

## ACT vs SAT

### 10 Major Differences

Preparing for college is a trying time for students, and the emphasis on standardized testing does not make this time any easier. Some students are not sure whether to take the SAT or the ACT or both—or what criteria colleges seek. Enclosed is a concise description of ten major differences between the SAT and ACT, which may help students in making their test-taking decisions:

- 1) ACT includes trigonometry (typically 4 questions); SAT does not.
- 1a) ACT has occasional questions on Matrices, Logarithms, Radians, and unreal numbers; SAT does not.
- 2) ACT includes “science reasoning”, which is logical reasoning based on data and scientific terms, but not based on classroom science.
- 3) SAT deducts points for wrong answers. However with coaching, students can actually use this to their ADVANTAGE.
- 4) SAT Math demands scrutinizing the English aspect of math questions. ACT is more straightforward, making it a more comfortable test, but not necessarily easier.
- 5) SAT directly tests high level vocabulary. This rewards students who are big readers or are good vocabulary absorbers.
- 6) SAT Critical Reading relies more on inference; ACT Reading asks questions that rely more on retrieving information from the text.
- 7) SAT Writing includes a written 25 minute essay. The ACT essay (30 min.) is optional, though most colleges require it.
- 8) The SAT Essay is more likely to ask about abstract topics; the ACT Essay will ask a practical question usually relating to high school life.
- 9) The ACT is more fast-paced; there are more questions to be done in a shorter amount of time.
- 10) One difference that could be considered “major” is colleges’ USE of the SAT vs ACT: Almost all competitive colleges “cherry-pick” SAT sub-scores, meaning they consider the best combination of Math, CR and Writing earned on different dates. Very few colleges do this with the four ACT sub-scores. Thus for most competitive colleges, a student who does not ping strong scores on all ACT sections on the same day, is being dragged down by one or more weaker sections, whereas the cherry-picking of the SAT scores means one weak section on one day does not hurt.

#### **Our suggestions:**

Make a comparison. Buy The Official SAT Study Guide ISBN # 0-87447-852-9 and take any of the first three full length tests under timed conditions. Buy The Real ACT Prep Guide ISBN # 076891-9754 and take any of the three tests therein under timed conditions. If you really need to save time, you need not do the Writing sections for either (they compare almost the same). Score them and use the accompanying table to compare the non-Writing sections (1600 SAT scale) with one another.

Absent a comparison (or if the comparison shows nearly identical scores): most students seeking admission to competitive colleges who are capable of absorbing vocabulary should study for SAT and disregard ACT if scores are strong. Add ACT prep if you have time or if after two SATs the scores are unlikely to impress your target colleges.

Our equally important suggestion: **START EARLY**. Colleges credit the best score, so it’s important to have three or more opportunities to take these tests. With vacations, proms, and graduations, that means the students who plan in advance will have the best opportunities. This is especially true for families that want to take advantage of Early Decision. For students who’ve had a semester each of Algebra and Geometry by the end of sophomore year, the summer before junior year and/or the fall of junior year are usually the best times to prep.

Bottom Line: the tests are similar. ACT remains a bit broader in content.

No college requires one over the other, and to our knowledge, no college has a preference.

If your email did not allow an attachment (we sent this with and without an attachment), the conversion table between ACT and SAT scores can be found at:

<http://www.act.org/aap/concordance/pdf/reference.pdf>