

ACT vs SAT: Timing

The **ACT** takes **2 hours and 55 minutes** to complete without the essay, and **3 hours and 35 minutes** with the essay.

The **SAT** takes **3 hours** to complete without the essay, and **3 hours and 50 minutes** with the essay.

Here’s the full breakdown for each section:

Section	ACT	SAT
English (ACT); Writing and Language (SAT)	45 minutes	35 minutes
	75 questions	44 questions
Math	60 minutes	80 minutes
	60 questions	58 questions
Reading	35 minutes	65 minutes
	40 questions	52 questions
Science	35 minutes	N/A
	40 questions	
Essay (optional)	40 minutes	50 minutes
	1 essay	1 essay

Of course, this does not include time for filling out paperwork, instructions, or breaks. All in all, you’ll probably spend at least 4 to 5 hours in the testing center. So, bring your snacks! Check out our breakdowns for SAT Test Day and ACT Test Day for more details on what your morning is going to look like.

ACT vs SAT: Time Per Question

It’s also important to note that one of the major challenges of the ACT is how time pressured it is. The vast majority of students struggle to finish at least one of the ACT sections, and many struggle to finish several of the sections within the time limit. Of course, plenty of students run out of time on the SAT as well; in fact, many students and tutors have reported that the new SAT is much more difficult to finish on time than the old SAT. So it may be possible that this oft-noted distinction between the (old) SAT and the ACT is no longer as valid, but we’ll continue monitoring as more students take the test.

Still the fact remains that...

You'll have less time per question on every section of the ACT than you will on the SAT.

Overall, across sections, you'll have an average of 50 seconds per question on the ACT and 1 minute and 10 seconds per question on the new SAT.

Keep in mind though that the questions are different; SAT questions may take you longer to parse than ACT questions, so you may need that extra time.

ACT vs SAT: Overall Structure and Breakdown by Section

The **ACT** has 4 multiple choice sections plus an optional essay. The sections always appear in this order:

ACT Math vs SAT Math

Here's what you need to know about the similarities and differences between ACT Math and SAT Math:

- **Math Level:** The new SAT has upped it's game as far as math difficulty goes: you'll see some questions on advanced math and trigonometry. However, as our SAT expert Chris Lele reported after taking the SAT in May, at least right now, the ACT includes more questions in the realm of Algebra II and Trigonometry. But for either test, don't panic if you haven't studied trig! All of the trig knowledge tested on either the SAT or ACT is at a very basic level. In fact, I'm fairly confident you could teach yourself what you need to know with our trig study guide for the new SAT and trig resources for the ACT (and for video lessons, go to Magoosh SAT or Magoosh ACT).
- **Calculator Usage:** This one's pretty important! On the ACT math section, you can use a calculator on every single question (whew!). But as you may have noticed above, the SAT includes a 25 minute no-calculator section with 20 questions. The math here is meant to be easy enough to do by hand, but keep in mind you might want to be brushing up on your mental math skills. If you are a whiz with numbers who can eyeball math problems and do calculations in your head, you might be at an advantage on the SAT over many of your peers.
- **Multiple Choice vs Grid-ins:** The ACT Math test is all multiple choice, meaning you'll always be able to have at least a 20% chance of getting the answer right, even if you have no idea what you are doing. The SAT Math test is 80% multiple choice and 20% grid-ins, meaning you have to fill in the blanks with your own answers on these ones.

ACT Reading vs SAT Reading

You'll also likely find that the ACT Reading and SAT Reading sections look pretty similar, at least on the surface. But there are some important differences to observe as well:

- **Number of passages:** There are four long passages (700-900ish words) to read on the ACT and five longish passages (500 to 750 words) on the SAT. Or rather, there are 4 discrete reading sections on the ACT and 5 on the SAT. Both tests include one set of paired passages for you to compare, but count these as a single passage.
- **Passage complexity:** The reading level of the passages on the ACT is pretty standard across the board (about a 10th to 11th grade level). On the SAT, you'll find a range from 9th grade to early college. There are some further differences in question types between the SAT and ACT, including the SAT's use of a special question type the College Board calls Command of Evidence.

ACT Science vs SAT ??

The Science section is unique to the ACT; there's nothing like it on the SAT, or really on any other standardized test I know of other than those developed by the ACT organization. There is very little actual science knowledge tested on the ACT Science section. You'll see a handful of questions that do require you to bring in outside knowledge, but most of the questions have to do with your ability to read tables and graphs, make assumptions about scientific situations, or evaluate scientific hypotheses. I suggest you take a look at our sample ACT Science questions or the example ACT Science questions on the ACT website before making any decisions about your suitability for this section.

Although the SAT doesn't have a discrete Science section; it's worth noting that the new SAT places a much greater emphasis on interpreting tables and graphs across all of the sections. You might think of this as its response to the ACT Science test. Being able to interpret data will help you on both tests.

ACT Essay vs SAT Essay

Even though the ACT and the SAT are looking a lot more similar these days, one point of pretty significant departure is the optional essay (optional assuming the colleges you are applying to don't require the essay).

On the ACT essay, you'll be given three different perspectives on a debatable issue and be asked to evaluate them and present your own perspective. For those of you who excel at debate and/or coming up with supporting examples on the spot, you might be naturally suited for the ACT essay.

On the SAT essay, you'll be given a 650-700 word passage to read (yeah, that is a decent amount of reading before you even get to the writing part). Then you'll write an essay explaining how the author builds his or her argument in the passage. The key difference here is that the SAT doesn't care at all about your own opinion or your own arguments; it just wants you to evaluate the arguments in the passage. This means that if you excel at analyzing readings in your English class, you might find the SAT essay to be a better fit for you.

ACT vs SAT Scores

ACT: The ACT uses what's called a composite score to give students an overall ACT score. Your overall composite score ranges from 1 to 36 and is an average of your scores on each of the multiple choice sections. You'll also receive your individual section scores, which range from 1 to 36 as well, but for most colleges, **it's the composite score that counts.**

So, for example, let's say you received a 25 on English, 32 on Math, 28 on Reading, and 24 on Science. Your overall composite score would be $(25+32+28+24)/4 = 27.5$, rounded to the nearest whole number, which would be 28. (It's icing on the cake when you get to benefit from the rounding up!)

SAT: The SAT is scored on a range between 400 and 1600. This is based on adding your Reading/Writing score from 200-800 and Math score from 200-800 together. Note that even though there are three main multiple choice sections to the SAT—Reading, Writing, and Math—Reading and Writing are combined into one score out of 800. This is different from the old SAT, on which students received a score out of 800 on each of the three sections, meaning the highest score on the old SAT was 2400.

Credit: <https://www.studyusa.com/en/a/1305/act-vs-sat-ultimate-guide-to-choosing-the-right-test> 2020. Study in the USA has been an international student recruitment marketplace for 40 years.