

Block **1**

SAT Overview in 20 Minutes

The best and easiest way to reduce your anxiety and own the SAT is to become familiar with it. Knowing what to expect means you can plan for it, so nothing on exam day is a surprise.

This block covers SAT basics, including what's on the test; how it's structured; and when, where, and how often you should take it. You also find out how to prepare for the exam and how to interpret your score.

Signing Up for the SAT

The SAT is given at multiple times at select high schools and testing centers throughout the United States and in English-speaking schools in many other countries. This section explains how and when to register for an exam and the acceptable methods of payment.

Choosing when to take and retake the test

The SAT is typically offered seven times a year, and you can take it as often as you like. Ideally, you take it two or three times, but the door is open if you want another chance. Most high schoolers follow this pattern.

- » **Start in the fall of your sophomore year:** Take the PSAT/NMSQT, which stands for Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test, and is sort of a junior SAT. For you as a 10th grader, this exam doesn't count for much other than a practice run and eye-opener of the series of exams to come.
- » **Continue in the fall of your junior year:** Take the PSAT/NMSQT again, only this time it counts. If you do well, it opens the door to many scholarship opportunities and special programs.
- » **In the spring of your junior year:** Take the SAT as a practice test, though you can send in your scores if you're pleased with them. Note that you can also take an unscored practice exam, but this experience isn't quite the same as the real thing. Some juniors take the SAT twice during the spring.

- » **In the fall of your senior year:** Take the SAT again for real. This time you're ready, and you should do well enough to use these scores for your application. If you're an early decision candidate, take the test in October or November.
- » **In the winter of your senior year:** You have one more chance to get it right, or if you did get it right, you have one more chance to get that scholarship. By now you're a pro, so success is just one last test away.



REMEMBER

The SAT is typically given on a Saturday, but exceptions are made for those who can't test on Saturday for religious reasons. If you fall into that category, your SAT may be on a Sunday or a Wednesday following a Saturday SAT day. Get a letter from your religious leader on letterhead and mail it in with your registration form.



TIP

Register early to select a test site. When you register, you may request a test site, but if it's filled, you get an alternate. So don't delay — send in the form or register online as soon as you know when and where you want to take the exam. You'll probably want to test at your own high school, if possible, where the campus setting is familiar to you.

Requesting accommodations

Like many products and services, the SAT stresses fairness and equal access for all students, including those with special needs. Even if you think you don't belong in this category, skim this section. You may discover an option that will help you gain a test-taking advantage.

Learning disabilities

If you have a learning disability, you may be allowed to take the SAT under special conditions. The first step is to get an Eligibility Form from your school counselor. (Homeschoolers, call a local high school.) You may also want to ask your college counseling or guidance office for a copy of the *College Board Services for Students with Disabilities* brochure. If your school doesn't have one, contact the College Board directly or check the testing agency's website (<https://accommodations.collegeboard.org>).



TIP

Once you're certified for accommodations on any College Board test (an AP, an SAT Subject Test, or the PSAT/NMSQT), you're certified for all College Board tests, unless your need for accommodation arises from something temporary.

File the form well in advance of when you expect to take the test. If the College Board grants you the accommodation, you'll be eligible for extra time on the SAT, which could mean an extra 50 percent of time for each test. So, if a regular test-taker has 32 minutes per verbal module, for example, an extended-timer gets 48 minutes.

Physical issues

At no additional charge, the SAT also provides wheelchair accessibility, large-print tests, and other accommodations for students who need them. Be sure to submit your Eligibility Form early so that the College Board can request documentation and prepare your accommodations. You can send paper documentation or file an Eligibility Form online. Check out <https://accommodations.collegeboard.org> for details.

If a physical issue (say, a broken arm) occurs shortly before your scheduled SAT and you can't easily take the exam later, call College Board Customer Service, explain the situation, and have your physician fill out the forms requesting whatever accommodation you need.



TIP

Questions about special needs? Your high school's counselor or principal can help, or you can check the preceding link or email the College Board (ssd@info.collegeboard.org).

Getting financial help to cover fees

If you need financial help, you can apply for a fee waiver, available to low-income high school juniors and seniors who live in the United States, Puerto Rico, and other American territories. (United States citizens living in other countries may also be eligible for fee waivers.) The College Board also gives you four extra score reports for free, along with four request forms for college application fee waivers. The College Board does what it can.

You can also check with your school counselor for fee-waiver applications. (As with everything SAT, if you're a homeschooler, call a local high school for a form.) And be careful to avoid additional fees when you can. You run into extra charges for late or changed registration and for some extras — super-speedy scores, an analysis of your performance, and the like.

Registering for the test

You can register for the SAT online, by mail, or, if you've taken the SAT before, by phone.

