

STANDARDIZED TESTING

While almost every college in the US became test optional during COVID and a few became test free, some are returning to requiring test scores, particularly the most selective.

Here are the different approaches colleges are currently taking:

Test optional means the college does not require any test scores. It does NOT mean that they wouldn't prefer to see strong test scores! There's a distinct difference between colleges that were test-optional long before COVID and those who adapted during COVID. Some colleges, such as Boston College, are upfront about their preferences; others are less so.

Testing preferred is a clear indication that the college is test optional but prefers to see test scores.

Within the group of test optional colleges are some that follow a "no harm" testing policy – in other words, a student does not have to worry that submitting relatively low scores might hurt their application: the college will only use the submitted scores if they help the applicant.

Test flexible means the college may accept AP scores in lieu of SAT and ACT scores.

Test free means the college will not review test scores at all, even if they are excellent. Notably, the entire University of California and California State University systems are test free.

A list of test optional, test flexible, and test free colleges can be found [here](#). As this list is bound to change, you should visit individual college websites to determine their specific testing requirements. If you plan to apply to one or more test optional colleges, you will need to decide whether or not to submit your test scores, which you can do on a college-by-college basis.

Submitting strong, above average scores for a particular college will provide another positive data point that could enhance an application. We recommend, therefore, that our students prepare to take the SAT or ACT by starting with a diagnostic test of each in the summer after their sophomore year. This will help them determine whether they perform better on one format over the other and whether they have a preference, so they can focus their test preparation efforts accordingly. Scores from either test are accepted by all U.S. colleges and universities.

Preparing for standardized tests can have a significant impact on your scores. You can prepare on your own by working through practice tests, either with books from the testing agencies themselves or online through affiliated websites such as Kahn Academy for the SAT. If you prefer to work with a tutor, we recommend one-on-one test preparation whenever possible to focus on the individual student's areas of weakness, rather than

group classes which are less tailored by definition. Feel free to ask us if we would recommend ACT or SAT tutoring in your case and whom we could suggest for you.

In many cases, you may self-report your scores on your applications, rather than sending them directly from the testing services (the College Board and the ACT), which can add up to significant savings. Some colleges still require official score reports from the testing companies to review your application. If you are applying to any of these colleges, you need to order score reports from the College Board and/or ACT to send directly to your colleges where necessary before application deadlines. Please keep in mind that those orders aren't fulfilled immediately, and some universities are very inflexible about late score reports. In some cases, they will move an early application to Regular Decision or not accept a Regular Decision application if scores are late.

Most colleges will “superscore” the SAT (using the highest section scores from multiple test dates) to create a new, higher combined score; most will also superscore the ACT, with some exceptions.

Careful test planning is essential. It is important to schedule your testing on appropriate test dates—consult with us to develop your optimal testing plan.

The PSAT

The PSAT is intended to expose students to the SAT format and is administered by your high school. It can also be a reasonable predictor of scores on the SAT and can identify areas of weakness that would benefit from focused preparation. While colleges do not require or even see PSAT results, National Merit recognition and scholarships are awarded on the basis of junior year PSATs (the top 1% in each state become finalists). High school sophomores and juniors have the opportunity to take the PSAT in October. We generally recommend PSAT preparation only for those students who have demonstrated the potential for National Merit consideration based on their sophomore PSAT results or high diagnostic SAT scores from the summer after their sophomore year.

The PSAT is digital and adaptive by module within two sections – Evidence-Based Reading and Writing, and Math. How well a student does on the first Evidence-Based Reading and Writing module determines which second Evidence-Based Reading and Writing module they receive, and the same for the Math modules. It currently runs 2 hours and 14 minutes. Each section is scored from 160-760 for a total range of 320-1520.

The SAT

Like the PSAT, the SAT is digital and adaptive by module. It also contains two sections: Evidence-Based Reading and Writing, and Math. Each section is scored on a scale from 200 to 800 with the highest possible combined score being 1600.

