

Most colleges accept scores from either test, so you can take the test that's right for you. Your college application journey is likely starting with the question, "Which test should I take?" Use this handy guide to help you decide:

Test Structure and Format	ACT	SAT
Length	3 hours, 35 minutes (including the optional Writing Test, not including breaks)	3 hours, 50 minutes (including the optional Essay, not including breaks)
Structure	<p>4 sections*</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• English• Math• Reading• Science <p>*Plus an Optional Writing Test</p>	<p>4 sections*</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading• Writing and Language• Math without a Calculator• Math with a Calculator <p>*Plus an Optional Essay</p>
Scoring	ACT	SAT
Score	<p>You will receive a composite score on a 1–36 scale. This score is an average of your scores on the 4 multiple-choice test sections (each section is scored on 1–36 scale).</p> <p>The optional Writing Test is not included in the composite score. You will receive 5 scores for the Writing Test: one overall score on a 2–12 scale and 4 domain scores, also 2–12, that are based on an analytic scoring rubric.</p>	<p>You will receive an overall score out of 1600. This score is calculated by adding your score on the Math section with your score on the Evidence-Based Reading & Writing section (each section is scored on a 200–800 scale).</p> <p>The optional Essay is not included in the overall score. You will receive 3 scores for the essay: Reading, Analysis, and Writing, which are all on 2–8 scale.</p>
Wrong Answer Penalty	No penalty for wrong answers.	No penalty for wrong answers.

**Sending
Score
History to
Colleges**

You can decide which score is sent to colleges. *Note: all scores from your selected test date are sent.*

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Topics Covered	ACT	SAT
Reading	Key Ideas and Details Craft and Structure Integration of Knowledge and Ideas	Command of Evidence Words in Context Analysis in History/Social Studies and in Science
Math	<p>Preparing for Higher Math:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number and Quantity • Algebra • Functions • Geometry • Statistics and Probability <p>Integrating Essential Skills Modeling</p>	<p>Heart of Algebra Problem Solving and Data Analysis Passport to Advanced Math Additional Topics in Math</p>
Science	Interpretation of Data Scientific Investigation Evaluation of Models, Inferences, and Experimental Results	<p>Science content is not tested on the SAT, but the test does measure your ability to interpret charts, infographics, and data on scientific topics in other sections.</p> <p>A Science Insight Score, based on these abilities, is provided.</p>
English/Writing and Language	Production of Writing Knowledge of Language Conventions of English Optional Writing Test (essay)	Command of Evidence Words in Context Analysis in History/Social Studies and in Science Expression of Ideas Optional Essay
Essay	Optional final section, 40 minute testing time	Optional final section 50 minute testing time Separate score, not included in overall score Topic comes from a 750-word passage to be read

Separate score, not included
in composite score

on test day
Tests reading, analysis, and writing skills

Topic presents conversations
around contemporary issues

Tests ability to argue a point
of view in a clear way, using
concrete examples

<https://greentestprep.com/resources/sat-prep/new-sat-vs-act/>

The New SAT vs. the ACT

Which One Should You Take?

If you want a competitive college application, you need high test scores. If you want high test scores, you need to take the right test. Before we dive in, know this first:

You should focus your efforts on taking *one* test. You don't get extra points for submitting two tests, but you'll *certainly* harm yourself by taking both tests.

No matter which test you decide to take, [my online system](#) comes with full programs for the New SAT and ACT. But picking the right test should come before any studying takes place.

Colleges use something called “the concordance table” to compare SAT and ACT scores. They don't prefer one test to the other: they just like you to have the highest COMPARATIVE score possible. A 1600 on the New SAT is a 36 on the ACT – getting either score will give you the exact same quality application, and once you get one great score, you're finished – there's no point in getting two good scores! It's like saying you're 6 feet tall and ALSO 2 yards tall – they might be different numbers, but you're saying the exact same thing. If you want to see how different scores compare to each other, you can use [my free New SAT ACT score converter](#).

