

Tri-Ed Tutoring's Step-by-Step Guide to Understanding SAT & ACT Scores



A Note from Tri-Ed Tutoring

“ I feel so much better about this whole process after talking with you. You have been so helpful, and I feel so much less stressed. ”



This is the best compliment a parent can give me after an initial phone call.

Tri-Ed Tutoring has helped parents and their students prepare for the SAT and ACT for over 15 years. We've seen, talked to, and served over 2,000 families who felt overwhelmed by the standardized testing requirement in the college admissions process.

The anxiety surrounding SAT or ACT testing seems to increase for both parents and students as students approach junior year. Within a 15-minute conversation, parents feel the stress lift as their questions are answered and we create a plan for junior and senior years. Standardized testing doesn't seem so scary once you have a plan with manageable steps along the way.

In our Step-by-Step Guide to Understanding SAT & ACT Scores, we put together the guidance that we give our students to understand the journey ahead. SAT and ACT testing doesn't have to be stressful. With a plan in place, your student can feel confident walking into the test.

Thanks for letting us help your student navigate standardized testing and the college admissions process. If you feel like this guide may help another parent or student, please feel free to pass it along. As always, reach out to us with any questions you may have along the way!

Sincerely,



Amanda Paldao

Owner of Tri-Ed Tutoring

www.tri-edtutoring.com



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Your SAT/ACT Scores Came Back- Now What?

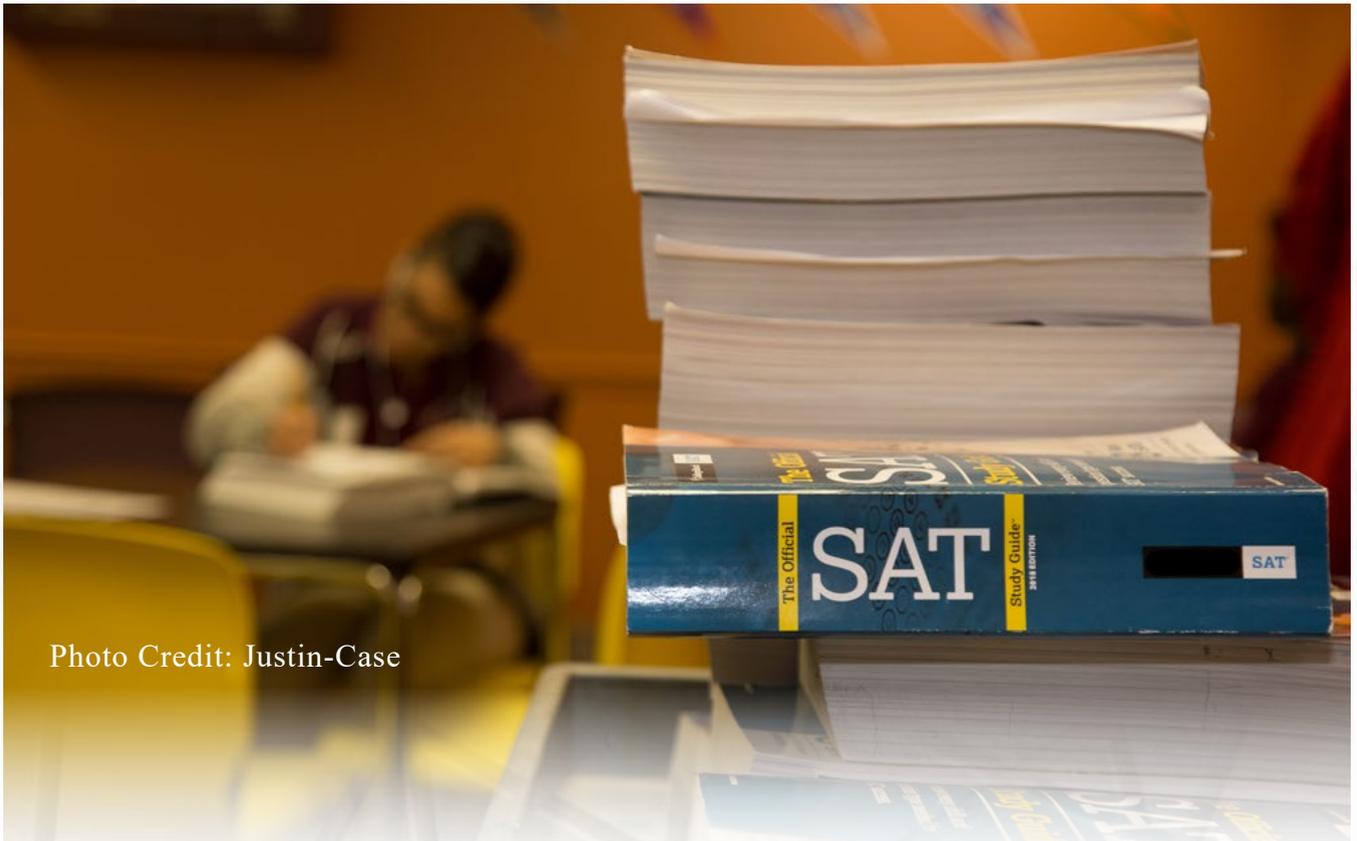


Photo Credit: Justin-Case

You did it! You made it through the painfully long three-hour SAT or ACT and just got your test scores back. Before you get too excited about never seeing another SAT or ACT question for the rest of your life, consider the two scenarios below:

Scenario 1: You received a 36 on the ACT or a 1600 on the SAT. Send your scores to schools and never worry about a standardized test ever again (well, until AP exams, the GRE, the MCAT, the GMAT, the LSAT, etc.).

