

Strategies for the SAT & ACT

Updated for 2025–2026 Testing | College & Career Pathways

Current Test Formats at a Glance (2025–2026)

Feature	Digital SAT	Enhanced ACT
Format	Fully digital (Bluebook app)	Digital or paper (student choice)
Total Time	2 hours 14 minutes	~2 hr 5 min (core); ~2 hr 45 min with Science
Scoring	400–1600 (two sections)	1–36 Composite (avg of 3 core sections)
Adaptive?	Yes — multistage adaptive (Module 1 → Module 2)	No — linear (same questions for all)
Essay/Writing	No essay (eliminated)	Optional Writing section (40 min, scored 2–12)
Science	No dedicated Science section	Optional (40 Qs / 40 min); separate score, not in Composite
Calculator	Built-in Desmos for all Math	Personal calculator allowed (paper); built-in (digital)
Guessing	None — answer every question!	None — answer every question!
Superscoring	Yes (many colleges accept)	Yes (Composite from English, Math, Reading only)

Section-by-Section Breakdown

Digital SAT Sections

Section	Questions	Time	Details
Reading & Writing	54 (2 modules of 27)	64 min (32+32)	Short passages (25–150 words), 1 question each. Craft & Structure, Information & Ideas, Standard English Conventions, Expression of Ideas.
Math	44 (2 modules of 22)	70 min (35+35)	~75% MC, ~25% student-produced response. Desmos calculator throughout. Algebra, Advanced Math, Problem Solving & Data Analysis, Geometry & Trig.

Enhanced ACT Sections (as of Sept 2025)

Section	Qs	Time	Details
English	50	35 min	~6 passages. Grammar, rhetoric, production of writing. Includes ~10 unscored field-test Qs.
Math	45	50 min	Now 4 answer choices (was 5). Algebra, geometry, trig, statistics. Includes field-test items.
Reading	36	40 min	4 passages, 9 Qs each. Shorter passages. Fiction, social science, humanities, natural science.
Science (opt.)	40	40 min	Data interpretation, scientific investigation, evaluation of models. Not in Composite.
Writing (opt.)	1 essay	40 min	Argumentative essay. Scored 2–12. Not in Composite.

Key Test-Taking Strategies

General Strategies (Both Tests)

- **Answer every question.** No penalty for guessing on either test. Never leave a blank.
- **Practice with official materials in the real format.** Use the Bluebook app for SAT; ACT's official Enhanced ACT practice test for ACT.
- **Know the directions in advance.** Save time on test day by being familiar with question types and tools.
- **Time management matters.** Both tests are shorter than before, but each question counts more. Practice pacing.
- **Understand superscoring.** Many colleges take your best section scores across multiple test dates. Plan to test 2–3 times.

SAT-Specific Strategies

- **Prepare for adaptive testing.** Module 2 difficulty depends on Module 1. Harder Module 2 may mean you did well!
- **Short passages, one question each.** Read carefully but efficiently. Each passage is 25–150 words.
- **Use the built-in Desmos calculator** for all math questions. Practice before test day.
- **Reading & Writing is combined.** Grammar, rhetoric, and comprehension in one section.
- **Student-produced responses (~25% of Math).** Practice typing in numerical answers.

ACT-Specific Strategies

- **Decide on Science before registering.** Check target colleges. When in doubt, take it.
- **Math now has 4 answer choices** instead of 5. Better guessing odds, but fewer total questions means less margin for error.
- **English section has shifted.** More rhetoric and production of writing; less basic grammar than before.
- **Expect embedded field-test questions.** ~10 per section are unscored but you won't know which. Treat every question seriously.
- **Choose digital or paper.** Unlike the SAT, the ACT still offers paper. Pick whichever you're most comfortable with.

Reading & Writing Tips

For SAT Reading & Writing:

- Each question is standalone with its own short passage—no need to track multiple questions per passage.
- Focus on: main idea, evidence, vocabulary in context, and Standard English conventions.
- For grammar questions, pick the most concise, grammatically correct answer.
- Eliminate obviously wrong answers first, then compare remaining choices carefully.

For ACT English & Reading:

- Read the passage first, then answer questions. Annotation still helps on the ACT!
- Highlight main ideas, underline key words, note the author's argument or tone.
- ACT Reading: 4 passages (fiction, social science, humanities, natural science), ~9 questions each.
- ACT English: Look for the most correct, most relevant, most concise answer.

Grammar & Writing Conventions to Know

- **Subject-verb agreement:** Make sure subject and verb match in number. Watch for tricky phrases between them.
- **Pronoun-antecedent agreement:** Pronouns must clearly refer to a specific noun and match in number.
- **Punctuation:** Commas, semicolons (joining independent clauses), colons (introducing lists), dashes (emphasis).
- **Parallel structure:** Items in a list or comparison should use the same grammatical form.
- **Modifier placement:** Modifiers should be next to the word they describe. Watch for dangling/misplaced modifiers.
- **Verb tense consistency:** Keep tenses consistent unless there's a logical reason to shift.
- **Conciseness:** Choose the shortest correct answer. Eliminate redundancy and wordiness.
- **Usage:** Further/farther, less/fewer, who/whom, affect/effect, its/it's, their/there/they're.

