

Understanding the Differences: SAT vs. ACT

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The SAT and ACT examinations differ in several ways. The SAT tests critical and analytical thinking skills. The ACT is more subject-based. This is often reduced to “aptitude” and “achievement”. The SAT is designed to evaluate innate ability. The ACT measures what a student has learned in high school. The Princeton Review favors the ACT because it is more knowledge-based and less ambiguous. However, there are other, more specific, differences.

Content

The SAT, modified in 2005, now includes ten sections - three critical reading, three math, three writing, and a required essay. The ACT contains four sections - English, math, reading, and science reasoning. The ACT also contains an optional essay. Both exams assume a student is capable of writing a five-paragraph essay. Unlike the SAT, the ACT math section includes math to the level of trigonometry.

Frequency, Scoring and Length of Examinations

There is a difference in the number of times the examinations are offered and how they are scored. The SAT is offered seven times each year, the ACT six. The SAT exam is scored on the basis of 200-800 points per section, for a combined three-section total of 600-2400. The required essay is scored on a scale of 1-6. The ACT is scored on the basis of 1-36 points. The optional essay is scored on a scale of 2-12. The SAT has a guessing penalty of 1/4 point for every incorrectly marked answer. The ACT has no guessing penalty.

The length of the SAT is 3 hours 45 minutes. The length of the ACT varies depending upon whether the student completes the essay. Total time for the ACT is 2 hours 55 minutes or 3 hours 25 minutes with the optional essay. Both examinations require content knowledge, analytical skills, and writing skills.

The SAT and ACT Essays

The essay has generated much discussion and concern. It is important to note several things.

First, the SAT essay is required. The ACT essay is optional. While, knowledge of grammar, usage, and word choice is an important part of both essays, the essay comprises 30% of the writing portion of the SAT, with the writing portion comprising 800 of the 2400 total points on the SAT. The ACT essay is a separate measure and does not impact the total score.

The writing prompts require that students reference historical, literary, or scientific information. Students must develop a thesis statement, several paragraphs with topic sentences and supporting details, and a conclusion. This is tantamount to the five-paragraph essay most students learned in elementary school; the issues are just more complicated.

An example of a writing prompt posted on the College Board web site is:

A sense of happiness and fulfillment, not personal gain, is the best motivation and reward for one’s achievements. Expecting a reward of wealth or recognition for achieving a goal can lead to disappointment and frustration. If we want to be happy in what we do in life, we should not seek achievement for the sake of winning wealth and fame. The personal satisfaction of a job well done is its own reward.

This prompt requires the student to write an essay that develops a point of view on this issue. It also requires the student to support his or her position with reasoning and examples taken from reading, studies, experience, or observations.

Another prompt might be:

Martin Luther King stated that the most segregated time in America is 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning. Using what you know about the civil rights movement, discuss this observation by Dr. King.

This essay requires a student to develop a thesis statement and provide historical or socio-political insights that demonstrate an understanding of this period of history.

The best strategy is to:

- ✓ Read the prompt and do not gloss over information contained in the prompt.
- ✓ Do not oversimplify. Explain your thesis and provide literary, historical, or scientific references.
- ✓ Freely give your opinion. The use of first person “I” is an acceptable strategy.
- ✓ Be sure to use appropriate language, descriptive words, avoid slang, and check spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

Similarities and a Word of Advice

The SAT and ACT differ in the areas of content, scoring, time allotted, and the writing section. However, students often forget that they are also similar. Both are one element of the entire college admissions process. Both are exams that tell you whether or not you take standardized exams effectively. Neither exam will tell you or an admissions officer how intelligent you are, your success in school, or even whether you will have what it takes to graduate from college. The best advice is to take the test that plays to your strengths. Many colleges will accept the SAT, ACT, or both. Some prefer one to the other, so it is important to check with the colleges you are considering before committing to either examination.

Regardless of which examination is taken, begin preparing early by working to build math, verbal, writing, and critical thinking skills. No amount of test prep will overcome a weak foundation. ♦

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