Scenario 2: The more likely scenario is that you did not receive a perfect score, along with 99.9% of high school students that took the same test. You may have prepped and improved your score, but not enough. You may have tried taking the test cold just to get an idea of how you would do. In either case, it's usually a good idea to take it again. No harm in trying to do a little (or a lot) better on a second test. There is no limit to the number of times you can take the SAT or ACT, but we usually don't recommend taking it any more than three or four times.

If you find yourself in the second scenario, don't worry. Follow these steps before taking your next test.

Step 1: Prep for the test that best showcases your strengths. If you have taken both the SAT and the ACT, compare the two scores using the concordance chart [found here](#). Colleges will [accept either test score](#) for admissions, so prepare for the test that is best suited for you. If you have not taken both tests, try a practice test at home and then compare your scores ([ACT practice test](#), [SAT practice test](#)).

Step 2: Review your mistakes. You can do this by ordering your test booklet that includes a copy of all test questions and the [correct answers for each question](#). This service is available three times a year for both the SAT (October, March, and May) and the ACT (December, April, and June). For the SAT it's called [Question Answer Service](#) (QAS); for the ACT it's called [Test Information Release](#) (TIR). There is an extra fee, but it's a great way to understand and analyze your test performance.

If you did not test on one of those dates, you can still gain a lot of information about your strengths and weaknesses from your score report. This is posted in your account at www.collegeboard.org or www.actstudent.org

within three to four weeks after the test date. For example, the math section of the SAT score report is broken down into three subscores: Heart of Algebra, Passport to Advanced Math, and Probability, Data, and Statistics. This will help you determine which types of problems to review before the next test.

Step 3: Reflect on your first testing experience immediately after finishing the test. Did you run out of time on any sections? If so, which ones? Did you have difficulty focusing throughout the test? It is likely the longest test that you have ever taken so it is common to start out well but encounter more difficulty at the end. Did you feel overly anxious during the test? If so, did you [combat your anxiety with any tips](#) such as taking deep breaths or repeating a positive mantra? If not, this is something to do during the next test. Did any sections seem more challenging than those that you had practiced?

Step 4: Practice, Practice, Practice. At this point, you have identified the test that is best for you. You should have also identified areas in which you still need to review as well as other hurdles in the testing environment such as focus and pacing. Now, it's time to review. If the main issue was pacing and focus, it's best to practice timed assignments and replicate the testing environment as closely as you can. The SAT prep books we recommend can be [found here](#).

Step 5: Retake the test with confidence!

Happy Test Prep!

What is a Good SAT or ACT Score?

