

Chapter 19

Sharpen Those #2 Pencils:

SAT[®] and ACT[®] Exams ... and the Rest of the Tests

Homeschooled or traditionally schooled, most high school students have one thing in common: their dislike—even dread—of the college entrance exams. While strong test-takers may consider these exams only an inevitable annoyance, some students wonder whether their scores will permanently define their higher education path or perhaps even their future careers. Thankfully, the situation is rarely so extreme.

In comparison to traditional students, homeschoolers have a somewhat different relationship to the SAT and ACT exams. For one thing, in the earlier grades, homeschoolers generally take fewer standardized tests than do their counterparts in traditional schools, and thus they may be less familiar with formal testing. Additionally, college admissions staff often place more emphasis on tests and less on the transcript when evaluating a homeschooler's application. Homeschoolers may feel that they need solid test scores to “prove” themselves and their educational methods to colleges. Regardless of where you stand on the issue, this chapter will help you understand the tests used for college admission and will guide you as you develop a strategy for test preparation.

HOW IMPORTANT ARE THE SAT AND ACT EXAMS?

Opinions about how much weight should be given to college entrance exams vary greatly, not only among homeschooling parents, but also among other parents, educators, college admissions committees, *and*, of course, students. Many believe that a student's record of courses, experiences, leadership, and extracurriculars should carry far more weight than a score on a morning's exam.

Though some colleges allow or even welcome nontraditional application formats, and though several colleges and universities—including Wake Forest, Bowdoin, Bryn Mawr and Wesleyan—offer holistic “test-optional” admission policies, standardized tests seem firmly embedded in the admissions process. And, justifiably or not, these tests take on magnified significance in the eyes of an admissions officer reviewing a homeschooler's application. Most of the “test-optional” colleges still require homeschoolers to submit SAT or ACT scores, as well as asking *all* students to submit these scores after admission (during the summer before matriculation), to be used for placement into appropriate college classes. Admissions committees need to have a way to compare all their applicants, regardless of the type of high school attended. The upside of jumping through the “hoops” of testing is that students earning high scores may be in the

running for merit scholarships.

The SAT exam (produced by the College Board) and the ACT test (produced by ACT, Inc.) are the two primary exams your student will encounter along the path to college. Most students will take one test or the other; some choose to take both tests. While the SAT was once more popular with students and colleges on the East and West coasts, and the ACT with those in the Midwest, South, and Mountain regions, these geographic differences have long been erased. Both tests are accepted by all of the nation's colleges and universities, and both are now equally popular with students across the U.S.

Currently, both the SAT and the ACT are administered on paper, using a test booklet and an answer sheet on which the student bubbles answer choices. Essay portions are handwritten, using officially ruled paper. The day is coming, though, when students may put away their #2 pencils for good. Both the College Board and ACT, Inc. have begun testing digital versions of their exams in selected high schools and testing facilities. Though it is unlikely that students will ever be able to test from home, computer-based tests would be a welcome change from the years of answer sheet bubbling.

HOW DO THESE EXAMS FIT IN WITH DIVERSE PATHS TO COLLEGE?

Some homeschoolers seek admission to highly selective colleges; others, to less selective colleges. In addition to these two variations, some students plan to begin their college education at the community college. The importance of college entrance exams varies depending upon the student's chosen pathway to college.

Students who aspire to attend the nation's most selective colleges *must* do well on these exams. High scores and GPAs, strong extracurriculars, impressive leadership skills, well-written essays, and insightful recommendations are the norm at these institutions. Occasionally, a student who is extremely strong in all categories except the test scores will still be admitted, but this scenario is the exception rather than the rule and depends on the student's other outstanding talents.

For moderately selective or less selective universities, students do not need the stellar scores that they would need for the most selective schools, but they should still try to obtain as high a score as possible to maximize their chances of acceptance and merit scholarships.

Students who plan to begin at a community college and then transfer to a university will generally not need SAT or ACT scores to enter the community college, though this practice may vary by state. However, the four-year university *may* require scores at the time of transfer. This requirement is relatively uncommon, but it's always a good idea to check. Generally, the longer it has been since high school graduation, the less important SAT or ACT scores are, and the more important college grades are. Check the websites of potential universities to understand what is required for a transfer application.

Early on, you may not know what your student's eventual path to college will be. Thus, preparing well for these exams is a wise idea and will help keep several options open.

THE SAT EXAM

The SAT exam, offered by the College Board, is a three-to four-hour test, depending on whether the student writes the optional essay. Although the SAT can be taken at any time during high school, junior year and fall of senior year are the most common times to take the test. It is administered on approximately seven Saturdays during a typical school year, with Sunday administrations available for students who cannot test on Saturdays due to religious observances.

The test has changed format several times over the years, morphing from a two-section test with a

perfect score of 1600, to a three-section test with a perfect score of 2400. The current version, launched in 2016, has returned to a total achievable score of 1600, with an optional timed essay section. The two main sections are now Math and Evidence-Based Reading and Writing. Evidence-Based Reading and Writing is divided into two subsections: a Reading section and a Writing/Language section. The Reading section contains passages several paragraphs long representing content areas such as literature, humanities, history, science, U.S. “founding documents,” and career information. Some of the passages also contain charts, graphs, and tables. Students are asked to interpret, analyze, and use evidence to answer multiple-choice questions on these passages as well as on the data sources presented. Vocabulary is tested within the context of reading passages rather than as standalone multiple choice questions as was the case in former versions of the SAT. Additionally, the vocabulary words tested are words that are encountered in the “real world,” rather than obscure, esoteric words. The Writing/Language section asks students to read a passage containing various errors embedded in some of the sentences and to perform an editing task, as well as understanding the meanings of words in context. Logically sequencing sentences and paragraphs, interpreting information from graphs and tables, and editing a portion of the passage to make it consistent with graph information comprise several of the tasks in this section.

The Math section of the SAT includes algebra, problem solving and data analysis, advanced math (involving more complex equations and functions), and college- and career-relevant geometry and trigonometry. On some portions of the SAT, calculators are permitted; other portions are calculator-free. Additionally, most of the problems are multiple choice with four answers to choose from, but several are “grid-ins” where students must supply answers.

In the 50-minute timed essay section, students are asked to read a passage and then analyze the techniques the author uses to persuade the reader of his or her point. The student is not asked to agree or disagree with the author's position, but rather to carefully examine strategies such as use of evidence, skillful diction, logical reasoning, appeals to emotion, and other elements that help the author build and express his or her argument. The student must use specific evidence from the passage to illustrate his or her response. The essay score is separate from the rest of the SAT exam score, and is arrived at by two readers, each of whom assign a score of 1 to 4 in each of three areas: reading, analysis, and writing. These scores from the two readers are combined for a total possible score of 8 in each of the three areas. Thus, a perfect score is reported as 8/8/8. As previously mentioned, this section of the SAT exam is optional, but it is a good idea for students to take it, because some colleges and scholarship programs require or recommend it. The College Board website maintains a list of colleges' policies regarding this section.

