

Understanding the Differences: SAT vs. ACT

by

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The SAT and ACT examinations differ in several ways. The SAT tests critical and analytical thinking skills. The ACT is more subject-based. This is often reduced to “aptitude” vs. “achievement.” The SAT is designed to evaluate innate ability. This distinction has created some controversy in the past, particularly among those who believe that not all teens have matured intellectually to the point where the SAT is a valid measure of ability. The ACT measures what a student has learned in high school. The Princeton Review favors the ACT because it is more knowledge-based and less ambiguous. However, there are other, more specific differences.

Content

The SAT includes three sections – critical reading, math, and writing (including improving sentences, improving paragraphs, identifying sentence errors). The exam also has a required essay. The ACT contains four sections – English, math, reading, and science reasoning. The ACT also contains an optional essay. Both exams assume a student is capable of writing a five-paragraph essay. Unlike the SAT, the ACT math section includes math to the level of trigonometry.

Frequency, Scoring, and Length of Examinations

There is a difference in the number of times the examinations are offered and how they are scored. The SAT is offered seven times each year, the ACT six. The SAT exam is scored based on 200-800 points per section, for a combined three-section 600- 2400. The required essay is scored on a scale of 1-6. The ACT is scored based on 1-36 points. The optional essay is scored on a scale of 1-6. The SAT has a guessing penalty of $\frac{1}{4}$ point for every incorrectly marked answer. The ACT has no guessing penalty.

The length of the SAT is 3 hours 45 minutes. The length of the ACT varies depending upon whether the student completes the essay. Total time for the ACT is 2 hours 55 minutes or 3 hours 25 minutes with the optional essay. Both examinations require content knowledge, analytical skills and writing skills.

The SAT and ACT Essays

The essay has generated much discussion and concern. It is important to note several things. First, again, the SAT essay is required. The ACT essay is optional. Knowledge of grammar, usage, and word choice is an important part of both essays. The essay comprises a portion of the entire writing section of the SAT (25 minutes). The balance of the writing section is comprised of improving sentences (25 questions) and paragraphs (6 questions) as well as identifying sentence errors (18

questions), a total of 35 minutes. The writing section comprises 800 of the 2400 total points on the SAT. The ACT essay is a separate measure and does not affect the total score.

Typical writing prompts require that students reference historical, literary, or scientific information. Students must develop a thesis statement, several paragraphs with topic sentences and supporting details, and a conclusion. This is tantamount to the five-paragraph essay most students learned in elementary school; the issues are just more complicated. The writing section requires the student to develop a point of view (thesis statement), support that point of view (paragraphs with topic sentences and supporting details), develop a conclusion, and applies the standards of accepted written English – punctuation, grammar, spelling, sentence structure, etc.

The prompts offered on both the SAT and ACT are fundamentally the same. An example of a writing prompt posted on the College Board web site is:

“A sense of happiness and fulfillment, not personal gain, is the best motivation and reward for one’s achievements. Expecting a reward of wealth or recognition for achieving a goal can lead to disappointment and frustration. If we want to be happy in what we do in life, we should not seek achievement for the sake of winning wealth and fame. The personal satisfaction of a job well done is its own reward.”

This prompt requires the student to write an essay that develops a point of view on this issue. It also requires the student to support his or her position with reasoning and examples taken from reading, studies, experience, or observations.

For those who may have taken a course in research methods, statistics, or any objective science – behavioral or physical – the following writing prompt may appeal to them:

“Even scientists know that absolute objectivity has yet to be attained. It’s the same for absolute truth. But, as many newspaper reporters have observed, the ideas of objectivity as a guiding principle is too valuable to be abandoned. Without it, pursuit of knowledge is hopelessly lost.”

This prompt requires some understanding and knowledge of the scientific method and the critical importance of objectivity inherent in the research process. A student could apply her knowledge of this process to any science that interests her – astronomy, sociology, biology, or psychology.

Last, another prompt that might appear on either the SAT or ACT is:

“Martin Luther King stated that the most segregated time in America is 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning. Using what you know about the civil rights movement, discuss this observation by Dr. King.”

