

# What is the Difference Between the ACT and the SAT?



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College-bound students in the U.S. have two national admission test options: the ACT and the SAT. Most colleges across the country will accept scores from either exam. So what are the differences between the two?

The ACT and the SAT are both designed to measure how ready students are to succeed in their first year of college.

The primary difference between the two is the way they go about measuring college readiness: The ACT is an academic achievement test, while the SAT is a reasoning skills test.

The SAT began in 1926 as an aptitude test. It has been revised a number of times over the years and is now described as a reasoning skills test that measures critical thinking skills—how students think, solve problems, and communicate.

The ACT was introduced in 1959 as a curriculum-based alternative to the SAT. It was and still is an achievement test that measures what students have learned in school—the specific skills and knowledge that are taught in core classes and are important to know for success in college.

There are also differences in the structure and content of the two tests. The ACT is made up of four required multiple-choice tests—English, mathematics, reading, and science—plus an optional essay writing exam. The SAT comprises three tests: writing, critical reading, and mathematics. The SAT's writing exam, unlike the ACT's, is mandatory. (Fewer than a fourth of four-year colleges require that students submit a writing test score for admission purposes.) The ACT includes a science test, while the SAT does not.

The scoring scales are different for the two exams also. Each of the three required SAT tests is scored on a scale of 200 to 800.

No average SAT score is issued to students. Each of the four required ACT tests, in contrast, is scored on a scale of 1 to 36, with 36 being the highest possible score. Students also receive an ACT composite score, which is the average of the four scores. ACT writing scores are reported separately.

Both the ACT and the SAT are administered in all 50 states. Nationally, the two exams are now taken by a nearly equal number of students: In the U.S.

high school graduating class of 2009, 1.53 million graduates took the SAT, while 1.48 million took the ACT. Some students take both exams, but it is not known how many do so.

Each test has its own regional strengths in terms of test-takers. The ACT is taken by half or more graduates in 27 states, mainly across the Midwest, Southeast, Southwest, and Rocky Mountain West. The SAT, in comparison, is taken by half or more graduates in 22 states, primarily along the East and West Coasts.

Finally, the ACT is being used in some states as an exam to measure academic achievement and encourage students to consider college. Six states (Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, North Dakota, and Wyoming) now administer the ACT to all 11th grade students as part of their statewide assessment systems.