The current version of the SAT exam also eliminates the “penalty for guessing.” Previously, wrong answers received a one-quarter point penalty in addition to not receiving a point for a correct answer. With this penalty now discontinued, students are free to take a guess even if they cannot eliminate any of the answer choices.

SAT Subject Tests™

The SAT Subject Tests are one-hour tests offered in approximately twenty subjects such as English, mathematics, world languages, science, and history. Colleges vary in the ways they use SAT Subject Tests. While some colleges require them for admission, most others simply recommend that students take them to strengthen the overall application. Subject Test scores can also be used as a guide for course selection or placement once the student enters college. Colleges requiring the Subject Tests typically ask students to take two or three different tests and may specify one or two tests in particular, leaving the other(s) to the

student's own choosing. For instance, a college may require one test in the math or science area and one in the humanities area. Check the websites of a few potential colleges during the student's freshman or sophomore year so that you can plan which subjects should receive heavier study in order to prepare for these tests.

For homeschooled applicants, colleges typically have stricter requirements regarding how many tests and which specific tests should be taken. Some colleges require more Subject Tests of homeschooled students than they require of other students. While this may not seem fair, the reasoning is that colleges desire to gain a clearer picture of the student's capabilities by asking for additional test scores. Subject Tests may also help homeschooled students clear requirements for specific subject areas on their applications to certain universities (the University of California is one such example).

If the colleges your student is considering require Subject Tests but do not stipulate specific tests, the student should choose tests in his or her areas of strength. However, try to include at least one in math or science and at least one in English, history, or a world language to show that the education was balanced. Two different mathematics exams, Level 1 and Level 2, are offered. The Level 1 exam is geared toward students who have taken two years of algebra and one year of geometry. The Level 2 exam is designed for students who have taken these courses plus precalculus and/or trigonometry. Be sure that your student takes the proper exam to fulfill the requirements of the college or university.

Subject Tests are usually taken at the end of the sophomore and/or junior year so that scores will be available for college applications in the fall of the senior year. However, freshmen may take these tests, too, and seniors often take them in the fall, as long as the score reporting dates coordinate with college application deadlines. Students should take the exams as soon as possible after completing applicable courses so that the material is fresh in their minds. Thus, one option is to take a Subject Test in May or June after finishing the course, and another is to take it after a summer of additional study. World language tests should be taken after at least two years of language study. One, two, or three Subject Tests may be taken on a given test day, but the Subject Tests may not be taken on the same day as the full-length SAT exam.

Scoring of Subject Tests is similar to that of a single section of the main SAT exam, with a perfect score being 800. Preparatory books are useful as students study for Subject Tests. *The Official Study Guide for All SAT Subject Tests™*, published by the College Board, is one such book, but many others are available from publishers such as Kaplan® or The Princeton Review®.

SAT Exam Registration

While traditionally schooled students receive SAT exam information and reminders from their guidance counselors, homeschooled students must be more proactive. However, it is easy to sign up for these tests online. Just be sure to register on the College Board website at least four or five weeks before the test date. Late registration is also available, at a higher fee. Registration involves choosing the appropriate test and date, selecting a test center at a local high school, and entering the student's high school code number. If you belong to a homeschool program with its own code number, you may use this code to identify your student as a privately educated student. If not, use the homeschool code which the College Board includes among its listing of high schools. At the time of this writing, the code is 970000, but check the website to confirm. Scores from the exam will be available online. If you wish to receive a paper copy in the mail, you must request this option at the time of registration.

Registration steps also include uploading a photo of the student to assure proper identification on test day (the student will need to bring a photo ID on the day of the test). An optional step during

registration involves answering questions about the student's college and career goals. This will prompt colleges and scholarship programs to send informational material to the student. Additionally, students who have been pre-approved by the College Board for special accommodations on test day due to learning differences or other factors will enter information they have previously received from the College Board. If your student needs accommodations, check into these arrangements well before the test registration deadline; approval takes about seven weeks. Types of accommodations offered include extended test time, use of a computer for the essay, extra breaks, small group or private room setting, multiple day testing, and several other options, depending on the student's needs.

After paying for the test registration, your student will receive an admission ticket which must be printed and brought to the test center on examination day. Be sure that you know how to get to the test center, where to park, and how much time to allow for the whole trip. In addition to bringing the admission ticket, your student should bring the items listed on the ticket: photo ID (absolutely essential), #2 pencils, an approved calculator, and any other items noted.

Score Reports

Scores are posted on the College Board website three or four weeks after the test date. Additionally, students may designate several colleges to which the College Board will send the scores. If this designation is done at the time of registration and testing (within about a week after the test), reports are free of charge for the first four colleges. If it is done at any subsequent time, or for more than four colleges, you will pay a reporting fee for each college. Eventually, the scores must be sent to all the colleges to which the student applies, but it is fine to wait until the student has settled firmly on a "preferred" list of colleges. When it comes time to report scores for college applications, remember that it takes three to five weeks from the test date for colleges to receive them (approximately three weeks for scoring, plus one or two weeks for the College Board to send scores and for colleges to receive them and process them into the student's file). Rush reporting is available for an additional fee. If desired, the student may use Score Choice™ to select scores from particular testing dates to send to colleges, thus omitting from the report any test dates that yielded lower scores.

The score report provided by the College Board offers several useful features to help students who plan to take the test again. Students can find out how many questions they answered correctly, answered incorrectly, or left blank for each test section and whether the questions were classified as easy, medium, or difficult. Subscores in specific task areas are also reported; these can be helpful in understanding which areas need more study and preparation. Students may also view a copy of the essay they wrote for the timed essay section.

THE PSAT/NMSQT® EXAM

The PSAT/NMSQT, administered each October, is an optional test that can be taken by high school sophomores or juniors to prepare for the actual SAT exam. Officially, the test is called the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test when it is taken during the junior year. The College Board and the National Merit® Scholarship Corporation cosponsor the test to provide practice for the SAT exam and to establish eligibility for the National Merit Scholarship program.

Like the SAT exam, the PSAT/NMSQT measures reading, math, and writing/language skills (however, there is no essay). Students who take the test can discover where their strengths and weaknesses lie as they continue to prepare for the SAT exam. With the 2016 revision of the SAT, the PSAT/NMSQT also

changed, including rolling out a separate version for tenth graders, called PSAT 10 to distinguish it from the PSAT/NMSQT for juniors. A PSAT 8/9 is also available for even younger students.

