

The ACT is an achievement test, measuring what a student has learned in school. The SAT is more of an aptitude test, testing reasoning and verbal abilities.

Colleges will accept either the SAT or ACT. So which should you take?

It's all about the numbers. Some students end up scoring substantially higher on the SAT; others do better on the ACT.

To help you zero in on the right exam, here are seven key differences:

1. ACT questions tend to be more straightforward.

ACT questions are often easier to understand on a first read. On the SAT, you may need to spend time figuring out what you're being asked before you can start solving the problem. For example, here are sample questions from the SAT essay and the ACT writing test (their name for the essay):

*SAT: What is your view of the claim that something unsuccessful can still have some value?*

*ACT: In your view, should high schools become more tolerant of cheating?*

2. The SAT has a stronger emphasis on vocabulary.

If you're an ardent wordsmith, you'll love the SAT. If words aren't your thing, you may do better on the ACT.

3. The ACT has a Science section, while the SAT does not.

You don't need to know anything about amoebas or chemical reactions for the ACT Science section. It is meant to test your reading and reasoning skills based upon a given set of facts. But if you're a true science-phobe, the SAT might be a better fit.

4. The ACT tests more advanced math concepts.

In addition to basic arithmetic, algebra I and II, and geometry, the ACT tests your knowledge of trigonometry, too. That said, the ACT Math section is not necessarily harder, since many students find the questions to be more straightforward than those on the SAT.

5. The ACT Writing Test is optional on test day, but required by many schools.

The 25-minute SAT essay is required and is factored into your writing score. The 30-minute ACT writing test is optional. If you choose to take it, it is not included in your composite score — schools will see it listed separately. Many colleges require the writing section of the ACT, so be sure to check with the schools where you are applying before opting out.

6. The SAT is broken up into more sections.

On the ACT, you tackle each content area (English, Math, Reading and Science) in one big chunk, with the optional writing test at the end. On the SAT, the content areas (Critical Reading, Math and Writing) are broken up into 10 sections, with the required essay at the beginning. You do a little math, a little writing, a little critical reading, a little more math, etc. When choosing between the SAT and ACT, ask yourself if moving back and forth between content areas confuse you or keep you energized?

7. The ACT is more of a "big picture" exam.

College admissions officers care about how you did on each section of the SAT. On the ACT, they're most concerned with your composite score. So if you're weak in one content area but strong in others, you could still end up with a very good ACT score and thus make a strong impression with the admissions committee.