



Empowerly's Guide to



EXAMS & TESTS

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www.empowerly.com

Email us: enrollment@empowerly.edu

Call Us: +1-(800)-491-6920



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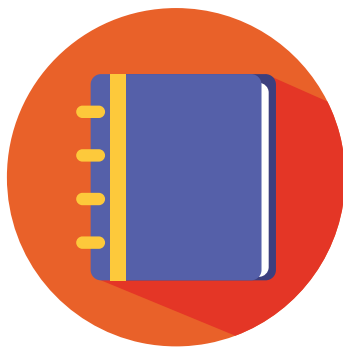
Table of Contents

Introduction

Different Types of Tests

College Entrance Exams

- SAT/PSAT
- ACT
- Differences between SAT and ACT
- When Should I Take It?
- What Score Should I Aim For?



English Language Proficiency Tests

- TOEFL
- IELTS
- Other Language Tests

Test Preparation

- Before the Exam
- On the Day of the Test
- After the Test
- What to Do if it Doesn't Go Well



Introduction

Did you know that you will have taken an average of 112 standardized tests by the time you graduate from high school? That doesn't include the many tests administered during the course of your school which evaluates what you have learned in their class. That's an awful lot of tests!

It's a little wonder then, that the skill of test-taking and preparation is an important one to have. Many students get the exam jitters and worry that they won't perform well, especially when they haven't had to take many exams and or haven't perfected their study habits. This guide provides an overview of the types of tests you can expect to take in high school and how to prepare for them, so you can tackle them with confidence!



Different Types of Tests

The most common tests administered in school are **achievement-based** - they are used to evaluate your skills and provide a picture of your strengths and weaknesses. They help teachers evaluate just how much information they have retained. They are used to help assign grades, motivate students, and provide a broad check on a school's academic performance.

Another type of test that you will typically take in school is an **aptitude test**. These are tests designed to measure ability in a variety of areas but typically include verbal, math, analytical, and writing. These tests are also standardized, making it easier to measure student aptitude across different learning environments or educational systems.

The US high school system is disparate — graduation requirements differ from one high school to another; course offerings vary including the number of AP or honors courses available; and high schools measure GPA in different ways. Standardized testing is helpful for colleges as it allows them to measure the pool of applicants against the same standard.

Read more about [GPA vs Standardized Testing](#) here!

Now that we have a sense of what these tests do, let's take a look at each, what they test and how to prepare for them.



AP Exams

AP courses and exams offer students a challenging curriculum that is sure to engage and inspire. An AP course load can signal to colleges that a student is interested in and able to handle rigorous coursework. The exams are college-level exams on specific subjects that are usually administered in May at the time when the AP course at high school is completed. AP courses and exams cover a broad range of subjects, everything from music theory to chemistry and are scored on a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high). Because they are college-level courses, students may be able to skip certain entry-level courses (advanced placement) or receive college credit if they earn a high enough score, thus reducing their cost of college. Colleges differ on their AP score requirements for advanced placement and college credit, some recognize a score of 3, while others will only recognize a 4 or 5. Students who don't receive a score that is eligible for credit may choose not to submit their exam with their college admission application and retake it during the next testing cycle.

AP exams usually take between 2-3 hours to complete and consist of a multiple-choice section and well as a section for free responses. Participating in the AP course is the best way to prepare for the exam as they teach the material covered in the test. While most students take the course before taking the exam, homeschooled students or students in high school that doesn't offer AP courses may need to self-study for them.



There is plenty of online AP test prep material such as practice tests and study guides that can help you prepare.

AP exams are usually administered by your high school but if yours isn't offering them, you can check whether another local school is. This year AP exams are being conducted both online and in-person due to the pandemic.

College Entrance Exams

There are a few different college entrance exams but the most common are the **SAT and ACT**. These tests are used to determine a student's critical reading, thinking, and problem-solving skills that are necessary for college and factor into most college admissions decisions.

Students often ask just how much they are valued when it comes to college admissions and while there has been a downward trend among colleges to require them, they are still used broadly, especially by the most competitive colleges that receive thousands of applicants.

This upcoming 2021-22 college admission cycle test-optional policies will remain in place and so while we encourage applicants to take tests if they can, they shouldn't feel pressured to take them if they can't. Test centers have limited or canceled tests altogether, so you shouldn't stress if it's not possible to take it and trust the promise made by colleges that you won't be penalized for not submitting a score. While most colleges haven't disclosed how many of their admitted students didn't submit a test score, it's worth noting the few that did:



Tufts University announced that more than half of its early-applicant pool had applied test-optional, and 56 percent of those accepted had applied without test scores. Nearly one-third of the University of Notre Dame's early admits had applied without scores. At Boston University, 71 percent of early admits were accepted without scores.

- [The Future of Admissions](#), March 10, 2021

Let's take a look at the most common college entrance exams - the SAT and ACT, what they test, and how they differ.