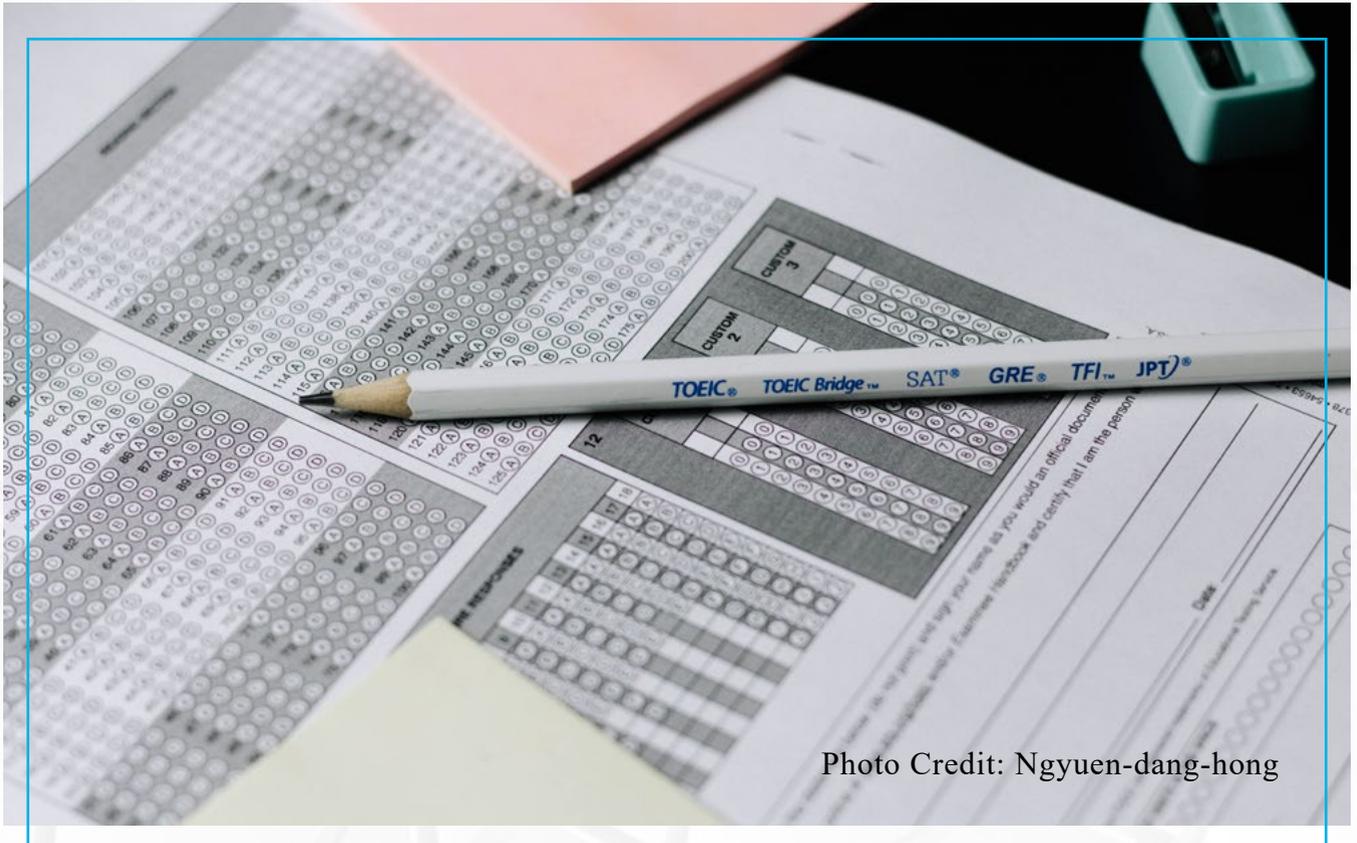


Photo Credit: Nguyen-dang-hong

When the SAT or ACT scores come out, we are often asked, “Is that a [good SAT or ACT score](#)?” This is a tough question to answer because “good” is relative.

Before we answer that question for a parent or student, we ask students to list their top schools and research the average SAT and ACT score ranges of accepted freshmen. A great resource to find this information is [College Scorecard \(ed.gov\)](#). Here are a few of the most popular schools in Virginia and their average SAT and ACT score ranges:

College Name	Mid-50% SAT	Mid 50% ACT
UVA	1340-1520	30-34
Virginia Tech	1180-1390	25-31
VCU	1070-1260	21-28
JMU	1120-1290	23-28
Radford	950-1100	19-24

Now consider what other strengths you bring to the table as an applicant. For example, if you are an [athlete recruited by a school](#) and score at the lower end of the accepted SAT score range, you might still be admitted since the school may weigh athletic ability against the less than stellar SAT scores. Similarly, if you had a challenging freshman year of high school and your GPA is not as high as you'd like, SAT scores above the average accepted scores show the effort that you are now putting into your studies and your readiness for college level work. Community service, extracurricular activities, the college essay, letters of recommendation, and strength of curriculum are additional factors in the college admissions process. The bottom line is that SAT or ACT scores are just one measurement that admissions counselors use to determine whether or not they grant you admissions.

Set an SAT or ACT score goal based on the schools to which you plan to apply. For highly competitive schools, like UVA or William and Mary, shoot for 1400+ or 31+. For moderately competitive schools, like VT or JMU, target 1200-1300+ or 25-28. For less competitive schools, like Radford, aim for 1000-1100+ or 20+.

Understanding Your SAT Score Report

The [SAT score report](#) provides detailed information to help you better understand your strengths and weaknesses in terms of SAT content. It's worth taking the time to review your score report in detail before deciding if you should retake the SAT because it can guide your practice for the next SAT. The information found in this report and how you should use it is explained below:

Total Score

This is the sum of your reading/writing and math scores. The scaled score can range from 400-1600, with a perfect score of 1600. This is the number most students are concerned about. You should see how your score stacks up to the average accepted scores at your top choice colleges. If you are not at least in the average range for the colleges to which you plan to apply, you should retake the SAT and/or try the ACT.

Section Scores

Your total score is separated into two section scores, one for the reading/writing section and another for the math section. The scaled score for both sections ranges from 200-800. This helps you determine your overall strengths and weaknesses and decide where to focus more of your prep in a general sense.

Percentiles

You'll see percentiles next to both total and section scores. Percentiles

compare your scores to the scores of high school students nationwide. This means that if you are in the 52nd percentile, you scored as well or better than 52 of every 100 students. Of the two percentiles given, you will notice the SAT User Percentile is always lower than the Nationally Representative Sample because the SAT User Percentile only represents college bound high school students taking the SAT and not all high school students.

Test Scores

These three scores represent how well you perform on the reading, writing, and math content areas. This allows you to compare scores across all three subjects. Scaled scores for each subject range from 10-40. To see how these scaled scores align with your reading/writing section score, add a 0 after both the reading and writing scores. This will total the section score. For example, a student with a reading test score of 25 and a writing test score of 30 would have a section score of 550 (250+300). This helps you see, within the reading and writing score, which section you need to review more.

Cross Test Scores

These scores indicate how well you answered concept questions in History/Social Studies versus Science. The scores are based on 35 questions per content area across all sections of the test. Scores are scaled from 10-40. Generally, students do not score higher in one area than another. However, if you have significantly lower scores in one area, this indicates that you should work on familiarizing yourself with more science or history content.

