

# Guide to

# College Entrance Exams

Colleges will use your teen's SAT or ACT scores to compare him to students from a variety of academic backgrounds and to predict how well he will do in college. The tests are certainly not the only factor that schools consider, but performing well can help him get into the college of his choice and qualify for scholarships.

This guide will help both of you navigate the college testing maze.



## Types of entrance exams

The SAT covers critical reading, writing, and math, while the ACT includes English, math, reading, and science. ACT also offers a separate Writing Test, a 30-minute essay exam taken the same day as the regular ACT.

If your high schooler is applying to highly selective colleges or pursuing certain courses of study, she also may need to take several SAT Subject Tests. There are 20 to choose from, each lasting an hour and covering a topic like history, literature, math, science, or foreign language. She can take up to three in one day, but none the same day as the SAT.

## Which test to take?

Although most colleges accept either the SAT or ACT, your teen should check her target schools to be sure. The tests differ in several ways:

- The SAT goes back and forth among content areas, while the ACT emphasizes one content area at a time.
- The SAT focuses more on vocabulary.
- The ACT includes science, and the SAT doesn't.
- The SAT has a writing portion, but on the ACT there's no essay unless a student opts to also take the ACT Writing Test.
- The SAT deducts points for wrong answers. The ACT awards points based on the number of correct answers, with no penalty for guessing.
- Admissions counselors are concerned with scores on individual SAT sections. But on the ACT, they're more



interested in the overall (composite) score. (Note: The ACT Writing Test score will be separate.)

Suggest that your child try sample questions and a practice version of each to help her decide which one to take—or whether to take both. Does one feel more comfortable? Does she score significantly higher on one than the other?

## When?

Students typically take the tests in winter or spring of junior year. Then, some students take one or both tests again later in the spring of junior year or early in senior year. College counselors often recommend that students take their preferred test (SAT or ACT) at least twice to get the highest score possible.

For SAT Subject Tests, it's a good idea to take each one soon after finishing the related classes—even if it's freshman or sophomore year. That way, the material will be fresh in your teen's mind. For instance, he might take the Chemistry Subject Test after completing chemistry in 10th grade. Foreign language tests are an exception—he should wait until he finishes the highest level he plans to take in high school.

Test dates and registration deadlines are available from the school counselor or the testing websites ([sat.collegeboard.org/register/sat-dates](http://sat.collegeboard.org/register/sat-dates) and [actstudent.org/regist/dates.html](http://actstudent.org/regist/dates.html)).



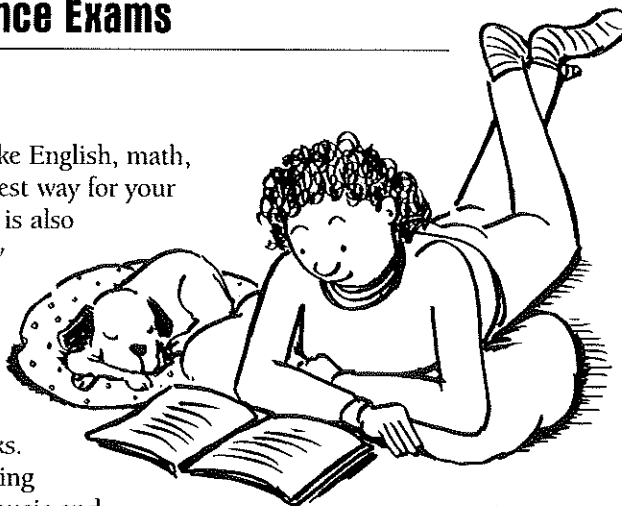
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## How to prepare

Working hard in core courses like English, math, science, and social studies is the best way for your teen to be ready. Reading regularly is also important, since a large vocabulary can help, especially on the SAT.

But no matter what, practicing for the tests in some way is important. Your high schooler might take practice tests at home, using tests found online or in books. Encourage her to simulate real testing conditions (sit at a desk, turn off music and TV) and time herself exactly as she'll be timed during the real test. Have her score her test afterward to help her pinpoint where to concentrate her studying.

She can find practice tests free at [sat.collegeboard.org/practice](http://sat.collegeboard.org/practice) and [actstudent.org/testprep](http://actstudent.org/testprep) or in books like *Preparing for the ACT* (free from her school). Or she could get test guides in the Barron's, Princeton Review, or Kaplan series.



*Idea:* Friends or neighbors whose children took the tests recently may be happy to pass on these books to your teen.

Also, some high schools offer SAT or ACT prep courses as electives. Or your child could find a college student who did well on the tests to tutor her for a low cost. Another idea is for

your teenager and a classmate to split the cost of SAT or ACT flash cards and take turns quizzing each other.

Any kind of writing practice will help your student prepare for the writing portion of the SAT or for the ACT Writing Test. Since she will have to explain her views persuasively, writing opinion pieces will be especially helpful. She might write letters to magazine or newspaper

editors, even if she doesn't plan to submit them. Reading opinion pieces in the news can help her pay attention to how arguments are presented. Finally, have her practice writing within a time limit, since that's what she'll have to do during the real tests.

*Tip:* Suggest that your child view the College Board's new "test day simulator" to see what test day will be like ([sat.collegeboard.org/register/sat-test-day-simulator](http://sat.collegeboard.org/register/sat-test-day-simulator)).

## How much?

The SAT costs \$49, and the ACT is \$34 (or \$49.50 with the writing component). SAT Subject Tests are \$22 for basic registration and \$11 per test. (Foreign language Subject Tests with a spoken component, called "language with listening," cost \$22 each.) *Note:* Make sure your high schooler registers by the due date and chooses his test location carefully—there may be fees for registering late or making changes.

Don't let cost keep your teen from signing up. He may be eligible for a fee waiver, which he can apply for through his school counselor.

## AP tests

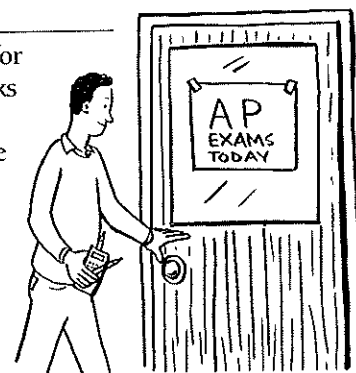
Taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses can help your teen gain higher-level academic skills and stand out when applying to college. If he scores well on the AP exams, he may be able to skip freshman-level courses or even save tuition money by receiving course credit. He'll need to check each college's AP policies, as they differ from school to school.

AP exams are given in May, and scores are sent to colleges in July (or upon the student's request). The tests are scored on a scale of 1 to 5, with a score of 3 considered "passing." Colleges often require a score of 4 or 5 to award credit. If your teenager is unhappy with a score, he can ask to have it withheld or canceled.

To prepare for AP exams, your child should keep up with the coursework all year and be sure to attend all review sessions that his teacher schedules. He might also check

bookstores or the library for AP exam preparation books or ask classmates who've taken the tests if they have books he can borrow. Suggest that he also check online for free test-taking tips (for example, [collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/prep](http://collegeboard.com/student/testing/ap/prep)).

AP tests cost \$87 each. Fee reductions or waivers are available for eligible students, and some school systems even pick up the cost for all students. Your teenager can check with his school counselor on this.



## High School Years