Online registration is simple: Go to www.sat.collegeboard.org/register to create an account, sign up, and choose a test center and date. You need to have a credit card or PayPal account and a digital photo of yourself ready to upload. Be sure the photo meets the College Board's standards: a headshot where your whole face is visible and you're the only one in the photo. Head coverings are okay if they're religious in nature.

You can also register by mail. At the time of this writing, you must register by mail if you're younger than 13 or older than 21 or if you need to take the exam on a Sunday for religious reasons.

You can also ask your school guidance counselor for a registration form. If you're homeschooled, call the nearest public or private high school, or call the College Board Customer Service Center for help. If you register by mail, you'll have to attach a photo and enclose registration payment (credit card number, a check from a United States bank, or a bank draft).

The College Board Customer Service line within the U.S. is 866-756-7346 and outside the U.S. is 212-713-7789. Hearing-impaired test-takers can call the TTY Customer Service number, which within the U.S. is 888-857-2477 and outside the U.S. is 609-882-4118. You can also contact the College Board by mail at this address: College Board SSD Program, P.O. Box 8060, Mount Vernon, IL 62864-0060.



TIP

However you register, you'll be asked whether you want to sign up for the Student Search Service. Answer yes and fill out the questionnaire. Colleges, universities, and some scholarship-granting organizations receive information about you from this service. Expect lots of emails and letters — a little annoying, perhaps, but it's good to know that the schools are interested in you. You may also discover a school or scholarship that you weren't aware of but that meets your needs perfectly.



WARNING

Scammers are interested in you, too. Don't send personal or financial information to any organization unless you know it's legitimate. You know this, of course, but exam registration and college application is a new game. Not sure something is legit? Call the College Board Customer Service line to check.

Knowing What to Expect on the SAT

What are you getting into here? Well, it's nothing you can't handle, but knowing what's on the test and the knowledge and skills required to score well will help you to prepare more effectively and feel less anxious on test day. In this section, I explain what the test covers and how it's structured, point out a key difference between the paper and computer versions of the exam, and provide insight into the knowledge and abilities you will and will not be tested on.

What's on the SAT

Here is the digital SAT testing experience, in this order:

- » **Reading and Writing section:** Two 32-minute modules consisting of 27 questions each, totaling 64 minutes for 54 questions.
- » **10-minute break.**
- » **Math section:** Two 35-minute modules consisting of 22 questions each, totaling 70 minutes for 44 questions. You're provided with an on-screen calculator for both modules.

Within each module, each question counts the same toward your score: The more questions you get right, the higher your score for that module. An easy question is worth the same as a hard question. Because you can move back and forth within each section, one strategy is to skip around and answer all the easy questions first and then go back and work the hard questions. If you like this idea, *try it out on a practice test* before exam day.

Table 1-1 provides a quick overview of what's on the exam.

TABLE 1-1 Digital SAT Breakdown by Section

Section	Number of Questions	Time Allotted
Reading and Writing Module 1	27 questions	32 minutes
Reading and Writing Module 2	27 questions	32 minutes
Break	—	10 minutes
Math Module 1	22 questions	35 minutes
Math Module 2	22 questions	35 minutes

Each section mixes in a few unscored “trial” questions, which are impossible to discern from the actual, scored questions. This is good — it means you don't get an extra, unscored “trial” module.

Taking the adaptive (computer) test

On the computer version of the exam, the *second* Reading and Writing or Math module becomes easier or harder based on your performance on the *first* one. For example, if you do exceptionally well on the first Math module, the SAT thinks you're good at math, so it makes the second Math module harder. Even if you don't get as many right answers in the second Math module, your score will be higher than that of someone who bombs the first section and performs better in the second section.

Note that the paper-based practice SATs from [CollegeBoard.org](https://collegeboard.org) have more questions in each section (33 questions per Reading and Writing module; 27 questions per Math module), but no stated time limit. These practice SATs are excellent for preparing, but they don't reflect the actual testing experience.

Knowing what the SAT really looks for

The SAT attempts to measure the skills you need to succeed in school and in the workplace. It's not a measure of how smart you are, nor is it a measure of how well you do in school. It measures how adaptable you are, and especially how well you prepare for a major exam.

The SAT doesn't test facts you studied in school. You don't need to know when Columbus sailed the Atlantic or how to calculate the molecular weight of an atom. Instead, the SAT takes aim at your ability to follow a logical sequence to comprehend what you've read and to write grammatically well in Standard English. The math portion checks on the math skills you have picked up during your years in high school. The point is that the SAT isn't a giant final exam or a review of high school. It's a test of your *skills*, *not* your knowledge.

Use this to your advantage. The skills for the Reading and Writing section, covered in Block 2, are easy to learn and just take practice to master. The skills for the Math section are also of a limited scope and are captured in Block 3 of this book. In other words, pretty much everything you need to know for the SAT fits into a smallish book. There may be an occasional "oddball" question as the SAT steps outside its defined scope of topics, but these questions are very few and very far between.

