

Comparing the SAT and ACT

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

	SAT	ACT	Differences
Form and Length	5 sections (comprising 4 "tests" and an optional essay) Writing & Language; Reading; 2 Math; Essay (optional) Total test time: 3 hours 50 minutes (with essay)	5 Sections (comprising 4 "tests" and an essay) English; Mathematics; Reading; Science; Writing (optional) Total test time: 4 Hours (with essay)	The SAT has a stronger emphasis on math, whereas the ACT emphasizes language arts. Overall testing time and section lengths are similar. SAT questions generally require more critical thinking, but the SAT also provides a bit more time per question.
Scoring	Combined Score: 400-1600 Evidence-based Reading & Writing: 200-800 Math: 200-800 Essay (not added into combined score): 6-24	Composite Score: 1-36 English: 1-36 Math: 1-36 Reading: 1-36 Science: 1-36 Writing (not averaged into Composite score): 1-12	The ACT Composite score is averaged, so a change in one test may not be reflected in the Composite. The SAT Combined score is the sum of the section scores.
Writing/English	Revising and editing Standard English grammar Punctuation Logical structure Effective rhetoric	Revising and editing Standard English grammar Emphasis on Punctuation Logical structure Effective rhetoric	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. Test questions on the SAT are NOT lined up with the passage.
Math	Pre- Algebra through Trig 12 Grid-in questions (no answer choice) Formulas provided Strong emphasis on algebra Calculator prohibited on one section	Pre- Algebra through Trig Extensive range of concepts tested Formulas not provided 5 answer choices per question (rest of test has 4)	The SAT and ACT Math tests cover similar ranges of concepts. The ACT starts of easy in rigor and progresses from there. The SAT requires a deep knowledge of a core set of concepts, particularly in algebra. The SAT offers more time per question than the ACT does.
Reading	4 single passages and 1 paired passage 2 diagrams/ charts 2 vocabulary-in-context questions per passage 2 evidence questions per passage	4 single or paired passages Consistent order of subject areas: Literary Narrative or Prose Fictions, Humanities, Social Science, Natural Science	The ACT Reading test emphasizes basic reading comprehension. The SAT reading test emphasizes understanding the role of the author, and defending answers with textual evidence. The SAT typically has more complex passages, but offers more time per question—some questions for a passage fall on different pages.
Science	The SAT does not have a stand-alone science section, but will be included throughout the Math, Reading, and Writing & Language tests.	40 questions 6 or 7 passages Emphasis on charts & diagrams Science is a reasoning test- Rarely requires prior specific science knowledge	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.
Essay	50 Minutes Analyze a passage and evaluate author's reasoning and rhetoric Scored on 2-8 scale of each three domains: Reading, Analysis, Writing	40 Minutes (optional per college) Evaluate three perspectives on a contemporary issue. Scored on 2-12 scale of each of four domains: Ideas & Analysis, Development & Support, Organization, Language	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—but reading an essay is required, so the timing is really equal.