

ACT TIPS

General Information

The entire test is multiple-choice with four possible answers for each question (the Mathematics section has five answer choices). You are scored from 1-36. You receive a score for each subject and an overall composite score, which is the average of the subject test scores. It is a timed test, and you have approximately three hours (175 minutes) for the entire exam. The required portion is divided into the following four subject tests in the following order: English, Mathematics, Reading, and Science Reasoning. There is a Writing section that is newer and is not required. This score does not affect your composite score. The English, Mathematics, and Reading tests have subscores from 1-18 so that you can review your strengths and weaknesses in each subject. You are scored from 2-18 on the Writing test and also receive a combined English and Writing score of 1-36. There also are essay comments from scorers. There may be a shorter experimental section as well, which helps determine future ACT questions. This does not count toward your final score, but you should do your best. (Note that the ACT is the primary test accepted in the Midwest, but the SAT is primarily accepted on the east and west coasts. See the map at the following site:

<http://nz.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20070809072025AA3Mk8r&show=7.>)

| Section | Number of Questions | Time (Minutes) | Average Score | Content |
|-----------------------|---------------------|----------------|---------------|---|
| English | 75 | 45 | 20.6 | usage/mechanics and rhetorical skills |
| Mathematics | 60 | 60 | 20.8 | pre-algebra, elementary algebra, intermediate algebra, coordinate geometry, geometry, and elementary trigonometry |
| Reading | 40 | 35 | 21.4 | reading comprehension |
| Science | 40 | 35 | 20.9 | interpretation, analysis, evaluation, reasoning, and problem-solving |
| Optional Writing Test | 1 essay prompt | 30 | 7.7 | writing skills |

* Information in the General Information paragraph and the chart above is taken from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ACT_test.

General Tips

- All questions are worth the same amount of points. Answer the easier or shorter/less time consuming questions first.

- You are not penalized for questions you answer incorrectly (points are not deducted). This is why it is so important that you make a guess for EACH question. You are scored on the number of questions you get right.
 - ACT: Answer every question, even if you have no idea. There is no penalty for getting them wrong or for leaving them blank. Your raw score is calculated by just adding the number you got right.
(<http://nz.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20070809072025AA3Mk8r&show=7>)
 - SAT: your raw score is the number you get right MINUS 1/4 the number you get wrong. This is (in theory) to correct for random guessing. But there's no penalty for leaving answers blank, you just don't get any points for than answer—blank answers are not “wrong”. And, yes, if you can narrow each one you guess on down to 2 or even 3 choices, it's better to guess, because then your odds of getting it right are higher than the risk of 1/4th of a point.
(<http://nz.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20070809072025AA3Mk8r&show=7>)
- Mark a minus sign next to questions you do not think you know the answer to or that are time consuming. You can come back to them at the end.
- Mark a plus sign or circle questions that you feel you can answer but that will take more time to answer. You can come back to these questions later.
- Or, write a checkmark next to any answer to which you need to return. Whatever marking you make, ensure that it is large enough to notice and that you know what it means.
- Be sure that when the moderator says that there are only a few minutes left, you start filling in the remaining blank ovals with a guess -- even if you do not have time to read the question thoroughly or to make an educated guess. **DO NOT** leave any blank answers.
- Write **ALL** over the test booklet! Circle, underline, make notes, etc. Do whatever you need to do to get the answer!
- **CROSS OUT** answers that you can eliminate. If you can erase two incorrect answers, you have a 50-50 chance of selecting the correct answer. This improves your odds dramatically!
- The ACT tests your general knowledge and information you have retained, but it also tests your reasoning skills. You do not necessarily need to have facts memorized to answer a question correctly. There are often hints in the question itself that can help you eliminate incorrect responses.
- For science or reading passages, read the questions associated with that passage first. This helps you focus your reading since you have to read very quickly.
- Study the question and make an educated guess before you even look at the answers. Most times, the answer you think up is among the choices or it is similar to the answer choices. If you look at the answers before reading the question, your thoughts can be swayed toward a certain answer, or you might try to make a certain answer fit. (It is ok to read the questions associated with passages first.)
- **GO WITH YOUR FIRST INSTINCT!** Do not try to reason your way out of each response. There is only **ONE** correct answer.
- Blacken all ovals completely, and erase all incorrect markings completely. You do not want to be penalized for not filling in an oval completely, even if you have selected the correct answer. **DO NOT** make stray marks on your answer sheet.
- Practice, practice, practice! Purchase or borrow ACT prep booklets from the UB office, and try out sample problems. Practicing will not be as helpful if you do not time yourself. Pretend you are in a real test situation and test in a quiet location. Time limits make most students nervous, so to get used to this pressure situation, and time yourself!
- There are thousands of online resources for ACT prep. You can practice during Saturday sessions, after school, or at home or in a library. Perform a Google search for ACT prep, or go to the websites listed below (and countless others) to find practice questions, tips, and tricks. Go through as many questions as you can a day.
 - <http://www.actstudent.org/>
 - <http://www.act-sat-prep.com/>
 - <http://ghsweb.k12.ar.us/counselors/testprep.htm> (other links included on this site)
 - www.actstudent.org

