

SAT & ACT

What's the difference between the two tests, and which test should be taken?

The differences between the two tests are relatively small, but sometimes significant enough to warrant taking one test over the other or trying your hand at both. Each test helps you gain admittance to schools and win merit-based scholarships.

The SAT and the ACT each test subjects in a slightly different order.

The order of subject testing for the SAT:

Reading

Writing and Language

Math

Essay (optional)-Highly recommended to give

The order of subject testing for the ACT:

English

Math

Reading

Science Reasoning

Essay (optional)- Highly recommended to give

While you might see these different orders of subject testing as insignificant, you might also be relieved to see math, for example, earlier or later in the test. Similarly, you might be enticed by the idea of testing your science reasoning, or you might be quite daunted by the prospect. Part of successful test-taking is approaching your test as calmly and confidently as possible. Which order of subjects might make you feel more relaxed? The answer to this question depends on which subjects you like, which you don't like, and whether you prefer to work through challenging subjects earlier or later in the test.

Within the subjects tested on each test, there are further differences.

The SAT requires students to complete five reading passages, and the ACT requires students to complete four.

The SAT does not test science, but the ACT has a science section to test your critical thinking skills (note that it is not used to test your specific science knowledge).

Both the SAT and ACT test arithmetic, algebra I and II, geometry, and trigonometry. However, the SAT tests data analysis, and the ACT tests probability and statistics.

You can use a calculator on all math questions for the ACT, but some math questions in the SAT do not allow you to use a calculator.

The optional essay in the SAT assesses your ability to comprehend a source text, and the optional essay in the ACT tests your ability to evaluate and analyze complex issues.

Otherwise, the content and test styles of the SAT and ACT are relatively similar, with just one additional difference: the SAT allots three hours to take the test (three hours and 50 minutes if you're also writing the essay), and the ACT allots two hours and 55 minutes to take the test (three hours and 40 minutes if you're also writing the essay). Given that the tests themselves contain a similar number of questions, you might make your decision based on whether or not you prefer to have more or less time to take a test.