

# SAT vs. ACT: Which entrance test is best?

**P**aper or plastic? Debit or credit? You may be pondering these kinds of choices, but your high school student is likely facing a far more perplexing decision: SAT or ACT? Of the two standardized tests that colleges use for admissions, which one should an applicant take?

It used to be just a matter of geography: Kids on the East and West coasts took the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test), while kids in the Midwest take for the ACT (American College Test). But as college admission has grown more competitive, many students now wonder which test might give them an edge.

There's no easy answer. While some kids perform noticeably better on one test or the other, just as many end up with comparable scores on both. And guidance counselors insist there's no foolproof way to know which test is best for what type of student. Still, it helps to understand how they differ so you can try to sort out which one might play to your child's strengths.

### How They Differ

Both the ACT and SAT are designed to predict a student's readiness for college, but they do so in very different ways: The SAT is essentially

a "reasoning" test that evaluates thinking and problem-solving skills. The ACT, by contrast, is curriculum based; it assesses students on specific subject matter that they've covered in high school.

Some say that hard-working kids who've taken rigorous high-school classes may do better on the ACT, especially if they have a hard time with tricky standardized tests. On the other hand, bright kids who under-perform in high school are sometimes better able to show their smarts on the SAT.

Another important distinction is writing assessment: It's mandatory on the SAT, but optional on the ACT, perhaps making that test preferable to a student who's a weak writer. The SAT has an extensive vocabulary section, while the ACT focuses more on grammar and punctuation. What's more, the SAT takes longer to complete: Students get 3 hours and 45 minutes to take it, compared to the 2 hours and 55 minutes for the ACT. So for kids who have a hard time sitting still, this is another worthwhile consideration.

Finally, the tests are scored differently. Each SAT section (math, verbal, and writing) is graded between 200-800, and then added together for a maximum perfect score of 2400. On the ACT, students earn between 1 and 36 on each section (reading, math, science and English), with the composite score being the average of those numbers.

Until this year, the ACT gave students more control than the SAT did over which test results colleges saw: If kids took the test more than once, they could have only their best score reported. The SAT used to send out the student's entire score history each time, but that practice ended in March with the introduction of a "score choice" option.

### The Bottom Line

While understanding the differences can help in the decision about which test to take, the only way to know for sure is to give each a try. Kids should consider experimenting with practice versions of each test to see if they perform better—or feel more comfortable—with one or the other. And for those who don't mind spending the time or the money—the SAT costs \$45; the ACT costs \$32 or \$47, if you include the writing section—there's always the option of sitting for both. Still, students should check with colleges to find out for sure which test the schools prefer. Most say they'll take either, but some highly selective institutions require students to also submit scores from SAT subject tests, known as the SATIIs.

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Regardless of which test a kid takes, one piece of advice remains the same:

Practice, practice, practice. It's the best way to get familiar with a test's format and content—and to maximize the chances of getting the best possible score.

## Test-Optional

Do you have a kid who you know can succeed in college—but who doesn't do well on standardized tests? If so, encourage him to look into the growing number of test-optional schools. Over 815 colleges and universities—including Briarcliff, Dowling, and Five Towns colleges on Long Island—do not require applicants to submit either SAT or ACT scores.

"These schools recognize that a student's high school record remains a better predictor of college performance than either test is," reports FairTest, a non-profit organization that promotes alternative assessments. Test-optional colleges include technical, music, and arts schools, as well as top-ranked institutions that are trying to recruit a wider variety of applicants. For a full list, go to [www.fairtest.org](http://www.fairtest.org).


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## Bookmark These 10 Great Websites for College-Bound Teens

**Use these sites to get tips, tools, and tactics that will help you find — and finance — the right school for you.**

### 1. Peterson's ([petersons.com](http://petersons.com)):

Originally a well-respected college guidebook, Peterson's has migrated online with enough material to fill volumes, so it's an awesome place to begin your college search. You'll find basic data about hundreds of colleges and universities, including criteria for admissions, courses of study, and total costs. In addition, there are helpful articles on virtually every aspect of the admissions process.