The PSAT/NMSQT exam is only one of many tools for preparing for the SAT exam, since a student can also take practice SAT exams at home before tackling the real exam. The most pertinent feature of this exam for high-achieving students is its role as the qualifier for the National Merit Scholarship. Although the test may be taken during any year of high school, only the junior year (eleventh grade) scores will qualify the student for the National Merit Scholarship program.

If students advance to Semifinalist status in the National Merit competition, they will be notified in September of their senior year. Finalists are notified in February, and winners are notified in March and April. Scholarships are sponsored by corporations, colleges, and the National Merit organization itself. See Chapter 26 for more information on the National Merit Scholarship program.

Registration

Unlike the SAT exam, for which online registration is simple, the PSAT/NMSQT exam has a school-based registration process. Instructions for homeschoolers are available on the College Board website and involve contacting a local high school well in advance of the registration deadline to find out how, when, and where to sign up. Since the test is administered in October, contact the school's principal or guidance counselor no later than June (at least four months before the test) to make sure that administrators will accommodate your student in the fall. Then check back, sign up, and pay the test fee before the deadline. A public or private homeschool independent study program in your community may also offer the PSAT/NMSQT exam, providing an even easier option for some families.

When registering for the PSAT/NMSQT exam, you will also use a specific homeschool code in place of the high school code. State-specific codes are available on the College Board website and are *not* the same codes used for the SAT or ACT. If the student advances in the National Merit Scholarship competition, a packet of Semifinalist information will be sent to the high school principal—in this case, the homeschool parent. For this reason, you should avoid using the code number of the brick and mortar high school where your student takes the test, since the Semifinalist information may not find its way to you when it arrives at the high school office.

Score Report

The total achievable score for the PSAT/NMSQT is 1520, based on a maximum of 760 in each of the two sections, Math and Evidence-Based Reading and Writing. Score reports contain overall section scores as well as subscores and “cross-test scores” to demonstrate analysis skills in history/social studies and in science (even though there is no specific science section). The PSAT/NMSQT scoring is structured to roughly predict the student's SAT score. Since the SAT is more difficult, the PSAT/NMSQT scoring has a maximum of 1520 rather than the SAT's top score of 1600. Theoretically, then, a score of 1400 on the PSAT/NMSQT approximates a score of 1400 on the SAT if the SAT had been taken that day. Presumably, by the time a student actually takes the SAT, he or she will score even higher, since several months of additional learning will have taken place.

Another feature of the score report is information on how the student is doing on “benchmarks” that indicate strength of various academic skills, as well as projection of these skills onto future performance on the SAT and suggestions of which AP courses might be a good fit for the student.

Additionally, the PSAT/NMSQT score report includes a “Selection Index,” used as a qualification

for the National Merit Scholarship competition. Cutoffs for Semifinalist status vary by state. For full information, check out both the College Board website and the National Merit Scholarship Corporation website for information on eligibility, awards, and definitions of Commended Students, Semifinalists, Finalists, and Merit Scholars.

PSAT/NMSQT signups trigger a plethora of mailings (both postal and email), since students may opt in to the Student Search Service® to receive information from colleges and scholarship programs. So if your mail carrier is developing a bad back and your student's inbox is full, this is the reason. Taking the PSAT/NMSQT also gives your student access to a helpful profile that suggests appropriate college majors and careers.

THE ACT TEST

The ACT test, offered by ACT, Inc., is another widely used college entrance exam. In fact, in 2012, for the first time ever, the number of students taking the ACT surpassed the number taking the SAT. While a portion of this number reflects states that require all high school students, whether college bound or not, to take the ACT, the rising popularity of the ACT is well established.¹

ACT tests contain multiple-choice sections covering English, mathematics, reading, and science. In the English section, students are asked to recognize errors in grammar and usage and to choose answer responses that provide the clearest and most correct sentences. Some questions also involve understanding the main idea of a passage and assessing whether the author has made his or her idea clear.

The mathematics section presents questions in pre-algebra, elementary and intermediate algebra, coordinate, plane, and three-dimensional geometry, and trigonometry. All questions are multiple choice, and a calculator may be used on all questions.

The ACT reading section asks students to read four passages in various genres (fiction, humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences) and to answer questions relating to main ideas, vocabulary in context, details about the text, and inferences drawn from the material.

Unlike the SAT exam, the ACT includes a separate science component. In this section, rather than recalling rote scientific facts, students are asked to use reasoning skills to interpret the results of experiments described in the form of text, charts, and graphs, and also to project or predict further experimental results by interpolating or extrapolating from the charts and graphs. One section asks students to answer questions based on “conflicting viewpoints” (two or more scientists' hypotheses on a given concept or situation).

Finally, an optional 40-minute timed writing test measures students' essay writing skills by raising a controversial issue, providing brief statements illustrating three perspectives on the issue, and asking the student to choose a position and defend it with logical reasoning.

Scores are provided on the exam as a whole (composite) and also on each of the four skill sections and the optional writing section. Test scores for the four multiple-choice sections range from 1 to 36, with a national mean score of 21.² For the optional essay section, scores range from 2 to 12. In addition to the basic scores, the ACT score report provides useful information such as how the student's performance aligns with ACT College Readiness Standards™, as well as data in other reporting categories.

The ACT test is offered on six testing dates per school year and takes a little over three hours to administer, including breaks, plus another 40 minutes for the optional writing test. As with the SAT, ACT scores are accepted by all colleges and universities in the U.S.

Like the SAT exam, the ACT offers online registration, special high school codes for homeschooled,

test preparation guides, college planning advice, test tips, and free practice questions. *The Official ACT Prep Guide* is the official prep book published by the makers of the ACT, and a host of test prep companies mentioned later in this chapter also offer ACT preparation courses and materials.

Differences Between ACT and SAT Exams

While both the SAT and ACT exams are widely used for college admission, a few differences set them apart. As previously noted, the ACT includes a science section testing scientific critical thinking, while the SAT does not. In lieu of this separate science section, several groups of questions in the reading and the writing/language sections of the SAT (and, of course, in the math section) include charts, graphs, and tables, and some reading passages deal with scientific topics, so the differences between the two exams are not as marked as one might think. In fact, the 2016 revision of the SAT exam made the test more similar to the ACT than it was previously.

With both exams, the essay writing component is optional but should be taken if a particular college requires it. Early on, a student will probably not know which colleges he or she will apply to, so it is wise to plan on taking this optional essay section. The 50-minute writing task on the SAT will appeal to students strong in rhetorical analysis of an author's techniques in nonfiction, while the 40-minute ACT essay will appeal to those skilled at analyzing a complex topic and arguing for one perspective while acknowledging other valid perspectives on the issue.

