



Comparing the ACT to the redesigned SAT

The ACT and SAT are different tests with significant overlap. While most students will score equally well on both, for some students the differences between the tests can make one test a better option than the other. The chart below outlines some of the high-level differences.

	ACT	New SAT	Key Differences
Format & Length	5 sections (comprising 4 “tests” and an essay) English; Mathematics; Reading; Science; Writing Total testing time: 3 hours, 25 minutes (with essay)	5 sections (comprising 3 “tests” and an essay) Writing & Language; Reading; 2 Math; Essay Total testing time: 3 hours, 50 minutes (with essay)	The SAT has a stronger emphasis on math, whereas the ACT has a stronger emphasis on science. Overall testing time and section lengths are similar. SAT questions generally require more critical thinking, but the SAT also provides 30-40% more time per question.
Scoring	Composite Score: 1-36 English: 1-36 Math: 1-36 Reading: 1-36 Science: 1-36 Writing (not averaged into composite score): 1-36	Combined Score: 400-1600 Evidence-Based Reading and Writing: 200-800 Math: 200-800 Essay (not added into combined score): 6-24	The ACT Composite score is averaged, so a change in one test may not be reflected in the Composite. The ACT Composite is divided into few possible scores, so an increase of one point can represent a significant difference in abilities. The SAT Combined score is the sum of the section scores.
Writing/ English	Revision and editing Standard English grammar Punctuation Logical structure Effective rhetoric	Revision and editing Standard English grammar Punctuation Logical structure Effective rhetoric	The SAT Writing & Language and ACT English tests are similar in format and content. The SAT has more emphasis on rhetoric and has more complex passages, but offers about 33% more time per question than the ACT does.
Math	Pre-Algebra through Trig Extensive range of concepts tested Formulas not provided 5 answer choices per question (rest of test has 4)	Pre-Algebra through Trig 12 Grid-in questions (no answer choices) Strong emphasis on algebra Calculator prohibited on one section	The SAT and ACT Math tests cover similar ranges of concepts. The ACT requires a broad, basic knowledge of many concepts. The SAT requires a deep knowledge of a core set of concepts, particularly in algebra. The SAT offers about 38% more time per question than the ACT does.
Reading	4 single or paired passages Consistent order of subject areas: Literary Narrative or Prose Fiction, Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences	4 single passages and 1 paired passage 2 diagrams/charts 2 vocabulary-in-context questions per passage 2 evidence questions per passage	The ACT Reading test emphasizes basic reading comprehension. The SAT Reading test emphasizes defining vocabulary in context, understanding the role of the author, and defending answers with textual evidence. The SAT typically has more complex passages, but offers about 43% more time per question.
Science	40 questions 6 or 7 passages Emphasis on charts & diagrams Science is a reasoning test—rarely requires prior specific science knowledge	The SAT does not have a standalone Science section, but science questions will be included throughout the Math, Reading, and Writing & Language tests	The ACT Science test measures interpretation, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, and problem-solving skills. The test uses scientific language and reasoning, but rarely requires any specific knowledge from your academic science classes. The SAT does not have an analogue to the ACT Science test.
Essay	40 minutes Evaluate three perspectives on a contemporary issue Scored on 2-12 scale on each of four domains: Ideas & Analysis, Development & Support, Organization, Language	50 minutes Analyze a passage and evaluate author’s reasoning and rhetoric Scored on 2-8 scale on each of three domains: Reading, Analysis, Writing	The ACT essay emphasizes crafting and comparing arguments. The SAT essay emphasizes understanding and analyzing how arguments are crafted. The ACT allows for more creativity, whereas the SAT requires strong analytical reading skills and provides more time to write the essay.