus on the main idea, grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure
SCIENCE	Doesn’t include a science section	Questions measure interpretation, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, and problem-solving skills—not specific science knowledge
	Test covers Algebra I & II, Geometry, and Trigonometry	Test covers Algebra I & II, Geometry, and Trigonometry
	» It also covers data analysis	» Doesn’t cover data analysis
	» Formulas are provided	» Formulas aren’t provided
MATH	» One part must be done without a calculator, but it doesn’t require difficult math	» Can use a calculator for entire test
	» Most math questions are multiple choice	» Answers are all multiple choice
	○ A few are “grid-ins,” which require students to calculate answer rather than select answer	
ESSAY	Optional (check if required by college)	Optional (check if required by college)
	» Student evaluates an argument	» Student develops and supports an argument
WRONG ANSWERS	No penalty for wrong answers	No penalty for wrong answers
	» Encouraged to guess and not leave any blank	» Encouraged to guess and not leave any blank
TYPES OF QUESTIONS	Questions require more analysis and problem-solving	Questions are long but straightforward
OVERALL EXAM	Allows more time per question	Allows less time per question
		» Student needs to pace progress through questions

Students who currently receive accommodations in school for testing (either state or unit testing) may be able to have those same accommodations on the ACT or SAT. The best way to make these arrangements is to start by checking with your teen’s high school counselor as early as possible before the test date. Your counselor will know what to do and will advise on the next steps to take.



WHEN SHOULD MY STUDENT TAKE THE ACT/SAT?

Good news: There’s some flexibility on the timing. Students can take either test as early as freshman year in high school—although taking it junior year is usually the best bet. And both exams also offer a “pre-test”: For the SAT, the College Board offers the PSAT, and ACT offers the PRACT for students. If her high school offers them, your teen can take either of these pre-tests in 10th grade as an introduction to the actual exam and as a preparation strategy to help her get the highest score on her first attempt at the ACT/SAT. She should ask her school counselor for all the details about PSAT/PRACT testing opportunities.

One important thing to know: Because both the SAT and ACT cover geometry and trigonometry, your student should wait until she’s completed these classes to take either test. (Just don’t wait until later than junior year to take it for the first time.)

There are real benefits to taking the ACT/SAT by the end of the junior year. For example, it allows

your student to figure out where she stands in meeting the admission criteria for the universities she’s interested in. It also gives her a chance to retake the test in her senior year to aim for a higher score—which is obviously a huge plus.

To make planning easier, both the ACT and SAT are offered multiple times each school year. The ACT is offered six times a year: September, October, December, February, April, June, and July. The SAT is offered seven times a year: August, October, November, December, March, May, and June. Just be sure to keep in mind that registration deadlines for these tests are approximately 4-5 weeks BEFORE the test date. (More on registration next!)

Regardless of when your teen chooses to take the ACT/SAT, she should check college admission deadlines way in advance to ensure that her scores can be submitted on time to the schools she’s applying to. The ACT/SAT does offer rush services, but you’ll have to pay extra.

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HOW DOES MY STUDENT REGISTER FOR THE TESTS?

The registration process is similar (and not too complicated) for both the ACT and SAT:

STEPS	SAT	ACT
WHERE TO REGISTER?	<p>Your student can register online at www.collegeboard.org</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » He'll have to create an account or log into his existing one » Neither you nor the counselor can register your child » Your teen will need to upload a photo as part of the registration 	<p>Your student can register online at www.act.org</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » He'll have to create an account or log into his existing one » Neither you nor the counselor can register your child » Your teen will need to upload a photo as part of the registration
WHEN SHOULD YOUR STUDENT REGISTER?	<p>Your student should register at least four weeks before the test date he's interested in</p>	<p>Your student should register at least five weeks before the test date he's interested in</p>
HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO REGISTER?	<p>The cost for each SAT test is \$45 without essay test and \$57 with essay test</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Fee waivers are available for students with economic hardships (basic eligibility is being on free or reduced-price lunch) » Your teen should check with his counselor for information on test waivers 	<p>The cost for each ACT test is \$42.50 without essay test and \$58.50 with essay test</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Fee waivers are available for students with economic hardships (basic eligibility is being on free or reduced-price lunch) » Your teen should check with his counselor for information on test waivers

Your student's exam registration won't be complete until he uploads that headshot photo of himself for both the ACT and SAT. This'll be used to identify him on the day of the test as a security measure. It's a requirement, so he won't be able to take the test if he doesn't submit his photo. More details on how to do the uploading can be found on the websites for each test.