The mathematics section of the SAT includes a data analysis component, while the ACT does not. As a result, the SAT is heavier on algebra and data analysis and lighter on geometry and trigonometry when compared with the ACT. For the ACT, math questions require memorization of certain common formulas, while the SAT provides these formulas at the beginning of the section. The SAT has "calculator" and "no-calculator" sections, while the ACT allows calculator use on all math questions. The SAT asks a number of questions known as "grid-ins" which require a student to fill in an answer; the ACT math section is 100% multiple choice.

Overall, the SAT presents somewhat fewer questions than does the ACT, and the total test time is longer, resulting in more time per question (approximately twenty seconds more) compared to the ACT. With the 2016 elimination of the SAT's quarter-point penalty for wrong answers, the SAT and ACT are on an equal playing field in this area.

After investing sufficient study and practice, your student might consider trying a full practice test for both exams, since some students score significantly higher on one compared to the other. Results of this practice test will guide the decision of which test to focus on. Additionally, as your student applies for scholarships, note whether SAT and/or ACT scores are required. If you are aware of this ahead of time, you can plan accordingly and have the scores available. For example, students who seek to advance from Semifinalist to Finalist level in the National Merit Scholarship competition will need to validate their PSAT/NMSQT scores with an SAT score achieved by fall of their senior year.

ACT ASPIRE™

Formerly, ACT, Inc. offered a test called PLAN®, typically taken by sophomores to prepare them for the types of questions asked on the ACT test. The PLAN has been discontinued, but ACT does offer a program called ACT Aspire, covering the same subjects and helping students in grades 3 through 8 and grades 9 through 11 build readiness for the ACT. Scores include ACT College Readiness Benchmarks in each of the exam's subject areas. Unlike the PSAT/NMSQT exam, this program is not associated with schol-

arship eligibility; additionally, it is geared toward traditional school classroom use.

SAT and ACT Test Preparation Options

Not surprisingly, parents and students can find a plethora of ways to prepare for these exams, and the main task becomes settling on appropriate preparation methods and study techniques. Test preparation classes and seminars are offered by companies such as Kaplan and The Princeton Review—everything from half-day sessions to summer residential programs. Students may also choose test preparation books or online prep courses so that they can work independently according to their own schedules.

Home-Based Preparation (Including Prep Books and Online Preparation)

Families can choose to spend much or little money preparing their students for college entrance exams. Test prep is big business, and test coaching companies charge anywhere from a few hundred dollars to thousands of dollars for preparation courses or private tutoring sessions—which, depending on the student's motivation and follow-through, sometimes yield only modest score increases. Unless you know for certain that your student needs interaction and accountability from an outside coach, the money you spend on classes could probably be saved for more interesting pursuits such as extracurricular activities in his/her area of passion. Instead, consider beginning with as many *free* test preparation options as you can find.

First, look on the websites of ACT, Inc. and the College Board for sample questions and tips, or check out test preparation books from the library (make sure these are for the current edition of the test). ACT and SAT preparation books by The Princeton Review, Kaplan, Peterson's®, Barron's®, and other popular publishers are easy to locate. Another free option for SAT prep is Khan Academy®. On this website, which partners with the College Board to provide test prep materials free of charge, students may take practice tests, view videos explaining strategies for answering questions, take diagnostic quizzes to identify strengths and weaknesses, and find other tips for the SAT. For other free or inexpensive ways to study for the college entrance exams, check out the Perfect Score Project, PrepScholar, Erik the Red, and The Critical Reader. Not surprisingly, videos on SAT and ACT advice, tactics, and techniques light up YouTube channels, providing yet another source of free test prep. Reviewing high school math textbooks, perhaps by reworking the last couple of exams in Algebra 2 and geometry, is also a worthwhile venture.

After giving the free options a try, you and your student can proceed to *inexpensive* options: buying a couple of the more promising test prep books or signing up for a modestly priced online course. For instance, ACT, Inc. offers a prep course called ACT Online Prep™, which includes personalized study plans based on an initial diagnostic test and utilizes various methods of study including games, quizzes, and study questions. The cost of this course is about \$40. ACT, Inc. also publishes a study guide titled *The Official ACT Prep Guide* and offers free sample questions on its website, ACT.org.

Numerous providers offer online test prep courses, and you will need to invest due diligence into sorting through the promised features, the prices, and the content delivery methods. Whether self-paced or rigorously scheduled, these methods may include live, interactive online courses, additional recorded content available online, user-friendly animations, online whiteboards, and other bells and whistles designed to motivate students. Be aware that some online courses (certainly not all) are little more than a higher-priced version of a test preparation book. If your student has enough self-discipline and motivation to study from a book, this type of online course will add little value to that method. Look at the delivery methods of various online courses to find one that works with your student's motivation level, learning

style, and current preparation status for the SAT or ACT exam. Features to look for include access to full-length tests (including an initial diagnostic test to spot weaknesses), scoring of these tests (the more detailed the better), short quizzes on a subset of material, personalized prep that focuses on the student's weakest skills, and solutions and explanations (not just answers) to test questions. Additionally, look for short videos that explain concepts and strategies, a large bank of practice questions, quizzes, and flash cards. For your convenience and peace of mind, investigate the availability of the instructor by email, chat, or phone, the accessibility of the course on mobile devices, logical and intuitive navigation of the course platform, and money-back guarantees.

Classroom-Based Test Preparation

Depending on your student's bent, you may never need to use more expensive test preparation modes such as classes or tutoring. Moreover, classes often do not present anything “magical” that a motivated student cannot do at home with the right materials. However, if your student needs the discipline of working with an outside teacher or enjoys the boost of a more social atmosphere, you might try a commercial course. Working with a live mentor can help identify weaknesses and boost confidence as the student prepares for the next test date.

Kaplan, The Princeton Review, and TestMasters® are a few familiar names in test preparation courses. However, new test prep companies, courses, and content delivery methods are cropping up all the time, both in brick and mortar formats and in online courses. Shorter courses tend to focus on test-taking skills and practicing with potential test questions. Longer courses work on teaching the actual content in which the student may be deficient. Since these courses can be expensive, shop carefully by asking for recommendations from friends and by reading customer reviews of courses you are considering. Look for features that can help customize the test preparation to your student's specific needs. For instance, if you are spending a great deal of money, avoid courses that are “one size fits all” and do not customize the review material to your student's abilities, needs, and timetable. A personalized analysis of your student's strengths and weaknesses will maximize his or her efforts and make study time more efficient than it would be if the student had simply plodded through a prep book without much of a plan.