Subscores

These scores break down questions by content type and help identify how well you scored in each skill area, such as command of evidence, words in

context, etc. Scores range from 1-15. These scores provide the most helpful information for studying before your next test retake.

- **Words in Context:** These questions can be found in both the reading and writing sections. They focus on choosing the best word to convey meaning. If this score is lower, you should focus on improving your vocabulary.
- **Command of Evidence:** These questions can be found in both the reading and writing sections and are often the most challenging questions for students. Students must defend the logic behind previous answers, determine if information should be added or deleted to support an argument, etc.
- **Standard English Conventions:** These questions found in the writing section focus on grammar, usage, and punctuation. If this score is lower, you should review your grammar skills. One study guide we recommend for reviewing grammar rules is [*The Ultimate Guide to SAT Grammar*](#) by Erica Meltzer.
- **Expression of Ideas:** These questions are found in the writing section and focus on effective organization and development of writing. They may include questions concerning the best placement for a sentence within a paragraph, best transition word, or which phrase should be used to best set up the information in the second half of a paragraph.
- **Heart of Algebra:** These questions focus on topics found in Algebra I, such as linear equations, word problems, and systems of equations. This area is often a weakness for students since many have forgotten some of the basics by the time they take the SAT. If this score is lower, you should review the basics of algebra. Khan Academy is a great place to start.

- **Passport to Advanced Math:** These questions focus on topics found in Algebra II such as quadratic equations, exponential equations, and appreciation/depreciation. If this score is lower, we recommend using one of our favorite math review guides, [*The College Panda's SAT Math: Advanced Guide and Workbook for the New SAT.*](#)
- **Problem Solving and Data Analysis:** These questions are found only on the calculator math section (section 4) and focus on interpreting data, statistical analyses, probability, variation, etc.

