

LESSON 3



Navigating the Testing Maze



Quick Write

Are you a good test taker? If not, why? What difficulties do you usually face? How could you solve them?



Learn About

- college entrance examinations
- college placement examinations
- conquering test anxiety
- test-taking strategies
- procedures for taking standardized tests

"Neither you nor the world knows what you can do until you have tried."

Ralph Waldo Emerson, essayist, lecturer, and poet

College Entrance Examinations

As you learned in the last lesson, one of the important parts of applying to college is taking an **entrance examination**, a standardized test that helps admissions officers determine who is qualified to attend their schools. A **standardized test** is one that is given and scored under the same conditions for all students. A standardized test is carefully constructed by a testing agency. The College Board, for example, creates, scores, and oversees the administration of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).



Most colleges in the United States require applicants to take at least one entrance examination.

Courtesy of Jack Hollingsworth/Getty Images



Vocabulary

- entrance examination
- standardized test
- Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)
- aptitude test
- American College Testing (ACT)
- achievement test
- College Placement Test (CPT)
- Preliminary SAT (PSAT)

As many as 2 million students take the SAT each year. A college to which you've applied can compare your score on such a test with the scores of all its other applicants.

Most schools look both at a student's grade point average (GPA) and at scores on standardized tests when evaluating candidates for admissions. A GPA is a good indication of how well you do in your own school, while standardized test scores show how well you stack up against students your age across the country who are applying for college. Colleges need both types of information to make fair decisions.

For this reason, most colleges in the United States require applicants to take at least one college entrance exam. You can find information on a school's test requirements in its catalog or on its website. Your guidance counselor will have information about test dates, locations, and registration procedures.

Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)

The **Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)** is a widely used entrance exam that measures the academic skills and knowledge students most need for success in college. In previous lessons, you learned that an aptitude is a talent or skill. An **aptitude test** is designed to assess a student's talent, skill, or potential for learning, rather than his or her accumulated knowledge. Both private and public colleges use SAT scores in evaluating students for admission. They also use SAT results as a basis for granting scholarships. Many educators believe that SAT scores are the best predictors of how well a student will perform in college. According to the College Board, "The SAT and SAT Subject Tests keep pace with what colleges are looking for today, measuring the skills required for success in the 21st century."

The SAT is offered several times a year at locations across the country. It takes 3 hours and 45 minutes to administer. Students can start taking this test in their junior year. If their scores are not as high as they would like, they can repeat it again and again until they are satisfied with the scores. Students should have the SAT completed by the fall of their senior year, so that interested colleges will have time to receive latest scores. The College Board submits all scores to the colleges a student has applied to; the college will then generally use the higher score in its evaluation of the student's qualifications.

The SAT gives students three scores—one for critical reading, one for writing, and one for mathematics. The highest-possible score on each part is 800, meaning that the entire test has a maximum of 2,400 points. The cumulative average SAT score is around 1,500.

In addition to a numerical score, students receive percentile rankings on the SAT. Your percentile ranking tells you what percentage of students scored below you. For instance, if you score in the 80th percentile, then you have scored better than 80 out of every 100 students who took the SAT.

SAT subject tests are one-hour tests in specific areas such as science, English, math, history, or foreign languages. Schools with strict admission standards may require that applicants take two or three subject tests as well as the overall SAT. They use the scores to place students in the most appropriate classes. For example, if you do well on the English SAT, you may be able to take an advanced English course during your freshman year of college. You'll be able to skip the entry-level course required for freshmen.

To take the SAT, you must register and pay a fee each time you take the SAT. You can apply for a waiver of the registration fee if you can't afford it. To find out more information, you can visit the SAT website at <http://sat.collegeboard.org>.

Sample SAT Questions, continued

Improving paragraphs. This section tests your ability to revise sentences in the context of a paragraph or an entire essay, organize and develop paragraphs in a coherent and logical manner, and apply the conventions of Standard Written English.

Essay writing. The SAT® begins with an essay. You'll be asked to present and support a point of view on a specific issue. Because you have only 25 minutes, your essay is not expected to be polished—it is meant to be a first draft.

CRITICAL READING

Critical-reading questions test your skills in the following areas:

Sentence completion. For each question in this section, select the best answer from among the choices given and fill in the corresponding circle on the answer sheet.

Example: Having inherited a staff known for _____ resources, the new chairman had no choice but to introduce a number of more efficient practices.

