

*Everything
You Want to Know
About the*

SAT[®]

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Q: *What is the SAT®?*

A: The SAT® I: Reasoning Test is a three-hour exam that measures two sets of skills—verbal reasoning and mathematical problem solving—that you



What is the SAT?

need to do college-level work in any academic area. About 2 million students take it every year.

The SAT II: Subject Tests are one-hour, primarily multiple-choice tests in specific subjects that measure knowledge or skills in a particular subject and your ability to apply that knowledge. Many colleges require or recommend one or more of the Subject Tests for admissions or placement.

Q: *Why do colleges want me to take the SAT?*

A: SAT scores are used for college admissions purposes because the test predicts readiness for college work.

There are more than 25,000 high schools in the United States, and their courses and grading standards vary widely. Since the SAT is standardized and objective—most questions are multiple-choice—it gives colleges a common yardstick that complements the high school curriculum in a consistent manner. Your scores show colleges how ready you are to handle the work at their institutions and how your verbal and math skills compare with those of other applicants.

Q: *What does the SAT tell colleges about me?*

A: The SAT I measures verbal and mathematical skills that you develop over time through the work you do in school and on your own.

It does not seek to determine how much information you have accumulated during school. It is neither a measure of innate intelligence (assuming there is such a thing), nor a measure of other important skills—such as motivation, creativity, or special talents—that can help you succeed in college and in life.

Q: *How important are SAT scores in admissions decisions?*

A: The best way to predict how a person will perform in a new situation is to observe how well he or she performed in similar situations in the past. That's why the high school transcript—judged both by grades received and by the rigor of the courses—is the most important factor in any admissions decision.

To get a more complete picture of you, admissions committees also consider a variety of other evidence, including SAT and Subject Test scores, essays, extracurricular activities, and what your teachers and counselors have to say about you. The relative weight of the various elements varies widely from college to college. Some universities select a portion of the entering class through the use of formulas that involve only grades and test scores. In rare situations, when two students appear similar with respect to grades and other factors, performance on the SAT can be decisive. For the overwhelming majority of decisions, however, test scores are only one of several factors. At highly selective colleges, where most applicants have good scores, SAT scores generally become an important factor only if they are particularly high or particularly low.

Q: *What's the difference between the SAT and the ACT?*

A: The two tests measure somewhat different things. The SAT tests general verbal and mathematical reasoning skills, while the ACT exam is somewhat more closely tied to high school curricula.

Q: *Is it possible to pass or fail the SAT?*

A: There is no such thing as a “passing grade” on the SAT. Over time, colleges develop a sense of how well students who score in a certain range are likely to fare at their schools; consequently, they judge scores to be high or low by their own local standards. A verbal score of 550 may be a green light into some schools, a blinking yellow or even a red at others.

Q: *Is the SAT useful to me—or just to colleges?*

A: Think of your test scores as a tool to help you find a college that is a good fit for you. When you ask to have your scores sent to a particular college, your confirming copy of the score report will contain the verbal and math score ranges for the middle 50 percent of enrolled freshmen at the school, that is, scores between the 25th and 75th percentiles. Your percentile should indicate the level of work you are prepared for.

When you take the SAT you also have the opportunity to fill out a background questionnaire giving information about your activities, interests, and academic plans. When students authorize the College Board to release this information, colleges use it to identify students who seem to be likely candidates for their institutions. Analyses of which colleges are filling up your mailbox can offer useful clues about where you will be a competitive applicant.

Your score report will also include feedback on how you did on the various sections of the test. Such information can tell you about academic strengths and weaknesses and help you decide which courses to take during your remaining time in high school.

Q: *Can a good score get me a scholarship?*

A: Many states and colleges use SAT scores as the basis for awarding merit-based financial aid. Many use formulas involving grades and test scores for initial screening of candidates and even for scholarship decisions.

The Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT®) that you take in October of your sophomore and/or junior year is a short version of the SAT with an additional writing skills section. Scores on this test taken in the junior year are used to identify semifinalists in scholarship competitions run by the National Merit Scholarship Corporation.

You can register online!