Private Tutoring

Some families opt to hire a private tutor to work with the student, keying in on his or her specific weaknesses and providing moment-by-moment accountability for the strengthening of skills. Obviously, tutors are paid by the hour or by an overall “package” agreement, and the cost of this option can be quite high unless your student needs only a few focused hours. But for some students, this learning environment can be just what they need to take their test prep seriously. Ask for recommendations from friends who have used tutors, and take the time at the outset to gauge the tutor's rapport with your student.

In short, discern your student's optimum learning style as you decide on a test preparation method. As you consider the costs, the time involved, your student's inherent motivation and self-discipline, the need for accountability, and his or her preferred mode of learning (visual, auditory, or kinesthetic), you can begin to decide whether home-based preparation, commercial courses, or private tutoring will be most suitable for your student.

Test Preparation Strategies

As much as possible, try to weave SAT or ACT preparation into the high school curriculum. The best overall strategy for test preparation is to start early, even as early as ninth grade, using the following pattern:

- *Take diagnostic tests to detect weak areas*
- *Review the material, especially in weak areas*
- *Take practice tests*
- *Score tests and remediate any deficiencies*
- *Take more practice tests*

Take Diagnostic Tests

Test preparation books generally begin with a diagnostic practice test which is used to pinpoint weaknesses. After your student takes the diagnostic test, go through the results to discern which skills need the most help. Observe general trends as well as more specific deficiencies. Perhaps math is weak while reading comprehension is strong; moreover, geometry skills need the most review, while algebra skills are respectable. Knowing what to focus on will help you design strategies to raise the ACT or SAT score.

Review the Material

Following the diagnostic test, most preparation books present a large section of review material. Your student can review the entire section or simply focus on the most troublesome types of problems. You might also dig out your math, vocabulary, and grammar textbooks for a little brushing up. Whatever you do, don't ignore deficiencies that the diagnostic test has revealed—particularly if your student has completed more than one practice test with similar results. While it is tempting to dive into more practice tests without much analysis, the student will not receive the full benefit of the diagnostic test without devoting focused review to problem areas.

Take Practice Tests

After your student has addressed the most obvious deficiencies, he or she should continue working practice exams—perhaps one every few weeks, depending on how quickly the test date is approaching. Aim to have your student take five to ten full practice tests altogether.

Score Tests and Remediate Any Deficiencies

At the conclusion of each practice test, score the test and then, together, analyze the answers to understand *what types* of questions were missed, and *why*. This thorough review of the practice test is an essential step and should include returning to the instruction portion of the prep book or to appropriate textbooks to brush up on the topics that are problematic. Encourage your student not to shortchange his or her efforts by skipping this step. Without this remediation step, the same mistakes will recur on future tests. By diligently practicing the problems and understanding the errors, your student will avoid repeating these mistakes and should see a gradual increase in scores.

Take More Practice Tests

As your student addresses these weaknesses and takes more practice tests, the full picture should begin to emerge. Perhaps he or she is gaining ground in all of the test sections. Perhaps one section is showing great progress while another is still in need of review and reinforcement. In this case, the scores will lead you in the direction of future review work. Tabulating the scores of each new practice test can be motivating for some students, but if it is demoralizing, downplay the actual scores and just continue to practice the test questions. In general, scores should rise; however, it is not unusual to see some lower ones as well. Certain practice exams simply seem harder than others.

Other Strategies

Tackle Vocabulary Words

Vocabulary study is one task you should tackle with your student during the entire high school career, not just in the weeks leading up to the exam. Vocabulary is such a key part of strong reading comprehension that it should be spread evenly throughout the first three years of high school. In this way, your student will have a large repertoire of words by the end of the junior year. While the most recent SAT revisions have eliminated “esoteric” words, and while the ACT has long been strong on context clues as an aid for deciphering vocabulary, your student should still work to gain a grasp of words typically used in upper high school and college-level reading assignments. Most prep books contain lists of words and definitions that your student can study. If you obtain a vocabulary guide at the beginning of the freshman year, you can systematically assign a few words each week for the first three years of high school. Your student will learn much more after 100 weeks of consistent vocabulary study than he or she would while trying to “cram” during the five or six weeks before the exam. It goes without saying, however, that the best and most natural way to increase vocabulary is to read quality literature (both fiction and nonfiction), as well as current material such as news magazines, throughout middle school and high school.

Brush up on Grammar and Usage

For the language sections requiring the student to recognize and fix errors in sentences and paragraphs, your consistent work on organizing paragraphs, writing clear sentences, using proper grammar, and recognizing usage errors will develop useful skills. Again, these skills cannot be taught in a few weeks but must spring from a steady program of high school level writing.

Practice Essay Writing Skills

For the ACT or SAT essay section, the best preparation is a strong writing program teaching the student how to express organized thoughts and well-supported positions (think thesis, topic sentences, transitions, and evidence). Since the essays are timed, your student will need skills in rapid thinking, outlining, writing, and proofreading. In addition, a good background in literature analysis and rhetorical strategies will give the student material to use for the SAT essay when discussing how the author has utilized specific techniques to persuade the reader. Since these essays are handwritten, not typed, some students may need to practice rapid handwriting skills, including legibility—until the day comes when these exams are given via computer.

Consider Other Helpful Preparation Techniques

Several other excellent academic activities prepare students well for the SAT and ACT exams. Latin study helps students learn English vocabulary. Experience in debate emphasizes reasoning and critical thinking. Reading and discussion of classic literature provides exposure to critical analysis and advanced vocabulary. Mathematical reasoning problems and word problems prepare the student for problems that might appear on these exams. In general, a challenging academic program is the best preparation for the ACT or SAT.

When to Take the SAT or ACT

How often should your student take these exams? And when should that all-important first sitting take place? This very individual decision depends on your student's skills, educational background, and attitude toward test taking.

If your student has taken geometry and two years of algebra, displays advanced skills in the categories tested on the SAT or ACT, and views test taking as an invigorating challenge, you might have him or her take the test in ninth or tenth grade. After a few practice tests at home to get ready for the big one, your student may tackle this test head-on and come out with an excellent score. The remainder of high school can be devoted to trying to raise this score (only if this is important to the student's college ambitions). Students who view this endeavor positively, as a challenge to be taken on, are less likely to become discouraged than are students who dread the whole ordeal.

If, however, your student has not covered enough subject matter to take the college entrance exams early or would be significantly discouraged by a less-than-successful experience, feel free to wait as long as possible before testing. Although it is preferable to have the first set of scores by the end of the junior year, some students do not take the exam until fall of the senior year. Be sure to coordinate this date with college application deadlines, though. Also realize that waiting until senior year can mean missing out on opportunities to retake the exam if the student needs to raise his or her scores. You could potentially squeeze in two test dates during the fall, but this plan will not leave much time for prep in between.

