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Chapter 1

Getting Your ACT Together: ACT 101

Are you the type of person who jumps into the cold water all at once instead of dipping your toe in a little at a time? If so, do we have a table for you! Table 1-1 gives you an overview of the ACT and shocks you with the entire kit and caboodle all at once.

If you add up the numbers, with the three required sections of English, Math, and Reading under regular timing, you have 131 multiple-choice questions to answer in 125, or just a little more than 2 hours. If you elect to take the optional Science Test, you add 40 questions and 40 minutes to your test for a total of 171 questions in 2 hours and 45 minutes. If you choose not to take the optional Writing Test, you get to walk out right after that.

TABLE 1-1 ACT Breakdown by Section

Test	Number of Questions	Time Allotted
English	50	35 minutes
Mathematics	45	50 minutes
Reading	36	40 minutes
Science (optional)	40	40 minutes
Writing (optional)	1	40 minutes

To test questions for future tests, the ACT incorporates into each of the four multiple-choice sections what the ACT calls *field test* questions. The questions don't count toward your score, but you won't be able to distinguish between field and actual questions when you're taking the test. About 20 percent of the English and math questions and 15 percent of the reading and science questions are field questions.

You have two ACT formats to choose from: paper-based and digital. The two formats are exactly the same; just the deliveries are different. If you feel more comfortable with a test you can hold and write on with your number 2 pencil, you can opt for the paper version. If screens are your thing, the digital version provides handy tools that allow you to approach it in much the same way you would for the paper test:

- » **Highlighter and line reader:** Use these tools to focus on important data and sentences.
- » **Answer eliminator and masker:** Use these tools to help you mark out wrong answers.
- » **Magnifier:** This tool allows you to read the fine print for charts and graphs in the science questions.

You also have a timer to keep track of your time, built-in graphing calculator, and the ability to move between questions and mark them for later review.

What to Take to the ACT

If you can't borrow the brain of that whiz kid in your calculus class for the day, you're stuck using your own. To compensate, be sure that you have the following with you before you leave for the ACT test center:

- » **Admission ticket:** You receive your ticket when you register online. Be sure to print it out so you have it for test day.
- » **Pencils:** Take a bunch of sharpened No. 2 pencils with you. You may also want to take good erasers (nothing personal — everyone makes mistakes). Mechanical pencils aren't allowed. You use pencils to mark answers and keep notes on the paper test and to make notes on the scratch paper with the digital version.
- » **Map or directions:** Go to the test center a few days before the actual exam to scope out your driving route and parking area. Often, the ACT is given at high schools or colleges that have parking lots far, far away from the test rooms. Drive to the location a few days in advance, park your car, and see just how long it takes you to get to the room. You don't need the stress of having to run to the test room at the last minute on test day.
- » **Clothing:** Schools that host the ACT may turn off the heat for the weekend (the ACT is usually offered on a Saturday), and the test room can be freezing cold. Alternately, in the summer, schools may turn off the air conditioning, making the room boiling hot. Dress in layers and be prepared for anything.
- » **Photo ID:** Showing the birthmark your boyfriend or girlfriend thinks is so cute isn't going to cut it with the test proctor. You need to upload a photo when you register for the test and bring a photo ID (student ID, driver's license, passport, military ID, FBI Most Wanted mug shot, whatever) to the exam. If you don't have a photo ID, you can bring a letter of identification. The form is available on the official ACT website (act.org).

- » **Eyeglasses:** Students taking the ACT frequently forget their reading glasses at home and then squint for the four long hours of the test. The ACT is enough of a headache on its own; you don't need eyestrain, as well. If you wear contacts, be sure to bring cleaning/wetting solution in case you have to take the lenses out and reinsert them during the break. (Hey, all those tears can really mess up your lenses!)
- » **Watch:** For the paper test, keeping track of time on your own timepiece may be more efficient than wasting precious seconds seeking out the clock on the testing site wall. Place your watch on the desk where you can refer to it easily throughout the exam. Digital watches may not be allowed. Stick with ones that have faces and hands. Your watch can't make any sounds, either. If the proctor hears so much as a beep from your watch, they will not-so-politely request that you leave the building and cancel your test.
- » **Calculator:** The ACT gurus allow you to use a graphing calculator on the Mathematics Test of the paper test. Although the ACT information bulletin has an entire quarter page detailing which calculators you can and cannot use on the paper test, generally, you can use any calculator as long as it doesn't make a noise or have a computer algebra system. Make sure the one you bring has at least a square root function and, ideally, basic trigonometry functions. The digital version has an integrated calculator for your use during the math questions.

