

Understanding the SAT and ACT

Years ago, deciding whether to take the SAT or ACT wasn't even an issue. Even if a school prefers one over the other, admissions officers will usually convert the scores interchangeably.

Thanks to grade inflation, differences in curriculum difficulty and teaching quality, a 4.0 at one school can vary greatly from a 4.0 at a different school. Colleges rely on standardized tests to help compensate for these differences. In addition, these scores serve as a reliable predictor of how a student will perform academically in their first year of college.

The SAT and the ACT are both intended to test a student's knowledge of the fundamentals. However, the two test creators are guided by very different philosophies. The SAT and ACT are *significantly* different tests, and in many ways, they measure different skills in different formats and test different subject matters.

The SAT is a logic-based test and is designed to showcase a student's ability to use critical thinking and problem solving skills.

The ACT is content-based and documents more of what was learned during high school.

Nonetheless, this contrast isn't exactly airtight. Many questions on the ACT test critical thinking, and a range of material on the SAT is based on basic high school knowledge.

Out of the two, the SAT is the most widely taken entrance examination. It is designed to test a student's skill level in math, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. The SAT tries to assess the "innate ability" of students. It does so by using tricky and confusing phrasing to determine skill level (i.e. the student's performance under pressure and the ability to identify what's being asked). It isn't necessary measuring comprehension on a specific subject, but rather how well a student can critically think through a problem. Although the SAT has shorter sections and is scored on a three digit system. Improving an SAT score requires a student to understand basic test-taking tricks.

The ACT is designed to test skill levels in English, math, reading, and science reasoning. The ACT focuses on the knowledge acquired during high school, meaning that the test assesses subjects and skills found in a typical student's curriculum. It does contain trigonometry and an optional longer writing section. The ACT has only a two digit scoring system and sometimes a single point can be the difference between getting into college and not. To do well, students must study actual subject matter. Both the ACT and the SAT ultimately test your ability to think, and both cover the basics of a high school education. Therefore, learning critical thinking skills can benefit both tests and can also help on other standardized exams such as AP, CLEP, LSAT, ISEE, etc. More than that, the skills used in preparing for the SAT will also be extremely helpful in preparing for the PSAT/NMSQT. This is a test taken in a student's junior year that could yield incredible scholarships like full tuition, free room and board, graduate school money, study abroad stipends, and more.

Even though the SAT and ACT are very different tests, they both fulfill the same role in the admissions process of getting into college. However, each test rewards different aspects of a student's ability, so performing well on a certain test may boil down to the type of student that takes it. Depending on their particular strengths and weaknesses, some students may perform much better on one test than the other.

As a result, many students are now considering both the SAT and ACT--to figure out which test provides a better showcase for their abilities.