

Intro to the SAT®



The SAT

Frequently Stressed-Over Questions

The SAT is a stressful part of the college admissions process that almost no one enjoys but almost everyone has to do. There's a lot of information swirling around out there that doesn't always help relieve the stress—some of the things you'll hear will actually stress you out more! So let's take a look at the answers to some of those swirling questions.

SAT Testing Dates, Fall 2020

- August 29th
- September 26th
- October 3rd
- November 2nd
- December 5th

Dates are subject to change.

- Click [here](#) to learn more about the latest testing schedule and updates from the College Board.
- Click [here](#) to register for the SAT.

What is the SAT and why do I have to take it?

- The SAT is a college admissions test administered by College Board (the same company that administers AP® tests) seven times a year.
- It tests your reading comprehension, grammar and editing skills, and math knowledge.
- The SAT allows college admissions offices to compare students from a variety of schools and locations. GPAs and course loads aren't always a perfect comparison tool, because knowing that a student has a 4.2 GPA doesn't tell you much without knowing how many honors/AP classes she took, how many advanced classes were available at the school, the student's individual grades, etc. It is very easy, on the other hand, to compare a student who got an 1150 on the SAT to the other 2 million students who took the SAT that year.

What does “test-optional” mean? Should I still take the test?

- “Test-optional” means that you are not required to submit an SAT or ACT score for admission to a college. This is different from “test-blind,” which means that colleges will not even consider your scores, no matter how good or bad they are. Many colleges have announced new test-optional policies in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, while a few have announced a test-blind policy. It’s important to remember that individual colleges make their own policies and can revise them at any time, so it’s important to check the details on the college’s website for accurate information. Also, some colleges still require the SAT or ACT for homeschool students, international students, or student athletes. Make sure you understand the fine print on their test-optional policy.
- Whether you should take the test depends on these policies and whether the exam will help or hurt your application. If your final exam score is higher than the college’s average score, then your score could be an asset to your application. Also, if you earned low grades in 9th or 10th grade, then a high SAT or ACT score can help support your application. But remember that “test-optional” means that submitting an exam is literally an option for you.

Why is this test so stressful?

- Don't worry—this test stresses out almost everybody! You are not alone.
- For one thing, it is a big part of your college application, but you only get a couple of shots at it (as opposed to your GPA, which you get to work on all day every day for four years).
- Secondly, this test *feels* like it should be like any other Reading or Math test you've ever taken. You're probably pretty good at taking tests in school, so you feel like you should be good at the SAT. But the SAT doesn't exactly play by the same rules your English teacher and Math teacher use when they write tests, so it feels more stressful.
- College Board is very good at writing tests that give score distributions with the highest percentage of students scoring around the average score, some who do a little better or a little worse, and a few outliers who do really well or really poorly.
- Take a look at the shape of the score distribution from the 2019 SAT scores: <https://reports.collegeboard.org/pdf/2019-total-group-sat-suite-assessments-annual-report.pdf>
- When you get your scores back and you didn't do as well as you had expected, it's *not* an automatic indicator you're not smart or that you're a bad student: you just weren't ready for that specific test from College Board. And *that's* what makes the test stressful!

Okay, great. Now I'm even more stressed out. I thought you said you were going to *help* with the stress, not make it worse!

- Don't panic! There's lots of good news here. This test is stressful, but it's also quite straightforward to prepare for it.
- First, think about what we call the SAT: it's a "standardized" test. That's because it's written to a certain standard so that the scores will be useful for comparing students across different test administrations. Consider what happens when you tell someone you got a 1200 on the SAT. There's no follow-up question of, "Yes, but was that in October or in *March*?" because (theoretically) the test is the same type of test over and over, seven times a year. Just learn the standards they use to write the test, and you'll find yourself going up against a very familiar opponent.
- Second, the SAT asks the same types of questions on every test. The test writers have to write multiple tests every year, and all those questions have to give similar results in order to keep the scores valid. College Board can't get creative because then the scores wouldn't be comparable. Don't worry about cramming content for this test- worry about learning the question types and strategies for those types instead.
- Let's take a look at some concrete steps to help you form a solid plan for the SAT.