Preparing to Take the SAT

As soon as you sign up for an SAT, the clock starts ticking. You have only so much time to study and practice, and suddenly the exam is tomorrow morning. The good news: I've led many students down this road, with great results, and here I've *curated* (collected) the best success strategies. Note that these strategies are *in addition* to studying with this book:

- » **Sign up for challenging courses in school.** Skip the courses that require papers short enough to tweet and just enough math to figure out how many minutes remain before your next vacation. Go for subjects that stretch your mind. Specifically, stick it out with math at least through Algebra II. If high school is in your rearview mirror, check out extension or enrichment adult-ed courses. Colleges will appreciate this initiative along with your SAT scores.
- » **Get into the habit of reading.** Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube don't do the trick. Instead, take on academic journals, established news sources, and any publication aimed toward an adult or college-level audience. The more you read challenging material, the more you build your ability to comprehend it. This will help you in so many ways in life, but on the SAT, it helps you understand vocabulary, analyze reasoning, and deconstruct evidence. Take note of unfamiliar words and check the words online. Also notice how an author makes a point — through description, citing experts, word choice, and so forth. This helps you understand the passages and writing methods of the Reading and Writing section.
- » **Develop a critical eye.** Read the school or local paper, websites, or any publication, and look for reasoning techniques. They're everywhere, and once you spot them, you see them all over. Is the sales pitch, persuasive argument, or editorial using statistics, emotion, anecdotes, or humor to make its point? As a side benefit, you learn to see through these tactics and spot the logic.

- » **Revisit your math.** Resist the urge to burn your geometry books the minute the semester is over. Keep your math notebooks and especially your old exams. Revisit the questions, especially the ones you missed, because these are the topics you'll see on the SAT. Research shows that memory improves when concepts are reviewed after a period of time, and this will help when the SAT asks you to factor a quadratic, which you may not have done for a couple of years.
- » **Take practice exams.** Work your way through all the questions and then check the answers and explanations to everything you got wrong, skipped, or wobbled on. After identifying areas of focus, you know where you have to practice. Block 4 of this book contains an abridged practice exam. You can find additional free practice exams at the College Board website: go to <https://satsuite.collegeboard.org/sat/practice-preparation>.
- » **Work on your writing.** Send a story in to the school newspaper or send letters or emails to a publication editor. Writing for an audience ups your writing game, because you pay much closer attention to your reasoning and grammar. Do this a few times, and you're a pro! This is especially true with the sort of questions that challenge your writing skills, because there are plenty of those that you have to answer correctly on the SAT.
- » **Download and practice with the Bluebook testing app.** This app is free to download from the College Board's website (www.collegeboard.org), and it's the best way to experience what the actual exam is like at a testing center or high school. Here you can take the digital SAT practice test and explore the online calculator, the reference screen with all the formulas, and the ability to annotate text and cross off wrong answers. Make sure you know how the app works. Don't discover these features on exam day — practice using them now.
- » **Check the device requirements.** As of this writing, you can take the digital SAT on your own laptop or tablet, provided it meets the requirements described on the College Board's website. If you don't have a device that meets these requirements, you can borrow one from your school — provided your school has one to spare.

Understanding Your Score

The SAT gives colleges an in-depth look at your skills and performance. If you take the exam more than once, as most students do, you can use the detailed information from your score reports to craft a personalized study program and zero in on the skills you need to fine-tune.

Composite score

Your exam score, called the *composite score*, is the score that everyone is worried about. It's the sum of the Reading and Writing section (200 to 800 points) and Math section (also 200 to 800 points). The maximum composite score is 1600, and the minimum is 400, which you get for showing up.

Score reports

At the time of this writing, the SAT provides four score reports, which can be sent to your choice of schools. (*Yikes? Not really. More like, Yes!*) If you want to send out more reports to more schools, you can do so for a nominal fee. Check the College Board website at www.collegeboard.org for current prices. You can request additional score reports when you sign up for the exam, when you take the exam, or after the fact. At the time of this writing, your scores are good for five years.

After you get your SAT scores, you can order a Question-and-Answer Service (QAS), which shows each question from the exam, which answer you selected, and if applicable, the correct answer. There may be a small fee for this, and the fee waiver may apply. If you are planning to retake the SAT, this service is a lifesaver: It's like turning on a light to see your exam performance. The bad thing is that this service isn't available for some tests, but the good thing is that it is available with your PSAT, so use that!

Score reports arrive in your mailbox and at your high school a few weeks after your test, and in your email about a week sooner. The College Board usually posts on its website the date that the test scores will be available.

Last thing. Be sure to create a free College Board account at www.collegeboard.org, where you can check your scores and register for the PSAT and SAT. Here, along with your score, you can find how well you did in comparison to everyone else who took the exam when you did. You can also immediately access the QAS and get right to the questions. Plus, you can get the Bluebook app and practice SAT pdfs, all for free.

