

# The ACT

Everything A Parent  
Needs to Know



TESTIVE

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# OVERVIEW

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## An Overview

The ACT is a standardized college entrance test that is widely accepted wherever the SAT is accepted. Colleges will take ACT scores just as seriously as SAT scores, so rest assured, students who want to take the ACT should not feel compelled to have to take the SAT as well. In years past, the ACT was the distant cousin of the SAT, but now the ACT is actually taken by more students than the SAT is each year. Colleges typically use the ACT for admissions decisions, but some may also use ACT scores to place students in courses or to award merit-based scholarships.

Standardized tests are important because they give an objective measure of performance to colleges, which provides an opportunity to level the playing field for students. When college admissions counselors look at grades, an A in Algebra at one school is going to be different than an A at another school. It's like comparing apples to oranges. Conversely, when they look at ACT scores, they are now comparing apples to apples.

Adding even more to this importance: standardized test scores are the only academic measure that a student can change in a short period of time. Grades, on the other hand, are not something that can be changed come application time. They are generally set in stone by the time your child is applying for colleges.

The ACT is [administered six times a year](#) in the U.S.: September, October, December, April, and June. Outside of these areas, the test is given five times a year: September, October, December, February, April, and June. Students should register for the test [on the ACT website](#) well in advance (at least 6 weeks) to avoid having to pay a late registration fee.

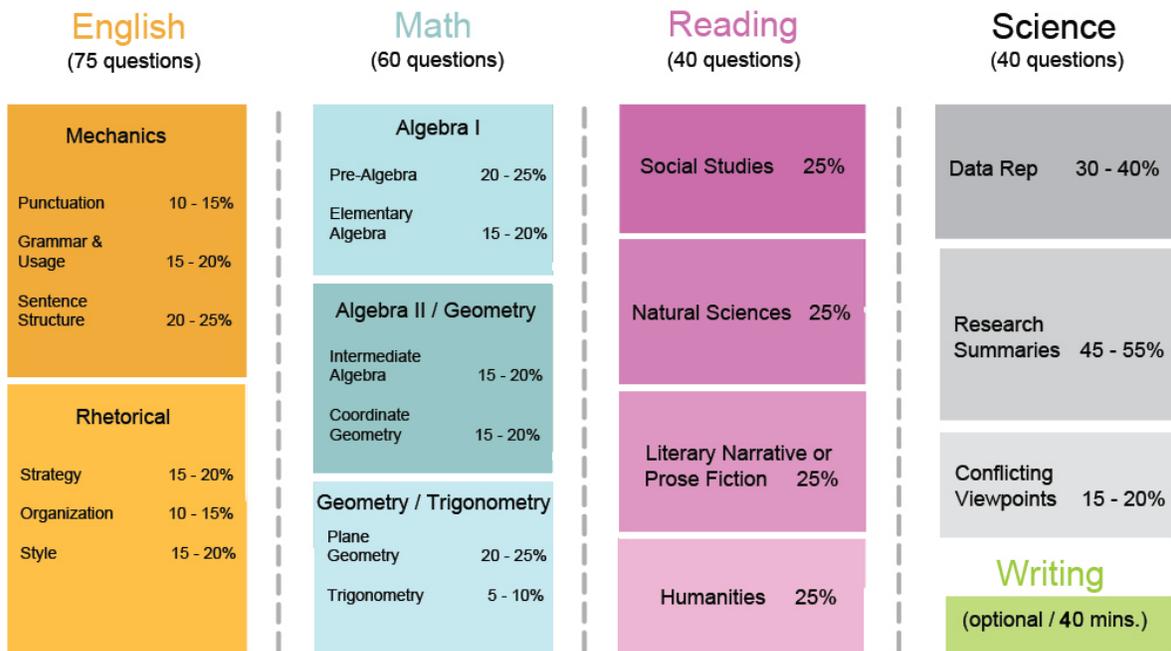
The test itself is made up of four main sections: English, Math, Science, and Reading. There is an optional Writing section that some schools require so make sure you take a look at the application guidelines of the schools your child is most interested in to see if they require it.