### 2. College Board ([collegeboard.com](http://collegeboard.com)):

You'll need to create an account here so you can register for the SATs—and check your scores the minute they're posted. But this nonprofit organization of more than 5,700 member schools provides a wealth of other information as well. Its website is a great starting point to gather—and compare—basic data on colleges, including admission requirements, program offerings, and costs.

### 3. ACT ([actstudent.org](http://actstudent.org)):

It's a good idea to take both the SAT and the ACT, since you will probably perform better on one than the other. Register for your

exam here, and then check your scores and send them on to your colleges of choice. (Tip: The College Board does a better job of providing comprehensive tips about applying to and enrolling in school than the ACT organization does, so don't spend much time with the college planning tools here.)

### 4. College Confidential ([collegeconfidential.com](http://collegeconfidential.com)):

This site bills itself as the "leading college-bound community on the web," and it's easy to see why. In addition to helpful articles on admissions and financial aid, it features lively discussion boards where parents, students, and admissions officers answer each other's questions, share tips, and offer support throughout the college process. Register and give yourself a "screen name" so you can join the conversation.

### 5. College Prowler ([collegeprowler.com](http://collegeprowler.com)):

You'll get the lowdown on schools directly from students and recent grads. Learn about everything from acceptance rates to assessments of the campus drinking and dating scenes on more than 6,900 colleges listed. You'll also find colorful quotes from co-eds that give you a real-deal sense of the college environment. In addition, the site offers a tool to help you assess your chances of getting into the schools you're considering.

### 6. CollegeClickTV ([collegeclicktv.com](http://collegeclicktv.com)):

Watch videos of students, faculty, and staff talking about all kinds of topics—from nightlife to academic rigor, from the best pros to the scoop about playing sports on campus. They don't replace a visit to a campus, but the videos could help you narrow your list.

### 7. Common Application ([commonapp.org](http://commonapp.org)):

Complete one main application and essay, and then submit them to any of the 415 "common app" schools. (Sounds fabulous, right?) You can also link to any supplementary application materials a school requires. (Tip: It's a good idea to check the link for each school you're considering, as their requirements vary.) Plus, teachers and guidance counselors can log on to submit your recommendations electronically.

### 8. Student Aid on the Web ([studentaid.ed.gov](http://studentaid.ed.gov)):

The U.S. Department of Education's site gives helpful info on preparing and paying for your college education. Here you'll find easy links to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (or FAFSA), which you'll need to complete if you want help paying for college. You'll also find repayment calculators, a free scholarship

search, and tips on how and when to apply to school.

**9. FastWeb ([fastweb.com](http://fastweb.com)):** If you're hoping for a scholarship, this is the place to hunt it down. After registering, you can custom-search a database of 1.5 million awards (worth more than \$3 billion) based on your individual qualifications and needs. FastWeb also supplies info on job and internship programs and has an active discussion board.

**10. FinAid ([finaid.com](http://finaid.com)):** This award-winning website may well be the most comprehensive resource on paying for higher education. You'll find nitty-gritty details about different types of loans, scholarships, grants, and even military programs. The site's FAQs cover anything you can think of: There's even a category called "miscellaneous and unusual" questions.

## Sites for Parents

**Sallie Mae's Education Investment Planner ([salliemae.com/invest](http://salliemae.com/invest)):** Use this impressive interactive tool to figure out exactly how much you'll need for college, estimate costs, and determine how much to borrow.

**LinkedIn ([linkedin.com](http://linkedin.com)):** You might already have an account; if not, it's free to register. Then you can join groups, such as "Parents of College-Bound Teens." Click the "Groups" button and then search the directory.

**The College Solution ([thecollegesolution.com](http://thecollegesolution.com)):** Veteran journalist Lynn O'Shaughnessy has written several books about affording college and finding the right fit. She gives great tips on a variety of college-related topics, and as a mother of two college students, she's sympathetic to the joys and challenges of searching for the right school.

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