

Top 10

Things Counselors, Parents & Students Need to Know About the ACT® and SAT®



1

Full-Length practice exams

ACT and SAT prep is incomplete without full-length practice exams. No matter which mode of prep students pursue—courses, web-based instruction, small group study sessions, private tutoring, or simply practice on their own—all students should be taking timed, official practice exams in preparation for the ACT or SAT. This is the only true way for students to adapt to the time constraints and stressors of the real exams. Students who wish to time and grade themselves can access free practice tests from each testing organization’s website.

2

ACT or SAT?

Students should determine whether one test is better for them. All colleges and universities view the ACT and SAT on equal footing: neither is preferred to the other, and submitting scores from both exams won’t earn students brownie points. Thus, it behooves students to determine which test, if either, favors their learning and test-taking styles. Though the exams are more similar to each other than ever before, they still feature a number of differences that can affect a given student’s performance. Taking “diagnostic” exams before starting prep is a great way to determine whether a student has more potential on one exam or the other. Students can visit the ACT or SAT websites to access free, official practice exams; alternatively, your school can use our practice test service to administer diagnostic exams to all of your students! Cross-exam scores can be compared using concordance tables.

3

Review test questions

For three tests per year, both the ACT and the SAT offer students the opportunity to order a copy of the questions they saw on test day. The ACT’s Test Information Release (TIR, \$22) is offered for the Saturday administrations of the April, June, and December ACTs; students will receive copies of their exams several weeks after their scores are released. The SAT’s Question and Answer Service (QAS, \$18, fee waiver available for qualifying students) is offered for the Saturday administrations of the March, May, and October SATs; students can access the questions from inside their College Board accounts on the day their scores are released, and will receive copies of the exam several weeks later.

The QAS and TIR provide the most specific insight into student performance on the ACT and SAT. Students who use these services can home in on their weaknesses and learn whether they are making careless errors and experiencing major time management issues on the real test.

Both of these services may be purchased during test registration, as well as up to a certain number of weeks after the administration of the exams. (See each test company’s website for details.)

4

No guessing penalty

On both the ACT and SAT, it is to students’ benefit to answer every single question, even if they must guess randomly toward the end of their sections. There is no longer a “guessing penalty” on the SAT. When the College Board revised the SAT in 2016, it changed the way the exam is scored. Students no longer lose points for providing incorrect answers; rather, they are graded simply based on how many questions they answer correctly. This aligns the SAT’s scoring system more closely to that of the ACT, which also gauges student performance solely by the number of correct answers provided.

5

Wear a watch

Students should always wear their own watches on test day. Timing is a critical factor on both the ACT and SAT. Technically, both testing organizations' guidelines specify that there should be a working, clearly visible clock in all classrooms used for testing. In practice, though, problems arise. We have heard too many horror stories of broken or obstructed clocks to count. Students should purchase or acquire a cheap digital watch and turn off the sounds. In this way, they can keep track of the time without having to rely on wall clocks in questionable working order.

6

Vocabulary

Studying vocabulary by rote is no longer relevant to test prep. The days of analogies, synonyms, antonyms, and fill-in-the-blank vocabulary questions are over. Therefore, studying vocabulary as part of ACT/SAT prep is a wildly inefficient use of time. Students should instead devote time to developing their reading skills such as comprehension, speed, and retention, and to learning strategic approaches to various questions.

7

GPA

GPA and ACT/SAT scores are correlated, but not perfectly so. Many times, you'll see an otherwise great student struggle with raising his or her ACT/SAT scores. Why? The ACT and SAT are entirely different than traditional in-school academic exams. Rather than testing small segments of knowledge, they test a broad range of abilities and content proficiency that spans students' education back to eighth grade. Both tests "dress up" simple question types in less direct language and in more sophisticated contexts. These factors make the ACT and SAT far more challenging than the average school test or quiz. It is therefore not unusual for students who excel in school to have a difficult time with the ACT and SAT. Depending on a given student's struggles, he or she may benefit from one or several modes of prep.

8

Repetition

Both the ACT and SAT are highly predictable, but it takes time for students to learn how this can help them. From our vantage point, it's easy to see how repetitive and standardized the ACT and SAT really are. We can look at a new test and immediately distinguish certain questions as near-copies of older ones. It's another thing, however, for students to get to this point. For that to happen, students need lots of practice through seeing lots of questions and passages. Only after they have seen several tests' worth of material will they begin to see how garden-variety most of the test material proves to be. To allow themselves ample time to work through several exams, students should come up with a test-taking timeline. Taking a few minutes to plan their prep for the months ahead pays dividends!

9

Take the first exam sooner

Most students wait too long to take their first ACT or SAT. Do the majority of your students take their first exams in the spring of junior year? Try to encourage them to prepare for and take their first exam sooner. Why? If students wait until March or April to take their first tests, many of their remaining chances to retest fall at inopportune times. There's May or June, when AP, IB, and final exams are in full swing; there's summer, when fewer testing sites are available; there's the fall of senior year, when any remaining standardized test obligations will collide with schoolwork, extracurriculars, and college applications season on top of it all. By shifting the start of their test-taking timelines earlier (say late fall or early winter of junior year), students can avoid untold amounts of stress and uncertainty. In our perfect world, most students would be finished with the ACT and SAT before the summer between junior and senior years. To accelerate the test-taking timeline, consider suggesting to your students that they start preparing for the test of their choice over the summer between sophomore and junior years. Even for students who are a bit behind in their math curricula, preparing for, say, the December ACT or SAT can confer great advantages.

10

Super scoring

"Super scoring" is not a choice students make. Many students take the ACT and SAT under the incorrect assumption that they can pool their best individual section scores from multiple exams into a single, tidy report. This isn't true. Some college and university admissions offices do operate under score-use policies that give applicants the benefit of the doubt, in that their systems will present the best section scores to the admissions committees; this, however, happens only after students submit full test-date score reports that contain the scores they'd like the admissions committee to see. It is up to the individual admissions committees to determine how to interpret the scores made available.