

Test-prep Tips for College Entrance Exams: The ACT, SAT, and PSAT

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Many colleges and universities require scores from either the ACT or SAT as part of their applications, which are due during the first semester of senior year. By planning ahead, students can begin the test-prep process much earlier and give themselves time to perform well.

The ACT and SAT are typically offered at least six times per school year, and independent educational consultants generally advise students to try and earn their best scores junior year. That way, students can still repeat either test, if necessary, in the fall of senior year.

Here are some tips to help you prepare for your college entrance exams and earn your best possible scores:

When should I begin my prep for the ACT or SAT? The summer before your junior year of high school can be the perfect time to devote to test preparation. To become test-ready for the math section of the ACT or SAT, however, you may want to wait until you've taken (or at least started) high school courses in Algebra 2 and Trigonometry.

Should I take the ACT, the SAT, or both? Colleges will accept a score from either test, and many students perform equally well on both. However, some students find that they are better suited to the ACT than the SAT or vice versa. Try taking a practice test of both the ACT and the SAT and see if you have a preference. If you perform much better on one over the other, focus your test prep there.

How many times should I test? I recommend that my students plan to take either the ACT or SAT three times. Because the first test can be an intimidating new experience, your score may also be adversely impacted. The second test should be your strongest effort to attain your best possible score. Having a third possible test date in mind is helpful if you would like to try again. The key is to plan ahead: Compare the test date schedule for the ACT and SAT to your upcoming commitments for finals, sports, jobs, vacations, and other planned activities.

Should I take advantage of ACT's "Test Information Release" service? Yes. I strongly encourage students to take their first ACT in December, April, or June when Test Information Release (TIR)

is available at national test centers. Through TIR, you pay an extra fee to receive a list of your answers, a copy of the multiple-choice test questions, and the answer key, along with a copy of the writing prompt, the scoring rubric, and the scores assigned to your essay by two different evaluators. You can order TIR when you register and for three months after you test. TIR is extremely helpful in identifying those areas where you may want to focus additional study and consider private tutoring, as well as those parts of the test you completed successfully.

What are SAT Subject Tests, and do I have to take them? A small number of highly selective colleges may also require that you submit scores from these single-subject tests. If you are applying to a college that requires SAT Subject Tests, you may want to schedule a test (and do your best) shortly after completing a high school course in a similar subject.

What is the PSAT? The PSAT is the qualifying test for high school juniors to compete for the National Merit Scholarship Program. It is not required by colleges and is only offered in mid-October. Students who expect to do well on the PSAT may benefit from taking this test as freshmen or sophomores (for practice) so they are better prepared to take it again when their scores count junior year. If your goal is to qualify for the National Merit program, you may also want to prep for the PSAT the summer before and during the fall of your junior year.

If I do well on the PSAT and am a National Merit contender, do I also have to take the SAT? Yes. To be named a National Merit Scholar, you must also submit a score from the SAT. Some students elect to take it in October or November, immediately following the PSAT. Special note to current high school sophomores who expect to do well on the PSAT (or did well on a practice test): The SAT will be completely different in 2016. You may want to take the SAT yet this school year, in May or June, before the test is changed, and begin your SAT test prep several months in advance.