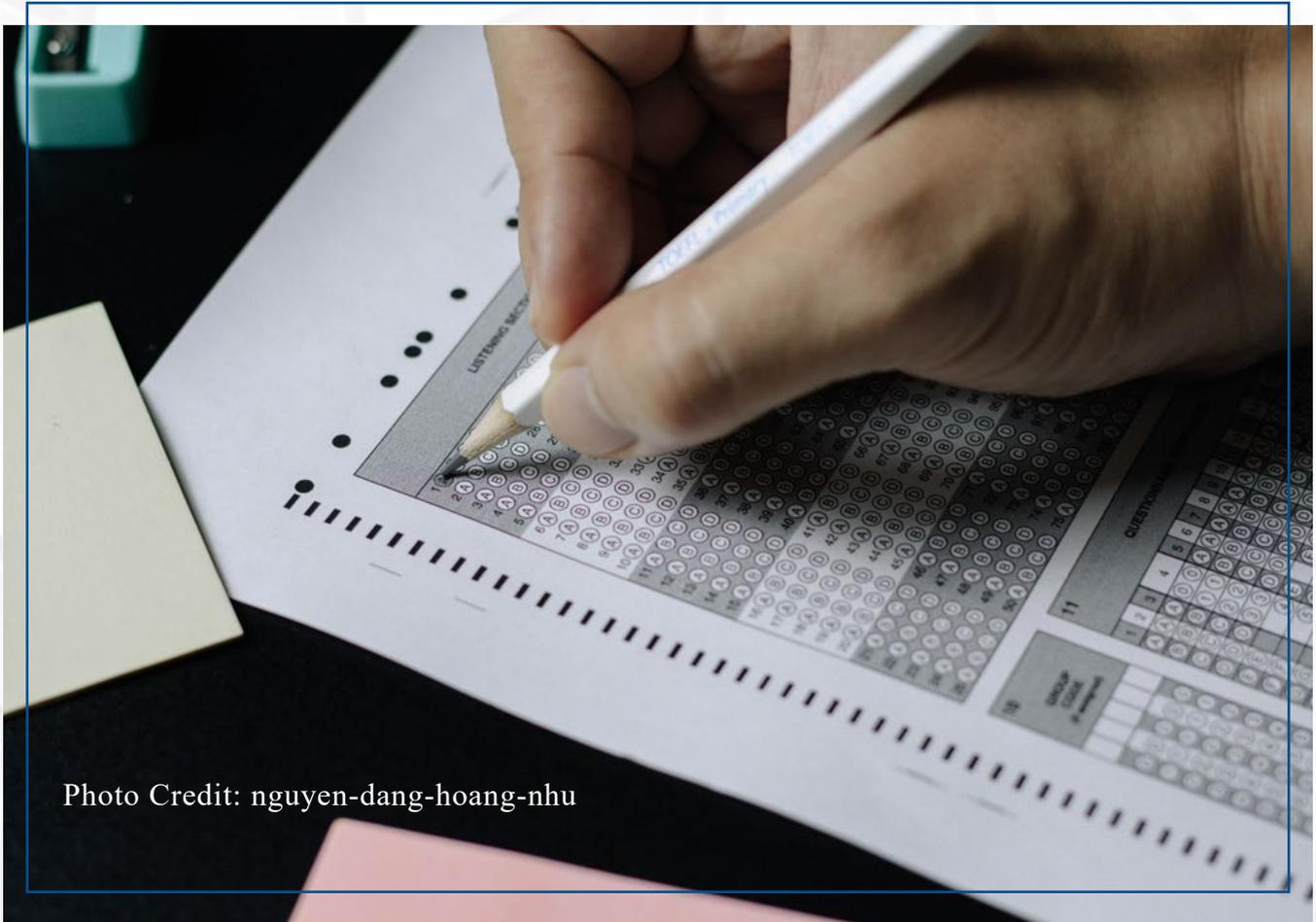


Photo Credit: nguyen-dang-hoang-nhu

Understanding Your ACT Score Report

Photo Credit: JESHOOOTS



The [ACT score report](#) provides detailed information to help you better understand your strengths and weaknesses in terms of ACT content. It's worth taking the time to review your score report in detail before deciding if you should retake the ACT because it can guide your practice for the next test. You can view a [sample score report here](#). The score report is broken down into the following components:

Composite score

This score is an average of the four subject test scores rounded to the nearest whole number. It ranges from 1 to 36 with a perfect score of 36. This score is indicated in the dark blue box in the top left corner. If your score is not within the average range for the colleges in which you plan to apply, you should retake the ACT and/or try the SAT.

Subject test scores

The math, science, English, and reading scores are taken from the number of correct answers in each subject's section. Subject test scores are then scaled from 1 to 36. This information helps you determine your overall strengths and weaknesses and where you should focus your study time.

STEM and ELA scores

The STEM score averages the math and science subject test scores, while the ELA score averages the English and reading test scores. These scores are not calculated into the composite score, they simply break down the four subject test scores into two broader subject scores.

Graph

The graph under these scores provides a visual representation that can be used to easily compare subject test scores. The solid green and blue lines indicate your actual scores, and the shaded areas around the solid score lines represent your score range, which predicts where you might score if you took the test on a different day. The purple lines signify college readiness benchmarks, which predicts how ready a student is for college level work in that subject area.

Rank

In this section, your composite and subject score percentiles are compared to the score percentiles of other high school students who took the test on the same day. This gives you an idea of how you rank among other students across the country and state. For example, if your U.S. composite score percentile is 56% you scored at or better than 56 of 100 students nationwide. The higher your percentile, the greater advantage you can expect when applying to competitive schools.

Detailed results

The detailed results section breaks down subject test scores into subsections. This is the most valuable part of the score report since it gives specific information about the types of questions you missed. Within each subsection, the number of correct answers versus the total number of questions in that section are identified, along with percentage correct and a visual bar graph to display the College Readiness Benchmark range.

Math

Preparing for Higher Math

- ◆ **Number & Quantity:** These questions focus on basic math, word problems, and general operations.
- ◆ **Algebra:** These questions focus on algebraic concepts, such as systems of equations, solving and graphing equations (including linear, polynomial, exponential, and radical), and matrices.

- ◆ **Functions:** These Algebra II questions focus on function notation and application including linear, quadratic, polynomial, logarithmic, and piecewise.
- ◆ **Geometry:** These questions focus on geometric concepts including area/perimeter/volume, triangles, circles, trigonometry, and conics.
- ◆ **Statistics & Probability:** These questions focus on mean/median/mode, ratios and proportions, probability, and data collection methods.

Integrating Essential Skills: These questions focus on basic math topics primarily learned in middle school such as ratios, proportions, percent problems, and perimeter/area/volume, but require students to apply these concepts to more complex or multi-step problems.

Science

- ◆ **Interpretation of Data:** These questions ask students to analyze scientific data presented in tables, graphs, and diagrams.
- ◆ **Scientific Investigation:** These questions focus on how a scientific experiment is set up and which scientific rules must be followed.
- ◆ **Evaluation of Models, Inferences, & Experimental Results:** These questions can be more challenging as they incorporate hypothetical scenarios and ask students to make inferences based on data from a scientific experiment.

English

- ◆ **Production of Writing:** These questions focus on the writing theme, development, and overall organization of a writing piece.
- ◆ **Knowledge of Language:** These questions focus on word choice, style of writing, and tone.
- ◆ **Conventions of Standard English:** These questions focus on punctuation such as commas, colons, semi-colons, and quotation marks as well as grammar rules. More than half of the English subject questions are categorized in this subsection.

Reading

- ◆ **Key Ideas & Details:** These questions focus on the central ideas and themes of a reading passage.
- ◆ **Craft & Structure:** These questions focus on the tone of a passage, analysis of a character's perspectives, and the author's word choice.
- ◆ **Integration of Knowledge & Ideas:** These questions focus on fact versus opinion and require an understanding of how authors construct an argument. These questions also ask students to make connections between two different texts.
- ◆ **Understanding Complex Texts:** This indicates whether you are understanding the texts at a level that is necessary to succeed in reading-heavy college courses.

*The ACT writing section is optional. Since very few colleges require writing scores we often recommend students opt out of this section.

Scoring Policies for the SAT and ACT

SAT and ACT test scores are often used as a predictor of college academic success and a comparative standard across all applicants. But how are these tests scored and how do colleges receive scores and evaluate them?

