

Testing, Testing, 1,2,3...

What You Need to Know About Standardized Testing

We all know that standardized test scores are an important element in college admissions decisions. So what is the secret to helping your teen manage the hype and pressure that surrounds these competitive exams? Like most things in life, if you are knowledgeable and make a plan, the process will be less stressful. Let's get started!

SAT or ACT?

First, realize that all four-year accredited colleges in the U.S. will accept either the SAT or ACT. There isn't typically a reason to take both, so the best strategy is to determine which test you are naturally strong at and put all your effort into maximizing your score on that test.

When should my student take the tests? The answer to this question is the same as the answer to most admissions questions: "It depends on the student." The summer prior to junior year is the best time to begin preparing for the ACT or SAT. The best strategy is to be consistent with test preparation throughout the year, expecting your highest scores toward the end of junior year. This approach gives students the whole summer prior to senior year to finalize their college list, complete personal statement essays, and start on college applications. Remember that your testing timeline will vary depending upon which test you choose to take.

This strategy will allow recruited students such as athletes, students who are auditioning for music or drama, students interested in the military academies, and those looking to take advantage of early admissions (early action, early decision) to have scores available for coaches, directors and admissions offices during the summer before senior year.

How many times should you take the tests?

It is recommended that students take the ACT or SAT twice, and in some cases three times. Some colleges will look negatively on more than three sittings of the test. The College Board has a policy called Score Choice. The intent is to ease the stress on students by allowing them to take the test as often as they like and choose which tests they send to admissions offices. It is important to note that some colleges do not support Score Choice and are requesting all test scores or simply the highest sitting.

Isn't there a practice test?

Both test companies offer a pre-test. The SAT test is called the PSAT/NMSQT or the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test. This test is offered through high schools during the month of October — mostly to sophomore and junior students. The test is a shortened version of the official SAT and is an opportunity for students to familiarize themselves with the testing format and question types. It can help students predict the actual score they might receive on the official SAT test. Students taking the PSAT during junior year will be able to participate in the National Merit Scholarship program. This prestigious scholarship is awarded to the very top percentile scores on the PSAT.

The ACT offers the Pre-ACT — a shortened version of the official ACT. It follows the same scoring and section structure as the official test and is offered to students at high schools that have chosen to participate. Ask your high school counseling office to see if your school participates. Unfortunately, if they don't offer it, he will not be able to take it.

Test Prep: Is it worth it?

There is a reason that the test prep business is a billion dollar industry. Most reputable test-prep organizations see improvements in their students' scores when students commit to the study program. Improving test scores can often make the difference in the outcome of the admissions decision. Luckily there are options for all types of students and all levels of budget. Some of the styles of SAT prep include group review sessions, preparation that focuses just on what the student doesn't know, or individual study. The highly motivated and disciplined student may be able to prepare on her own using the resources put out by College Board and ACT Student, or by using another online resource.

Sign me up!

ACT: Have your teenager go to www.ACT.org and complete the registration. There is a lengthy questionnaire/profile that students can fill out. This profile is sometimes used by colleges to better understand the student. Remind your student that these profile questions are optional and will result in a calculation of her probability for success in her major. This information will not be shared with students; however, it will be reported to admissions representatives. Encourage your student to exercise her right to choose what information is presented with her application and to think carefully before answering the profile questions. The cost is \$50.50 without the optional essay portion or \$67.00 including the essay. The ACT test is given seven times a year, usually September, October, December, February, April, June, and July. Note that the ACT essay is optional but many schools require it. It is a good idea for your teen to write the optional essay portion of the exam so that she can keep her options open.

SAT: Go to www.collegeboard.org and complete the enrollment. The SAT will cost \$47.50 without the essay and \$64.50 with the essay. The College Board offers the SAT seven times a year: October, November, December, March, May, June, and August. Check the registration dates to avoid late fees.

SAT SUBJECT TESTS: Don't forget these! Many highly selective schools require two or three SAT Subject Tests in addition to the SAT or ACT. There are twenty different SAT Subject tests and each is one hour in length. Students may take up to three different Subject Tests at one sitting. It is generally best to take the Subject Test right after completing the associated class, while the content is still fresh. March is the only test sitting students may not take the Subject Tests. Sign up at: www.CollegeBoard.org.

Test day tips:

- Have your teen get a good night's sleep the Friday before the test. Last-minute, late-night cramming usually doesn't help. Make sure your student knows how to get to the testing location. If it is not her home school, she can drive to it ahead of time to make sure she knows how to get there. She will want to take note of the location of the check-in area where her ID will be checked and she will be given her classroom assignment.
- Make sure your student brings the following items: registration form, photo identification that looks like the photo on the registration form, approved calculator with extra batteries, sweater or sweatshirt, two number 2 pencils with erasers, wrist watch (cell phones are prohibited), healthy snack and water.
- Your teen should show up to the test location 20-30 minutes early to get settled. He may want to do a couple of practice problems to get his brain in gear. He should warm up his brain the same way he would warm up his body for exercise!

Although standardized test scores are just one of the many decision criterion used by college admission offices, it is an area over which your student has some level of control, and with preparation, test scores can highlight his strengths. And, many colleges calculate their merit aid offerings based on a combination of GPA and SAT or ACT test scores — even little increases in test scores can result in hundreds or thousands of dollars! So tell him to sharpen his number 2 pencils and get ready for some testing.

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