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## Chapter **1**

# What to Expect with the SAT

**T**he 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. Colleges accept both, so the right test for you is the one you perform better on. There are advantages and disadvantages to each test, so it's not a bad idea to consider taking both.

You can take the ACT on paper or on 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.

The ACT takes between two and three hours, depending on whether you choose to take the optional science section, so the time length of the SAT and ACT is roughly the same.

The SAT and the ACT are similar in overall difficulty. The math is about 90 percent the same, but SAT math tests concepts in less traditional ways than ACT math does, 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 an optional science test, which the SAT does not. Check the college websites to determine whether they require the ACT Science Test.

The ACT also provides 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 English into two tests, totaling 75 minutes.

For more on the ACT overall, pick up *ACT Prep 2026/2027 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 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 gap year 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 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.

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.

**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



TIP

The College Board website ([collegeboard.org](http://collegeboard.org)) also offers eight official paper-based practice SATs in PDF form. The questions are real SAT-style questions, but the format isn't exactly the same as the digital test. Each section has more questions (33 in Reading and Writing and 27 in Math), and there's no official time limit. These practice SATs are excellent for extra practice, but they don't fully re-create the actual testing experience.

## Working through the Adaptive SAT

The SAT is adaptive, which means your performance on the first module affects what questions you get on the second module. There are two versions of the second module for both the Reading and Writing and Math sections. Whether you get the easier or harder second module is based on how you do on the first one. For example, if you do extremely well on the first Math module, the SAT thinks you're good at math. It gives you a harder module and establishes a baseline math score that you won't go lower no matter how badly you do on the harder module. If you don't do so well on the first module, it gives you the easier second math module and establishes a baseline math score that you can't rise above no matter how well you do on the second module.

Within each module, each question has the same point value: The more questions you get right, the higher your score for that module. 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.

## 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

Online registration is simple: go to [collegeboard.org](http://collegeboard.org) and sign in to your account to register for the SAT. During registration, you'll choose a test date and test center and upload a photo of yourself. Have a payment method ready and a digital headshot where your full face is visible and you're the only person in the picture. Head coverings are okay if they're religious in nature.

The College Board Customer Service line within the United States is 866-756-7346 and outside the United States is 212-713-7789. Hearing-impaired test-takers can call the TTY Customer Service number, which within the United States is 888-857-2477 and outside the United States 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 eight 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 spring of or summer after your sophomore year:** Many high schools offer a PSAT test to help you get a feel for the SAT. 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. You can use your results to help you begin studying in the summer before junior year. See Chapter 2 for more on the PSAT.
- » **Continue in the fall of your junior year:** Here you take the PSAT/NMSQT, which stands for Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test. This version provides a test with difficulty equivalent to the SAT and is the qualifying exam for the National Merit Scholarship. You can find more about this qualification in Chapter 2. Fall semester is also a great time to take your first actual SAT. Tests are offered in August, September, October, November, and December, giving you ample opportunities to test your summer practice.
- » **In the spring of your junior year:** Practice the skills you need to improve and take the SAT again. Some juniors take the SAT twice or more during the spring.
- » **Again in the fall of your senior year, if necessary:** You will be busy completing applications; you likely don't want to also study for the SAT. That's why it's best to take several tests before senior year. If you'd like to try one more time to boost your score, we suggest taking the SAT in August or September, so you have your scores ready for any early application deadlines.



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 submit it with your registration form.



TIP

Register early to get your preferred test site. When you sign up, you choose a location, but if it fills, you'll be assigned another nearby site. So don't delay — 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 documented disability, you may qualify for testing accommodations. Start by speaking with your school counselor or SSD (Services for Students with Disabilities) coordinator. They will submit the request through the College Board's online system; students usually do not send forms themselves. Details and documentation requirements are available at [accommodations.collegeboard.org](http://accommodations.collegeboard.org).

Once approved, your accommodations generally apply to all College Board tests. Depending on your needs, accommodations may include extended time, extra breaks, assistive technology, or alternate test formats.

Submit your request well in advance of your test date so everything is in place before you register.

## Temporary injuries or medical issues

If you have a temporary issue — for example, a broken arm shortly before the test — contact the College Board as soon as possible and work with your school to request temporary accommodations. Documentation from a medical professional will be required.



TIP

Questions about special needs? Your high school counseling office or SSD office should be your first stop. You can also get information at [accommodations.collegeboard.org](http://accommodations.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. (U.S. citizens living in other countries may also be eligible for fee waivers.) A fee waiver covers the cost of the test and provides additional benefits, such as extra score sends and college application fee-waiver opportunities at participating schools. (See the section, “Scoring on the SAT,” later in this chapter for more information on score-reporting options.) Ask your school counselor for help. They'll provide the waiver and apply it to your registration.

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. There are many, many opportunities and places to look, so talk to your school counselor.

Try to avoid extra SAT charges when possible. Fees may apply for late registration, test-date changes, or optional services. Check the College Board website for current pricing and policies.

# 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.

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!



TIP

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, if you can crack the basic language in word problems, 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. The Common Application, used by most U.S. colleges and universities, provides an Additional Information section. This section is the perfect place to give context to a test score that you think may not represent your abilities. For help with college admission essays, 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.

There is one caveat to the preceding claim: virtually 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 17, following the practice exams in Part 4.

### Score reports

At the time of this writing, the SAT provides four free score reports you can send colleges. If you want to send scores to more schools, you can do so for a fee. Check the College Board ([collegeboard.org](http://collegeboard.org)) for current prices. You can request score reports when you register for the exam or after you receive your scores.



WARNING

It may not be a good idea to send score reports to colleges when you register, even though it’s free. You won’t have seen your scores yet, and you may not want every college to receive them. Most colleges allow you to self-report SAT scores on your application. Typically, you only need to send an official score report after you enroll. A few colleges require official scores at the time of application, but it’s usually worth paying later so you can choose which scores to send later after you’ve seen them.

Last thing; create a free College Board account at [collegeboard.org](http://collegeboard.org). You’ll use it to register for the PSAT and SAT and view your scores. Here, you can access score details, the Bluebook app (discussed more in Chapter 2) and paper-based practice SAT, all for free.

