

WHAT ABOUT STANDARDIZED TESTS? A JUNIOR YEAR Q&A

Standardized tests are an important part of the college admissions process. The exact weight is somewhat difficult to determine. Some prestigious colleges no longer require them. (For a complete listing of test optional schools visit www.fairtest.org). For the vast majority of colleges, however, tests are still required and play an integral part in the admissions process.

Colleges and universities use tests differently. Some very large universities use test scores in combination with other statistical factors to create an admissions index. At colleges which use that system (largely because they have too many applications to deal with individually) tests may count more heavily than at colleges which use tests as a way of validating other information.

How important are scores? If a college asks for them, they will use them. But colleges do use them differently. Almost every college admissions officer will say that scores are used to verify what the transcript says or to help them spot an over-achiever or an under-achiever. In general, the larger the school, the more mechanical the process is and the more important the scores. At large universities that do not request letters of reference or essays, scores certainly are important.

At very selective schools, scores play a different role, usually confirming what the application, essay, transcript, and recommendations tell the admissions officer. To quote the Dean of Admissions of one Ivy League university, "High scores alone won't get you in but low scores are a flag we cannot ignore."

DEFINITION OF TERMS:

PSAT

The PSAT is a mini-SAT Reasoning Test and takes 2 hours and 10 minutes. **This is not a test that will be used for college admission.** It consists of two 25-minute critical reading sections, two 25-minute math sections and a 30-minute writing skills section. The 2009 PSAT mirrors the SAT Reasoning Test with some differences (i.e. no essay).

Each section of the PSAT is scored on a scale of 20-80. Colleges may purchase the names and addresses of students based upon certain information that the student has provided (scores in certain ranges, major interest, gender) so they can begin the process of identifying potential applicants and mail information to those students. If a student does not want to participate in that process, permission does not have to be given. It makes no difference in calculating your scores.

The PSAT is taken in October of a student's freshman, sophomore, and junior years. The PSAT is used as the qualifying exam for the National Merit Scholarship program in the student's junior year. Taking the test in ninth and tenth grade provides an opportunity to practice taking standardized tests and become familiar with the testing situation. Students are allowed to use calculators on the mathematics sections of the PSAT.

Because the PSAT is a practice test, opinion about preparing for it is divided. Certainly, a good night's sleep and a good breakfast before the exam are essential. The College Board provides a practice test that all students taking the test should use to be more comfortable with the test and the type of questions that are asked on the actual PSAT.

For more information, go to: <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/psat/about.html>.

NATIONAL MERIT SCHOLARSHIP QUALIFYING TEST (NMSQT)

The NMSQT is the same test as the PSAT. Only the PSAT taken in the student's junior year counts as the NMSQT. The results of the PSAT are used to select entrants for the National Merit Scholarship, National Achievement Scholarship, and National Hispanic Scholarship programs. More information about the NMSQT is found in the PSAT information flyers given to all freshmen, sophomores and juniors. The information is also available at www.collegeboard.com.

SAT REASONING TEST

The SAT Reasoning Test is a 3 hour and 45 minute examination given seven times each year. The SAT Reasoning Test is composed of three sections: Critical Reading, Mathematics (use of approved calculators is allowed) and Writing. Scores range from 200-800 in each area.

For more information, go to: <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/about.html>.

ACT

The ACT is a standardized test that is universally accepted by colleges and universities. All colleges that require standardized tests accept the ACT or SAT Reasoning Test. It is a four-part test of english, mathematics, reading proficiency, and science reasoning. The ACT does not penalize for incorrect responses, while the SAT deducts a fraction of a point for wrong answers. Scores range from 1-36.

For more information, go to: <http://www.actstudent.org/>.

ACT with Writing

This is the ACT test with an essay writing section. **We recommend that all students take the ACT with Writing.**

COMPARISON OF SAT REASONING TEST TO ACT

Unlike the SAT Reasoning Test, the ACT is more like a subject test. Students who perform at a high level in the classroom but whose SAT Reasoning Test scores are low may find that their scores improve by comparison when they take the ACT. In fact, research shows that 1/3 of students earn a higher score on the SAT Reasoning Test than the ACT, 1/3 earn a higher score on the ACT than the SAT Reasoning Test, and 1/3 perform about the same on both. (See the Concordance Table for score comparisons: <http://www.act.org/aap/concordance/index.html>.)