- (A) defining
- (B) harboring
- (C) neglecting
- (D) bolstering
- (E) squandering

(Correct answer: E, squandering)

Passage-based reading. Some of the reading passages in the SAT are as short as a paragraph or two, about 100 words in length. You will also find one or more pairs of related short passages in each edition of the test. Such material can be followed by two to five questions that measure the same kinds of reading skills as are measured by the questions following longer passages. The questions are based on the content of the passages; questions following a pair of related passages may also be based on the relationship between the paired passages. Answer the questions based on what is stated or implied in the passages and in any introductory material that may be provided.

Sample SAT Questions, continued

MATHEMATICS

Items in the math test are of two types: multiple-choice questions and student produced responses.

Multiple-choice questions

Example: Emily's school offers 3 English classes and 4 History classes for her to choose from. She must choose 3 of these classes to complete her schedule. If exactly one of these must be an English class, how many different combinations of classes are possible for Emily?

- (A) 7
- (B) 12
- (C) 18
- (D) 21
- (E) 35

(Correct answer: C, 18)

Student-produced responses. In this section you compute your own answers to math questions. These are not multiple-choice questions.

Example: Of the 6 courses offered by the biology department at his college, Shawn must choose exactly 2 of them. How many different combinations of 2 courses are possible for Shawn if there are no restrictions on which 2 courses he can choose?

(Correct answer: 15)

Below are three possible methods of finding the solution (there are more):

- 1.** There are 6 courses offered; let us refer to them as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. One way to find the number of combinations is to list all possible pairings. They are 1-2, 1-3, 1-4, 1-5, 1-6, 2-3, 2-4, 2-5, 2-6, 3-4, 3-5, 3-6, 4-5, 4-6, and 5-6. There are therefore 15 combinations. Note that 1-2 and 2-1 represent the same combination.
- 2.** You could also notice that there are 5 pairings that start with course 1, and 4 additional pairings that start with course 2, and so forth. The total number of combinations using this method is $5 + 4 + 3 + 2 + 1 = 15$.
- 3.** You could also solve the problem by noting that the total number of permutations (that is, the number of different ways 2 of 6 courses could be selected) is 6 for the first course selected times 5 for the second course selected, or $6 \times 5 = 30$. To find the number of combinations, you must divide the number of permutations by the number of arrangements. For each pair of courses A-B selected, the arrangement B-A is also possible. Therefore, there are 2 arrangements. Therefore, the number of combinations is $30 \div 2 = 15$.

American College Testing (ACT)

The **American College Testing (ACT)** exam is a college entrance examination that is an alternative to the SAT. Whereas the SAT primarily measures a student's aptitude, or learning potential, the ACT is an **achievement test** that tests what a student has actually learned. Most schools require either the SAT or ACT.

The ACT has four sections: English, mathematics, reading, and science reasoning. It is two hours and 55 minutes long and is composed entirely of multiple-choice questions. There is an optional 30-minute writing test. (The writing test on the SAT is mandatory.) Scores on each of the four sections range from 1 to 36. These scores are averaged to produce a composite score.

Colleges use ACT scores, just as they use SAT scores, in making decisions regarding admissions and scholarships as well as in placing students in special programs and honors or remedial courses. Like the SAT, the ACT has a waiver of registration fees for students who can demonstrate financial hardship.

Most students take the ACT during the winter or spring of their junior year. If they think they can improve their scores, they should take the test again in the fall of their senior year. If a college gives you the option of taking either the SAT or the ACT, you may want to take both. Then you can decide which score you want to have submitted to the college. You can learn more about the ACT at www.actstudent.org.

Sample ACT Questions

MATHEMATICS

A car averages 27 miles per gallon. If gas costs \$4.04 per gallon, which of the following is closest to how much the gas would cost for this car to travel 2,727 typical miles?

- (A) \$44.44
- (B) \$109.08
- (C) \$118.80
- (D) \$408.04
- (E) \$444.40

The correct answer is D: If you divide 2,727 miles by 27 miles per gallon, you will get the number of gallons: $2,727 \div 27 = 101$. Then, multiply the number of gallons by the cost per gallon: $101(4.04) = 408.04$. This gives the cost of gas for this car to travel 2,727 typical miles.

ENGLISH, READING, SCIENCE, OR WRITING

These sections of the ACT require the test taker to read passages on the subject matter and answer questions from information contained in these passages. You can learn more about the ACT test prep at www.actstudent.org.

