Chapter 1

Getting Your ACT Together: The Format

In This Chapter

➤ Packing your bags: What to take to the ACT
➤ Avoiding dead weight: What not to take to the test
➤ Dealing with unusual circumstances: What to do if you’re someone special
➤ Chancing it with sophisticated scoring: What’s that about dumb-luck guessing?
➤ Looking right before your eyes: What’s on the ACT
➤ Examining the strange but true: Horrible (but hilarious) tales of the ACT

Are you the type who jumps in the cold water all at once instead of just 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1-1</th>
<th>ACT Breakdown by Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Test</strong></td>
<td><strong>Number of Questions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science Reasoning</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Optional Writing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you add up the numbers, you find that you have 216 questions to answer in 205 minutes; 205 minutes is 3 hours and 25 minutes, or nearly 3\( \frac{1}{2} \) hours. You get one ten-minute break between tests two and three (the Mathematics and the Reading tests). If you opt to not take the optional writing test, then you get to happily walk out right after the Science test. If you include the time in the classroom spent giving out the tests, explaining the directions, checking your ID, and so on, your whole morning is shot. You may as well figure on giving up 4 to 4\( \frac{1}{2} \) hours for this test.

I’d Forget My Head If It Wasn’t Attached: What to Take to the ACT

If you can’t borrow the brain of that whiz kid in your calculus class, you’re stuck using your own. In addition, be sure that you have the following with you:
Admission ticket: By about two weeks before the exam, you should have received your ticket in the mail. If you don’t have the ticket by then or if you got it but lost it, call the ACT at 319-337-1270.

Pencils: Take a bunch of sharpened No. 2 pencils with you. You may also want to take a big eraser (nothing personal, everyone makes mistakes) and a small pencil sharpener.

Map or directions: Go to the test center a few days before the actual exam, and scope out your driving route and parking area. Often, the ACT is given at colleges that have parking lots far, far from the test rooms. Drive to the college 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.

Clothing: Rumor has it some weird kids are lobbying for a special Nude ACT. Until it becomes available, you need to have some sort of external covering. Take a few extra layers. The heat is often turned off for the weekend in many classrooms (the ACT is usually offered on a Saturday), and the room can be freezing cold. Alternately, in the summer, schools 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 thinks is so cute isn’t going to cut it with the proctor. You need to bring a photo ID (student ID, driver’s license, passport, military ID, FBI Most Wanted mug shot, whatever). If you don’t have a photo ID, you can bring a letter of identification from your school. (The ACT registration booklet goes into detail about what this letter entails; we won’t bore you with that information here.)

Eyeglasses: Students frequently forget their reading glasses at home and then squint for the next four hours. The ACT itself is enough of a headache; you don’t need eyestrain, as well. And if you wear contacts, be sure to bring cleaning/wetting solution in case you have to take the lenses out and reinsert them. (Hey, all those tears can really mess up your lenses!)

A snack: True, your break is only ten minutes between tests two and three, but that’s enough time to gobble down something to jump-start your brain. We often suggest taking an energy bar or some peanuts, something with protein and carbohydrates. Scarfing down a candy bar is actually counterproductive; your sugar levels rise only momentarily and then drop down below where they were before you had your chocolate fix.

A watch: If your watch has an alarm, turn it off so that you don’t disturb the other students. If you don’t know how to do so, borrow another watch. The proctor will take a beeping watch away from you.

A calculator: ACT gurus finally joined the 20th century and agreed to allow students to use calculators. Although the ACT information bulletin has an entire quarter page detailing which calculators can and cannot be used, for all practical purposes, you can use any calculator (yes, even a graphing calculator) as long as it doesn’t make a noise. You may not use a laptop computer (don’t laugh; you’d be surprised by how many of my students want to bring one to the test!) or a pocket organizer.

What Not to Take to the ACT

Believe it or not, you shouldn’t take some things to the test, such as the following:

Books and notes: Last-minute studying won’t do you much good. Forget the books; you won’t be allowed to take them into the test room with you. (Just be sure to tell this to your parents. 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 continuing.)
Scratch paper: You may not bring your own scratch paper, and no scratch paper will be given to you during the exam. Fortunately, the exam booklet has plenty of blank space on which you may do your calculations.

Normal Is Boring: Unusual 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 is a brief list of special circumstances and how they affect your ACT.

- **Learning disabilities:** If you have a diagnosed learning disability, you may be able to get special accommodations. You may have extended time, but you must specifically request this on your application form. Please note that in order to get special testing, you must have been diagnosed LD professionally and must have a current, individualized plan at school. Talk to your counselor for further information.

