

SAT / ACT Strategy Guide

A clear, low-stress plan for smarter test prep — not last-minute panic

nathan@hurwitzadmissions.com • (203) 613-9262 • hurwitzadmissions.com

Standardized testing is one of the most misunderstood parts of college admissions. Students either over-prepare (cramming for months with diminishing returns) or under-prepare (assuming the test doesn't matter as much as it does). The truth is straightforward: students who start early, choose the right test, and practice strategically almost always see meaningful score improvement — without the anxiety that comes from last-minute urgency.

The most successful test-takers are not the most naturally gifted — they're the most prepared. Early, purposeful practice beats last-minute cramming every time.

SAT vs. ACT — What's the Difference?

Both tests are accepted by every major college and university in the United States. Choosing between them is not about which one is 'better' — it's about which one matches how you naturally process information under time pressure.

SAT

The SAT rewards careful, methodical thinking. It gives you more time per question, emphasizes close reading and evidence-based analysis, and tests algebra and problem-solving in layered, multi-step ways. Students who prefer to think problems through — who tend to reread passages before answering — typically perform better on the SAT. **Best for:** methodical thinkers, strong readers, students who prefer fewer questions with more time.

ACT

The ACT rewards speed and efficiency. It moves faster, asks more straightforward questions, includes a dedicated Science section (data interpretation and reasoning, not memorization), and rewards students who trust their instincts and move quickly. **Best for:** fast workers, students strong in science reasoning, those who prefer straightforward questions.

The Rule

Choosing the right test is not about intelligence — it's about fit. A student who processes information quickly and intuitively may outscore themselves by 4 composite points simply by switching from the SAT to the ACT. The only way to know which test is right for you is to take a full diagnostic of both.

SAT — Section by Section

Reading and Writing

64 questions | 64 minutes

Tests reading comprehension, grammar and usage, rhetoric, and evidence-based analysis. Questions are passage-based — you'll read short to medium-length texts and answer questions about meaning, structure, and craft. Strong readers with a solid command of grammar conventions typically score well here.

Math

*44 questions | 70 minutes
(includes a no-calculator section)*

Covers algebra, advanced math (functions, quadratics, exponentials), geometry, trigonometry, and data analysis. The SAT Math is not primarily a memorization test — it rewards understanding over formula recall. Showing work strategically matters here.

ACT — Section by Section

English

75 questions | 45 minutes

Tests grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, and rhetorical strategy. Fast-paced — you'll need to move efficiently. The questions are straightforward, and strong grammar knowledge pays off directly.

Math

60 questions | 60 minutes

Covers a wider range of topics than the SAT, including some trigonometry and pre-calculus content. Questions are more straightforward but move faster. Calculator permitted for the entire section.

Reading

40 questions | 35 minutes

Four passages from different genres (literary narrative, social science, humanities, natural science). The ACT rewards efficient reading — students who get bogged down in a passage often run out of time.

Science

40 questions | 35 minutes

This is not a science knowledge test. It's a data interpretation and reasoning test. Students who can read graphs, interpret experimental setups, and reason through conflicting hypotheses perform well here — regardless of their science class grades.

Writing (Optional)

1 essay | 40 minutes

Not required by most schools. If required by your target schools, practice structuring a nuanced argument in response to a complex prompt. Check each school's requirements before deciding whether to take it.

Building Your Prep Plan — Step by Step

Effective test prep is paced, purposeful, and pressure-free. Here's exactly how to structure your preparation from start to finish.

1

Take a Full Diagnostic

Before any prep begins, take a full-length SAT and ACT under realistic timed conditions — same time of day as the real test, no interruptions, complete sections. This is the foundation of everything.

- Use official practice tests only (College Board for SAT, ACT.org for ACT) — unofficial tests have different difficulty calibrations.
- Score both tests and compare. The better score usually reflects the better-fit test, but look at where your time pressure was greatest.
- Don't draw conclusions from one diagnostic — a single test can be skewed by a bad day, an unfamiliar format, or topic distribution.

2

Analyze Your Results

A score without analysis is just a number. Go through every wrong answer and categorize it: Was this a content gap? A timing issue? A careless error? A test-strategy problem?

