



Standardized Exams and Test Preparation

When and how many times should I take the ACT or SAT?

You should plan on taking your first SAT in the late winter or early spring (January or March) of your Junior year. Typically, these dates have very few possible educational conflicts and you will have enough time to fully prepare. Also, these dates are typically the most popular, so there is a good chance that your school will be available as a test center.

I highly recommend that you take the ACT at least once, to see how your results compare to your SAT results. The February and April ACT are very popular with Juniors and offer the most test centers.

After reviewing the results of your SAT and ACT, you should decide which exam works best with your ability as a test-taker and plays to your academic strengths. Then, take that exam again in June. Senior year exams should be used as an emergency fall back, not as part of the original plan.

Taking any standardized test more than two times rarely provides any benefit (assuming full preparation and a normal test day experience), as scores tend to plateau.

Do I need to take SAT Subject Tests?

SAT Subject Tests (formerly, SAT IIs) are exams whose scores are used for acceptance and placement at many universities. Schools that require these tests most commonly want to see scores from a math (most often, the Math II) or science exam and a humanities exam (US History, for example). Though there are schools that don't require them, if you wait until your Senior year to decide to take them, it may be too late.

My advice is to take SAT Subject Tests just in case, and do it at the time(s) that will result in the highest scores. For students taking AP courses, this would likely be in May, immediately before the (much more extensive and more difficult) AP exam in the same subject. This is helpful for students taking classes like AP English, AP Biology, and AP US History in their Junior year. Students who do not anticipate taking AP courses should take the exams in June, after the full course for which they are testing has been completed. Keep in mind, however, that students cannot take the SAT and SAT Subject Tests in the same day.

Summarized Possible Testing Schedule

January SAT, February ACT, April/June ACT or May/June SAT
or
March SAT, April ACT, May SAT Subject Tests, June SAT or ACT

But all of my friends have started their testing in the Fall of their Junior year!

There is no need to rush your testing. Learning how to “be” a Junior is challenging enough that you don’t need to couple it with test prep. Additionally, taking unprepped exams “just to see how it goes” can create anxiety as a result of poor performance. Be patient, make a plan, and stick to it.

However, there are some students who may have legitimate cause to test early. Those students who are testing perfectly (meaning all questions in all sections correct) at the start of their Junior year need not wait. Those students who are athletes and are being asked for scores by coaches might want to get the ball rolling. Finally, students who have major conflicts in the spring such that they cannot prepare or test should take it earlier rather than later.

Why should I take the ACT?

In short, the ACT exam is a standardized test-taker’s dream. Every four-year college in the US that uses standardized test scores started accepting ACT scores for admission. About a decade ago, this exam was only popular in the Mid-West and the South, but its reach has expanded dramatically. In fact, the ACT is now taken by more students than the SAT nationally each year. Many of us in the test preparation industry prefer the ACT to the SAT. Some important differences make the ACT more palatable, including more straightforward questions and a lower level of math required.

How can I register for the ACT or SAT?

SAT registration is most easily completed on www.collegeboard.org . ACT registration can be done at www.act.org . If you are registering for extended time or other accommodations, you may be required to do so through the mail. The on-line registration processes for both exams are quite lengthy, so allow for several minutes to complete them. After you have taken your first SAT or ACT, however, subsequent registration takes very little time, as you have already provided all of your background information.

When should I register?

For either exam, you should plan out your testing well in advance and register as soon as they allow you to do so. This will insure that you can test at the center of your choice and not a less convenient location. For the less prepared, you may register up to the normal deadline (usually 4-5 weeks before the exam), or pay a little extra and register late (usually 2-3 weeks before the exam).

Where should I take the exams?

Familiarity is the key when it comes to testing. If your school is offering the exam on a desirable date, take the exam there, even if it is further from your home than another testing site. Otherwise, pick a place nearby and easy to find. It is always a good idea to take a practice run to an unfamiliar testing site. You may also call the guidance department of the school to find out where on campus, specifically, testing will be held: schools very often will only have one entrance door unlocked and outdoor signage may not direct you there.

When should I start to prepare?

Doing well on standardized testing involves having a good approach and being very familiar with the exam. I recommend that you begin your SAT preparation before your Junior-year PSAT. This will allow for a dry-run of sorts to apply what you have learned and see the results. You should continue your preparation up to and through your very last SAT.

In our experience, a student who is well prepared for the SAT can prepare for the ACT fairly quickly. A few weeks of preparation, leading up to each individual ACT, should provide enough time.

How should I prepare?