One of the advantages of the ACT having the Science section (while the SAT does not), is that oftentimes more selective schools will offer the choice between taking the ACT with Writing or the SAT with two SAT subject tests. The advantage is that students who choose the ACT option will have to take fewer tests, meaning they save both time and money.

The ACT includes 215 multiple-choice questions and takes approximately 3 ½ hours to complete (including breaks). If your child chooses to do the Writing portion of the test, they can plan on being there for over 4 hours.

To survive this mental marathon, a short break is scheduled after the first two tests. And if your child is taking the ACT Plus Writing, a brief break is also scheduled before the Writing portion of the test. Bringing snacks and water to enjoy during the breaks is strongly recommended. This test sucks up a lot of brainpower and your student needs to maintain his/her stamina to keep going strong.

In terms of content, the chart below gives you a good idea of what is included on each section of the test.



## Scoring

Scoring on the ACT ranges from 1-36 points. Each section results in a score between 1 and 36. Unlike the SAT, where section scores are summed, on the ACT they are averaged. So, the total Composite score will be the average of the four section scores. Students receive points for correct answers, and no points are deducted if they get a question wrong. So, it's okay (encouraged even!) to guess than to leave answers blank.

For those who choose to write the optional essay, they will also have essay scores. Two readers each give the essay a score between 1 and 6 for each of the five domains: Expressing Judgment, Focusing on the Topic, Developing Ideas, Organization, and Language Use. These two numbers are summed up for each domain and can be seen under the "Writing" section. These five numbers are then averaged to find the total Writing score, which will be on a scale of 2 to 12.

Scores are usually available to view online 2 weeks after the test date. Full score reports take a bit longer - 3 to 8 weeks after the test date. Students who took the writing section will have to wait a bit longer for their scores - 5 to 8 weeks after the test, to be exact.

In addition to the scores, the score report will include other information such as the rank. This is the percentage of students that your student scored the same as or better than. For example, if your student's rank is 70%, this means that they scored the same as or higher than 70% of the other students who took the test. The highest possible percentile here is 99%. Ranks will be given for each section as well as for overall performance.

Another measure included on the report is the College Readiness Benchmark. This is meant to estimate how well the student would do in a first year college course in that subject. A score at or above the Benchmark means there's at least a 50% chance of obtaining a B or higher. For example, if your student obtained a 24 in the Science section and the benchmark is a 23, this means that your student has at least a 50% chance of getting a B or higher in a first year college science course, such as Biology or Chemistry.

# CONTENT

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## English Test

The English section of the test includes 75 questions to be answered in 45 minutes. This section is meant to measure knowledge of English language conventions as well as standard written English knowledge and skills. In more concrete terms, the section tests knowledge of grammar, usage, punctuation, as well as knowledge and skills related to the production of writing.

The section is composed of five essays or passages, each of which contain multiple choice questions to answer regarding the reading.

### A Sampling of Skills Tested

#### Topic Development

- Identify the purpose of a word or phrase
- Determine if a passage has met a certain goal
- Determine the relevance of specific material to the topic at hand

#### Organization, Unity, and Cohesion

- Determine the most logical pace for a sentence in a paragraph
- Summarize the main idea
- Rearrange sentences to create a better flow

#### Knowledge of Language

- Revise unclear writing
- Remove redundant words
- Choose the most appropriate words in terms of context

#### Conventions of Standard English Grammar

- Determine need for punctuation or conjunctions
- Identify and fix inappropriate shifts in verb tense
- Recognize errors in sentence structure

## Example

### A Microscope in the Kitchen

I grew up with buckets, shovels, and nets waiting by the back door<sup>1</sup>; hip-waders hanging in the closet; tide table charts covering the refrigerator door; and a microscope was sitting on the kitchen table. Having studied<sup>2</sup> my mother<sup>3</sup> is a marine biologist. Our household might have been described as uncooperative<sup>4</sup>. Our meals weren't always served in the expected order of breakfast, lunch, and supper. Everything was subservient to<sup>5</sup> the disposal of the tides. When the tide was low, Mom could be found down on the mudflats. When the tide was high, she would be standing on the inlet bridge with her plankton net.

