

SAT or ACT: How to Help Your Child Get Ready

There is no secret trick to getting a high score on the SAT or ACT, but there are ways you can help your child get ready for the test.

By [GreatSchools Staff](#)

Test day is the worst time to learn what kind of questions appear on the test. Your child can become familiar with the test format and decrease his anxiety level on test day by practicing with questions like those he will encounter on the test. But real preparation begins years before. Generally, your child should:

Take Challenging Courses.

Encourage your child to take academically rigorous classes in middle school and high school. The SAT is designed to measure reasoning and problem-solving skills. The ACT is designed to measure a wider range of subject matter learned in school. Although they are different tests, each measures skills learned in the years — not weeks — before the test.

Read.

The most effective way your child can improve her score on the reading portions of the tests is to improve her vocabulary. The best way to do that is not with flash card drills in the two weeks before the test, but by reading — books, newspapers, magazines, and yes, her class texts.

Get Familiar With the Test Format.

Taking tests is a skill, and you can help your child learn strategies that will help her on this one. For example, there is no penalty for making a wild guess on an ACT test question. On the SAT, your child will get one point for each correct answer to a multiple-choice question, zero points for every unanswered question and get .25 point deducted for every question answered incorrectly. In other words, for the SAT, wild guesses aren't good strategy. Does that mean she should never guess? No, it means she needs to guess intelligently. Many test experts explain it this way: If your child can eliminate even one of the multiple choices, she probably ought to guess.

Do Your Homework Before Paying for Test Prep.

Where does your child learn more about the tests? Test preparation is big business, and there's no shortage of resources, from online to group tutoring and one-on-one sessions.

But commercial test-preparation services can be expensive. Test experts caution that you should be wary of any that claim your child will increase his score by a specific amount.

You should also note that spending money on test preparation won't be worthwhile unless your student puts in her own time preparing.

When researching test-prep options, take into account the way your child studies best. Some students benefit more from one-on-one tutoring, particularly if they need work in specific subject areas. Some benefit more from a group setting in the company of other motivated students. Others will quite happily work independently online.

There are many free or low-cost prep classes offered by local universities, community colleges and high

schools. Check with your high school guidance counselor to see what resources are available near you.

Use the free online resources provided by the [College Board](#) and [ACT](#). Other sites such as [Number2.com](#) also offer free practice tests.

Whether you decide to invest in test preparation is a personal decision. Consumer Reports WebWatch, which assessed online services in 2006, concluded that costlier options are not necessarily better than free ones when it comes to online services.

The [WebWatch](#) report also cautioned parents to:

- Confirm who runs a test-prep service before buying.
- Make sure it's possible to get a refund if your child can't successfully log in.
- Make sure your browser, computer and Internet connections are up to date before you enroll, or you risk paying for a frustrating experience for your child.
- Make sure that during the registration process your child does not accidentally authorize the release of his personal information unless you approve.

Find Out How Colleges on Your Child's List Weigh Tests.

Some colleges have dropped admissions testing as a requirement altogether, and tests are just one factor that the others consider when evaluating an applicant. Other factors include high school grades, extracurricular activities, an applicant's personal statement, and recommendations from teachers and counselors.

The emphasis colleges place on scores varies widely, as does the way they use the results in making admissions decisions. Some colleges, for example, will look at an applicant's highest math and reading scores even if the student earned them in two different test-taking sessions. Others will average the scores if a student takes a test more than once or look only at the highest score earned in a single session.

It's important for students to ask questions before deciding which tests to take and when. Your child's high school counselor is a good place to start.

Plan Your Test Timetable.

Students usually start by taking the [PSAT/NMSQT \(Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test\)](#) in the fall of their junior years and sometimes in their sophomore years for practice. This test, administered by your child's high school, is not counted for college admissions, but a junior who gets a high score can qualify for a scholarship.

Students typically take the SAT or ACT in the spring of their junior years of high school. By then, they have completed most of the coursework that will help them in the test, and they can still retake it in the fall of their senior years if they feel they can improve their scores.

It's important to research college admissions deadlines to be sure that the test results your child needs to report will be available in time, and also to check to see if SAT Subject Tests are required. These tests measure a student's knowledge in specific subjects, such as English, math, biology or language. They cannot be taken on the same day as the main SAT test, which means your child will need to take all these tests into account as he develops his timetable.

Your student should also consider when she can spend the time preparing for the test before deciding when to take it. If she can only spend time taking practice tests in the summer, then taking the admissions test in the fall of junior year may be a better option than waiting until spring.

A final note about retesting:

If you take the ACT more than once, you can select the test results you want to send to colleges. The SAT reports all results of your tests to the colleges you choose. However, many admissions officers say they only look at the test with the highest score. Again, it's important for students to find out the policies of the colleges they're interested in.

Research shows that students can often — but not always — improve their scores by retaking the test a second or even a third time. The College Board reports that students who take the test a second time typically see a 30-point increase on their combined score. But experts also caution against taking the test over and over unless a student has a solid reason to believe he can significantly improve his results. In addition to being expensive, test and test prep takes time a student might otherwise be investing to improve his high school grades.

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