

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Choosing between the ACT and the SAT
- » Seeing what the SAT covers
- » Scheduling your study time for the SAT
- » Accommodating for special needs
- » Doing amazing even if English isn't your first language
- » Understanding what the SAT looks for
- » Getting the SAT scoring

Chapter **1**

What to Expect with the SAT

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.

In this chapter, you find the basics of the SAT, including when, where, and how often you should take it. This chapter also tells you what sort of scores you receive, explains how to deal with special needs, and gives you a peek into the structure of the actual exam. If English isn't your first language, there are tips on getting the edge over your primarily English-speaking competition.

Thinking About the ACT

Most 11th and 12th graders take one of two, or both, giant exams on their way to college. One is the SAT, and the other is the ACT. Most colleges accept both, but you should check with your target schools just to be sure. When you call or email the college admissions office, among your other questions, ask the following:

- » Do you require an exam score with my application?
- » If so, do you accept both the SAT and the ACT?
- » Do you need me to write the exam essay?

You take the ACT as a paper-based test, but at some testing centers, you have the option to take it on the computer. The paper-based and computer-based versions of the ACT are exactly the same in terms of length, types and numbers of questions, difficulty level, and scoring algorithm.

At the time of this writing, the ACT takes between four and five hours, while the SAT has been shortened to just over two hours. It's possible that in response to the revised SAT, the ACT will change even more, with reduced numbers of questions and shorter reading comp passages. At this time there is no indication of other changes to the ACT, so here's a rundown of the differences between the current ACT and the recently revised SAT.

The SAT and the ACT are similar in overall difficulty. The math is about 90 percent the same, but SAT math goes more in depth than ACT math, while ACT math covers more topics. (ACT math has logarithms, for example, which SAT math does not.) Some students may find ACT math easier.

The ACT also has a Science Test, which the SAT does not. To compensate, the SAT has science-based questions mixed into the Reading and Writing section, but not to the extent of the ACT Science Test. Students who struggle with science may prefer the SAT.

The ACT also ends with an optional essay question, which the SAT does not.

SAT Reading and Writing covers similar topics to ACT Reading and Writing however, the SAT combines these into a two-part module that runs slightly over an hour, while the ACT separates Reading and Writing into two tests, or three tests with the optional essay, totaling about two hours (or close to three hours with the essay). The SAT doesn't have an optional essay, so the entire exam is about two and a half hours, while the ACT can run over five hours if you include the essay.

Basically, it sounds like the digital SAT is a better bet, but I would expect the ACT to respond with its own shorter, digital version sometime soon. In the meantime, for more on the ACT overall, pick up *ACT Prep 2025/2026 For Dummies with Online Practice* by Lisa Zimmer Hatch and Scott A. Hatch (published by Wiley).

Besides contacting your target schools and checking their websites, you can find more on the application requirements by checking a college guide. A *college guide* is a *compendium* (thorough collection) of school listings and admission requirements. Many libraries and bookstores carry college guides, and you can also talk with your college counselor, who may also have one.



TIP

If college isn't in your immediate future, you may want to take the SAT just to get it out of the way, while the test topics are still fresh in your head. If your plans include a stint in the armed forces or the Peace Corps before hitting higher education, you can keep your options open by taking the SAT before you go. Then when you're ready to get back into the classroom, you'll have some scores to send to the college of your choice. As of this writing, your SAT scores are officially valid for five years, but that could change, or the college you apply to may require newer scores. Just keep that in mind.

So . . . What's on the Digital SAT?

What are you getting into here? Well, it's nothing you can't handle, but it helps to know what's coming up. 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.
- » Ten-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.

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.

Note that the paper-based practice SATs from 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.

Working the Online, Adaptive SAT

Within each module, each question counts exactly 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, then go back and work the hard questions. If you like this idea, *try it out on a practice test* before exam day.

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 extremely 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 good because the questions were harder. Your score will definitely be higher than the score of someone who bombs the first Math module — so the SAT thinks they're not good at math — but does great in the second Math module, because the questions were much easier.

Signing Up before Sitting Down: Registering 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.

How to register

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 have to 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.