College Placement Examinations

As you've learned, colleges often use the results of students' performance on college entrance exams such as the SAT or ACT to place them in particular classes. But there are other types of exams. One of the most common is the **College Placement Test (CPT)**, which is *designed to help schools place, or assign, students in classes where they'll learn most.*

Advanced Placement Examinations

Colleges give advanced placement (AP) exams to students who have taken AP courses in high school. Doing well on these exams gives students the opportunity to earn credit or advanced standing at most colleges and universities. AP exams cover 34 courses across 22 subject areas, including history, government, English, music, art, some sciences, and foreign languages.

College-Level Examination Program

The College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) enables new college students to receive college credit without taking a basic or introductory course if they can show they already know the information covered in that course. Around 2,900 colleges grant credit or advanced standing for CLEP exams. Receiving such credit enables a student to move on more quickly to studying advanced topics. Business, industry, government, and professional groups use the CLEP to decide whom to admit to training programs.

ACT ASSET

ACT ASSET is a series of short placement tests designed to measure a student's strengths and needs in language, reading comprehension, mathematics (numerical skills, elementary algebra, and geometry), and study skills. ACT ASSET takes two to three hours to complete. It is used primarily by community and technical colleges. For more information on ACT ASSET, visit www.act.org/asset.

ACT COMPASS

The ACT Computerized Adaptive Placement Assessment and Support System (COMPASS) is a series of tests in mathematics, reading, and writing. It also has a component that determines placement levels for students who want to take classes in English as a Second Language. Like ASSET, COMPASS is used primarily by community colleges. You can find out more about COMPASS at www.act.org/compass.

Institutional Challenge Examinations

Some colleges allow students to take an institutional challenge exam to qualify for course credits. If a student demonstrates proficiency on this exam, he or she receives college credit for the course without having to enroll. For more information on institutional challenge examinations, consult individual colleges and universities.

Conquering Test Anxiety

The thought of taking any test fills some students with dread. A major test such as the SAT or ACT—one that has major consequences for a student’s future—can produce even greater anxiety. Many students are sure they will not do well. They may fear the test so much that they question their decision to go to college in the first place.

Do these thoughts occur to you? Don’t despair. You can’t study for entrance exams the way you study for a math quiz, but you can do several things to overcome your fears and make sure you get the highest-possible score.

Helpful Reminders for Reducing Test Anxiety

- Approach the test with an “I can” attitude
- Prepare yourself emotionally for the test; control what you say to yourself, and be positive
- Remind yourself that you studied and that you know the material
- “Overlearn” the material—you can’t study too much
- Chew gum or eat hard candy during the test if allowed; it may help you relax
- Go to bed early. Do not pull an all-nighter before the test
- Eat a healthy meal before the test
- Arrive early for the test (at least 15 minutes early)
- Sit back, relax, breathe, and clear your mind if you become nervous
- Come to the test with everything you need: pencils, calculator, and other supplies
- Read over the entire test first; read all the directions; highlight the directions
- Listen to the teacher/proctor before the test begins.
- Keep an eye on the clock
- Answer what you know first, the questions that are easiest for you
- Check your answers, but remember, your first response is usually correct
- Find out about the test before it is given; ask the teacher/proctor what types of questions will be on the test
- Find out exactly what the test will cover ahead of time
- Ask the teacher/proctor for a study sheet—you may not get one, but it doesn’t hurt to ask
- Know the test’s rules and the teacher’s/proctor’s rules
- Attend the review session if the instructor/teacher offers one
- Know what grade value the test holds
- Ask about extra credit or bonus questions on the test
- When you get the test, jot down any mnemonic (memory device) you might have developed on the back or at the top of a page
- Never look at another student’s test or let anyone see your test.

1. Take the **Preliminary SAT (PSAT)**, a standardized test that covers the same areas the SAT does. The PSAT measures reading skills, math problem-solving skills, and writing skills. It will help you prepare for the SAT by showing you the kinds of questions you will see on the SAT. Taking the PSAT also gives you a chance to compete in the National Merit Scholarship Program. Students should take the PSAT in their junior year.
2. Take a test-preparation course to get ready for specific college entrance exams such as the SAT and ACT. Your school may offer such courses. Commercial courses are also available. To take commercial courses, however, you must pay a tuition fee. Just type a phrase such as “SAT prep” into an Internet search engine to find out some of the possibilities, or talk to your guidance counselor.
3. In 2011 The College Foundation released The Total College Solutions (DVD) containing SAT and ACT E-Book Study Guide with Peer to Peer Coaching and Zero Hour Threat SAT and ACT prep games.