How the SAT and ACT are Scored

The SAT test is divided into two sections, math and reading/writing, with the potential to earn 800 points for both sections and a total composite score of 1600 points. The ACT test is divided into four sections—math, reading, English, and science—with the potential to earn 36 points per section and a total composite (average) score of 36.

Test Score Submissions

When you register for the SAT and/or ACT, you can request your test scores be automatically submitted to four colleges of your choice (you can select more than four, but you'll have to pay for it). However, if you take the test more than once, the majority of colleges will only use your highest section scores when evaluating your application.

Some students prefer to submit their best single test score to colleges, and they can do this by registering for score choice. If you choose to use score choice, you will lose the four free score reports offered during the registration process. For many students, this is a small price to pay knowing that the school of their dreams won't see their first attempt at the SAT or ACT.

Scoring Policies

If you submit more than one SAT score with your application, which one will colleges consider? While each college admissions department follows its own SAT scoring policy, most schools superscore. Superscoring combines the highest math section score with the highest reading/writing section score, even if they are taken from different test dates. However, some of the highly competitive schools will look at the highest test score in one sitting, which means your highest total score from one single test date. If the chart below indicates your test scores, the highest test score in one sitting would be 1260 but the superscore would be 1290 (650 math in March plus 640 reading/writing in October).

Test Month	Math	Reading/Writing	Total
March	650	580	1230
May	600	620	1220
October	620	640	1260

Like the SATs, colleges follow their own scoring policies when evaluating ACT test scores. They can accept the highest total composite score from one single test date, average the highest section scores across all test dates (superscore), or a combination. UVA, for example, does not recalculate the ACT composite score but they do look at the highest score for each individual section (see more info and an example on [UVA's admission blog](#)).

If the chart below indicates your ACT test scores, the highest composite score would be 22 and the highest superscore would be 23 since all composite scores are rounded to a whole number (21 in math, 26 in reading, 25 in English, and 19 in Science).

Test Month	Math	Reading	English	Science	Composite
April	19	22	25	18	21
June	18	23	24	19	21
October	21	26	24	17	22

The majority of Virginia colleges superscore SAT test scores but are split on how they evaluate ACT scores. With more colleges moving to test optional admissions, it's best to check each school's scoring policies.

Why does Scoring Policy Matter?

Scoring policy can influence the way you study for the SAT or ACT. If all the colleges you apply to superscore, you can study just one section after you've hit your goal score on the other sections. If the colleges you apply to evaluate the total composite score you can study your weaker areas across all sections to increase your total score. You will also need to continue practicing your stronger subject areas to keep that information fresh.

Five Questions to Ask After the Test

1

Should I cancel my scores?

Short Answer: No.

Long Answer: You want to get a good sense of your current score, what that score shows about your strengths and weaknesses, and what you need to do to prepare for the next test. Your SAT or ACT score report will come with valuable insight about your performance. Knowing this is half the battle. These insights will help with the next test, and who knows, you may have done better than you think. Instead of cancelling scores, you can choose not to send your scores to any colleges when you register. This way, you don't have to worry that the school of your dreams will see your first score.

2

Should I take the ACT (or SAT) instead?

Short Answer: [Yes, if you've taken a practice test.](#)

Long Answer: You should take a practice ACT or SAT in test-like conditions to determine if that test is a better fit. Then grade it and see how your scores compare using the concordance chart [found here](#). This will help you decide which test to take next.

3

Should I register for another test?

Short Answer: Very likely.

Long Answer: Before registering for another test, consider how much time you will have to study between tests. For example, you will not have a lot of time to prepare if you take both the May and June SATs. If you can, register for a later test in August or October, so you have time to examine the score report and determine your strengths and weaknesses. Then develop a game plan to improve your weak areas. If your SAT score was much lower than expected, it may be better to try the ACT instead (see answer to question #2).

4

When should I take the SAT or ACT next?

Short Answer: [two to three months after your first SAT or ACT](#)

Long Answer: You want to have enough time to review your score report and prepare for the second test, but you don't want so much time between tests that you lose momentum. The sweet spot tends to be about two to three months between tests for most students. You should also consider your schedule and be realistic about how much time you have to prepare. For example, if you took the March SAT, the June SAT could be a good option as a second test. However, if you will be busy preparing for AP exams and finals while also playing a spring sport, it may be better to push off SAT prep until the summer and then retake the SAT in August.

5

When should I start preparing for the next SAT or ACT?

Short Answer: [Prepare daily.](#)

Long Answer: If you felt anxious and overwhelmed during the first test, then practice 15-30 minutes a day. Daily practice will help you gain confidence with the material, so you feel prepared for the next test. In terms of official prep, you can schedule a class or tutor at least 8-10 weeks before your next test date depending on how many points you need to increase your score.