Your only job is to pick ONE test that'll give you the best comparative score. It's your job to pick the test that'll give you the best score, focus all of your energy on it, and knock it out of the park.

With that in mind, the big question is: which one will get you the best comparative score?

The Differences Between the New SAT and ACT

The New SAT, which launched on March 5th of 2016, is basically a carbon copy of the ACT – it was designed to be just that.

The two tests have far more commonalities than differences, so let's list the few things that set them apart:

- **The New SAT doesn't have a science section. [The “science” section of the ACT is easy to master](#), and has nothing to do with science. But if you hate it, then the New SAT is your savior.**

- **The essays are different.** Both tests come with optional essays. The ACT essay asks you to come up with your own argument and support it – the New SAT essay asks you to evaluate an argument that someone else has already written for you. Neither is easier or harder – it’s just an issue of personal preference.
- **The New SAT has a few fill-in-the-blank math problems, and half of the math problems don’t allow calculator use.** The ACT lets you use a calculator on all its math problems, and all the answers are multiple choice. The New SAT has a “with calculator” and “without calculator” section, and 13 of its problems force you to fill in your own answer. The “without calculator” problems aren’t difficult because they don’t require any difficult arithmetic, so it’s not that much of an issue.
- **The New SAT is far less “time intensive.”** This is the big issue that really separates the two exams. The New SAT gives you far more time per problem, so it’s a much less intense testing experience. Alternatively, the ACT makes you go at a blisteringly fast pace. So if you need some more time to consider your answers, the New SAT is going to be your friend. If you can plow through questions and are super focused, then the ACT should be your exam of choice.

Aside from those differences, the tests are practically identical. The material tested is the same. The formatting is basically the same. They both test your knowledge of math, English grammar, and reading comprehension. They both take 3-4 hours to complete. And they both accomplish the same exact same goal: giving admissions an officers to save time by tossing your application in the trash if your scores aren’t high enough before they ever look at it.

Because the New SAT lacks a science section and is less time intensive, it might seem like an obvious choice. But there’s something to keep in mind: the nature of competition.

Pick the Test That Gives You the Biggest EDGE

Overall, I’d say that the New SAT is objectively easier than the ACT. You have more time to deal with each question and fewer sections to master. But before you dive right into the New SAT, you need to know the following:

- **College applications are about COMPARISON, and not about absolute value. You’re not evaluated based on how good you are – you’re judged on how good you are *compared to all the other applicants*.**
- **These tests are graded on a curve.** Your performance is scaled, and your final score is based on how you did *compared to everyone else*.
- **This means that you should take the test that gives you the biggest competitive edge.** The SAT might be “easier,” but it’s easier for *everyone who takes it*. The ACT might be “harder,” but it’s also just as hard for all the students who are taking it alongside you. The scale will come into play – if you can use that scale to your advantage, you’ll end up with the best college application possible.

The short version: if you’re awesome at fast-paced assignments and can stay focused for long periods of time, you have a *huge* competitive edge on the ACT. You can use those skills to blow the other students taking the ACT out of the water.

If you’re not so good at fast-paced assignments (if you prefer to take your time and think things through, or if you usually don’t finish your tests in school), the ACT will be a total nightmare. You should probably take the New SAT instead.

The Really Simple Way to Decide

If you take the following steps, you’ll be able to make the right decision and begin focusing on the correct test. This will only take an afternoon, and it’s the best possible investment you can make in your future test success:

1. **Grab a copy of both tests. You can either buy the [Official College Board Manual](#) and the [The Official ACT Prep Guide](#) , or you can find a [free copies of the New SAT](#) and a [free copy of the ACT](#) online.**

2. **Spend an hour looking at each test (including its rules for each section, its format, and its problems) and see which one you like best.** I've never had a student that was neutral on this issue.

Most students love the SAT and hate the ACT or vice versa.