Q: *When and where do I take the SAT?*

A: The SAT is given seven Saturdays a year, usually in a high school, in October, November, December, January, March/April (United States, Puerto Rico, and U.S. territories only), May, and June. Accommodations are available for students with disabilities and for those with religious observance on Saturday.

Q: *Which test should I take?*

A: To find out which test(s) you should take, contact the college(s) you are interested in attending. You can also use the College Search tool at www.collegeboard.com. College Search contains school profiles, including admission requirements for over 3,500 institutions. Many colleges require the SAT for admission and use the Subject Tests for placement; others require both the SAT and the Subject Tests for admissions purposes. Additionally, some colleges require specific Subject Tests while others allow you to choose which tests you take.

Because Subject Tests are directly related to course work, it's helpful to take tests such as World History, Biology E/M, Chemistry, or Physics as soon as possible after completing the course in the subject, even as a freshman or sophomore, while the material is still fresh in your mind. You'll do better on other tests like languages and the SAT II: Writing Test after at least two years of study.

Q: *How often should I take the test?*

A: You can take the test as many times as you want. At least half of all students take the SAT twice—in the spring of the junior year and in the fall of the senior year. Some students take the test three or more times. Your score report will show your current test score, plus scores for up to six SAT and six Subject Test administration dates. (Most colleges consider only the highest ones.)

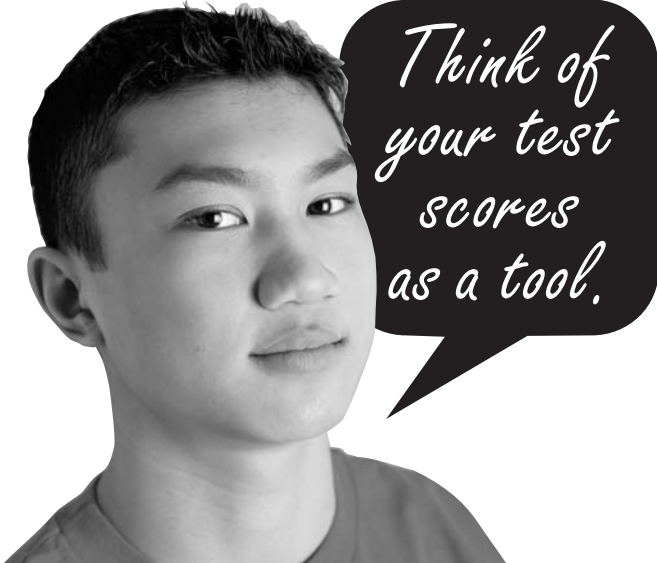
Q: *Will my scores go up if I take the test more than once?*

A: Your reasoning abilities continue to grow over time as you mature, gain knowledge, and accumulate life experience. Studies have shown that, on average, test-takers increase their combined verbal and math scores by about 30 points between spring of the junior year and fall of the senior year. As you might expect, students with lower scores the first time are more likely to see large increases than students with high initial scores.

Q: *How do I register to take the test?*

A: There are several ways to register. Choose the registration option that is most convenient for you:

- Registering online at www.collegeboard.com gives you immediate test center assignment and confirmation of your registration. Starting in May, you can register online for tests to be given the following school year.
- Reregistering by telephone is convenient and available if you've registered previously. Call 800 SAT-SCOR (800 728-7267).
- Fax registration is available for students living outside the United States.



Think of your test scores as a tool.



- Mail registration is necessary for students who are testing under the Services for Students with Disabilities, and for those who need to test on a Sunday or need a test center closer to home. In these cases, additional information must accompany the Registration Form. Once you register for Sunday testing by paper, you may reregister online (and only Sunday dates will be displayed online as choices).

A credit card is required for online, telephone, and fax registration. You can obtain a *Registration Bulletin* with the mail Registration Form from your school counselor's office. If you cannot afford the test fee, you may apply for a fee waiver through your school counselor.

Q: *What do I do if I have a disability and need testing accommodations?*

A: If you have a documented disability, you may be eligible to test with accommodations. For information and procedures, ask your counselor for the *College Board Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) Brochure* or go online to www.collegeboard.com.