You can't be sure that test-prep courses will make a major difference in your test performance. They can, however, ease your anxiety. They will introduce you to the test format. They'll give you a chance to apply basic strategies involved in analyzing and answering different types of questions. They'll provide opportunities to practice and increase your speed. And they'll give you a chance to analyze your test-taking strengths and weaknesses.

If nothing else, taking the PSAT or a test-prep course will give you a psychological boost and the assurance that you've done all the preparation you can. You'll feel more in control of the situation.

success TIP

Reduce Stress, Improve your Scores by Taking the Full SAT Practice Test

The College Board website has free complete SAT Practice Tests at <http://sat.collegeboard.org/practice/>. This is a convenient way to get comfortable with the testing process and improve your scores on the SAT and PSAT. You can test online, or you can print it out.

Test-Taking Strategies

Here are some test-taking tips that other students and the experts have found helpful. You may find them useful for an upcoming quiz or final exam, as well as for a standardized test.

- *Don't jump the gun*—When you first read a question, you may think you know the answer immediately. This is called a *quick-time response*. But take your time. Read the whole question, and then read it again. You may find that the wording is a little tricky, and that the answer is not what you thought.
- *Keep moving*—Suppose you read a question and have no idea what the answer is. You reread it: Nothing comes to mind. When that happens, move to the next question. You don't have to answer the questions in order. An idea may occur to you later—perhaps while you are reading another question. This is called a *lag-time response*.

- *Guess smart*—Sometimes neither quick-time nor lag-time responses work for a question. What if you have no idea what the answer is? Should you guess or leave the item blank? Don't guess unless you know you won't be penalized for wrong answers. For example, the SAT penalizes you for wrong answers, but the ACT does not.

So if you are taking the ACT or any other test that does not penalize you for wrong answers, go ahead and do some intelligent guessing. For example, if it's a multiple-choice question, do you know that some of the answers are obviously wrong? Then narrow the choices, and make your best guess. You can also try this strategy for multiple-choice questions on the SAT, although you'll be doing it at a greater risk.

- *Relax*—Don't cram the night before the exam. If you're not ready by that time, you never will be. Get a good night's sleep. Take time for breakfast. Get to the exam site a bit early. Do the best you can. If you don't do as well as you think you should, don't be too hard on yourself. Learn from the experience, and you'll do better next time around.

Tips for Answering Multiple-Choice and Essay Questions

Multiple-Choice Questions

- Try to answer the question before you read the options provided; that will get your mind set in the right direction.
- Be aware that answers containing extreme modifiers, such as *always*, *every*, and *never*, are usually wrong.
- Read all the options before selecting your answer.
- Cross off answers that you know are incorrect.

Essay Questions

- Realize that bigger is not always better—be as concise and informative as possible (the person who grades your essay would rather see one or two pages of substance than five pages of fluff).
- Outline your thoughts before you begin writing.
- Be careful about spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- Use details, such as times, dates, places, and proper names, where appropriate.
- Write neatly.
- Proofread your answer.

Procedures for Taking Standardized Tests

Consult the colleges you are applying to and ask which tests they require. Then talk to your guidance counselor about when and where the test will be given in your area.

If you decide to take a test-prep course, schedule it well before the test date. This will give the studying and test-taking tips you learn time to sink in. You'll be able to apply at least some of them to taking quizzes and class tests in the meantime.

Even if you don't take a course, reading books a half-hour or so per day will help you develop a good sense of English usage. Also, practice working a variety of math problems every day.

As the test day draws near, relax. Remember that the test is only one of the factors that the school will look at in evaluating you. They'll look at your GPA. Your references, essay, and interview are also important, as you'll learn in Lesson 4, "Essays, Interviews, and Campus Visits."

✓ CHECKPOINTS

Lesson 3 Review

Using complete sentences, answer the following questions on a sheet of paper.

1. What is the main purpose of college entrance exams?
2. What are the two basic entrance exams used by colleges in the United States?
3. Why do you think some students have trouble taking tests?
4. What are two tips for reducing test-taking anxiety?
5. Give three strategies named in this lesson for improving your test-taking ability. Add any other strategies that may have helped you.

APPLYING TEST-TAKING SKILLS

6. Ask your guidance counselor for a sample of SAT questions, or go to www.collegeboard.com. The College Board administers the SAT and has sample questions on its website. See how well you can answer them.