3. **Start prepping and focus on the test you like the most.**

Did you expect it to be more complicated? Fortunately, it's not! These tests are remarkably similar – so if you think you'll have an edge on the ACT and you like the way it looks, take the ACT. If you think the ACT's time restraints are insanely challenging, or you really don't like the look of the science section, take the New SAT.

If you want to get more in-depth, there's a "varsity step" that you can take:

4. **Take a full-length, timed, graded, realistic practice exam of both tests and then compare your scores using the concordance table.**

This will take about eight hours over the course of two weekends. The College Board book and Real ACT book will show you exactly how to grade your exams. If you want a truly "scientific" comparison of your performance, this is doable. But there are two things to keep in mind:

- **You need to take BOTH tests under REALISTIC conditions** If you take one test on a weekend, after a full night's sleep, with a proper meal in your belly, in a quiet room, and you take the other test in the afternoon, in a busy library, on 4 hours of sleep, you're obviously going to do better on the former. There's no point in doing this unless you do it right. If you want to learn how to take a proper practice test, [check out my free guide on how to take an in-home diagnostic.](#)
- **The result you expect is usually the result you'll get.** I've had numerous students go through this exercise. In every case, the test that the student *thought* or she was going to do best on was the test that ended up giving him or her the best comparative score. So I don't have my students do this anymore – it's overkill.

That's really all there is to it! If you know what both tests look like, figure out which one will give you the biggest edge based on your own preferences and testing style, and then focus on that one, you're making the best possible test prep decisions.

One last thing:

Step Five: Start Early

People think test prep is a horrendous, stressful process. It's not – **if you start early.** If you start studying a month before your test, it's going to be hellish and stressful, and you won't be able to leverage your brain's preference for absorbing information over the long-term. If you start months in advance, you can put in 20-40 minutes a day (split into small sessions of 10-20 minutes each) and get way higher scores.

Once you've picked your test, you already know what to expect. So start studying as soon as you can! You'll get a much higher score *and* the entire process will be way easier. As a bonus, you won't need to derail any of your other activities – even if you're in the debate club, on varsity soccer, and dealing with a challenging course load, you can easily find the time to study for 15 minutes in the morning and another 15 minutes in the afternoon. Why wouldn't you?

Check out [my free guide on the importance of starting your SAT and ACT prep early.](#) In my 15,000+ hours teaching this exam, I've learned that THE biggest factor separating the winners from the losers is "prep runway." Give yourself the time to adequately prepare and this will be a stress-free, successful process. If not, you're just setting yourself up for a stressful, ineffective experience.

Looking to start prepping as soon as possible? Check out [my prep systems](#), with an average user score of 215+ points on the SAT and 4.66+ points on the ACT – and for less than half the price of the competition.

Deciding between the New SAT and the ACT is **essential**, but it's far from difficult. Take care of this as soon as you can and you'll be on your way to testing success in no time!

COMPARISON TABLE

SAT Composite Score (Math & CR only)	ACT Composite Score
1600	36
1540-1590	35
1490-1530	34
1440-1480	33
1440-1480	33
1400-1430	32
1360-1390	31
1330-1350	30
1290-1320	29
1250-1280	28
1210-1240	27
1170-1200	26
1130-1160	25
1090-1120	24
1050-1080	23
1020-1040	22
980-1010	21
940-970	20
900-930	19
860-890	18
820-850	17
770-810	16
720-760	15

SAT Composite Score (Math & CR only)	ACT Composite Score
670-710	14
620-660	13
560-610	12
510-550	11

<https://www.princetonreview.com/college/should-i-take-the-act-or-sat-quiz>

A quiz to help you decide which might suit you better

<https://thecriticalreader.com/sat-vs-act-quiz/>

Another short quiz to help you decide

<https://blog.prepscholar.com/act-vs-sat>

11 Key differences to help you decide.

<https://www.testive.com/sat-vs-act/>

Information, plus access to practice test for both, to help you decide.