

Comparing the SAT and ACT

The SAT and ACT are different tests with significant overlap. While most students will score equally well on both, for some students the differences between the tests can make one test a better option than the other. The chart below outlines some of the high-level differences.

	SAT	ACT	Key Differences
Format and Length	<p>5 sections (comprising 3 “tests” and an essay)</p> <p>Writing & Language; Reading; 2 Math; Essay</p> <p>Total testing time: 3 hours, 50 minutes (with essay)</p>	<p>5 sections (comprising 4 “tests” and an essay)</p> <p>English; Mathematics; Reading; Science; Writing</p> <p>Total testing time: 3 hours, 25 minutes (with essay)</p>	<p>The SAT has a stronger emphasis on math, whereas the ACT has a stronger emphasis on science. Overall testing time and section lengths are similar. SAT questions generally require more critical thinking, but the SAT also provides 30-40% more time per question.</p>
Scoring	<p>Combined Score: 400-1600</p> <p>Evidence-Based Reading and Writing: 200-800</p> <p>Math: 200-800</p> <p>Essay (not added into combined score): 6-24</p>	<p>Composite Score: 1-36</p> <p>English: 1-36</p> <p>Math: 1-36</p> <p>Reading: 1-36</p> <p>Science: 1-36</p> <p>Writing (not averaged into composite score): 1-36</p>	<p>The ACT Composite score is averaged, so a change in one test may not be reflected in the Composite. The ACT Composite is divided into few possible scores, so an increase of one point can represent a significant difference in abilities.</p> <p>The SAT Combined score is the sum of the section scores.</p>
Writing/English	<p>Revision and editing</p> <p>Standard English grammar</p> <p>Punctuation</p> <p>Logical structure</p> <p>Effective rhetoric</p>	<p>Revision and editing</p> <p>Standard English grammar</p> <p>Punctuation</p> <p>Logical structure</p> <p>Effective rhetoric</p>	<p>The SAT Writing & Language and ACT English tests are similar in format and content. The SAT has more emphasis on rhetoric and has more complex passages, but offers about 33% more time per question than the ACT does.</p>
Math	<p>Pre-Algebra through Trig</p> <p>12 Grid-in questions (no answer choices)</p> <p>Strong emphasis on algebra</p> <p>Calculator prohibited on one section</p>	<p>Pre-Algebra through Trig</p> <p>Extensive range of concepts tested</p> <p>Formulas not provided</p> <p>5 answer choices per question (rest of test has 4)</p>	<p>The SAT and ACT Math tests cover similar ranges of concepts. The ACT requires a broad, basic knowledge of many concepts. The SAT requires a deep knowledge of a core set of concepts, particularly in algebra. The SAT offers about 38% more time per question than the ACT does.</p>
Reading	<p>4 single passages and 1 paired passage</p> <p>2 diagrams/charts</p> <p>2 vocabulary-in-context questions per passage</p> <p>2 evidence questions per passage</p>	<p>4 single or paired passages</p> <p>Consistent order of subject areas: Literary Narrative or Prose Fiction, Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences</p>	<p>The ACT Reading test emphasizes basic reading comprehension. The SAT Reading test emphasizes defining vocabulary in context, understanding the role of the author, and defending answers with textual evidence. The SAT typically has more complex passages, but offers about 43% more time per question.</p>
Science	<p>The SAT does not have a stand-alone Science section, but science questions will be included throughout the Math, Reading, and Writing & Language tests</p>	<p>40 questions</p> <p>6 or 7 passages</p> <p>Emphasis on charts & diagrams</p> <p>Science is a reasoning test—rarely requires prior specific science knowledge</p>	<p>The ACT Science test measures interpretation, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, and problem-solving skills. The test uses scientific language and reasoning, but rarely requires any specific knowledge from your academic science classes. The SAT does not have an analogue to the ACT Science test.</p>
Essay	<p>50 minutes</p> <p>Analyze a passage and evaluate author’s reasoning and rhetoric</p> <p>Scored on 2-8 scale on each of three domains: Reading, Analysis, Writing</p>	<p>40 minutes</p> <p>Evaluate three perspectives on a contemporary issue</p> <p>Scored on 2-12 scale on each of four domains: Ideas & Analysis, Development & Support, Organization, Language</p>	<p>The ACT essay emphasizes crafting and comparing arguments. The SAT essay emphasizes understanding and analyzing how arguments are crafted. The ACT allows for more creativity, whereas the SAT requires strong analytical reading skills and provides more time to write the essay.</p>