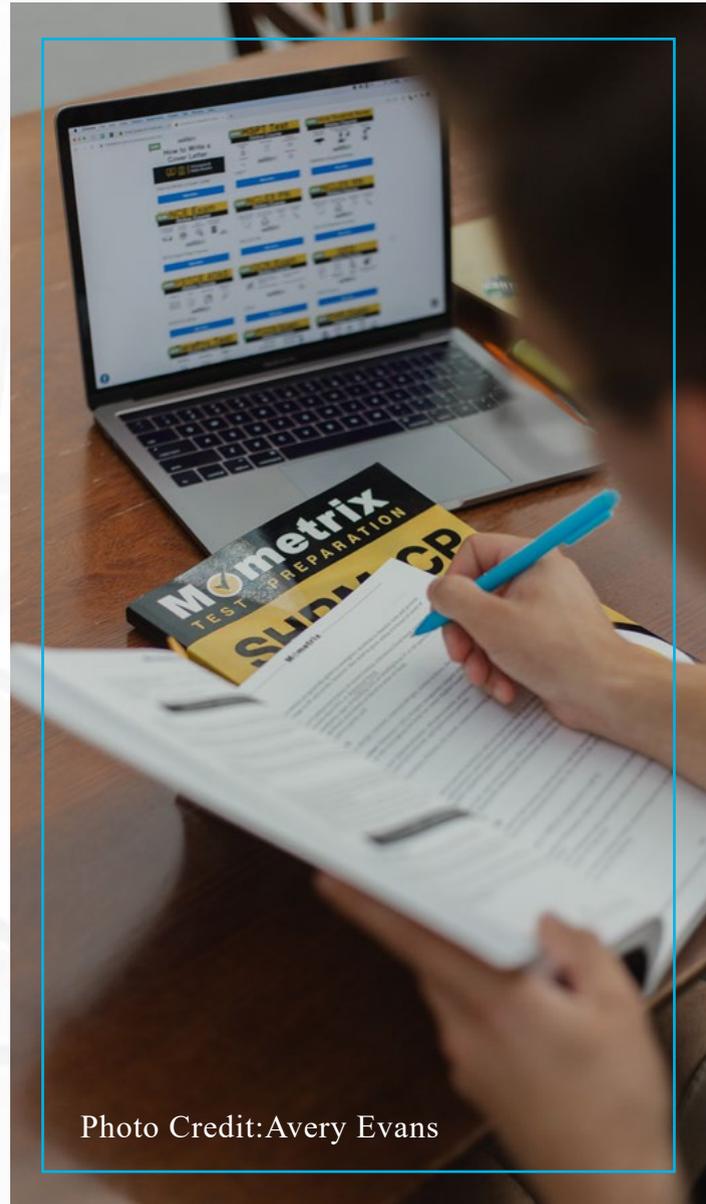


Photo Credit:Avery Evans

ACT to SAT Conversion Chart: See How Your ACT and SAT Scores Compare

If you have taken the SAT and ACT practice tests you can use this chart to determine which test best showcases your strengths.

ACT, Inc. (2018). ACT/SAT Concordance Tables [PDF]

<https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/ACT-SAT-Concordance-Tables.pdf>

ACT	SAT	SAT Range
36	1590	1570-1600
35	1540	1530-1560
34	1500	1490-1520
33	1460	1450-1480
32	1430	1420-1440
31	1400	1390-1410
30	1370	1360-1380
29	1340	1330-1350
28	1310	1300-1320
27	1280	1260-1290
26	1240	1230-1250
25	1210	1200-1220
24	1180	1160-1190
23	1140	1130-1150
22	1110	1100-1120
21	1080	1060-1090
20	1040	1030-1050
19	1010	990-1020
18	970	960-980
17	930	920-950
16	890	880-910
15	850	830-870
14	800	780-820
13	760	730-770
12	710	690-720
11	670	650-680
10	630	620-640
9	590	590-610

Should You Submit Test Scores?

Most colleges understand that test scores aren't the only indication of academic performance. In fact, more and more colleges are incorporating a "test optional" admission policy, meaning that SAT and ACT scores are not a requirement for admissions into the college. Before deciding whether or not to submit SAT or ACT scores with your application, it's important to consider the advantages and disadvantages of both options.

Advantages to Not Submitting Test Scores

Maybe you've taken the SAT three or more times, scoring below your target school's average test scores each time. If you are a great student but a poor test taker, it could be more advantageous keeping your SAT scores to yourself. As long as you can portray academic success through your college application, personal statement, GPA, and supplemental information, it could be more harmful