WHERE DOES MY STUDENT TAKE THE ACT/SAT?

Ultimately, the test site will depend on the date of the exam. Your student will choose a date for his test when he registers. Once he picks the big day, a list of sites (called “test centers”) will appear for that date. The test sites are usually local high schools. Just be sure your teen chooses the site that’s closest to your home so that he doesn’t have to travel very far.



HOW TO SEND TEST SCORES TO COLLEGES?

There are two ways to send scores to the colleges your teen is applying to, regardless of whether she takes the ACT or the SAT. And know that the colleges require official score reports sent directly from either ACT or SAT—your student isn’t allowed to submit a copy of her test scores.

▶ **DURING REGISTRATION** When your child registers for the ACT or the SAT, she can select up to four colleges to send her scores to at no extra charge. All she needs to do is pick the colleges she wants to receive her scores by entering the code for each of the schools (every college has a unique code). Selecting the colleges during registration is recommended because it’s included in the cost of registering—which means it’s free!

She can look up the codes for the colleges on their individual websites (usually under the “Admission Requirements” section) or directly on the ACT or SAT websites. Her GEAR UP advisor or school counselor can also help her find the codes for the colleges she’s applying to.

And this isn’t a one-time deal. Every time she registers to take the ACT or the SAT, she can choose four colleges to send her score report to free of charge.

▶ **AFTER TAKING THE TEST** After she takes the ACT or SAT, she can still send her scores to other colleges she may be interested in. However, she’ll have to pay a fee for these additional reports—about \$12 PER school.

However, if she took the SAT and qualified for a test fee waiver, she may be able to send her score report to an additional four colleges for free. So she should definitely check with her counselor about sending additional reports after taking the SAT.

Fee or no fee, she’ll need to log into her account for whichever test she wants to send scores for (SAT at www.collegeboard.com or ACT at www.act.org) and complete the steps to send the additional score reports.



WHEN ARE TEST SCORES READY?

The waiting game can be rough! Luckily, both the ACT and SAT allow your student to view her scores online (they generally don't mail physical copies of the results anymore). For the ACT, scores are usually available within two weeks after taking the test. Score reports to the colleges she identified during registration will be sent by ACT within two to eight weeks of taking the test. For the SAT, your teen can see her online scores within four weeks. SAT will also begin sending her test scores to the colleges she selected within four weeks.

Both the ACT and SAT offer students the opportunity to choose which scores they want sent to the colleges. ACT's process is automatically set up to send out only the scores for the date you designate—it doesn't send any other scores. For the SAT, this feature is called Score Choice. Your student will need to decide which test date she wants to send reports for. Keep in mind that all her scores from a test date will be reported together, and she can't combine scores from two different exam dates. For example, she can't report her reading score from one test and her math score from another test (unfortunately). Also, some colleges and universities require students to submit ALL scores, so she should be sure to check on her specific schools' requirements.



IMPORTANT NOTE:

Submitting all scores doesn't necessarily put your teen at a disadvantage. That's because most colleges follow a practice called "superscoring" that works in your student's favor. It basically allows your child to get credit for the highest section scores she receives from all the tests taken. She doesn't have to worry about making

the highest score on each section of the exam on the same test date. Colleges that superscore automatically accept your student's highest section scores, even if they happened on different test days. You can find each college's policy on superscoring on their website under "New Students" or "Future Students."

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HOW SHOULD MY STUDENT PREP FOR THE TEST?

It's super crucial for your teen to become highly familiar with the ACT/SAT—knowing exactly the type of questions asked, how the test is laid out, and the time allowed to complete each different section. He should officially start prepping for the exam six months before the test date. There are a few things your child can do to prepare for the big test(s):

- » Take challenging classes throughout high school
- » Attend free test-prep sessions offered by GEAR UP or the high school
- » Use free test-prep materials offered by the high school or the public library, which may include ACT/SAT practice manuals, test booklets, and old practice tests

His GEAR UP advisor or high school counselor can provide your teen with more information on these free **(and incredibly helpful)** materials.