Although both the SAT and ACT exams can be taken repeatedly, these exams differ in how score reports are sent for multiple test dates. For the SAT, the default is that all scores will show up on the official score report unless the student opts for Score Choice through the College Board. This feature allows students to choose which testing date(s) to use when reporting scores to colleges and is helpful to students who have some lower scores which they would prefer not to reveal. For the ACT, the student chooses which test dates to report and pays for the score report for each test date. Thus, the student can pick and choose among multiple test dates.

Years ago, many colleges evaluated students with multiple sets of scores by *averaging* all the scores. Obviously, this practice hurt students whose first attempts at the exam yielded low scores. Today, for the SAT, most colleges select the highest score ever attained in each section of the test (even from different testing dates) and record this as the official score. This is called superscoring. For example, suppose a student took the SAT in March and achieved a math score of 700, along with an Evidence-Based Reading and Writing score of 680. Then in May, the student scored 720 in Math but only 660 in Evidence-Based Reading and Writing. The superscored result would be 1400, the sum of the highest math and highest reading/writing sections, gleaned from the two different dates. Some colleges superscore only by selecting scores from the same testing date (i.e., choosing the "highest sitting"), but most colleges use the highest individual scores,

regardless of what dates they come from.

For the ACT, since the student selects which test dates to report, superscoring will come into play *if* the college practices ACT superscoring and *if* the student submits scores from multiple test dates. If your student is taking the SAT or ACT exam early, be sure you know the potential colleges' policies about multiple sets of scores. Fewer colleges superscore ACT scores as compared to SAT scores.

Some students can raise their scores quite admirably by strategic, focused study between test administrations. Others, however, find that their scores rise only insignificantly or even drop a bit on subsequent testing. A student should not take the official SAT or ACT exam more than about three times, especially if these test dates are close together. The scores will not improve much, and the student may become burned out or discouraged. If your student takes several practice tests at home and studies diligently in between, you will have a reasonable idea of whether his or her scores are on the rise.

What Is a Good Score?

The \$64,000 question about these exams is “Just what is a good score?” The answer depends on the type of college your student is aspiring to attend. A useful benchmark is the middle 50% SAT or ACT score ranges (the 25th to 75th percentile of admitted students) which colleges publicize on their websites and which can also be found in *U.S. News & World Report's* annual rankings, called *Best Colleges*, as well as on the College Board website in its college search section. This range indicates the SAT or ACT scores of the 25th percentile of admitted students all the way up to the scores of the 75th percentile. In other words, it includes the “midrange” of students—all but the lowest 25% and the top 25% of admitted students. For example, if a college's middle 50% range for the SAT is 1300 to 1460 and your student's score is 1240, the likelihood of being admitted to this college is a bit on the low side, but not impossible, because the student falls into the lowest 25% of admitted students. Likewise, a score of 1520 would put a student in good shape to be admitted. Similar information is available regarding ACT scores for the nation's colleges and universities. Of course, test scores are only one of many factors used in admission.

As a *very* general statement, scores of about 1000 on the 2016 revision of the SAT (both subject areas combined, not including the essay) are average scores and could be adequate for the least selective colleges. A score of 1100 to 1200 would put a student in the running for the next level of schools. The 1300 to 1400 range begins to open up possibilities for selective schools, and with a 1500 or so, a student would be eligible for the most selective schools, including the Ivy League universities. Of course, the higher the better, especially for the top schools and for many academic scholarships. For ACT scores, these approximate score levels would be 21 (average), 22 to 25 (somewhat more selective colleges), 26 to 31 (even more selective), and 32 to 36 (most selective). Again, these are only rough approximations and vary widely from college to college.

Many state university systems admit students based on a formula involving GPA and test scores. The higher the GPA, the lower the test scores need to be, and vice versa. Realize, though, that because some of these institutions do not officially recognize homeschool transcripts, validating the GPA may present some difficulties. Fortunately, most of these institutions have developed admissions pathways for homeschoolers and other students without traditional transcripts.

ADVANCED PLACEMENT® EXAMS

The topic of AP® courses and exams was covered fully in Chapter 12, but just as a review, these exams are based on year-long advanced courses designed to be equivalent to a first-year college course in a

given subject. The AP program has become another frequently used tool among college admissions officers to evaluate students' aptitudes for college work.

These exams are given only once a year, in early May. They are administered at local high schools, and in order not to miss out on registration, homeschoolers need to begin inquiring in January. Contact the appropriate counselor at a local high school to find out deadlines and procedures for signing up. You may also be able to register for AP exams at homeschool academy programs that offer AP exams.

With our daughter's experiences in taking her AP exams at both a public and a private high school, we did not encounter any difficulties at all; however, these procedures are district-dependent and you may have to be persistent and resourceful if you encounter resistance. If needed, seek help from AP Central® through College Board to find a testing site for your student. Stay on top of the process and make sure you know when and where to register, pay, and show up for the exams. Since school officials have so many students to deal with at their own schools, you as a homeschooler may fall through the cracks unless you keep up on deadlines and communication.

CLEP® EXAMS

The College-Level Examination Program® (CLEP) allows students of any age to demonstrate college-level achievement by testing out of undergraduate college courses. Almost 3,000 colleges nationwide grant credit and/or advanced standing for CLEP exams. Homeschoolers can benefit from the CLEP program by taking exams in their strong subjects, thus saving time and money which would have been spent taking college courses.

With the cost of each 90- to 120-minute exam under \$100, the CLEP is an attractive alternative to expensive college courses. Students who pass CLEP exams in basic college courses can move on to advanced courses, satisfy prerequisites or proficiency requirements, or use CLEP exams to help them graduate college on time if they are having difficulty registering for classes they need. CLEP exams are offered in more than 30 subjects, such as literature, freshman composition, algebra, calculus, world languages, history, government, economics, biology, chemistry, accounting, management, and business law.

Though created by the College Board, the CLEP exams are in no way related to the SAT exam as college entrance exams. They are simply another way—similar to AP exams but not as rigorous—to earn college credit for knowledge the student has gained. If your student is already planning to take an AP exam in a particular subject, he or she might consider taking a CLEP exam soon afterward, while the studying is fresh. If he or she does not score well enough to earn AP credit, the CLEP credit (if accepted by the university) may serve the same purpose. More information can be found on the College Board website.

Not all colleges grant credit for CLEP exams. Before taking CLEP exams, your student should check with the college to discover its policies about credits and the minimum passing score on the exam. Most colleges limit how many credits students can earn through CLEP, AP, or other exams, and some do not allow CLEP credit in a subject already studied in a college course. (Obviously, in that case, your student would probably seek to transfer the credits from the college course rather than take a CLEP exam.) Another important warning is that students who later intend to apply to medical, law, or graduate school should check with potential graduate schools to find out their restrictions regarding CLEP exams. Some institutions will not accept CLEP credit to fulfill course prerequisites for graduate work; instead, the course(s) must actually be taken at a college, and perhaps even at a university rather than at a community college. One additional note is that some colleges have rules and restrictions about how many science

courses can be completed with CLEP, since CLEP does not have a lab component. Some of the science work may need to be completed at the college or university.

