



One of the most difficult decisions for high school athletes — and students in general — is deciding whether to take the SAT or the ACT. It's true, the two tests are similar, but they play to different strengths.

A football team can choose to run any number of offensive schemes. Some coaches prefer a slower, run-heavy approach while others might decide to run a wide open pass-first offense. The best coaches play to their strengths. If the offensive line, quarterback and running back are all more talented in the running game, it makes little sense to pass it the whole game.

Any scheme can succeed if it matches up with the strengths of the players. There are different ways to win a game and both the SAT and the ACT can take you where you want to go.

In this analogy, you're both the player and the coach. You have to know your strengths (and your weaknesses) as well as your goals. We all have different academic strengths and knowing what yours are can make the process of choosing which standardized test to take a whole lot easier.

First though, you need to familiarize yourself with both tests and how they differ. Below are some facts about each test, followed by some tips for taking each and ideas to get you thinking about which test you personally should take.

SAT

- 3 hours
- 4 sections
 1. Reading (52 ?s, 65 minutes)
 2. Writing/Language (44 ?s, 35 minutes)
 3. Math- Calculator Inactive (20 ?s, 25 minutes)
 4. Math- Calculator Active (38 ?s, 55 minutes)
- Scoring: 400-1600 (50% reading + writing, 50% math)

ACT

- 2 hours 55 minutes
- 4 sections
 1. English (75 ?s, 45 minutes)
 2. Math- Calculator Active (60 ?s, 60 minutes)
 3. Reading (40 ?s, 35 minutes)
 4. Science (40 ?s, 35 minutes)
- Scoring: 1-36 each section, Average 1-36 overall



Either Works

Both tests are accepted by every college in the U.S. and there's no real advantage from that perspective to taking either test. The scoring matches up. For example, a 19 (50%) on the ACT is seen as the same as a 1000 (50%) on the SAT. However, that doesn't mean that every student that gets a 19 on the ACT will also get a 1000 on the SAT. Some students strongly prefer one test over the other and the scores often show that.

Understanding the tests

Unfortunately, the only way to know without a doubt which test more suits you is to take them both. However, there are plenty of good indicators that can help you decide which is likely best for you.

First, we need to understand what each is testing. The point of standardized testing is NOT to test your knowledge.

I'll repeat that. The SAT and the ACT are not designed to test your knowledge.

Instead, each test was created to test your test-taking abilities. Let's look at the average scores of each. I mentioned above that a score of 19 on the ACT means that the student got 50% of the questions right. The average ACT score among all students in 2018 was just over a 20.

That means the average student on the ACT got about 53% of the questions right. That'd be an F in any high school class!

Both tests are designed to test your ability to think quickly and react, not to quiz you on knowledge.

The highest level math on the SAT is Math 2 (The ACT is about 5-10% Math 3) and the reading/grammar concepts do not go past 10th grade either. In fact, if I were to give you a week to do an SAT, you'd probably score in the 12-1400s.

But you don't get a week to take either test. The tests move quickly on purpose. So while the concepts might not be too difficult, you don't exactly have all day to work on them. Succeeding on standardized tests is more about focusing the majority of your effort on the questions you know how to answer quickly.

Each test requires a similar focus and quickness to succeed.

SAT vs. ACT

While they are similar in a lot of ways, let's focus on some key differences and what they mean for prospective test-takers.

Timing

As you can see above, while both tests move quickly, the SAT allows a few extra seconds per question compared to the ACT. Look at the reading sections. While the SAT requires students to answer 12 more questions, it gives you an extra half hour to work. Similarly, the SAT gives students more time per question on both math sections and the language section.

Overall, the SAT gives you about 21.5 more seconds per question than the ACT. That may not sound like a lot, but that can amount to nearly 15 extra minutes over the entire section. The SAT by no means gives students an eternity of time to answer questions, but the extra few minutes can be crucial, especially for students that struggle to answer questions speedily.

Subject Matter

Because the SAT has two math sections while the ACT has one math and one science section, there can be a big difference in scoring. Most of the ACT science section involves reading charts and graphs and answering questions based on experiments or scientific write-ups, not necessarily requiring a large amount of prior scientific knowledge. Still, students that enjoy science often find this to be an advantage of the ACT.