Q: *How do I find out how I did on the test?*

A: Scores are mailed—usually about three weeks after the test date—to you, your high school, and the colleges or scholarship programs that you designate. You can get your score early at a modest charge by calling 800 SAT-SCOR (800 728-7267) or logging into your SAT account at www.collegeboard.com.



Take challenging academic courses.

Q: *What kinds of questions are on the test?*

A: The SAT I: Reasoning Test is divided into seven sections, which are timed separately and may appear in different orders. There are three verbal and three math sections, with each subject divided into two 30-minute sections and one 15-minute section. Another 30-minute section can be either verbal or math and does not count toward your score. It is used to try out new questions and to make sure that test scores are comparable with those of past and future tests.

There are three types of verbal questions: sentence completion, analogies, and critical reading. These questions test your vocabulary as well as your ability to understand and analyze what you read and to recognize relationships between parts of a sentence and between pairs of words.

There are also three types of math questions: standard multiple-choice, quantitative comparisons, and grid-ins, those that require you to produce your own answers. Math questions measure your ability to solve problems and are designed so that a year of algebra along with some geometry is the most advanced course work you need to answer them. You may bring along your calculator.

Q: *Do I need to study for the SAT?*

A: No one should take the SAT “cold,” and very few students try to do so. Common sense says that you should familiarize yourself with the format of the test, the types of questions, how they are grouped, directions for each type, how to manage your time, and how to respond on the answer sheet. You should also read up on basic test-taking skills, such as answering the easy questions first and knowing when to guess. Then go over the sample questions and take some practice tests. You can find free and low-cost materials to help you prepare at www.collegeboard.com.



Test prep helps but isn't necessarily a "guarantee."

The best preparation of all, of course, is to take challenging academic courses and to work hard in them. Extensive reading will also increase your vocabulary and comprehension skills. As testing time approaches, it's a good idea to brush up on your algebra and geometry. One of the best ways to practice for the test is to take the PSAT/NMSQT in your sophomore and/or junior year. You will get specific feedback on your skills that need improvement as well as a predicted SAT score range.

Q: *What test prep materials are available from the College Board?*

A: Visit www.collegeboard.com to find test prep information. The SAT Prep Center contains free tutorials to help you become familiar with the question types. This section also provides selected questions and answers from recently administered tests. Additionally, you can take a free Mini-SAT and order (for a fee) SAT PrepPacks™ (download or online formats) to help you focus your practice on specific math and verbal question types. At the Store, you can purchase the paperback book *10 Real SATs*, which contains 10 complete practice tests; *Real SAT II: Subject Tests*, for practice on each subject test, and *One-on-One with the SAT®*, a fun-to-use software program that helps you review for the test and practice on real questions. (Some of these materials may be available in your school or public library.)

You can also ask your school counselor for free copies of the booklets *Taking the SAT I: Reasoning Test* and *Taking the SAT II: Subject Tests* or download them from the Web site. They are full of tips on how to approach the tests and include practice tests and/or sample questions that you can take and score yourself.

Q: *Should I take a coaching course?*

A: That depends on your particular needs. It makes sense to approach the test with a confident and positive attitude. To develop such an attitude, most students need only to familiarize themselves with the test and with basic test-taking techniques, review the test directions, and try some sample questions. Others, including many academically able students, may benefit from the reassurance that comes from systematic preparation. Some students are able to prepare for a test like the SAT on their own, while others need a more structured approach. It's basically a matter of temperament, motivation, time, and personal learning style. Follow your own instincts.



If you do decide to take a coaching course, there is no reason to pay big bucks. Some high schools offer test prep at little or no cost, and self-paced courses are readily available from the College Board and other sources.

Q: *How should I decide among various coaching courses?*

A: Formal test prep courses differ widely. Shorter courses (about 20 hours) tend to focus on familiarity with the test, test-taking skills, and practice questions. Longer ones (40 hours or more) teach content as well and are essentially extensions of schooling.