As with the SAT or ACT exams, prep books are available for CLEP exams. The College Board publishes the *CLEP Official Study Guide* as well as guides for each individual test. These can help your student become familiar with the content covered on a particular exam.

THE GED® TEST

The GED Test (General Educational Development) is a set of tests comprising a high school equivalency exam, generally taken by older teens or adults who did not finish high school but who want the equivalent of a high school diploma. Information on the GED Test can be found at the website for the GED Testing Service®.

Administered via computer, the test measures knowledge and skills against those of traditional high school graduates and contains multiple choice, short answer, essay-based, and other question types in the areas of reading comprehension, writing, language conventions and usage, social studies, science, and mathematics through algebra and geometry. The test is aligned with high school standards and college- and career-readiness expectations.

To take the GED Test, students need to meet their state's age requirements. In some states, the minimum age is 16; in many states, it is 18. Additionally, they cannot be enrolled in high school and cannot be high school graduates. Specific rules vary from state to state, and many homeschoolers find the test to be irrelevant for reasons of age restriction or other parameters.

With respect to the use of the GED Test, much has changed for homeschoolers over the years. Colleges and universities once required homeschoolers to take the GED Test to make up for the absence of an accredited high school diploma. In fact, without passing this exam, students were not considered eligible for federal financial aid. As a result of hard work by Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), this all changed. In 1998, HSLDA drafted an amendment to the Higher Education Act which was subsequently approved by Congress, eliminating the GED Test requirement as a prerequisite for federal financial aid.³ During this same time period, homeschooled military recruits were also having trouble because of the requirement to pass this exam before enlisting in any branch of the service. Another amendment removed this requirement, and a 2006 federal law eliminated future unequal treatment of homeschoolers.⁴ Thanks to the work by HSLDA, homeschool graduates are now designated “preferred enlistees” in all four branches of the Armed Services and are treated the same as traditional high school graduates.

HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY EXAMS

Some states offer exams which, like the GED Test, are designed to certify equivalency to a high school diploma. Two of these tests include the TASC Test Assessing Secondary Completion™, developed by ETS, and the HiSET® exam, developed by McGraw-Hill. While they still cover the basics of reading, mathematics, social studies, science, and writing, these tests are less expensive and more widely available than the GED Test. Students who pass these tests receive a high school equivalency certificate issued by their state. Similarly, students in California may take the CHSPE (California High School Proficiency Exam), a test that assesses proficiency in language arts, writing, and mathematical skills at the high school level. States that offer these tests may provide them instead of or in addition to the GED Test, so be sure you understand which tests are being used in your state. Also check on age and residency requirements. As

with the GED Test, preparation materials for these exams are widely available in the form of books, online courses, and other online help.

If your state offers such an exam, and if students are allowed to take it at a younger age (16 or 17 instead of 18), homeschoolers may use the test in a variety of ways. Some homeschool academy programs may require students to pass this test before graduation. Other families use it to show that their students have met the state educational requirements. Still others utilize it as an aid to enrolling in community college classes, especially when limitations would normally apply because of the student's age. If the student has passed the exam offering equivalency to a high school diploma, the community college must accept him or her as a college student. Of course, your homeschooler may choose to continue high school studies even after passing the exam.

Prior to your student taking and passing a high school equivalency exam or the GED Test, think carefully about how you will use this information. Will you consider your student a high school graduate, completely finished with homeschooling and ready to move on to college? Or will your student continue to take high school courses as if he or she had never passed the exam? Is there a chance that your student will lose motivation for further high school studies after receiving this certificate? Will the fact that your student has passed this exam impact any important aspects of courses, college applications, or extracurricular activities? For instance, will a four-year university consider your student a transfer applicant rather than a freshman applicant if community college courses were taken after passing the equivalency exam? Or will your student be disqualified from participation in certain competitive extracurriculars? Mathematics competitions or national homeschool speech and debate associations may stipulate that participants must be high school students, and passing an equivalency exam may impact this qualification. It is wise to check on these matters ahead of time.

STATE STANDARDIZED TESTS

Some homeschooling parents regularly have their students take grade-level standardized tests such as the Stanford Achievement Test, the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills®, the TerraNova® Tests and Assessments, state-specific standardized tests, or other tests used in their region. Certain states require this testing, and some homeschooling parents appreciate the chance to assess their students' progress. Many homeschoolers, on the other hand, enjoy exercising their freedom *from* standardized tests. If you typically opt for such tests, you may wonder whether your student should continue taking them throughout high school. Your decision depends on your reasons for doing the testing.

If your student is not yet ready for the SAT or ACT exams, but you would like an annual benchmark of progress and continued exposure to the formal standardized test environment, feel free to have your student continue to take these tests. You may find additional practical use for the scores if you need documentation of readiness for a community college course. For instance, if your student wants to take a math class and you can provide the community college with high math test scores and a grade report from the prerequisite course, these items may be all the college needs to approve your student's enrollment.

If your student is ready to try the PSAT/NMSQT, the SAT, or the ACT early in high school, you may choose to let your student prioritize test preparation for these exams rather than continuing the grade level tests. An exception, of course, would be if your state or homeschool program requires homeschoolers to take yearly standardized tests.

COLLEGE-BASED TESTS

Some universities require admitted students to take writing proficiency exams or placement exams in math or in languages other than English (sometimes called assessments) prior to registration. These exams assess the student's skills in order to place him or her into the appropriate course at the college. During the application process, be aware of what exams will be required so that your student can decide whether he or she will need to invest any prep time for them. It is possible that some of these tests can be taken ahead of time if they are available locally or online. They may also be part of the freshman orientation your student will attend during the summer or just before beginning classes. Once your student has committed to attend the university, check out the requirements and dates for these exams.

More pertinent to the day-to-day life of a homeschooler are placement or assessment exams at the community college. For certain courses (often math and English, sometimes science), students need to take a placement exam before being allowed to register for a particular course. Schedules of placement exams are posted on the college website in the weeks before each new term begins, and students typically have several different dates and times to choose from. Rules will vary as to whether retakes are allowed and whether other methods (such as scores on Advanced Placement exams) can be used to challenge the assessment process. The community college website or admissions office will likely offer suggestions for preparation books or online review material.