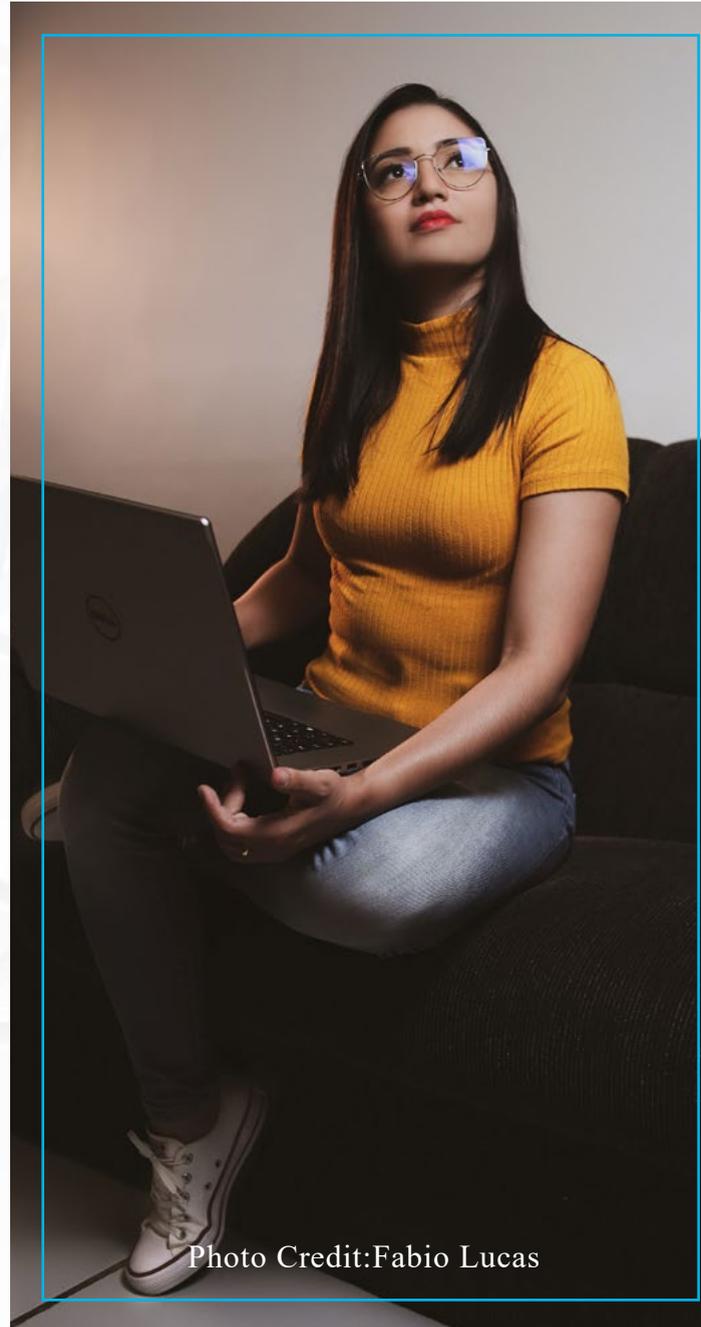


Photo Credit: Fabio Lucas

than helpful to submit low test scores.

Disadvantages to Not Submitting Test Scores

If your GPA is at or below the school's average GPA and you don't think your application will stand out from the others, it would be more beneficial to submit test scores if they are above average for accepted students at the colleges to which you plan to apply. You'll want to do everything you can to improve these scores, whether that means taking an SAT or ACT prep class, participating in one-on-one tutoring, or intense self-study. Consider taking the test three times with the intent to continuously improve your scores. Many schools superscore; they add the highest section scores from all test attempts for a total overall score. When applying to schools that superscore, strategize accordingly to get the most out of each test attempt.

Rule of Thumb

If your SAT or ACT scores fall within or above the average range of accepted scores at a school, it makes sense to submit test scores. If your scores fall below the average range of accepted scores at a school, it's best not to send in any scores. Work on strengthening other areas of your college applications, such as GPA, teacher recommendations, and essays.

Additional Considerations

Although many schools have test optional policies for admissions, there are some additional considerations to check before deciding not to take the SAT or ACT.

- ◆ **Athletes:** the NCAA eligibility is usually based on a sliding scale between GPA and SAT/ACT scores. NCAA did waive the testing requirement for athletes starting college in fall 2021 and 2022 but have not yet made a permanent decision to waive testing.

If you are planning to play a sport in college, double check the current NCAA policy.

- ◆ **Applicants to Competitive Programs:** Some colleges still require SAT/ACT scores for specific programs even if admission to the school is test optional. Common examples of more competitive programs include pre-med, nursing, and engineering programs as well as Honors Colleges.
- ◆ **Scholarship/Merit Aid Considerations:** Some scholarships or merit aid awards still require SAT/ACT scores. Check these requirements carefully to be sure you don't miss out on free money.

Test Optional Colleges

For an up-to-date list of test optional schools across the country, visit fairtest.org. Use this list as a general resource but reach out to each school and check if there are any additional requirements in lieu of test scores. For example, some schools have a minimum GPA requirement in order to apply without submitting SAT/ACT scores or ask for supplemental materials to support your application such as additional essays or letters of recommendation.

About Us

Tri-Ed Tutoring, a small, family-owned company, has provided private in-home and online tutoring services for all subjects and grade levels since 2006. We specialize in individualized instruction with a focus on remediation of a student's weak areas and enrichment of his or her strengths. Our company consists of about 30 tutors throughout the Northern Virginia area.

Since we know our tutors well, we hand select each student's tutor based on subject expertise and student/tutor personalities. We really listen to the concerns of each family before selecting a specific tutor for a student. In addition to our unique, personalized tutor matching process, our tutors work around students' busy schedules to find a time and location that works for them.

Services

Test Prep Tutoring

High School Entrance Exams
SAT- Individual and Class
ACT
PSAT
GRE
PRAXIS
College Placement Tests
ASVAB (Military)

Subject Tutoring

All Subjects

Study Skills

Organizational Skills
Time Management
Academic Coaching

College App Assistance

College Essay
College Application Review

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