

SAT or ACT: The Final Frontier



By Nikki Porcaro

ACT or SAT? It's an important choice, and confusion often reigns. Standardized tests are by no means the be-all, end-all of the application process, especially as many schools value or are moving toward a more holistic evaluation model, but they can be a great opportunity to help students distinguish themselves. They can help students gain access to honors programs or attain scholarships, and can even allow students to place out of certain intro-level college courses.

The SAT, which changed (again!) in 2016, is barely recognizable from when many parents took it. Gone are analogies and sentence completions, as well as the dreaded fraction-of-a-point deductions for wrong answers (aka. the guessing penalty). Now the reading and grammar sections are combined into one verbal score (essentially rendering the math portion of the test more heavily weighted), and there are two math sections, no calculator and calculator, both of which include "grid-in"

questions that require students to input their own answers without choices. The new SAT math section tends to correlate more closely with what students are doing in school (e.g., Algebra II, early pre-calculus); but because of this, it tends to have a greater number of higher-level questions than the old iterations of the test or the ACT.

One of the big benefits of the ACT is that it allows more time per question than the SAT. The ACT overtook the SAT in market share for the first time ever in 2012 (which, if you ask this cynic, is precisely why the SAT made the changes they did). The ACT has become very popular for local students, and for some of them it is a better choice. It features English and reading sections very similar to the SAT, a math section with a lot of overlap, and a science section that is geared more toward logical reasoning and chart reading than actual science knowledge.

Both tests have optional essays requiring students to rhetorically analyze an argument and how it is structured. It is a more advanced task than on the pre-2016 tests, which called for a simple persuasive or opinion essay.

The SAT is scaled from 400-1600, and the ACT from 1-36. Almost every school out of the almost 5,000 in the U.S. accept both tests equally. Some students are choosing to take both tests, since they're much more similar with the changes in recent years. This is in no way mandatory, but gung-ho test takers may feel it gives them more opportunities to score well. Since most strategies for both tests overlap, some students choose to focus on one and take the other as an extra. Other students feel that focusing solely on the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of one test is a better way to go for them.

Some students and parents are confused when their usual grades do not match up with their test score. One thing to remember is that grades in school aren't based solely on demonstrating knowledge, but include things like un-timed projects, class participation, homework, and makeup quizzes, depending on a school's rules — all very different metrics of evaluation than a timed, standardized test. The tests are indeed aligned with much of what is learned in school, but the skills of timed reading comprehension and computation, as well as higher-level thinking skills like inference

and multi-step problems, still require a concerted, strategic process. With effective practice, one can start to see the test's predictability, common trap answers, and common question types. They are conquerable! Students shouldn't look at these standardized tests as an obstacle to their success, but rather as an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and outshine other applicants.

Just remember that what's right for your neighbor's hairdresser's cousin's kid may not be right for yours. While anecdotal stories from friends can be one metric to determine the test that is best for your teen, do your research. At No Anxiety Prep International, we use a free combo test to help families decide, and you can also look at your child's academic strengths. Some feel that the SAT is geared more toward math-talented students, while the ACT has more reading and verbal-based sections. Some opt to apply to only test-optional schools.

The great thing about this process is that there are choices.

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