- Content gaps require targeted review — go back to the concept and rebuild it from scratch.
- Timing issues require paced practice — timed section drills, not untimed review.
- Careless errors require process improvements — checking work, slowing down on key steps.
- Test-strategy problems (wrong approach to question type) require direct instruction.

3

Build a Targeted Prep Schedule

Prep works best when it's consistent and specific. Sporadic, high-intensity sessions are less effective than shorter, regular, focused ones.

- Two to three sessions per week of 45–60 minutes is typically more effective than one three-hour session.
- Rotate between content review, timed practice drills, and full-length practice tests.
- Track progress in writing — note what you worked on, what improved, and what still needs attention.

4

Practice Under Real Conditions

The test is timed, and timing pressure is itself a skill. Practice under conditions as close to the real thing as possible.

- Complete full sections timed, not just questions.
- Simulate the test environment: quiet room, no phone, same timing as the actual test.
- At least two to three full-length practice tests before the official exam.

5

Review Every Mistake Analytically

The most important habit in test prep is deep mistake review. Most students see they got something wrong and move on. That's where progress stops.

- For every wrong answer: identify what you misunderstood, what the correct approach was, and what you'll do differently.
- Keep an error log. Patterns become visible over time — and patterns tell you exactly where to focus.
- Re-do problems you got wrong until you get them right three times without looking at the solution.

When to Test — A Clear Timeline

Stage	Timing	Purpose
Diagnostic Test(s)	Late 10th or early 11th grade	Establish baseline, choose the right test. No pressure — this is information only.
Focused Prep	Fall/Winter of 11th grade	Targeted skill-building based on diagnostic results. Consistent weekly sessions.
First Official Test	Spring of 11th grade	Most common first attempt. Leaves room to retest before senior year.

Second Attempt	Summer or fall of 12th grade	If scores need improvement. Most students improve meaningfully with structured prep between attempts.
Final Deadline	October/November of 12th grade	Most schools' final score deadline for EA/ED and many RD applications. Know your schools' specific dates.

Test-Optional — What It Actually Means

Test-optional policies have expanded significantly in recent years, and many students misinterpret what they actually mean. Here is an honest, clear breakdown.

Submit scores if they strengthen your application. A strong score — generally at or above a school's 25th-75th percentile range — is a clear positive. Submit it. You can find this range in each school's Common Data Set (search 'School Name Common Data Set').

Don't submit scores that will hurt you. A score significantly below a school's 25th percentile will likely be held against you even at test-optional schools. The admissions officer's mental model adjusts downward — even if it's not official policy.

Test-optional does not mean test-irrelevant. At many 'test-optional' schools, submitting strong scores remains a meaningful advantage. Students with strong scores who submit them are often admitted at higher rates than those who don't.

Some programs and merit scholarships still require scores. Honors colleges, merit aid, and specific programs may have different requirements than general admissions. Always check separately.

When in doubt, check the Common Data Set. The Common Data Set (CDS) is a standardized document published by most colleges that gives you the actual 25th-75th percentile score ranges for enrolled students. It's the most reliable benchmark available.

A Note for Parents — How to Support Without Adding Pressure

Parents play a critical role in test prep — but the most helpful version of that role is often quieter than you might expect. Here's what actually helps:

Help create a realistic schedule. Consistency matters more than intensity. A student who practices 45 minutes three times a week for three months will outperform one who crams for six hours on weekends. Help set up the routine — then step back.

Treat the diagnostic as information, not a verdict. The diagnostic score is a starting point, not a ceiling. Most students improve 100–200 points on the SAT or 2–4 composite points on the ACT with structured prep. Don't react to the baseline.

Focus on progress, not a target. Fixating on a specific score creates pressure that interferes with learning. Focus instead on whether the prep sessions are happening, whether mistakes are being reviewed, and whether understanding is growing.

Don't hover over prep sessions. The student has to do the thinking. A parent who hovers or helps in the moment removes the productive struggle that makes practice effective. Be present for logistics; be absent for the actual work.

Trust the process. Standardized tests are learnable. Students who follow a structured prep plan with real practice tests and genuine mistake review almost always improve. The process works when it's followed consistently.

Test prep works best when it's paced, purposeful, and low-pressure. Students who start early, practice consistently, and choose the right test almost always see meaningful improvement — without last-minute anxiety.