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Information and tips on preparing for college admissions tests. Start now >
About

A guide for the college testing process

Two of the most widely known college entrance exams in the United States are the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) and the ACT. These exams may sometimes seem confusing. The exam process includes a number of rules and deadlines in addition to lengthy test times. The College Testing Guide was developed to assist parents in helping teens with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) navigate the college admission testing process.

Shire extends its thanks to Michele Novotni, PhD, an internationally recognized expert in the field of ADHD, who contributed to the development of this guide.

For more information and resources to support those affected by ADHD, visit ADHDandYou.com.
Choosing

SAT or ACT?

At first look, the SAT and the ACT might seem quite similar. They are both around 3 hours long, are used to measure knowledge, and are sent to colleges prior to admission. But actually, these tests have some important differences that you and your teen might want to be aware of.

Compare the SAT and ACT tests:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SAT</th>
<th>ACT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measure</td>
<td>Aptitude: critical thinking and problem solving</td>
<td>Achievement: knowledge of subject matter and what has been learned in school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills tested</td>
<td>Critical reading - reading passages and sentence completions</td>
<td>English - questions on punctuation, grammar and usage, sentence structure, strategy, organization, and style</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing - short essay and multiple choice questions on identifying errors and improving grammar and usage</td>
<td>Math - questions on pre-algebra, elementary algebra, intermediate algebra, coordinate geometry, plane geometry, and trigonometry</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Math - questions on arithmetic, algebra, geometry, statistics, and probability</td>
<td>Reading - questions on reading comprehension of selections in 4 areas: social studies, natural sciences, prose fiction, and humanities</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Science - questions on scientific interpretation, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, and problem solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Essay is mandatory.</td>
<td>Essay is not mandatory, but may be required by some colleges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guessing</td>
<td>There is a penalty for wrong answers—guessing is less attractive.</td>
<td>There is no penalty for wrong answers—students may guess.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>The test is 3 hours 45 minutes long. Test-takers also get 3 short breaks.</td>
<td>The test is 2 hours 55 minutes, or 3 hours 25 minutes with optional essay. Test-takers also get 1 short break (or 2 if taking the ACT Plus Writing).</td>
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</table>

ADHD tip

Before choosing an exam, you and your teen may want to:

- Confirm any special testing requirements by the colleges where your teen is applying
- Compare the tests and consider which testing model would emphasize your teen’s strengths
- Talk with your teen’s guidance counselor, teacher, learning support teacher/teacher’s aide, and/or ADHD coach
Preparing
A timeline for you and your teen

Sophomore year

Fall

- **Consider accommodations.** Will your teen need them for college testing? See examples at right and learn more at [www.sat.collegeboard.org](http://www.sat.collegeboard.org) or [www.actstudent.org](http://www.actstudent.org).

- **Prepare for accommodations.** If your teen needs college testing accommodations, now is the time to make sure your teen’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan and your teen’s ADHD evaluation meet the SAT’s or ACT’s requirements for documentation. Check the guidelines for accommodation requests at [www.sat.collegeboard.org](http://www.sat.collegeboard.org) or [www.actstudent.org](http://www.actstudent.org).

- **Sign up to take the PSAT or PLAN,** the pretests for the SAT and ACT.

Winter

- **Receive the results** from the PSAT or PLAN exam.

- **Review the PSAT or PLAN results** to help decide how to best prepare for the SAT or ACT. Consider all the various types of [study options](#), from tutoring and classes to online programs.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College testing accommodations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Here are some accommodations for the SAT or ACT that might be available for your teen:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Testing over multiple days</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Additional or longer break times</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Small group setting or private room</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Use of a computer for the essay portion</td>
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</table>

*Note: This is not a complete list.*

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADHD tip</th>
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<tr>
<td>Find out about a summer test-preparation program. It may be easier for students with ADHD to focus on test prep while school isn’t in session.</td>
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</table>
Preparing
A timeline for you and your teen

Junior year

Summer/Fall

- Request accommodations for the test your teen will be taking as soon as possible. The accommodation application process can take a few months since the school counselor needs to complete a section of the application and several weeks are required for processing.