Additionally, some colleges accept the ACT in lieu of SAT Subject Tests. ACT also offers an optional Writing section. If you plan to take the ACT you should check with each college in which you are interested to learn whether they require the ACT with Writing exam. You can learn more about this test at www.act.org.

SAT SUBJECT TESTS

SAT Subject Tests are one-hour tests measuring knowledge and skill in particular subject areas. Students may take up to three tests on the same test date but may not take the SAT Reasoning Test and SAT Subject Tests on the same date. There are 20 different SAT Subject Tests offered six times per year.

Some colleges require its applicants to submit scores from one to three SAT Subject Tests. Because there is so much variation regarding what exams different colleges require, it is very difficult to give general advice as to which exams should be taken. It is your responsibility to check the requirements of each college. Visit www.compassprep.com and look at the Subject Test section for detailed information about college recommendations and requirements.

Again, some colleges accept ACT exams in lieu of SAT Subject Tests. It may be in the student's interest to explore this option. Please check with the individual college about its requirements or recommendations for testing.

For information, go to: <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/about/SATII.html>.

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE TO STANDARDIZED TESTING: JUNIOR YEAR

Before laying out an ideal planning calendar, it is important to remember that each college search is as unique as the student who is going through it. But there are better and worse approaches and there are more and less efficient ways to proceed. Find the best option for you.

GRADE 11

August/September/October

- Fill in the dates for the PSAT, SAT Reasoning Test, SAT Subject Tests, ACT, and AP exams on your personal calendars. These test dates appear on the school's master calendar and also on the test agencies' web pages. Bookmark www.collegeboard.com and www.actstudent.org on your favorites' list. Visit these sites for information about testing/registration date deadlines. **YOU MUST REGISTER TO TAKE TESTS 6 WEEKS BEFORE THE ACTUAL TEST DATE.**

October

- All students take the PSAT, which also serves as the qualifying test for National Merit and Achievement Scholarship competitions.

Winter/Spring

- Juniors are encouraged to take the SAT Reasoning Test and ACT with Writing.

May

- Many students take SAT Subject Tests and AP exams. For more information on AP exams, go to: <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/about.html>.

June

- Many students take SAT Subject Tests, the SAT Reasoning test, and/or the ACT with Writing.

TESTING Q&A FOR JUNIORS

When should I take the SAT Reasoning Test or ACT with Writing? How many times should I take each?

We recommend that students take both the SAT Reasoning Test and ACT with Writing at least once and 3-4 times total between the two exams. Research indicates that scores tend to plateau after the 3rd testing, so we rarely advise a student to take either test more than 3 times. Almost all students, however, will take the SAT Reasoning Test or ACT with Writing twice, as most students see an improvement on at least one section between first and second testing. As many colleges indicate that they like to see a senior year score, it is generally advisable to take the SAT Reasoning Test or ACT with Writing at least once during the junior year and a final time in the fall of 12th grade.

When should I take the SAT Reasoning Test and ACT for the first time in 11th grade?

That depends on your schedule and commitments. Our advice, in general, is to sit for the SAT Reasoning Test for the first time in January or March (March is a particularly good test date because it is the first Saturday of Spring Break). For the ACT, we recommend either the December, February, or April test date. (Again, consider athletic commitments, performing arts events etc.) Please note some students like to take the December or February ACT so they have an early ACT test score to compare to their PSAT. By comparing PSAT and/or SAT scores, students will have a sense of whether one test (SAT or ACT) will demonstrate strengths. Review the test dates and decide which dates work best for you and which dates give you the best opportunity to prepare.

How should I prepare for the SAT Reasoning Test and/or ACT? Should I take a prep course?

All students should take some time to prepare. However, test prep is an individual decision for families based on time, expense and personal preferences. Some students want a structured environment in which to review. Others will take time to do review on their own. Again, it is a personal decision and one answer is not right for all students. Either way, test experts agree that students who read outside of school perform better on ALL sections of standardized tests than students who do not.

Any test day tips?

Yes, both the SAT Reasoning Test and ACT are nearly 4 hours long. Get a good night's sleep before the test and eat breakfast before going. Also, take a snack and some water. Parents, drive your son or daughter to the test site so that they are not stressed by parking congestion, etc. Review other tips available through many online resources as well.