A few rules of thumb: Beware of any course that “guarantees” to increase your score. (If your score stays the same or goes down, your refund is likely to be the right to repeat a course that didn’t help the first time.) Remember, too, that test prep instructors do not have any secret insights that are not readily available from other sources at no cost. Learning tricks in order to “beat the test” is a risky strategy that can backfire.

Think about the time involved in taking a course, especially the longer ones, and ask whether this is the best use of the time you have to prepare yourself for college. SAT scores are only one element in admissions decisions, and getting into college is only the first step toward earning a college degree.



Q: *What about those huge score increases I hear about?*

A: Coaching courses boast about clients who made big score gains, but they don’t talk a lot about clients whose scores went down (nor do they include negative numbers when calculating average gains).

Moreover, many claims are unscientific because they are not based on comparisons of scores from two actual testing situations. The initial score may involve taking an “SAT-like” test in a setting where there is little motivation to get the highest possible score. Also, since many students who take formal coaching courses engage in other preparation activities as well, it is not always possible to identify the exact cause of a big score increase. One recent study using a random sample of test-takers compared the score increases of students who had attended coaching programs outside their schools with those of students who had not participated in such programs. The study estimated the effect of coaching on combined verbal and math scores at 26 points beyond the “expected” gain of about 30 points. The average gains were greater on the math section (18 points) than on the verbal one (8 points). Such findings are consistent with other studies that have been carried out in accordance with standard academic procedures.

Q: *What do I do if my scores do not match my grades?*

A: If you are disappointed with the scores you receive, by all means take the test again. Before doing so, make sure that you take the basic steps to prepare yourself, and think about factors that may have worked against you the first time.

Test anxiety can be dealt with through familiarity and practice with the test. Since the test puts some premium on speed, students who are perfectionists by nature can



work on pacing themselves and doing intelligent guessing. Low scores on an SAT test taken during the junior year can serve as a wake-up call to work on areas where you missed quite a few questions.

Q: *Will high test scores make up for a low grade-point average?*

A: Don't count on it. Selective colleges turn down large numbers of applicants with high test scores every year. A pattern of high scores and low grades suggests to admissions directors that you are not working up to your capacity. If you took the easy road in high school, why should they expect you to act any differently in college? If you're in this situation, the best approach is to dig in, take more rigorous courses, and get decent grades in the time you have left in high school.

Q: *How accurate is the SAT in predicting success in college?*

A: Grades in college are influenced by many factors, from personal work habits to the rigor of courses. Although no test can predict with certainty the grades that any one student will achieve in college, certain overall patterns persist over time. Admissions directors have learned from experience how students with various patterns of grades and test scores are likely to do at their institution.

Q: *How important is success on the SAT?*

A: SAT scores are best viewed as a tool for making good matches between particular students and particular institutions. You should take the SAT seriously and prepare yourself well. Realize, though, that test scores are only one element in any admissions decision, and not usually the

deciding factor. In most cases SAT scores confirm a pattern that is evident from the high school transcript and other materials in your folder.

Above all, remember that the SAT does not measure your worth as a person, nor is it a branding for life. The test is a snapshot of a limited set of academic skills taken at a particular point in your academic career.

Q: *When will changes go into effect for the new SAT?*

A: The new test will be administered to the high school class of 2006 in March of 2005. Until then, the current SAT will be given.

Q: *Is the new SAT likely to affect the PSAT/NMSQT?*

A: Yes, the PSAT/NMSQT will also change. The first new PSAT/NMSQT will be administered in the fall of 2004, again for the class of 2006.

The College Board: Expanding College Opportunity

The College Board is a national nonprofit membership association whose mission is to prepare, inspire, and connect students to college and opportunity. Founded in 1900, the association is composed of more than 4,200 schools, colleges, universities, and other educational organizations. Each year, the College Board serves over three million students and their parents, 22,000 high schools, and 3,500 colleges through major programs and services in college admissions, guidance, assessment, financial aid, enrollment, and teaching and learning. Among its best-known programs are the SAT®, the PSAT/NMSQT®, and the Advanced Placement Program® (AP®). The College Board is committed to the principles of excellence and equity, and that commitment is embodied in all of its programs, services, activities, and concerns.

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