I have great respect for my mother<sup>6</sup>. I learned early that the moon affected the tides. Mom was always waiting for a full or new moon, when low tide would be lower than average and high tide higher than average. The moon being<sup>7</sup> aligned with Earth and the sun when full or new, so its<sup>8</sup> gravity combines with the sun's gravity to create an even stronger gravitational pull. I knew that it took about eight hours for the tides to change from<sup>9</sup> high to low, sixteen hours for a complete cycle of tides. I didn't have to wait to learn these things in school. In our house they were everyday knowledge.

1. Choose the best answer.

- A.  NO CHANGE
- B.  waiting, by the back door,
- C.  waiting by the back door,
- D.  waiting by the back door

2. Choose the best answer.

- E.  NO CHANGE
- F.  would sit
- G.  sitting
- H.  sat

## Mathematics Test

The Math section of the ACT has 60 questions that need to be answered in 60 minutes. The questions are all multiple-choice (unlike the SAT math section, which has student-produced responses) and calculators are permitted. This section is meant to test math skills students have been learning in school up to the beginning of senior year. Students are expected to use reasoning skills to solve math problems, but they are not expected to memorize complex formulas for the test. Areas tested include numbers, algebra, geometry, statistics, and probability.

### A Sampling of Skills Tested

#### Number and Quantity

- Calculate using whole numbers and decimals
- Write powers of 10 using exponents
- Understand absolute value in terms of distance
- Add, subtract, and multiply matrices

#### Algebra

- Solve equations in the form  $x + a = b$
- Solve inequalities
- Factor quadratics and solve quadratic equations
- Solve systems of linear equations

#### Functions

- Extend a given pattern by a few terms
- Evaluate linear, quadratic, and polynomial functions
- Demonstrate knowledge of logarithms
- Use trigonometric concepts and basic identities to solve problems

#### Geometry

- Use angle properties to find unknown angle measure
- Compute area and circumference of circles
- Use Pythagorean theorem and distance formula

## Statistics and Probability

- Compute probabilities
- Manipulate data from tables and charts
- Calculate weighted average
- Demonstrate knowledge of conditional and joint probability

### Example

1. A car averages 27 miles per gallon. If gas costs \$4.04 per gallon, which of the following is closest to how much the gas would cost for this car to travel 2,727 typical miles?  

A.  \$44.44

B.  \$109.08

C.  \$118.80

D.  \$408.04

E.  \$444.40

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2. When  $x = 3$  and  $y = 5$ , by how much does the value of  $3x^2 - 2y$  exceed the value of  $2x^2 - 3y$ ?  

F.  4

G.  14

H.  16

I.  20

J.  50

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## Reading Test

The reading test contains 40 questions and is 35 minutes long. This section of the test is meant to measure reading comprehension in three general ideas: Key Ideas and Details, Craft and Structure, and Integration of Knowledge and Ideas.

There are four sections in the Reading test, each with one long or two short prose passages that are meant to be representative of texts found in first year college classes. Passages include topics in social studies, natural sciences, literature, and humanities.

### A Sampling of Skills Tested

#### Key Ideas and Details

- Ability to locate facts, draw logical conclusions, and paraphrase statements
- Identify topics and summarize key details
- Identify cause-effect and comparative relationships

#### Craft and Structure

- Interpret meaning of words and phrases
- Analyze how one or more sentences relate to the whole passage
- Recognize author or narrator's point of view and purpose or intent

#### Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- Identify or infer central claim
- Analyze how sentences offer support for the claim
- Compare two passages

## Example

1. **The point of view from which the passage is told can best be described as that of:**