The SAT is offered on multiple test dates each year—you can confirm test dates and registration deadlines on the College Board website. Most students take it twice in the spring of their junior year and possibly a third time in the summer or fall of their senior year.

We do not recommend taking the SAT more than three times. While the College Board's Score Choice option will allow you to submit only your highest scores to colleges, some colleges will require you to report all your scores. Taking it more than three times can appear over-anxious to admissions officers and distract from focusing in the classroom. Research also indicates that most students achieve their best scores on the second or third sitting, with few seeing improvements beyond that.

While your high school registers you for the PSAT, you are responsible for registering yourself for the SAT. At the time of registration, the College Board offers students an opportunity to send test scores to four colleges at no additional charge; we do not recommend sending test scores sight unseen. Students may order test scores to be sent to their colleges later in the process.

The SAT runs approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes, and you have an average of 71 seconds on each Evidence-Based Reading and Writing question and 95 seconds on Math, depending on the section. Test results are generally available about two weeks after testing.

The ACT

The ACT is also digital, although non-adaptive; testing centers still offer a paper version, which we recommend over the digital test. The test is divided into five sections, including the optional Writing and Science sections. As very few colleges require the Writing section, we do not recommend taking it. Each section is scored from 0-36 and the English, Math, and Reading section scores are combined to create a composite score (also 0-36); Science scores will be reported separately. Right now, only a small number of colleges are requiring or recommending the Science section:

Requiring

Georgetown University
Pomona College
U.S. Naval Academy
California Institute of
Technology
Johns Hopkins University

Recommending

Boston University
Duke University
Michigan State University
Rochester Institute of Technology (for STEM
applicants)

If a student has any interest in one of these colleges, or if their list is still evolving, they should include the Science section in their preparations and testing. You should also confirm ACT requirements at the colleges on your list as they change with each season.

The ACT format requires quicker pacing than the SAT, allowing an average of 36-60 seconds per question, therefore students who read or process more slowly may be better off taking the SAT. The ACT runs 2 hours and 20 minutes for the three sections that make up the composite score (two hours and fifty-five minutes if you include the Science section). Diagnostic practice tests should help determine which test format is better for you.

Because we have heard of some complications with the digital ACT (students need to use test center devices instead of their own and need access to the Internet throughout the test), we have been recommending students take the paper version of the test, if available. As with the SAT, you may take the ACT multiple times but we discourage taking it more than three times for the same reasons. ACT scores are generally available about 10 days after testing.

Advanced Placement Exams (APs)

Advanced Placement courses follow college-level curricula developed and audited by the College Board; students taking those courses sit for their Advanced Placement Exams in May and get their scores in early July. The AP Exams are scored from 1 to 5; some colleges will give credit for scores of 4 or 5, some give credit for 3s. Most colleges will use AP scores for placement purposes or even to fulfill distribution requirements. In addition, strong AP scores from 11th grade or before enhance an application, as does a good grade in the course. Although submitting AP scores is not generally required, we encourage students to submit all AP scores of 4 or 5 and generally recommend not submitting scores lower than 3. To receive academic credit, you will need to instruct the College Board to release your AP scores to your chosen college when they become available in July after you graduate.

As of 2025, 16 AP exams are fully digital and 12 are hybrid to accommodate free responses and symbolic notation. The courses currently offered by the College Board can be found [here](#) and your school's AP Coordinator registers you.

Accommodations

If you are currently using accommodations for learning differences in class, you may find similar accommodations helpful on standardized testing such as the SAT, AP Exams, and/or the ACT. Accommodations might include extra time or taking the test in an alternate setting, depending on the nature of the learning difference. Generally speaking, you must be able to present documentation of your learning difference, either through a school verification process or a document review. Either process takes several weeks or more so please plan accordingly. The link to learn more about accommodations from the College Board is [here](#) and the comparable link for the ACT is [here](#).