SAT/PSAT

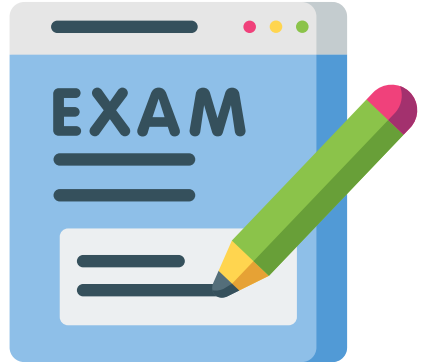
The [SAT](#) is a multiple-choice test that measures a student's readiness for college. It consists of a math section and a reading and writing section and must be completed within three hours. Each section is scored on a scale of 200 to 800 points, with the highest possible score for both sections being 1600. It's more [commonly taken than the ACT](#) by a small margin.

The [Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test](#) (PSAT/NMSQT) test is a prelude to the SAT that measures whether you are on the right track for college entrance, as well as a qualifier for the National Merit Scholarship Program. Like the SAT, it has a math and reading and writing section, each scored on a scale of 160-760 with a maximum score combined of 1520. In order to qualify for college scholarships offered through the National Merit Scholarship Program, you typically need to [score in the top 1%](#) and have taken the PSAT in your junior year of high school.



ACT

Like the SAT, the ACT consists of a math, reading, and English section, but also includes a science reasoning section. Each section is scored individually on a scale of 1-36 and a composite score of 1-36 is calculated for the entire test. Students have 2 hours and 55 minutes to complete the test.



Differences between SAT and ACT

You may wonder which test is better to take, as research shows that there are pointed differences between the two. Here are a [few key differences](#):

- **Focus:** SAT is more critical thinking-focused, while the ACT is more science-based.
- **Test Style:** SAT questions are evidence and context-based, focusing on real-world situations while ACT questions tend to be more straightforward and easier to decipher.
- **Difficulty Levels:** SAT questions increase in difficulty as you move through a section while ACT questions vary in difficulty randomly. One point of departure is the Reading Level: All of the passages on the ACT English section are at a relatively easy reading level while the passages on the SAT Writing & Language section can vary in difficulty, from a 9th-grade reading level to early college.

- **Math:** SAT math questions involve problem-solving and data analysis but they include formulas while the ACT does not. However, the ACT math section allows you to use a calculator on every single question while the SAT includes a 25-minute no-calculator section with 20 questions. The ACT math test is all multiple choice while the SAT math sections are 80% multiple choice and 20% grid ins meaning you will have to calculate and offer your own answers.
- **Timing:** One of the major differences between the ACT and SAT is time pressure. While plenty of students run out of time on the SAT, the vast majority of students struggle to finish at least one of the ACT sections within the time limit. Across sections, you will have an average of 50 seconds per question on the ACT and 1 minute and 10 seconds per question on the new SAT. However, because the questions are different, SAT questions may take you longer to sift through so the differences may be moot.

What Score Should I Aim For?

There is no pass or fail for the SAT/ACT but **you should aim to achieve a better than the national median score**. Before you decide on the score you want to achieve you should first look at the colleges you plan to apply to and aim to achieve at least the median score for the target schools on your list. If you are unsure of the median scores for those colleges, visit their admissions website, most colleges publish data on the average test scores of admitted students. In general, the median score for the top 50 colleges is a 1420/32 or greater.

SAT & ACT Scores

Colleges	Avg. SAT	Avg. ACT	SAT 75th	ACT 75th	SAT 25th	ACT 25th
Amherst College	1477	33	1550	34	1410	31
Brown University	N/A	N/A	1570	35	1440	33
Claremont Mckenna College	1429	32	1510	34	1360	31
Emory University	1442	32	1530	34	1360	31
Princeton University	N/A	N/A	1570	35	1460	33
Stanford University	N/A	N/A	1570	35	1440	32
University of California, Berkeley	N/A	N/A	1530	34	1310	28
University of California, Los Angeles	1405	31	1530	34	1270	27
University of Michigan	1435	33	1530	34	1340	31
University of Pennsylvania	1490	N/A	1560	35	1450	33

When Should I Take It?

Empowerly recommends taking the PSAT in your junior year and the SAT or ACT at the latest by the end of your junior year so that you can take it again if you are not satisfied with your score. Often students find that [they will score better](#) the second time around if they don't do so well during the first sitting, which is why taking it earlier is a smart move! Alternatively, consider taking the ACT if you didn't do well on the SAT or vice versa.



English Language Proficiency Tests

For those students applying from an overseas country, are non-native speakers, or whose education was not instructed in English, an English proficiency test score will need to be submitted when applying to college in the US. Several exams are available but the most common are the TOEFL and IELTS.

TOEFL

The TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) tests your reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills in four separate sections, each section devoted to one skill scored at a range of 0-30 with a total score of 0-120. The test takes about 3 hours to complete and can be taken at various test centers around the world or online. On average US colleges require a minimum score of 74 to be admitted.