TEST-TAKING STRATEGIES

Entire books have been written about test-taking strategies or “how to crack” the SAT or ACT exams. Without duplicating information you can find elsewhere, here are a few thoughts and tips to get you going in the right direction. Because the student, not the parent, will be taking the exam, this section is addressed to the student.

General Tips for All Tests

Before the test:

- As you complete practice tests, always learn from your mistakes by consulting the answer key and understanding *why* you missed what you missed.
- Become accustomed to the time limits on the various sections of the test and follow them to the minute when practicing. During practice tests, if you run out of time, mark the point at which the time was up and use only those answers to calculate your score. Then continue answering the rest of the questions, so that you can benefit from all available practice questions.
- Be sure you understand the general test directions before the test day. Preview the latest instructions from the College Board or ACT website, not necessarily from your prep book, which might be outdated.
- Before registering, make sure you have a proper photo ID. If you don't have a driver's license or government-issued ID, find out *ahead of time* what is an acceptable form of ID.
- Understand which calculator types are allowed and which are prohibited. If the calculator you own is prohibited, seek to borrow one from a friend or family member before the test.
- Pay *serious* attention to lists of prohibited items (phones, cameras, tablets, etc.) as explained on the College Board or ACT website. For instance, the use of a cell phone, even during breaks, can result in cancellation of your scores.

- Be aware that the directions for some of the SAT Subject Tests vary, depending on the subject. Language tests have a listening segment with specific types of audio equipment required.
- Prepare all your materials the night before: pencils, admission ticket, photo ID, approved calculator, snack, and other required or acceptable materials.
- Get a good night's sleep before the test, and eat a nutritious but not overly heavy breakfast. Bring a healthy snack to eat during your break.
- Arrive at the testing center early, building in a margin of time for traffic problems. Remember that parking the car, locating the proper room, and checking in will all take time.

During the test:

- Become familiar with the answer sheet. Answer your questions in the proper section and column of the answer sheet. Mark the answer bubbles clearly, make no stray marks on the sheet, and completely erase any answers you change. Usually you may do scratch work in the test book and transfer your final answer to the answer sheet, but understand the rules on this.
- Don't panic if you encounter difficult questions. You are not expected to know all the answers in order to get a good score. Keep going!
- If you are stumped on certain questions, try to reason out the answer using common sense. Often you can figure them out, even with limited information.
- Watch your time. Answer the easiest questions first, coming back to the more difficult ones as time permits. To save time later, mark the questions you want to come back to, and cross off the answer choices you have already eliminated.
- Especially if you are skipping questions, pay attention to where you are on the answer sheet and avoid getting off track in marking the answers. After every few problems, compare the question number to the number on the answer sheet.
- Don't spend too much time on any one reading passage or question, since all questions are of equal value.
- After reading a question, anticipate the possible answer before looking at the choices.
- Be sure you are answering the question that is actually being asked. Don't be tricked into providing a partial or preliminary answer.
- Utilize every ounce of your focus, confidence and effort. Put 100% into taking the test, and don't slack off or become discouraged, even though the session is long and grueling.
- Check your work if you finish before time is called. In particular, make certain you have marked answers in the proper place.

Tips for Reading Sections

- As you read the passages, mark words or phrases which may be important and look for main ideas, author's tone, comparisons, contrasts, symbols, and author techniques. This alertness will help you focus on the passage so you don't have to reread it.
- Beware of words such as "always" or "never," which are often a red flag that this particular multiple choice answer may be invalid.
- Look for shades of meaning among vocabulary words, to distinguish between a good answer and the best answer.

Tips for Mathematics Sections

- Do your work on scratch paper (usually the test booklet itself). It is a mistake to try to keep all the calculations in your head as you work the problem.
- Read the questions carefully. Don't rashly assume that you know what the question is asking for. Some questions are worded very specifically to elicit the correct answer, which may *not* be the answer you choose after only a superficial reading.
- Check to see that your numerical answer sounds reasonable in the context of the question. If it appears that you are off by a factor of ten or one hundred, go back and look again.
- Use good judgment on when to use a calculator. Some problems can be solved more quickly with common sense solutions than with elaborate calculations.
- Make use of the list of formulas given at the beginning of the SAT mathematics section.
- Don't hesitate to draw a diagram of the problem to help you visualize it.
- Avoid solving problems by working backward from the multiple-choice answers given. This is time consuming. Instead, try to solve the problem and then check to see what answers are given.

Tips for Science Sections

- As with other sections, do plenty of practice tests so that you are comfortable with the format of the section and the types of information and questions you will encounter.
- Bear in mind that you do not need a tremendous amount of specific science knowledge, and in particular, you do not need to memorize formulas and facts. Nearly all the information you need is provided in the description of the experiment and in the graphs and tables accompanying it. You may need knowledge of a couple of general scientific principles to go along with this information.
- Keep track of the units and scales being used on the graphs; these will figure into the answer you choose.
- Stay calm, stay on your toes, and simply use your skills of careful reading, critical reasoning, and observation of trends in charts, graphs, and tables.
- Sometimes the answers are easier and more obvious than you might expect. Avoid over-thinking.
- One section of the science test asks you to consider two or more scientists' viewpoints or hypotheses on a certain observation or experiment. As you read their viewpoints, mark key ideas and terminology so that you can quickly come back and compare these without rereading the entire description.

Tips for Timed Essays

- Practice as many essays as you have time for. Make sure you go into the test having written at least six or seven of these timed essays.
- Find a teacher or mentor to evaluate your essays and give them approximate scores.
- In addition to writing full essays for practice, work with a multitude of possible prompts ahead of time, making brief notes about main points and outlining specific examples or reasoning that could be used.
- Understand the writing task objectives and guidelines before going into the test so that you don't waste precious time reading the directions. The instructions are standardized; only the topics change.

- Read the prompt and/or passage carefully and then quickly outline your essay, noting the stand you will take on the issue, the main points you will make, and the examples or illustrations you will use.
- Planning the essay is the hardest but most important task. If you can increase your skills and speed here, you will have an easier time with the actual writing.
- *Always* support your main point with specific examples and strong reasoning, not generalities.
- Try to write as much as you can. Studies have shown that higher scores correlate well with longer essays.
- Write legibly. If your handwriting is normally very difficult to read, devote some focused practice to rapid, legible cursive or printing.
- Save at least two minutes at the end to revise and proofread your essay.

TO SUM UP

SAT, ACT, CLEP, AP, GED, PSAT/NMSQT—the alphabet soup of standardized tests can appear shrouded in stress-producing mystery. By visiting the websites of these test makers early and often, college bound students can become familiar with what they will be up against during the last half of high school. From there, they can gather useful information that will translate to a fruitful season of test preparation.

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Homeschooled and Headed for College: Your Road Map for a Successful Journey.

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