What Not to Take to the ACT

Do not, we repeat, *do not*, take any of the following items with you to the ACT test room:

- » **Cell phones and other electronic devices:** Leave your cell phone in the car. You aren't allowed to bring it into the test room. One student we know was dismissed from the test because he accidentally left his cell phone in his pocket, and it rang during the exam. The same goes for other electronics, such as iPads, PC tablets, or anything else that can access the Internet or make a sound. Currently, you can't use your own device to take the digital ACT.
- » **Books and notes:** Take it from us: Last-minute studying doesn't do much good. So leave all your books at home; you aren't allowed to take them into the test room with you. (Just be sure to fill your parents in on this rule. We once had a student whose mother drove all the way to the test center with her daughter's ACT prep book, thinking the girl needed it for the test. The mom actually pulled the girl out of the test to give her the book, resulting in the girl's nearly being disqualified from the test.)
- » **Scratch paper:** You may not bring your own scratch paper to the paper test. Fortunately, the exam booklet has plenty of blank space on which you can do your calculations. The test center supplies scratch paper or whiteboards for digital version test takers to use during the exam.

What to Do If You Have Special Circumstances

Not everyone takes the ACT under the same conditions. You may have a special circumstance that can allow you to change the date of the ACT or the way you take your exam. Here are a few of the special circumstances that may affect how you take the ACT:

- » **Learning differences:** If you have a diagnosed learning disability (LD), you may be able to get special accommodations, such as more time to take the test. However, you must specifically request such accommodations way in advance. Prepare your requests for fall tests by the prior

June and for spring tests by the prior September. Please note that in order to be eligible for special testing on the ACT, your LD must have been diagnosed by a professional, and you should have a current individualized education plan (IEP) at school that includes extended test time. Talk to your counselor for more information. Note that you can only request special accommodations in conjunction with a test registration.

- » **Physical disabilities:** If you have a physical disability, you may be able to take a test in a special format — in Braille, large print, or on audio. Go to the official ACT website (act.org) for complete information about special testing.
- » **Religious obligations:** If your religion prohibits you from taking a test on a Saturday, you may test on an alternate date. The ACT registration website specifies dates and locations in each state.
- » **Military duty:** If you're an active military person, you don't complete the normal ACT registration form. Instead, ask your Educational Services Officer about testing through DANTES (Defense Activity for Nontraditional Educational Support).

Guessing for Points to Maximize Your Score

Scoring on the ACT is very straightforward:

- » You get one point for every answer you get right.
- » You get zero points for every answer you omit.
- » You get zero points for every answer you get wrong.



REMEMBER

The ACT doesn't penalize you for wrong answers. Therefore, guessing on the ACT obviously works to your advantage. Never leave any question blank. We suggest that you save a couple of seconds at the end of each section just to go through the test and make sure that you've filled in an answer for every single question.

Your Number's Up: Scoring on the ACT

We once had a frustrated student tell us that the scores on the ACT looked a lot like measurements to him: 34, 29, 36. However, the ACT has several scores, which makes for a very strange set of measurements! The ACT scores are nothing like high school scores based on percentages. They're not even like the familiar SAT scores that range from 200 to 800. Instead, they range from 1 to 36. Scoring on the ACT works like this:

- » **Scaled score:** Each multiple-choice test (English, Mathematics, Reading, and Science) receives a *scaled score* between 1 (low) and 36 (high) that appears on your score report.
- » **Composite score:** The *composite score* is the average of the three required test-scaled scores. The ACT uses customary rounding to determine the composite, so if your composite average is 26.67, your composite score will be 27. If your average is 26.33, your composite score will be 26.
- » **STEM score:** A *STEM score* is the average of your scaled Mathematics Test score and your scaled Science Test score. If you take the optional Science Test, you receive a separate score

for that section that isn't averaged into the composite score. You also receive a separate STEM score.

- » **Writing Test score:** If you take the ACT with the optional Writing Test, you receive a Writing score that ranges from 2 (low) to 12 (high). The writing score is the sum of the average of each of the four subscores you receive from each of the two people who grade your essay. The Writing Test score is completely separate from your composite ACT score.
- » **English Language Arts (ELA) score:** If you take the Writing Test, the ACT will convert that score to a 1–36 scale and use it in combination with your English Test and Reading Test scores to give you a separate ELA score. The ELA score is only provided if you take the ACT with Writing.
- » **Percentile score:** A *percentile score* tells you where your scores rank in your state and nationwide.

Look at the percentiles. Just knowing that you got a 26 doesn't tell you much. You need to know whether a 26 is in the 50th percentile, the 75th percentile, or the 99th percentile. If you get a 36, you have documented lifetime bragging rights because that's a perfect score!

- » **Additional scores:** You may see additional readiness scores:
 - The Progress Toward Career Readiness Indicator measures your progress toward career readiness for a variety of careers.
 - The Understanding Complex Tests indicator tells you whether you sufficiently understand text material for college and career-level reading.

Colleges will see these scores, but they aren't combined in any way with your ACT composite.

The ACT website (act.org) provides a sample score report and scoring information that shows you what all these scores look like when you and your colleges of choice receive them.