Similarly, if you don't love science, but also struggle to do math without a calculator, the ACT can offer a nice change of pace from the math-heavy SAT. If you're a math person, especially one that can do mental math without the aid of a calculator, the SAT can give you an advantage more so than the ACT.

The SAT does test some scientific concepts, but they're mostly just strewn across all sections and aren't really all that much about science.

So, if you think science sounds appealing, go with the ACT. If not, the SAT may be better for you.

Content Depth

This is the one that most people don't know about. Think of the ACT as a really wide garden. It's not the very deep, but covers a lot of ground side-to-side. Think of the SAT as a couple holes in



the ground. They're not very wide and don't cover a lot of ground but dig really deep into the ground they do cover.

The content on the SAT fits nicely into one of a few categories. In fact, five math concepts make up almost 75% of the 58 questions. If you struggle with any one of them, it can really hurt your score. That being said, it's easier to study because you don't have to worry about other topics.

Both tests check your knowledge of algebra, but the ACT has nearly four times the amount of geometry problems plus a few questions of trig functions, matrices and logarithms, three topics that aren't on the SAT at all.

If you struggle with one or two math topics, you'll be just fine on the ACT, because you'll only see 2-3 questions on any one topic. However, studying for the ACT is more difficult. You have to cover a lot of ground and any topic you do study might only raise your score a point at most. If you take the SAT and realize you need help on factoring, you can study that alone and see your score go up 50-70 points.

Having a good grasp of the 5-6 main math concepts on the SAT will almost guarantee a high score on that section.

Scoring

As mentioned above, the ACT has a science section and that has a major impact on how the tests are scored.

The SAT has four sections: Reading, language, calculator inactive math and calculator active math. The reading and language sections are each worth the same amount. Your total on each section is added together to give you a reading/language score out of 800.

The math sections are not averaged. Rather, your total correct on each section gets added together (Out of 58) and converted to a math score out of 800. Thus, the calculator inactive section comes out to about 20% of your overall score out of 1600 and your calculator active section comes out to about 30% of your overall score. With no science, the math is worth 50% of your score.

The ACT, with its unique science section, is obviously scored differently.

Each of the four sections are scored out of 36 and averaged equally. So science, math, language and reading are each worth 25% of your total score.



While the math might be a bit harder on the ACT to some, it's only worth 25% of your score, so students that struggle in math often prefer the ACT to the math-heavy SAT.

Additional Notes

Finally, one balancing thing on math. On the ACT, 100% of the questions are multiple choice. The SAT, by contrast, has 10 free response questions without answer choices. There are usually 2-3 of those that are really easy, but this still may influence your decision.

The ACT though has 5 answer choices for each question while the SAT has 4. The ACT also typically has about 5-7 questions on Math 3 topics, while the SAT stops at Math 2.

Stick it out

Just like changing positions in your sport, changing tests isn't a decision to be taken lightly. Most students will have a preference of test, but it's not helpful to jump back and forth between the two. Even if your score is low, it may help to study a bit more and try the same test again.

Ultimately, you may decide to switch tests and that will often be to your benefit. Just realize that studying for the two is very different and might even take a completely different mindset and study method.

If you plan to flip back and forth endlessly, you're setting yourself up for failure. Spend some time getting to know the test you're working on. Many schools have their students take in school at various points in the year. These in-school tests can give you a good idea of which you like better. Don't give up on the one you think you like after one attempt. Use your score report to see what you actually like and don't like.

Just like switching positions in a sport, switching tests means you have more to learn. In the long-term it may help your score, but it's usually better to stick with one and get comfortable with that one. If you really feel like you need to switch tests, do that, but be wary of switching too quickly.

SAT/ACT Chart

If you're still stuck, look at the chart on the following page for help deciding.

Still stuck? Circle your answers to the following questions:

	Column A	Column B
Which kind of math do you prefer?	Geometry	Algebra
Are you good at mental math? (No calculator)	No!	Yeah!
How are you with science?	Great!	Not for me!
I'm pretty good at math	Not really	That's me!
Time constraints stress me out	Nope, I'm great with time	I'm not good at working quickly
I'm good at memorizing formulas	Yeah!	No, but I can use them if I see them
I like when the questions are in chronological order	Meh, not that important	Please, I want them in order

Now add up your totals in Column A and Column B. If you have more circles from A, you'd probably like the ACT better. More in B? You'd probably like the SAT better.