- A.  a man looking back on the best years of his life as director of a community center in a strife-ridden neighborhood.
  - B.  a narrator describing his experiences as they happen, starting with childhood and continuing through his adult years as an advocate for troubled children.
  - C.  an unidentified narrator describing a man who devoted his life to neighborhood children years after his own difficult childhood.
  - D.  an admiring relative of a man whose generosity with children was widely respected in the neighborhood where he turned around a declining community center.
- 

2. **It can reasonably be inferred from the passage that which of the following is a cherished dream that Abshu expects to make a reality in his lifetime?**

- E.  Establishing himself financially so as to be able to bring his original family back under one roof
- F.  Seeing the children at the community center shift their interest from sports to the dramatic arts
- G.  Building on the success of the community center by opening other centers like it throughout the state
- H.  Expanding for some, if not all, of the children the vision they have of themselves and their futures

## Science Test

The Science section is 35 minutes long and includes 40 questions. It measures the interpretation, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, and problem-solving skills required in natural, earth, and space sciences. The test assumes that students have completed a course in earth and/or physical science, and biology. However, students are not tested on specific scientific content knowledge, but rather, on their ability to think and reason in a scientific fashion.

Students will be given several sets of scientific information, followed by multiple choice questions. Information is given in the form of reading passages as well as graphic representations (graphs, charts, tables, illustrations).

### A Sampling of Skills Tested

#### Interpretation of Data

- Identifying features of a table, graph, or diagram
- Understand scientific terminology
- Translate information into a table, graph, or diagram
- Determine mathematical relationship that exists between data

#### Scientific Investigation

- Find information in text that describes an experiment
- Understand experimental design
- Determine an alternate method for testing a hypothesis
- Identify a control in an experiment

#### Evaluation of Models, Inferences, and Experimental Results

- Find basic information in a model
- Identify similarities and differences between models
- Identify strengths and weaknesses of models
- Determine which models present certain information

## Example

1. Which of the following best describes how the 2 scientists explain how craters are removed from Europa's surface?

- A.  Scientist 1: Sublimation  
Scientist 2: Filled in by water
  - B.  Scientist 1: Filled in by water  
Scientist 2: Sublimation
  - C.  Scientist 1: Worn smooth by wind  
Scientist 2: Sublimation
  - D.  Scientist 1: Worn smooth by wind  
Scientist 2: Filled in by water
- 

2. According to the information provided, which of the following descriptions of Europa would be accepted by both scientists?

- E.  Europa has a larger diameter than does Jupiter.
- F.  Europa has a surface made of rocky material.
- G.  Europa has a surface temperature of 20°C.
- H.  Europa is completely covered by a layer of ice.

## Writing Test

The writing test is an optional 40 minute long essay. Some schools do require ACT with Writing, so check to see if you will have to take the Writing section. The essay measures writing skills, specifically the skills emphasized in high school English classes.

The test will describe an issue and provides three different perspectives on the issue. Students will have to evaluate and analyze the points of view, and then state and develop their own perspectives on the issue. They will also have to explain the relationship between their perspective and those presented.

### Skills Tested

#### Expressing Judgment

- Demonstrate clear understanding of the persuasive purpose of the task by taking a position on the issue
- Give clear and relevant reasons for stated position
- Acknowledge implications or complications of issue and address counterarguments

#### Focusing on the Topic

- Present a clear thesis that states your position and focuses on the given issue
- Maintain focus on the issues throughout the essay

#### Developing Ideas

- Clarify ideas by using examples, reasons, and details
- Demonstrate clear movement between general and specific ideas
- Substantiate claims with use of specific and logical reasons

#### Organize Ideas

- Provides unified structure that presents logical progression of ideas
- Use precise transitional words to convey logical relationships between ideas
- Presents well-developed introduction and conclusions

## Using Language

- Correctly use Standard English grammar, usage, and mechanics
- Consistently choose precise and varied words
- Use a variety of sentence structures

## Example

### Intelligent Machines

Many of the goods and services we depend on daily are now supplied by intelligent, automated machines rather than human beings. Robots build cars and other goods on assembly lines, where once there were human workers. Many of our phone conversations are now conducted not with people but with sophisticated technologies. We can now buy goods at a variety of stores without the help of a human cashier. Automation is generally seen as a sign of progress, but what is lost when we replace humans with machines? Given the accelerating variety and prevalence of intelligent machines, it is worth examining the implications and meaning of their presence in our lives.