What the ACT Expects You to Know

The ACT tests the following subjects:

- » **English:** The ACT expects you to know the fundamentals of grammar, usage, punctuation, diction, and rhetorical skills. For example, you must understand sentence construction — what makes a run-on and what makes a fragment. You need to know how to distinguish between commonly confused words, like *affect* and *effect* or *principal* and *principle*. You must be able to use the proper forms of words, distinguishing between an adjective and an adverb, and you must know the difference between a comma and a semicolon. Part 2 addresses the English portion of the test.
- » **Mathematics:** The ACT requires basic skills in arithmetic, geometry, and algebra. If you've had two semesters of algebra, two semesters of geometry, and a general math background, you have the math you need to answer about 90 percent of the questions. The ACT also tests algebra II and trigonometry. Oh, and you don't have to know calculus. The ACT has no calculus questions. Happy day! Refer to Part 3 for more.
- » **Reading:** The ACT expects you to be able to read a passage in a relatively short amount of time and answer questions based on it. Your reading skills are probably pretty set by now. However, this fact doesn't mean you can't improve your ACT Reading score. Chapter 13 shows you a few tricks you can use to improve your speed and tells you how to recognize and avoid traps built into the questions.



WARNING

» **Science (optional):** You don't have to have much specific science background to ace the Science Test. The passages may test chemistry, biology, botany, physics, or any other science, but you don't have to have had those courses. The test gives you all the information you need to answer most of the science questions in the passages, diagrams, charts, and tables.

Although the Science Test is optional, some colleges may require it for admissions. Be sure to check each college's testing policies before you make the decision to skip the science questions. Head to Part 5 for more about the Science Test.

» **Writing (optional):** The ACT folks added this optional section to test your writing ability. Don't worry! You've been writing for years, and the ACT people know that you can't possibly write a perfect essay in a measly 40 minutes. They're not focusing on perfection; instead, they're looking at your thesis, organization, and ability to support your thoughts. The ACT doesn't require you to write the essay, and few colleges require or even recommend the essay. Part 6 gives you the lowdown on the Writing portion of the ACT.

Repeating the Test for a Better Score

Are you allowed to repeat the ACT? Yes. Should you repeat the ACT? Probably. Other than the additional cost (both financial and emotional) required to test again, there is no real downside to retesting. Decide whether you want to repeat the ACT based on your answers to the following questions:

- » **What errors did I make the first time around?** If your mistakes were from a lack of knowledge, that is, you just plain didn't know a grammar rule or a math formula, you can easily correct those mistakes by studying.
- » **Why do I want to repeat the test?** Is your ego destroyed because your best friend got a better score than you did? That's probably not a good enough reason to retake the ACT. Do retake the exam if you're trying to get a minimum qualifying score to enable you to get into a college or earn a scholarship.
- » **Can I go through this all over again?** How seriously did you take studying the first time around? If you gave it all you had, you may be too burned out to go through the whole process again. On the other hand, if you just zoomed through the test booklet and didn't spend much time preparing for the test, you may want a second chance to show your stuff.
- » **Were my mistakes caused by factors that were not my fault?** Maybe you were in a fender-bender on your way to the exam, or perhaps you stayed up late the night before in an argument with your parents or your best friend. If you just weren't up to par when you took the exam, definitely take it again, and this time, be sure to get a good night's sleep the night before.



TIP

If you take the ACT in a certain national administration (usually April, June, or December), you may be able to pay to see a digital copy of your full ACT test and the questions you missed. This handy resource gives you valuable information to study for a future test. The cost for My Answer Key is \$30 when you register for the test, and access to the test questions is available as soon as you receive your scores for that ACT test date. You can order My Answer Key after you receive your scores, but it'll cost you \$40. This service is only available on certain test dates in the United States and isn't offered for international administrations of the test.

The ACT doesn't automatically send colleges the scores for every time you take the test. It gives you the option of deciding which set of scores you want colleges to see. If you don't want to report the results of all your tests, keep these issues in mind:

- » **The ACT automatically sends scores to the colleges you list on your test registration form.** If you want to wait until after you see your report to decide whether certain colleges can see your scores for a particular test administration, don't list those colleges with your ACT registration.
- » **Many colleges figure your ACT composite score by averaging the highest scores you get in each section across all administrations of the test.** They refer to this practice as *superscoring* the ACT. If you get a 24 in English, a 22 in Math, and a 23 in Reading the first time you take the ACT and a 25, 20, and 24, respectively, the second time, these colleges will figure your composite score by averaging your higher 25 English score, 22 Math score, and 24 Reading score. Your composite score for each administration would be 23, but the composite score the colleges calculate would be 24 (23.67 rounded to 24). Therefore, you may want the colleges to get reports from all the times you take the ACT so that they can superscore your highest section scores. When the ACT institutes section retesting and the superscore report, your highest section scores will appear on one report, and (if colleges allow), you'll only have to send (and pay for) one report.
- » **A handful of colleges require you to report your scores from every test date.** Check with the admissions committee at the colleges to which you're applying to make sure they allow you to withhold score reports from particular test dates.



REMEMBER

A growing number of colleges allow you to self-report your ACT scores. Those colleges consider the ACT scores you list on your college applications or report within the college's online portal on a separate form, depending on the policies of the individual school, to make admissions decisions. You only send an official score report after you've been admitted and have decided to attend that particular college. Self-reporting allows you to save the money you'd have spent to send official score reports to every college on your application list. If you're able to take advantage of the self-reporting option, be sure to follow the college's procedures exactly and report your scores accurately. A discrepancy between the scores you report on your application and the scores that appear on your official report could be grounds for rescinding your college acceptance.