The ACT/SAT themselves also provide some exam-prep resources for your student. SAT offers free online test prep through the Khan Academy (<http://www.khanacademy.org/sat>), practice tests, and a daily question through its mobile app. To access all these no-charge resources, your teen should visit: <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/practice>. The folks at the ACT offer a “Question of the Day” and a free study guide. They also provide other online resources for purchase—like online prep and ACT Kaplan Online Prep Live. (For more information, your child can go to <http://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act/test-preparation.html>)



AS A FIRST-TIME ACT/SAT-TAKER, THERE ARE A FEW TIPS YOUR STUDENT SHOULD ALWAYS KEEP IN MIND DURING THE TEST TO HELP HIM:

- » Read the instructions and each of the questions carefully to be sure he's answering what the question asks.
- » Answer the easy questions first. The hard and the easy questions count the same on the tests. This'll also help ensure your teen answers as many questions as possible in the time allowed for each section.
- » Be sure that he marks the questions he skips so he can easily find them on his answer sheet.
- » Use "smart guessing" on the ones he skipped. That's when he eliminates the impossible answer or the answers he knows are wrong.
- » Constantly check that the question he's answering matches the question he's bubbling in. He needs to mark only one answer for each question, making completely certain that he's marking the correct row of ovals. It's not uncommon for students to bubble in the correct answer for the wrong question, which could lead to a whole domino effect of wrong answers down the sheet.

Another issue that may arise as he takes the ACT/SAT for the first time is test anxiety, which is extreme nervousness during an exam that can sometimes be overwhelming and interfere with your student's test performance. There are some signs he should look out for: sweaty palms or forehead, stomach pains, trouble concentrating, or getting a headache. Besides studying and preparing for the ACT/SAT with plenty of time before the test, there are also some anti-test-anxiety strategies your teen can use on the day of the test and during the exam itself:

- » Lay out the items needed for the test (like photo ID, admission ticket, calculator, and #2 pencils) the night before.
- » Arrive to the test center with enough time to register and get to his seat without rushing.
- » Breathe slowly and deeply.
- » Tense and relax his muscles—especially his hands, legs or neck.
- » Count to ten, slowly and silently.
- » Recite and repeat a quote, saying, or prayer silently to himself.
- » Keep focused on the test questions by underlining or circling key words or phrases.
- » Keep working through the test, looking for the easier questions.



MY STUDENT IS RETAKING THE TEST: WHAT CAN SHE DO TO SCORE BETTER?

Most students retake the ACT/SAT at least a couple of times. For the SAT, there's no limit to the number of times your student can retake the test. ACT limits retakes to 12 times.

Both ACT and SAT will provide your teen a detailed report of her scores online that shows her strengths and weaknesses. This is incredibly useful, because it'll help her identify the test sections that need improvement. Her teachers and counselors may also be able to assist her to pinpoint areas she should concentrate on to bump up her scores. Once she figures out the test areas that need work, your student can then develop a long-term study plan.

If your child takes the SAT, she can upload her score report to Khan Academy, which will create a free practice plan that'll be personalized just for her—based directly on her test results.



HOW CAN I HELP MY STUDENT?

Although the main duties for the ACT/SAT rest mostly with your student, there are absolutely ways you can support him.

- » Make sure your student...
 - Gets a good night's sleep the evening before the test.
 - Wakes up early to ensure enough time to:
 - Eat a nutritious breakfast.
 - Arrive to the correct center on time (the admission ticket will have any instructions about where to park and where to enter the building).
 - Prints and brings his admission ticket to the testing center.
 - Remembers to bring a photo ID, calculator with new batteries, and four sharpened #2 pencils. Highlighters or colored pencils are not allowed.
 - Brings a drink and snack in his backpack for his break.
 - Doesn't bring a laptop or devices that make any noise.

- » Remind your student to...
- Keep his phone out of sight and in complete silent mode—even during breaks! If he doesn't, he faces immediate ejection from the testing site and his scores being canceled.
 - Read questions carefully. Misunderstandings can lead to incorrect answers.
 - Answer easy questions first and then come back to the hard ones.
 - Mark/circle the questions he skips.
 - Monitor his time and not spend too long on any one question to avoid running out of time.
 - Answer every question because there's no penalty for guessing.
 - "Smart guess" by eliminating possible answers—getting rid of even one answer improves chances that he'll choose the right answer from the remaining choices.
 - Reassure your student that SAT/ACT tests are NOT the only factor considered by colleges in the admissions process.
 - Most colleges report that they weigh multiple factors in determining which students to admit to their institutions. The ACT/SAT is one of those factors—along with a variety of others like the classes he took, the rigor of those classes, his grades, his extracurricular activities, and letters of recommendation that his teachers and mentors submitted on his behalf.
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