Step 1: Learn the structure

The test will always be constructed in the same order with the same types of content:

Content Type	No. of Questions, Time	Description
Reading	52 questions, 65 minutes	Passage-based reading comprehension
		5 passages covering Literature (1), Social Studies (1), History (1), Science (2)
Writing & Language	44 questions, 35 minutes	Passaged-based editing focusing on basic grammar, editing, punctuation
Math: Calculator-Inactive	20 questions, 25 minutes	Multi-Step Questions Focus on theories behind math principles such as building equations
Math: Calculator-Active	38 questions, 55 minutes	Core math competencies (Algebra and Data Analysis)
Essay	Optional, 50 minutes	Rhetorical Analysis

Step 2: Understand how scoring works (and how to use it to your advantage)

- Scoring has three main levels
 - Composite (Your “SAT Score”): 400–1600
 - Area Scores (Your “Verbal” and “Math” scores): 200–800
 - Test Scores (Reading, Writing & Language, Math): 10–40
- The average SAT score is around 1050.
- There are easy, medium, and hard questions on all sections of the test. “Hard” questions, though, might just be tricky or confusing instead of being hard with regards to content.
- Let’s take a quick look at an example:
 - Finding the slope of a line $\left(\frac{\text{rise}}{\text{run}}\right)$ is pretty straightforward, but what if you ran into this question?

x	$g(x)$
0	6
1	8

- The table above gives corresponding values for x and $g(x)$ in the linear function g . If $y = g(x)$ is graphed in the xy -coordinate plane, what is the slope of the graph?

- It's just a slope question (the answer is 2), but College Board makes it look more complicated. Also, $\frac{1}{2}$ would almost certainly be an answer choice because many students accidentally solve for the change in x over the change in y .
- No matter the difficulty, each question is weighted equally, so there's no benefit to racing through the easy questions—likely making careless mistakes along the way—just to get to the hardest questions where you're more susceptible to fall for trap answers.
- There is no penalty for wrong answers.
- Your essay scores do not factor into your composite score.

Step 3: Create your own pacing strategy

- In school, your goal with any test is to get all the questions right in the time allotted, so that's how you might initially approach the SAT. However, attempting to answer all the questions on the SAT can actually hurt you. Let's take a look at how.
- **Student 1:** *Attempts all questions. Makes some careless mistakes, gets bogged down, and ends up running out of time. Gets about **half the questions right** and ends up with a **score right around 1050**.*
- **Student 2:** *Slows down. Avoids careless mistakes, skips questions that are confusing or time-consuming, and doesn't run out of time. Gets about **two-thirds of the questions right** and ends up with a **score around 1200**.*
- So how many questions should you do? Depends on the score you're shooting for, so be sure to do your research!

Boston University	1340–1510
California State University- LA	890–1080
New York University	1350–1530
San Diego State University	1110–1320
University of California- Davis	1150–1310
University of Michigan- Ann Arbor	1340–1530

- Slow down and work on the number of questions you need for your target score.
- Skipping a question? Don't leave it blank! Put something down—it can't hurt you, and it might even help.

Step 4: Use the answers to help you

- Process of Elimination: virtually the entire test is multiple-choice, which means it is open-book! Use those answer choices to your advantage.
- Reading
 - Eliminate anything that isn't supported by the text.
 - This part of the test does not test your ability to analyze or interpret passages, so avoid overthinking answers.
 - Not supported by the text? Cross it off.
 - For the questions that ask about the lines that “best support the answer to the previous question,” start by looking at the lines they give you, and use those to work through the answers to the previous question.
- Writing & Language
 - Don't try to find the right answer or figure out “how you'd fix it.” That wastes time.
 - Eliminate answers that you know are incorrect.
 - Compare what's left and see what's changing. Use that to make your decision.
- Math
 - Let the answer choices help! Eliminate answers that are clearly too big or too small if you can.
 - On multiple-choice questions, see if it would be helpful to work backwards from the answers rather than solving the question on your own and hoping the correct answer is there.

Step 5: Practice!

- Do a full-length practice test on your own. Find free tests on College Board's website or get [College Board's Official Guide for the SAT](#).
- Take the test timed.
- Check your answers, but don't only focus on why the right answers are right. That matters, but you also need to focus on why you chose the wrong answer. Did you misread the question? Mess up on a negative? Need to review a comma rule? Make a list of all those problems and work on them. That will help you improve as you find places you need to work on.
- Repeat with another practice test.
- Need more help or having trouble staying motivated? Sign up for a class or find a tutor to provide some guidance.

GET MORE PRACTICE!

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- New videos every week about college admissions, the SAT®, and more
- Live review sessions with Tom Richey, John Moscatiello, and the rest of the Marco Learning Team

SAT® Summer Camp—Only \$99!

- Six 90-minute sessions with SAT® experts
- Review the content and strategies you need for the math, critical writing, and reading sections