#### Perspective 1:

What we lose with the replacement of people by machines is some part of our own humanity. Even our mundane daily encounters no longer require from us basic courtesy, respect, and tolerance for other people.

#### Perspective 2:

Machines are good at low-skill, repetitive jobs, and at high-speed, extremely precise jobs. In both cases they work better than humans. This efficiency leads to a more prosperous and progressive world for everyone.

#### Perspective 3:

Intelligent machines challenge our long-standing ideas about what humans are or can be. This is good because it pushes both humans and machines toward new, unimagined possibilities.

**SAT or ACT**

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## SAT or ACT

As the prospect of college quickly approaches, the task of figuring out which college admissions exam to take can be more than a bit intimidating. Here are answers to the questions we get asked most frequently.

### What does each test measure?

#### The ACT

The ACT is comprised of Math, Science, English, and Reading with an optional essay.

The Math section tests elementary and intermediate algebra, plane geometry, and trigonometry. The math section on the ACT may align more directly with the Common Core.

The Science section includes very dense passages and students also have to decipher graphs that can get a little confusing. Time is not your friend for this portion of the test, so if your student is someone who generally needs extra time, this may be something to consider. With that said, students can definitely prepare for this section by getting comfortable with the language the test employs and learning what to look for. Timing oneself on practice tests will help build up stamina for this section.

The English and Reading sections are both constructed around written passages. There are four passages in the Reading section and five in the English section. The key skill on both is the ability to dissect a passage carefully. The English section focuses on usage mechanics and rhetorical skills; while the Reading section focuses more on comprehension.

#### The SAT

There are also four sections on the SAT (five including the essay): Evidence-Based Reading, Writing, Math with calculator permitted, Math without calculator permitted, and an optional essay.

The Reading & Writing sections are quite similar to the ACT. However, in addition to pulling in reading passages from things you might see in the newspaper, the SAT will be asking students to analyze U.S. founding documents, great global conversations, and speeches by leading world figures. Students will also be asked to answer linked questions in which they cite specific evidence from the text that supports previous answer choices. The SAT Reading section therefore may require slightly more complex thinking/reasoning than the ACT Reading section. The Writing section, however, is nearly identical to that of the ACT.

The SAT Math section will now include trigonometry, which is similar to the ACT. There is no science section on the SAT, but they do include scientific graphs throughout the test to try to simulate testing of Common Core data interpretation concepts. The Math section without calculator permitted does not involve complex calculations, but it does demand fairly rigorous mathematical reasoning on the part of students - many students find the lack of a calculator quite challenging, so preparation and practice are important for this section.

### **Does one test favor a certain type of student?**

The main advantage of the SAT is time. If you look at how much time you get per question, you'll see that you have around a minute per question on the SAT and around 45 seconds per question on the ACT. That adds up.

The Math section in the SAT is slightly more difficult than the Math section in the ACT. However, the Reading & Writing section is about the same on both tests as far as difficulty, but students will have more time to complete this section on the SAT.

The Science section is only on the ACT, so if scientific comprehension and data interpretation are strengths your teen is trying to showcase, that might be something to consider.

Both tests have an optional essay so that shouldn't have a huge impact.

## Should students just take both tests?

Before you have your teen sign up for both the SAT and ACT, Testive recommends you purchase the latest edition of the College Board's The Official SAT Study Guide and the latest edition of the ACT's The Real ACT. Or, you can access free PDF practice tests for both the SAT and ACT [on Testive's free software](#).

Then, have your teen take a timed, proctored practice exam from each book—preferably under the supervision of a teacher or parent.