This essay requires a student to develop a thesis statement and provide historical or socio-political insights that demonstrate an understanding of this period of history. For a student of history, sociology, or any behavioral science, this would be an ideal essay to tackle.

The best strategy for any writing prompt is to:

- Read the prompt and do not gloss over information contained in the prompt.
- Do not oversimplify. Explain your thesis and provide literary, historical, or scientific references.
- Freely give your opinion. The use of first person “I” is an acceptable strategy.
- Be sure to use appropriate language, descriptive words, avoid slang, and check spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

The writing section of the SAT, in the words of Wayne J. Camara, Vice President of research and development at the College Board, “will be scored using a holistic approach.” That is, the writing entry is considered in its totality, and the whole is literally greater than the sum of its parts. So, grammar, spelling organization, mechanics, and structure are all factored into a total package. The total impression of the essay gathered by the reader becomes the basis of the final score.

When Should Your Child Take the SAT or ACT Examinations?

We receive hundreds of calls each year from parents who wonder when their child should take the SAT or the ACT examination. When I receive these calls, I ask a series of questions before making a recommendation. These questions are:

1. Does your child have any weaknesses in the areas of math, reading comprehension, vocabulary or writing?
2. How has your child performed on standardized examinations since elementary school? Has your child struggled with the examination process in general? Has he/she shown a historical pattern of difficulties in any of the functional areas associated with standardized examinations?
3. Has your child exhibited test anxiety in the past when taking any standardized examination?
4. Does your child have any learning disabilities or other educational or emotional challenges that would deter him/her from performing at his/her best on standardized examinations? Have these issues been addressed by his/her guidance counselor to determine whether he/she is eligible for any accommodations?
5. Is your child currently enrolled in Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses in school? If so, keep in mind that testing for those

examinations occurs in early May each year. Scheduling the SAT or ACT examinations during the same period will place undue stress on a student.

6. Does your child think analytically and critically, or is he/she a more traditional, linear thinker? The SAT generally tests analytical reasoning skills; the ACT tests content knowledge. Selecting which examination to take may mean the difference between a good score and a mediocre score. It may also mean the difference between a strong vs. a weak self-esteem for your child.
7. Does your child want to major in a field that requires much math and science? If the answer to that question is “yes”, he/she may want to consider taking the ACT examination because it contains a *required* science section.
8. If your child is science/math oriented and disdains the writing process, the ACT may also be a better alternative because it contains an *optional* writing section. The SAT contains a *required* writing section.
9. Which examination do the schools to which your child is applying for acceptance require? Some schools require the SAT, some the ACT. To make matters more confusing, some *departments* within a school may want to see the scores of one or the other. For example, if your child plans to major in physics, the college may require the SAT, but the physics department may want to see an ACT score with its required science section.
10. Should your child enroll in an SAT or ACT prep class, work with a tutor in a one-on-one capacity, or simply go it alone? My recommendation is to seek some assistance at some point. Depending on the responses to the questions noted above, most students will benefit from at least some preparatory help. A student with few academic weaknesses and little or no test anxiety can probably get by with several preparatory sessions, enough for a competitive edge. A student with multiple academic issues should begin the process of preparing for the SAT or ACT as far as a year in advance.

Similarities Between the Examinations and a Word of Advice

The SAT and ACT differ in the areas of content, scoring, time allotted, and the writing section. However, students often forget that they are also similar. Both are one element of the entire college admissions process. Both are exams that tell you whether or not you take standardized exams effectively. Neither exam will tell you or an admissions officer how intelligent you are, your success in school, or even whether you will have what it takes to graduate from college. The best advice is to take the test that plays to your strengths. Many colleges will accept the SAT, ACT, or both. Some prefer one to the other, so it is important to check with the colleges you are considering before committing to either examination.

Regardless of which examination is taken, begin preparing early by working to build math, verbal, writing, and critical thinking skills. No amount of test prep will overcome a weak foundation.