# SAT or ACT? *The 5-Minute Decision Guide*

Nearly every U.S. college accepts both tests equally, so the right test is simply the one where your student scores higher. Two quick steps will tell you which one that is.

## 1 Which test fits your student?

For each row, check the description that sounds more like your student. Go with your first instinct.

| | A | B |
|---|---|---|
| **Pace** | ☐ Does their best work with a little extra time to think | ☐ Works quickly and stays accurate under time pressure |
| **School** | ☐ Picks things up quickly; strong at logic and tricky reasoning | ☐ Earns grades through steady effort, organization, and follow-through |
| **Reading** | ☐ Prefers short, dense passages with one question each | ☐ Comfortable with longer passages and keeping track of the big picture |
| **Grammar** | ☐ Reads very closely and catches subtle differences in wording | ☐ Knows a wide range of rules, including tone, concision, and sentence order |
| **Math content** | ☐ Strongest in algebra and Algebra 2 | ☐ Solid across many topics, including geometry and trigonometry |
| **Math style** | ☐ Enjoys word problems where the path isn't obvious at first | ☐ Likes problems that are straightforward once you know the concept |
| **When stuck** | ☐ Looks for a clever shortcut or a different angle | ☐ Works carefully through the method they know |
| **Test format** | ☐ Fine with a digital test that adapts to how they're doing | ☐ Prefers a fixed, predictable test, with the option of paper |

**Count the checks:** **A's** _____ **B's** _____

### 6–8 A's
Lean toward the SAT. Confirm it with Step 2.

### 5–3 or 4–4 split
A toss-up. Either test can work, so Step 2 decides.

### 6–8 B's
Lean toward the ACT. Confirm it with Step 2.

## The two tests at a glance

| | SAT | ACT |
|---|---|---|
| **Length** | 2 hr 14 min | 2 hr 5 min (plus 40 min if taking optional Science) |
| **Time per question** | About 71 sec (Reading & Writing), 95 sec (Math) | About 42 sec (English), 67 sec (Math and Reading) |
| **Format** | Digital only, adaptive (Bluebook app) | Paper or online, not adaptive |
| **Calculator** | Entire Math section, Desmos built in | Entire Math section, Desmos built in online |
| **Scoring** | 400–1600 | 1–36 composite of English, Math, and Reading |

Science is optional on the ACT and no longer counts toward the composite, so it shouldn't drive your choice unless a college on your list asks for it. Formats as of September 2026; confirm details at collegeboard.org and act.org.

# 2 Let the scores decide

The quiz points you in a direction. A practice test of each confirms it. Plenty of students who "sound like" SAT test-takers end up scoring higher on the ACT, and the reverse.

### 01
**Take one of each**

A full-length, timed official practice test for each. Both are free; just follow these links to find them:

SAT: Download Bluebook ↗

ACT: Free practice tests ↗

### 02
**Keep it realistic**

Separate days, one sitting each, phone in another room, only the scheduled breaks.

### 03
**Convert and compare**

Find the SAT score in the table to get its ACT equivalent, then compare it to the ACT score.

## The decision rule

1. **2 or more ACT points apart?** Go with the stronger test.
2. **Less than 2 points apart?** It's a toss-up. Go with the quiz result and whichever test dates fit your student's calendar.

**Example:** SAT practice score of 1210 converts to an ACT 25. ACT practice score is 27. That's a 2-point gap, so this student should focus on the ACT.

## Your student's results

SAT practice score _____

ACT equivalent (from table) _____

ACT practice score _____

Difference in ACT points _____

*A Teacher's Note:* Once you pick a test, commit to it. Splitting prep time between the SAT and the ACT almost always costs more points than choosing the "wrong" one.

## SAT to ACT concordance

Find the SAT range that includes your student's score.

| SAT | ACT | SAT | ACT |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1570–1600 | 36 | 1100–1120 | 22 |
| 1530–1560 | 35 | 1060–1090 | 21 |
| 1490–1520 | 34 | 1030–1050 | 20 |
| 1450–1480 | 33 | 990–1020 | 19 |
| 1420–1440 | 32 | 960–980 | 18 |
| 1390–1410 | 31 | 920–950 | 17 |
| 1360–1380 | 30 | 880–910 | 16 |
| 1330–1350 | 29 | 830–870 | 15 |
| 1300–1320 | 28 | 780–820 | 14 |
| 1260–1290 | 27 | 730–770 | 13 |
| 1230–1250 | 26 | 690–720 | 12 |
| 1200–1220 | 25 | 650–680 | 11 |
| 1160–1190 | 24 | 620–640 | 10 |
| 1130–1150 | 23 | 590–610 | 9 |

Based on the 2018 ACT/SAT Concordance Tables published by College Board and ACT, the most recent official version. Treat conversions as estimates.

## Have both scores? Let's read them together.

Book a free consultation and bring both practice-test scores. I'll tell you which test to focus on, how much room there is to grow, and what a realistic plan looks like. No pressure, no hard sell.

**1090 → 1260** +170 TOTAL

**1200 → 1310** +110 TOTAL

**680 → 730** +50 MATH

**Book your free consultation**

tutoringbymatt.com/contact

Recent student results on the August 2026 SAT · **10+ years** and **1,500+ hours** of tutoring · Johns Hopkins & Colgate graduate · **5.0★** on Google and Wyzant

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