

The SAT or the ACT? www.usnews.com

One of the best options for a student deciding which test to take is to take practice exams for both, either online or from a prep book. Choosing which standardized test to include in your portfolio is, without a doubt, an important part of your [college application](#) strategy.

Many years ago, your choice would have been determined largely by geography. Students applying to Midwestern schools took the ACT, while students applying to schools on the East and West coasts took the SAT.

Today, however, most [colleges and universities](#) place equal weight on results from either test. This ambivalence provides an opportunity for savvy applicants to play to their key strengths as a result of the different structures of each exam.

1. Pick the exam that suits you best: Research is the first step in choosing which standardized assessment is right for you. If a school on your list prefers one test over the other, then it is essential to focus your efforts accordingly.

If you have yet to [narrow your college search](#), then you should focus on determining which test would allow you to excel most. Taking both tests is rarely the best option. They differ enough that your time spent studying for one will not likely improve your score on the other.

It is a more efficient use of time and resources to [focus on maximizing your score](#) on just one of them. An excellent result from one test will outweigh merely good scores on both of them.

2. Assess your critical thinking skills and overall knowledge: One of the differences between the two exams is that the SAT primarily assesses reasoning ability, while the ACT focuses more on strict knowledge. Of course, there is some crossover in material.

Both tests, for example, have a math section and both require a solid foundation in geometry and algebra. The SAT is more likely to include story problems and creative application of the basic rules of geometry. The ACT, by contrast, tends to be more straightforward.

Additionally, the ACT includes basic trigonometry among the math questions. The main difference becomes one of problem-solving versus a wider range of tested concepts.

In the English section, the SAT places a greater emphasis on reading comprehension and vocabulary. In fact, it could be said that the SAT is notorious for its emphasis on vocabulary, to the extent that some of its study guides exist solely to focus on helping students get up to speed.

The reading comprehension portions of the SAT also present some challenging time management issues due to the length of the passages and the difficulty of some of the associated questions.

Although the ACT includes a reading comprehension section as well, it focuses more on grammar and syntax. As in the math sections, the ACT is more a test of knowledge than of reasoning and problem-solving.

3. Factor in your science skills: The final difference is that the ACT includes a section on science – a subject that is entirely absent from the SAT. For students with a good background in [high school](#)-level biology, earth science and physics concepts, this can be an opportunity to shine.

Furthermore, the ACT requires interpretation of graphs and charts, as well as knowledge of the proper construction of scientific hypotheses. The broader range of topics, however, can make studying for the test that much more challenging for students who do not already have a good footing in the subjects.

One of the best options for a student deciding which test to take is to take practice exams for both, either online or from a professional prep book. Be sure to follow the exams' formats as closely as possible.

Complete each test in one sitting while observing the appropriate time limits and other rules. Most students are able to do very well on the SAT when they have unlimited time to consider their answers – the time limits are an inevitably large part of the overall challenge.

When comparing your scores, look at the percentile results. Remember that raw scores – the number of correct or incorrect answers – matter only relative to the results of other students.

If your practice scores on each test land you in a comparable percentile, focus on the test that feels more natural to you. In almost all cases, however, your goal should be to center your efforts on the one test that plays to your strengths the most (U.S. News, 2013).