After taking both tests, ask your teen the following questions:

- Which exam felt more intuitive?
- Which exam felt more straightforward?
- Which exam do you feel allows you to most efficiently show off what you are capable of to the colleges you are applying to?

What matters most is to have a baseline test score, which they'll come away with after taking these two practice tests. Then have them reflect on why they've answered a question incorrectly rather than just glancing over it. Testive helps students figure out where they're doing poorly and helps them tackle what they're not doing well. Our software will keep serving up questions in their trouble areas until they've got it.



*(screenshot of practice test score report available with free student accounts)*

For those students who still decide they want to take both exams the road ahead is especially tricky. Keep in mind that both exams are renowned for their repetitiveness and predictability, but also that each takes a very particular approach. Make sure they study for each test separately and space them out. Trying to study for both at the same time will only lead to frustration and confusion. Ultimately, each student has to make their own decision which test or tests they want to take. But remember, as with anything in life, focus, effort, and preparation are the keys to success.

# WHEN TO PREP

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## When and How to Prep

### When should a student start prepping for the ACT?

Students should figure out when they think they have 100 hours of prep time before the test. For most students, they can fit this in over the course of three to four months; however, those with really busy schedules may need a little more time. In our experience, the best time to start prep is the summer before junior year but this can vary from situation to situation.

### What about the SAT? Is the prep time the same?

If students choose the ACT over the SAT, they will need the same amount of time to prep. The only difference between preparing for the ACT and the SAT is the content to study.

### Do you suggest taking both tests just to see what happens?

We suggest taking at least one practice ACT and one practice SAT. It's best if students have a teacher or parent proctoring and timing the exam just to make it is a more realistic experience. By doing this, if a student doesn't finish certain sections because of time constraints, they can focus on them in their prep.

Remember, students have a limited window of time to prepare and take these tests. They don't want to take an actual ACT test just to get a baseline. That's an inefficient use of time and money.

### What types of students have been most successful in their prep?

Students who are engaged and have goals. It helps everyone keep on track if a student has a strong goal and can see that they are making progress towards that goal. Find out the average score for the school they are most interested in and orient around that as a target. At the end of the day, the only way to be successful in prep is by doing the work. Successful students in our one on one coaching program consistently complete 80-120 practice questions per week (roughly ~30 mins a day for 4-5 days a week). Prepping for the SAT or the ACT is no different than training for a sport, it requires consistency,

commitment, and hard work. Many students need additional support to maintain a steady prep habit and the best advice we can give is to not wait too long before getting that support.

### **How does Testive prep differ from other test prep companies?**

We take an error-focused approach which makes a student's work highly productive. We always have students practicing in their weakest areas and heavily emphasize the review and reflect process. Additionally, because our program is online, we're able to capture critical practice data to continually tailor a student's work and personalize their experience. By doing this, we see 3x the industry average in score increase. To learn more about Testive's different test prep plans, [check out our Plans page](#). If you want to learn about the differences between Testive's different prep options, [take a look at our How It Works page](#).

### **If I want to start prepping with Testive, when & how do I sign-up?**

You should sign up as soon as you can! All of our coaches are great but each student is different and will work differently with each coach. Even if you are planning to begin in a month or two months from now, it is best to reserve your spot with the coach who will work best with your student as soon as you know this is the prep method for you.

The best way to sign-up is to [schedule a call](#) with one of our student success advisors. We can walk you through the process, set up a demo of our platform, and answer any questions you might have. But, if you're confident that Testive will be a good fit and you just want to get started, you can [enroll in a plan](#) and then we'll contact you and your student with a kickoff call.

## **If I have more questions about the ACT or test prep in general, is there a place I can send an email or a phone number I can call?**

Most questions about these tests are difficult to answer through email. As each student is different, my recommendations for your situation may be different. The quickest way to have your questions answered is by [booking a time to chat](#) with one of our student success advisors. With that said, you are still certainly welcome to go to our website and [complete a contact form](#) or call us at (888) 960-8378 and we'll get back to you within 24 hours.