When to take the test

The SAT is typically offered seven times a year, and you can take it as often as you want. 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:** Here you take the PSAT/NMSQT, which stands for Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test, and is sort of a junior SAT, for the first time. For you as a 10th grader, this exam doesn't count for much other than a practice and eye-opener of the series of exams to come. See Chapter 2 for more on the PSAT.
- » **Continue in the fall of your junior year:** Here you 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. No pressure now.
- » **In the spring of your junior year:** Take the SAT as a first run, which serves as a practice test, though you can send in your scores if you're pleased with them. Note that you can also practice with 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.
- » **Again in the fall of your senior year:** The SAT strikes again, but this time you're ready, and you should do well enough to use these scores for your application. You also have the chance for a few tries. If you're an early decision candidate, you should take the test in October or November.
- » **Finally, 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 should be right in your hands. There may be some juniors in the room with you.



REMEMBER

The SAT is typically given on a Saturday, but there are exceptions for those who can't 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.

Accommodating Special Needs

Like many products and services, the SAT stresses fairness and equal access for all students, including those with special needs. Even if you don't think you belong in this category, skim this section. You may discover an option that will help you “show what you know” when it matters most.

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, as described in the next section. If you fall into that category, see the next section for more information.

File the form well in advance of the time 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 get things ready for you. 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 at a later date, 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).

Financial help

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.

If you're worried about paying for school later on, there are loans, grants, scholarships, and other programs to help you achieve success in college and hopefully your career. There are many, many opportunities and places to look, so talk to your school counselor. That's what the counselor is for!

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. (See the section, "Scoring on the SAT," later in this chapter for more information on score-reporting options.)

Making the SAT Work for You as a Foreign Student

This is an opportunity for you to stand out among your high school peers and represent with honors the country where you are a national! A high score on this exam is certainly within your reach, even if English is not your first language, if you know what to do and practice your skills.

For the SAT Reading and Writing section, you may get stuck on some of the academic vocabulary. To work on this, as you practice SAT-level reading, underline and look up any word you don't know. After a while, you'll know enough of the words.

Also, the vocabulary strategy for all SAT-taking students helps you as well: As discussed in this book's intro, be sure to learn any word in *this font*, which is an SAT vocabulary word followed by its *elucidation* (definition).

You also have probably studied the mechanics of English more than your native English-born counterparts, so you may have a better academic understanding of sentence structure and verb form than they do. I have observed many, many times in a class with both English-only and non-native English speakers that after a refresher of the basics of this test, the non-native English speakers often do much better than the native English speakers!

One thing that you can do right now is start reading books in English. Pick movies or novels that you love in your own language and read the English versions. You'll be more into the story, and you'll know the gist of events well enough to pick up the English style of writing. Most importantly, you'll learn the placement of grammar and the style of expressive writing.

For the SAT Math section, the math doesn't change from language to language, so if you can crack the basic language used to put forth the problem, you should do just fine. There may be some minute differences (for example, 2,345.67 in one language may appear as 2.345,67 in another), but the basics are the same, and the small differences are easy to master. Just be sure to practice using SAT materials.

Examining Your Mind: What the SAT Really Looks For

The exam 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 giant exam.



TIP

The college application essay is a great place to put your scores in perspective. If your SAT score struggles from a special circumstance, such as a learning disability, a school that doesn't value academics, a family tragedy, or any other reason, you may want to explain your situation in an essay. A good essay gives the college a way to interpret your achievement and to see you, the applicant, in more detail. For help with the college admission essay, check out *College Admission Essays For Dummies* by Jessica Brenner (Wiley).

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 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 Part 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 Part 3 of this book. In other words, pretty much everything you need to know for the SAT fits into a medium-sized 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.

One *caveat* (disclaimer) to the preceding claim: Everything you need to know for the SAT is right here in this book, *assuming* you already have a basic grasp of English and math. This claim assumes that you have certain skills at the basic high school level: You can read and understand a narrative in English, you can construct a complete sentence in English, and you can execute basic math, such as long division and adding fractions. If any of these topics is an area where you struggle, there are literally thousands of books and resources available to you, many free online or at a library. You can also check with your school for any type of remedial program, including student tutors. This is something you can easily fix and place into the past, and it'll help you far beyond this exam.

Scoring on the SAT

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.



TIP

You can run through the basics of converting your correct answers to a tangible SAT score in Chapter 15, following the practice exams in Part 4.

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.