Suggested Testing Timeline

When	What to Do
Sophomore Year	Take the PSAT for practice. Begin building vocabulary and reviewing math fundamentals.
Junior Fall	Take a full practice SAT and ACT to decide which test suits you. Begin focused prep.
Junior Spring	Take the SAT or ACT for the first time. SAT dates: March, May, June. ACT dates: April, June.
Summer	Assess scores. Identify weak areas. Continue targeted practice (2–3 full practice tests recommended).
Senior Fall	Retake SAT/ACT if needed. SAT dates: Aug, Oct, Nov, Dec. ACT dates: Sep, Oct, Dec.

Preparation Resources

Resource	Description
Bluebook App (College Board)	Free official digital SAT practice tests in the actual test format. Essential for SAT prep.
ACT Official Prep Guide	Updated for the Enhanced ACT. Includes practice tests matching the new format.
act.org Practice Test	Free Enhanced ACT practice test PDF available on the ACT website.
Khan Academy	Free SAT and general test prep resources, practice exercises, and video lessons.
Wikibooks.org	Free SAT/ACT study guides with practice problems and explanations.
Freerice.org	Vocabulary building through a quiz game format.

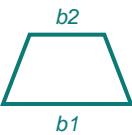
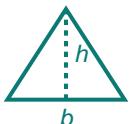
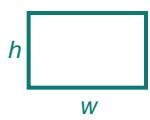
What Changed? Quick Reference

- **SAT is now fully digital** (since March 2024). Taken on a computer via the Bluebook app. No more paper SAT.
- **SAT is shorter** — 2 hours 14 minutes instead of 3 hours. Short passages with one question each.
- **SAT essay is gone**. No essay or writing component on the Digital SAT.
- **SAT uses adaptive testing**. Performance on Module 1 determines Module 2 difficulty in each section.
- **ACT launched the ‘Enhanced ACT’** in 2025 — shorter test, fewer questions, more time per question.
- **ACT Science is now optional**. Composite score is based only on English, Math, and Reading.
- **ACT Math has 4 answer choices** instead of the previous 5.
- **ACT is available digitally or on paper** — student’s choice. The ACT is NOT adaptive (linear format).
- **Both tests have no guessing penalty**. Always answer every question!
- **ACT includes embedded field-test questions** in each section (~10 per section). Unscored but you won’t know which.

Prepared for VSAC College & Career Pathways 2025. Updated for 2025–2026 testing formats. All test information is current as of February 2026. Check collegeboard.org and act.org for the latest updates. Original materials by Matthew Shagam (MShagam@gmail.com).

ACT Math Formula Sheet

Area Formulas



Rectangle: $A = lw$

Triangle: $A = (1/2)bh$

Circle: $A = \pi r^2$

Trapezoid: $A = (1/2)(b_1+b_2)h$

Circumf.: $C = 2\pi r$

Arc Len.: $L = (\theta/360) \cdot 2\pi r$

Sector A: $A = (\theta/360) \cdot \pi r^2$

Volume Formulas

Box: $V = lwh$

Cylinder: $V = \pi r^2 h$

Cone: $V = (1/3)\pi r^2 h$

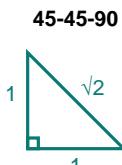
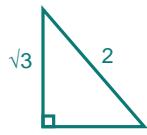
Sphere: $V = (4/3)\pi r^3$

Pyramid: $V = (1/3)Bh$

Pythagorean Theorem



Special: 30-60-90



Coordinate Geometry

Distance: $d = \sqrt{[(x_2-x_1)^2 + (y_2-y_1)^2]}$

Midpoint: $((x_1+x_2)/2, (y_1+y_2)/2)$

Slope: $m = (y_2-y_1) / (x_2-x_1)$

Slope-Int: $y = mx + b$

Pt-Slope: $y - y_1 = m(x - x_1)$

Circle Eq: $(x-h)^2 + (y-k)^2 = r^2$

Algebra

FOIL: $(a+b)(c+d) = ac+ad+bc+bd$

Quadratic: $x = (-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}) / 2a$

Vertex: $x = -b / 2a$

Diff. Sq.: $a^2 - b^2 = (a+b)(a-b)$

Exponents: $x^a \cdot x^b = x^{a+b}$
 $x^a / x^b = x^{a-b}; x^0 = 1$

Statistics & Probability

Mean: sum of values / count

Median: middle value (sorted)

Mode: most frequent value

Probability: $P = \text{favorable} / \text{total}$

Avg Speed: $d = rt$ (dist = rate \times time)

% Change: $|(\text{new} - \text{old})| / \text{old} \times 100$

Trigonometry

SOH: $\sin \theta = \text{opp} / \text{hyp}$

CAH: $\cos \theta = \text{adj} / \text{hyp}$

TOA: $\tan \theta = \text{opp} / \text{adj}$

Identity: $\sin^2 \theta + \cos^2 \theta = 1$

Sines: $a/\sin A = b/\sin B = c/\sin C$

Cosines: $c^2 = a^2 + b^2 - 2ab \cdot \cos C$

Unit Circle ($\cos \theta, \sin \theta$)