- **Physical disabilities:** If you have a physical disability, you may be allowed to take a test in a special format — in Braille, large print, or on audiocassette. If your disability is physical, do not complete a registration folder; write to the ACT Universal Testing and receive a form called “Request for ACT Assessment: Special Testing.” This booklet explains your options.

- **Religious obligations:** If your religion prohibits you from taking a test on a Saturday, you may test on an alternate date. The ACT registration bulletin specifies dates and locations in each state.

- **Military duty:** If you’re an active military person, you don’t complete the normal registration form. Instead, ask your Educational Services Officer about testing through DANTES (Defense Activity for Nontraditional Educational Support).

Anything’s Better than Nothing: Guessing for Points

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 wrong answer.
The ACT is absolutely wonderful in that it does not penalize you for wrong answers. (The SAT subtracts a fraction of a point for every question you miss. The ACT does not.) Therefore, guessing on the ACT obviously works to your advantage. Never leave anything blank. We suggest that you save a couple of minutes 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

We once had a frustrated student tell us that the scores on the ACT looked like measurements to him: 34, 29, 36. However, the ACT has four scores, which makes for a very strange set of measurements! The ACT scores are nothing like high school scores based on percentages. They are not even like the more familiar SAT scores that range from 200 to 800. The ACT scores are as follows:

- Each test (English, Mathematics, Reading, and Science Reasoning) goes from 1 (low) to 36 (high). The Writing scores go from 1 (low) to 6 (high).
- You also have a composite score, which is the average of the four test scores.
- Three of the tests have subscores. The subscores in English, Mathematics, and Reading range from 1 to 18. Don’t assume that the subscores determine the total score. That would be too easy and too logical. The subscores are determined independently and do not necessarily add up to the total score in a section.
- A percentile score tells you where you rank in your state and nationwide.

So How Do I Know that I’m a Genius? What Scores Mean

Look at the percentiles. Just knowing you got a 26 doesn’t tell you much. You need to know whether a 26 is a 50th percentile, a 75th percentile, or a 99th percentile. If you got a 36, be prepared to be accepted at any college nationwide!

What Do They Want from Me? What Is Tested?

The following subjects are tested on the ACT:

- **English:** The ACT tests English grammar. You are expected to know the fundamentals of usage, 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. If you don’t have a strong grammar background (you probably have been studying literature for the past few years and haven’t had grammar since about the seventh grade), don’t panic. This book features a gruesomely exhaustive grammar review with just about everything you’ll need to know.

Surprisingly, the ACT English Test is one of the strongest portions of this exam for international students. You learned all these picky grammar points as you learned English. You may be much more comfortable with the rules than native English speakers are.
Mathematics: The ACT requires basic skills in arithmetic, geometry, and algebra. If you have had two semesters of algebra, two semesters of geometry, and a general math background, you can answer probably 90 percent of the questions. Unfortunately, the ACT also tests a little bit of trigonometry. If you have not had trigonometry, don’t worry. This book gives you the few things you need to know. In addition, the test has only a few trig questions (usually just four), and they are often so close to the end that many students don’t even get to them anyway. Trig should be the least of your worries. You don’t have to know calculus. The ACT has no calculus questions. Happy day!

Reading: You are expected to be able to read a passage in a relatively short amount of time and answer questions based upon it. Your reading skills are probably pretty set by now. If you are 17, you are not going to change the way you’ve been reading for the past 12 years. However, this fact does not mean you cannot improve your reading score. Chapter 12 shows you tricks that you can use to improve your speed and tells you how to recognize and avoid traps built into the questions.

Science Reasoning: You are not required to have any specific science background. The passages may test chemistry, biology, botany, physics, or any other science, but you do not have to have had those courses. The test gives all the information you need to answer the science questions in the passages or in diagrams, charts, and tables.

Optional Writing Test: You are not required to take this test, but we suggest that you do. The ACT folks added this section to test your writing ability (an extremely important component for college success). 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 30 minutes. What they will be focusing on is your thesis, your organization, and your ability to support your thoughts.

Practice Makes Perfect: Repeating the Test

Are you allowed to repeat the ACT? Yes. Should you repeat the ACT? Probably. Decide whether 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 with studying. However, if you made mistakes because you were careless or if you daydreamed during the exam, that may be a personality quirk that you’re not going to change. Very few people who are careless test-takers change their test style overnight.

Why do I want to repeat the test? Is your ego destroyed because your best friend got a better score than you did? That is probably not a good enough reason to retake the ACT. Do retake the exam if you are trying to get a minimum qualifying score to enable you to get into a college or into a scholarship program.

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 that again. On the other hand, if you just zoomed through the booklet and didn’t spend much time preparing for the test, you have a second chance to show your stuff.

Were the 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 boyfriend or girlfriend. 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.