Preparation can be done a number of ways. You may choose to prepare on your own on-line or using review books, you may choose one-on-one tutoring, or you may enroll in a course. You must choose the method (or methods) that fit best. If you can motivate yourself to prepare on your own, you may succeed by enrolling in an on-line course (Khan Academy's Official SAT Prep and the Official ACT Online Course are best) or purchasing a book (of which I would recommend the College Board's Official SAT Study Guide or Peterson's Real ACT Prep Guide).

If you are less motivated, then you may do better in a course or one-on-one. Obviously, the cost of this is far greater: good tutors often charge \$75-\$150 an hour, while courses may cost up to \$2000. The potential benefit of outside preparation is great, as long as you are matched with the right instructor. Different instructors use different strategies, so be sure that the instructor that you are using is offering

updated material following the most recent additions and revisions. For example, SAT instructors who stress memorizing vocabulary words or their roots have not changed their approach for the more reading-focused exams introduced in 2005.

You may be tempted to default into the course offered by your school. You may assume it is reputable based on the reputations of the teachers in their regular coursework. Sometimes this is true; however, good teachers do not necessarily make good test prep instructors. You should research these courses as you would any other: the traditional Math and English teacher duo sometimes don't yield the results you are looking for. Talk to the instructors, talk to students who have taken the course, and make sure the course has a track record of success.

Good instructors often have their schedules booked weeks (or months) in advance, so plan ahead. Getting calls in early may allow you to find a scheduled time that works better for you. Rising Juniors should start contacting instructors in the spring of the Sophomore year for PSAT and SAT preparation.

Either way, you would do well to learn the strategies that work for you and then practice, practice, and practice some more. Treat it as you would a golf swing or jump shot or pitching motion: do not mix approaches or take long breaks from preparing. An occasional refresher with your "coach" (or, test prep instructor) will help.

The test is coming up this week, what should I do?

If you've been preparing, you should simply continue to do more of the same in the week leading up to the exam. Schoolwork always takes top priority: be sure that you have completed all of your assignments on time. You may also plan ahead and complete any long-term assignments before the end of this week. Otherwise, try to make time every day to practice, up to and including the Thursday before the exam.

On Friday, focus on relaxation. Day-before preparation can be dangerous, as a poor performance on practice questions can increase test day anxiety. You should treat the day like a normal school night in which you have no homework. No single party is more important than Saturday's exam (trust me, there will be plenty more), so stay home. Watch a movie with friends or, if you really feel inclined to prepare, read something.

Make sure you eat a good meal on Friday night and Saturday morning. Avoid foods that will have digestive ramifications that you will have to deal with during the exam (chili, Mexican food, greasy omelets, etc...). Instead, eat complete meals for dinner and breakfast. This will help to keep your energy up. You're going to need it.

Before you go to sleep, try to get together everything that you will need on test day. See the attached checklist for help. If you often have trouble deciding what to wear in the morning, try to put it out the night before.

Plan on going to sleep at the same time you would on a school night. Don't try to force yourself to sleep earlier...you may find yourself staring at the ceiling and panicking about Saturday's events. If you are having trouble sleeping, read. Do not try to sleep with the TV on: TV has been shown to delay sleep, not help it.

And set your alarm. Make sure the person driving you to the exam does the same.

How do I survive the test day experience?

On test day, there are a couple things that you can do to make the experience a little less stressful.

Have a normal school day morning. Don't do or eat anything that you wouldn't normally do or eat!

Be comforted in the knowledge that you are prepared and remember to keep things in perspective. The exam you are about to take is not the equivalent of making a putt to win or lose a golf tournament. Instead, it is the equivalent of having 5 attempts to make the winning putt. If you miss on this one, you can try again.

Steal every possible second of mental down time you can during the test. If you finish a section, never go back to check your answers simply for the sake of checking them. Instead, give your mind a break. Think about something easy: what you want for lunch, what you are doing that night, what you want for your birthday. Don't close your eyes and put your head down, though. Falling asleep could be disastrous.

Dress appropriately. School buildings are notoriously too cold or too warm. Dress in light layers, so that you can add or remove clothes to be as comfortable as possible.

Most importantly, turn off your cell phone. If it rings, or is even discovered to be on, at any point (including breaks), the proctor is obligated to cancel your score. Leave your phone at home if you can.

I have so many more questions, now what?

Call someone for help. Your guidance counselor may be a good resource, though sometimes they know about as much as you do. Speak to someone who has gone through this before (and recently). Or, call someone who works in private college counseling or test preparation.

Test Day Checklist

- Admission ticket
- Photo ID
- Two non-mechanical pencils with erasers
- Scientific calculator
- Extra batteries for calculator