- Study regularly for the exam, perhaps with a formal prep class, if needed. It might help to have a study schedule or a plan for studying different sections.

- Register for a pretest, the PSAT or PLAN.

- Register to take the SAT or ACT in winter or spring—pick a test date at least 2 months ahead of application deadlines.

Winter/Spring

- Take the SAT or ACT. It should take approximately 2 to 3 weeks to receive your teen’s test scores.

- Register to retake the exam, if needed, in the fall. It is not uncommon to take either exam more than once.

Senior year

Fall

- Retake the exam, if needed. This may be the last time to take it and still have the test results arrive at your teen’s college(s) of choice in time for him or her to be considered for acceptance.
Studying
Options for test preparation

Take a pretest
What it is — A formal pretest for the SAT or ACT exam—called the PSAT or the PLAN.

How it can help — 1) A pretest simulates real-life testing conditions. This may be very helpful for students with ADHD, who may need additional time and/or resources to prepare.
2) Pretest results allow your teen to identify his or her strengths/weaknesses and target the subjects he or she needs to focus on improving.

Enroll in a test prep course
What it is — Formal test-prep courses are offered at high schools, through professional test-preparation programs, and with professional coaches or tutors who may work one-on-one or in small groups. Ask your teen’s school counselor or learning support teacher about available programs in your area.

How it can help — It may be a good way to help your teen with ADHD stay on track and keep college testing a priority.

ADHD tip
Take practice tests in a classroom, library, or the actual test setting. These environments will probably be full of other students and may help prep your teen as well as alert you to the need for ADHD accommodations.
Studying

Options for test preparation

Use a practice test

**What it is** — Your student may also take practice tests online and order official but “retired” tests at [www.actstudent.org](http://www.actstudent.org) and [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com). Your local library or bookstore may have prep books that include practice tests.

**How it can help** — A practice test can be an eye-opener as to what may be on the exams, and can help show the differences between the SAT and ACT.
Testing

Tips before the test

The week before

**Chill out** — Encourage your teen to ease up on his or her schedule and be well rested. Let him or her know that it might be best not to study 2 to 3 days before the test.

**Drive the route** — To avoid problems getting to the testing location on time. Drive your teen or, if he or she is old enough to drive, have your teen drive to the testing location and ensure that he or she knows where to go.

**Set a departure time** — Your teen should plan to arrive on site ahead of time, based on the testing center recommendation. **If a student is late for the exam, he or she will not be admitted and will not be permitted to take the exam. Rules are very strict for college testing.**

**Make a checklist** — Your teen should list items needed for the day of the test and plan to check them off before leaving the house. Items should include admission ticket, photo ID, pencils with erasers, calculator, and watch. **Smart phones are not allowed in the test room.**

Calculators

Your teen may use a calculator on the math portion of the SAT or ACT. Check the list of permitted and prohibited calculators at [www.sat.collegeboard.org](http://www.sat.collegeboard.org) or [www.studentact.org](http://www.studentact.org).
Testing

Tips before the test

The night before

Gather needed items — Since most exams start fairly early, it would be a good idea for your teen to gather all needed items on the checklist the night before so the morning goes smoothly. For someone with ADHD who has organization issues, this is especially important.

The morning of the test

Give support — You may want to offer your teen a little extra help: consider having him or her wake up earlier than usual. Perhaps you could even prepare a favorite breakfast as a special treat and to give encouragement.

Check the checklist — Make sure that your teen has all needed items on the checklist before he or she leaves.

Remember

A student’s SAT or ACT score is not the sole consideration for college admission. Your teen’s grades, grade point average, essays, and activities are also important factors. So, although achieving a good score on the SAT/ACT is important, remember that it is not the only deciding factor for your teen to get into college.
For more information and resources on ADHD, visit [www.ADHDandYou.com](http://www.ADHDandYou.com).