



Key Differences Between the ACT and the SAT

Order of the sections

SAT	ACT
Reading	English
English (grammar, punctuation, editing)	Math
Math (no calculator)	Reading
Math (with calculator)	Science
	Essay (optional)

English

The sections that test English grammar, punctuation, and editing are almost exactly the same. When the SAT recently restructured itself, it basically copied the ACT format. However, there are a few differences:

	SAT	ACT
Timing	35 minutes for 4 passages (8:45 per passage), each passage contains an average of 11 questions – it varies a little from one passage to the next (44 total questions)	45 minutes for 5 passages (9 minutes per passage), each passage contains 15 questions (75 total questions)
Content	some charts or graphs must be interpreted	there are no charts or graphs to interpret

Summary: These sections are basically interchangeable – the charts and graphs introduce a bit of challenge on the SAT that is absent on the ACT, but the questions pertaining to English grammar, punctuation, and editing are essentially the same.

Math

The key differences are the content (ACT covers more topics), the calculator (ACT allows the calculator for the whole thing, SAT has a no calculator section), free response vs. multiple choice (the ACT is all multiple choice, the SAT has 45 multiple choice, 13 free response questions), and the scoring of each test.

	SAT	ACT
Timing	No Calculator portion: 25 minutes, 20 questions Calculator portion: 55 minutes, 38 questions (Total: 80 minutes, 58 questions)	60 minutes for 60 questions, all in one section
Content	Less topics than on the ACT, but difficult questions are hard because they are written in a confusing way. A familiar concept might be turned inside out and upside down, rewarding the student who can recognize it or abstractly intuit the answer. Many students find that having their calculator taken away is very stressful for section 3. No Calculator Section: 15 multiple choice, 5 free response Calculator Section: 30 Multiple choice, 8 free response	There are some advanced topics, such as matrices and expected value, that do not appear on the SAT at all. So overall, the scope of the ACT math questions is greater. However, the questions themselves are more clearly written – if you know the concept that is central to the problem, you will recognize it and know how to do the problem. All math questions are multiple choice on the ACT, and you are allowed to use your calculator for all of it.

Scoring:

To understand this, you might need to learn a little about how the tests are scored.

The scores are all percentile-based. For example, a 710 on the SAT math corresponds to the 96th percentile (<https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/pdf/understanding-sat-scores.pdf>), just like a 31 on the math of the ACT represents the 96th percentile (<https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/MultipleChoiceStemComposite.pdf>).

How is it that the score always matches the percentile?

Well, the College Board and the ACT must get the results from a given day (the raw scores of every student, which is the number of questions they answered correctly) and then **determine how to scale the raw scores** to get the same distribution of scores. So for example, on one ACT exam, it could be that missing 11 questions gets you a 31; on another ACT exam, missing 8 questions could also get you at a 31 (see pages 106 and 1013 of their most recent book, *The Official ACT Prep Guide, 2022-2023*). That could

be because one test was harder or because students performed worse – or some combination of the two.

On the SAT, there are more easy-level questions, which means that students bunch up near the top. In that situation, every missed question drops your score a LOT, because they need to create separation between the scores. You might have heard students say “I only missed 4 questions and I got a 700!” This is why.

On the ACT, there are a lot more medium level questions, which creates a much bigger spread of results among students. That’s why on the ACT, you can usually miss a question and still get a perfect score. In general, you are not overly penalized for a couple of the hardest questions.

Summary: The ACT math is more challenging, on the one hand because it includes more topics, but if you prepare for the test and go in knowing how to do most things, you will be rewarded by the questions that tend to be asked in a straightforward way, even if they are hard. You get a cushion, in that you don’t need to get every single question right to get an excellent score. Also, the fact that you can use your calculator for the whole thing and all the questions are multiple choice tends to make students more comfortable.

Reading

The reading passages are vastly different. You get more time for the SAT, but the language is more difficult (there is usually a passage taken from over a hundred years ago, so the English vocabulary and structure are different) and the answer choices are very short – to the point that it can be hard to differentiate them. To see what I mean, see question 19 or Practice Test One (found here: <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/practice/full-length-practice-tests>), where you must choose between “offer an explanation” and “support a conclusion” – it might be okay if neither was the right answer, but the first one is the right answer – this is semantics, and has nothing to do with understanding the passage.

The ACT timing is short, so you need to be decisive and keep moving, but the answer choices are longer, so it’s easier to tell them apart, and the passages are written in contemporary English.

Timing:

	SAT	ACT
Timing	65 minutes for 5 passages (13 minutes per passage), each passage contains 10-11 questions (52 total questions)	35 minutes for 4 passages (8:45 per passage), each passage contains 10 questions (40 total questions)

Summary:

Despite the shorter timing, I think that students have a better chance of understanding the passages and the questions on the ACT. With practice, students learn how long they have and when they need to move on.

Science

Timing: 35 minutes for 6 passages (5:50 per passage), each passage contains 6-7 questions (40 total questions).

This section **only exists on the ACT**, and it essentially comes down to reading comprehension with charts and graphs. Students are challenged to visually absorb a lot of information and to demonstrate their understanding on the questions.

The reasoning of the questions is based on sound scientific practices, but only a small handful actually require outside knowledge, such as the meaning of a vocabulary word or where to find the chromosomes in a cell. For the most part, all the information is laid out for students.

This is a hard section for most students, but I don't think it's reason enough to avoid the ACT. You don't need to have done well historically in science classes in school – that's a common misperception. You really just need to be able to absorb new information, mark up the passages to be sure you're looking in the right place, and to practice.

Essay

This is only for the ACT. (40 minutes)

I hope that the ACT gets rid of the essay soon, as the SAT has done. It is hard to craft a quality piece of writing in 40 minutes. The good news is that **less than ten schools** actually require that the essay be done – so chances are you won't have to do it. Here's a brief overview, in case you must (or choose to) do the essay. (My advice is to stay away unless you have to take it. The test is already long enough.)

The prompt presents a matter and asks a question. Then it presents three different perspectives on the issue. Students are asked to answer the question by:

1. Clearly stating his or her own view and how it relates to at least one of the perspectives presented.
2. Develop and support ideas with reasoning and examples
3. Organize ideas clearly and logically
4. Communicate ideas effectively in standard written English

The student's perspective may be in full agreement with one given, in partial agreement, or completely different.