IELTS

The [IELTS](#) (International English Language Test) assesses listening, reading, writing, and speaking abilities and is graded on a scale of 1-9. A score is given for each test component that is averaged and rounded to produce an overall band score. The test takes 3 hours and can only be taken in person at a test center. In general, applicants need [a score between 6 - 7.5](#) to apply to colleges in the US.

Other Language Tests

There are several other English proficiency tests offered both in-person or online including the [iTEP](#) (International Test of English Proficiency), [Duolingo English Test](#), [PTE Academic](#) (Pearsons Test of English Academic), and [C1 Advanced](#) or [C2 Proficiency](#) (Cambridge English: Advanced or Proficiency). Before you decide on which to take, research the colleges you are interested in applying to and find out which exams they will accept and the minimum score required to apply. Once you have decided on which to take, look online for materials that can help you prepare or consider taking a test prep course.

Now that you have an idea of the different types of exams you can expect to take, you should consider how to prepare for them.



Test Preparation

Knowing how to prepare for and take exams is an indispensable life skill to have. If you can study and learn efficiently, you'll have a headstart on your education, so the earlier you learn these skills the better.

Preparing for a test starts well in advance of the test day, whether that be on day 1 of your class or in the case you are studying independently, weeks before exam day. While preparing for an aptitude test differs from preparing for a high school course test, many study tips can be applied to both. Here are our suggestions on what to do prior to taking the test, on the day of the exam, and following the exam. Follow these steps and you will feel much more confident and positive about the exam!

Before the Exam

Weeks before the exam...

- Pay attention during class from day 1 making sure you take notes, study, and complete homework assignments. Ask questions when you don't understand.
- Review class material on a regular basis, paying close attention to what the teacher has stressed in the classroom as these are more likely to be raised in the test.
- Use technological tools that help you study such as Quizlet, Youtube, publisher's practice questions, Khan Academy, etc.
- If you are struggling with the subject matter employ a tutor early on rather than later.
- Work out! Studies show that exercise improves your memory. Do sports, join a gym, or even just get out and walk/run. This can help you learn and retain information as well as reduce stress.

1-2 weeks before the exam...

- Budget your time to ensure that you have sufficient time to study before the test.
- Set goals for each study session, this will help keep you focused. Chunk larger topics into small ones to make the task more manageable.
- Go over any material from practice tests, flashcards, class notes, homework assignments, textbooks, or workbooks.
- Summarize main ideas into a “cheat sheet” drawing on main concepts you think will be covered in the test.
- Study in different study places - the library, your home office, a quiet cafe. Alternating study spots can [improve retention](#).
- Remove distractions. That means turn the TV off, don't listen to music, and put your phone on silent.
- Attend the last classes before the exam. Teachers often review material prior to the exam, covering the most important aspects that will be emphasized on the test. If they don't, ask!
- Adapt your study according to the type of test you will take. Multiple-choice tests tend to focus more on facts and details, essay questions may need some brainstorming on the questions that may be asked, and deeper reflection and critical thinking over the material that has been covered.

A day before the exam...

- Eat well before a test. This will give you energy and will help you focus.
- Don't burn the midnight oil. You need to be well-rested before the test so that you can stay focused.



Before the Exam

- Give yourself ample time to get to the testing place. You should show up at least 5 minutes before the test will start.
- Bring more than one pen and pencil and any other material (calculator with extra batteries) you are allowed to have.
- Make sure you have a watch so you can pace yourself.
- When you first receive your test, skim through the entire test so that you know how much time you expect to work on each section.
- Start with the easiest problems first. If you get stuck, skip over it and return to it once you have finished.
- Don't rush through the test. Read each question carefully and take sufficient time to respond.
- If you don't understand a question, don't hesitate to ask the instructor for clarification.
- Write neatly. If your writing is illegible it will be marked wrong.
- If you think you won't have time to complete the test, focus on the questions that have the greatest point value first.
- Don't stress if others finish before you. Everyone works at their own pace!
- If you have time left when you are finished, look over your test. Make sure that you have answered all the questions. Watch out for careless mistakes and proofread your essay and/or short answer questions.
- Stay positive and take some deep breaths if you feel nervous. You've got this!



After the Test

- Look at your graded test and make sure there are no grading mistakes.
- Focus on the mistakes you made and make sure you understand what you did wrong.
- If the teacher reviews the test in class, be sure to take notes.
- Save the test as study material for future cumulative tests.

What to Do If It Doesn't Go Well

Don't despair. We all experience disappointment, so don't let a poor grade set you back. Perseverance is what separates winners from losers! If you can, retake it. During the time between the next test, focus on the questions you got wrong and make sure you understand your mistakes and have corrected them. If you can't retake the exam, ask your teacher if there is any extra credit you can do.

Exam preparation is a crucial part of your education, so it's important that you master the skill of preparing for them so you can achieve your best academically. Empowerly can offer you the support and guidance to help structure your study schedule, select courses that most interest and challenge you as well as choose the exams you need to take in order to get into the colleges that best fit you. We'll be happy to discuss how the Empowerly program works, and match you with one of our expert counselors.