- Do NOT risk cheating. Your exam will be taken away and you will receive no score. You have numerous opportunities to take the exam, so do not blow it by trying to cheat once. Nobody wants to retake a three-hour exam.
- Ensure that you get at least eight hours of sleep. Do NOT stay up late or go out the night before. Relax and watch a movie, or do something fun to ease your mind. Cramming in practice questions will only stress you out, especially for each answer you do not immediately answer correctly.
- EAT BREAKFAST! Protein helps ease hunger pangs. You will be testing from approximately 8:00 to noon in most cases, which is a long time without a snack. You are not allowed to leave early, even if you finish your exam early, so eat breakfast. Your brain cannot warm up to full speed without food.
- You can also warm up your brain before the test by reading part of the newspaper during breakfast. Or, read a magazine, book, or something to get you used to reading early in the morning since you will be reading quickly for around three hours. Read something that will be well-written to improve your ear for grammatically correct prose.
- Months before the exam, read a little each day of a newspaper or novel. These represent examples of edited text and proper grammar usage. The ACT will be testing your knowledge of this and will help with your reading comprehension. You should be reading a bit a day anyway! (Note that blogs and websites may not be good examples of proper grammar.)
- Use the ENTIRE time for your test. Even if you think you have answered all questions, you should check your answers. It would be terrible if you accidentally were off a line and marked ALL of your answers one row off! You can also use extra time to go back to questions you marked that gave you some trouble.
- Pace yourself. Do not rush but do not spend more than a minute per question. If you do not know an answer, make a guess and move on. You can change it later. Try to answer as many questions you know you can answer first. If you are weak in geometry, save those questions until the end, and focus on algebra, for example. Often, there are more questions per section than minutes per section so WATCH your pace.
- Wear a watch and watch the clock! Pay attention to the times the moderator writes on the board (or announces), and adjust your pace accordingly.
- Ensure that you have all supplies. The moderator will provide you with blank scratch paper. Make sure that you have three sharpened number 2 pencils with good erasers. If you have to get up during the test to get a pencil, your concentration will be broken. In addition, double-check to ensure that you have your calculator with you so you do not panic right before or during the test (even though you don't technically need a calculator).
- Brush up on relaxation techniques. Breathe deeply right before or during the exam to calm your nerves. One way to accomplish this is by breathing in deeply through your nose and exhaling through your mouth several times.
- Consider signing up for the ACT toward the end of your junior year. You can always retake the test even several times to try to improve your score. If you get a decent score, congratulations, you're finished and you have one less thing to worry about during your senior year! You also have a better idea of what schools you can apply to or what types of scholarships you could receive. (Note that some college programs require a certain score on the ACT. For example, teachers often have to have an Act score of 20 – 22 to be admitted into the school's College of Education.) You can retake the exam during college if you need to improve your score, but it is better to do this in high school when the information is fresh in your mind. You are eligible for more scholarships the higher your score gets! If you take the test at the end of your junior year, you will know what the test is like and will be less nervous and better at retaking it should you choose to do so. And, you can even practice over the summer! Some schools sponsor ACT prep classes that are often taught during the summer, so you might consider taking advantage of those. They usually are provided for a fee. In the fall of your senior year, the information will be fresh again and you may have learned more math or other skills, so consider taking the test again. Taking the test more than once is not fun, but it will not hurt! Even if your score drops or remains stagnant, you did not lose anything, and at least you know you tried your best. Remember, your highest score always counts.

- If you are doing poorly in school in one of the core subject areas, get tutoring! Stay after school for extra help. Often, grades and success in school can help determine your success on the ACT.

English (Sentence Structure) Section Information and Tips

This is the first section and is 45 minutes in length and has 75 questions. It covers usage, mechanics, and rhetorical (the ability to use language effectively and the use of literary devices) skills. Several passages are included with various underlined portions, ranging from whole sentences, to phrases in sentences, to a single word. Most questions will contain a response of NO CHANGE as the A (first) selection. This means that the underlined sentence or sentence portion is correct the way it is written. The other three responses offer alternatives to the underlined portion. You need to determine if the underlined portion is correct as is or if it needs to be modified and then you must select the best alternative. There will be a few questions regarding the order of sentences in a paragraph or paragraphs in a passage and if they are in the most logical order, and there may be a question regarding tone (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ACT_test).

- The most common types of grammatical errors are verb/subject agreement, plural versus possessive, apostrophe errors, sentence structure errors, awkwardness, verbosity, redundancy, and the incorrect use of idioms (www.petersons.com/testprep/tips).
- Common sentence structure errors are sentence fragments, run-on sentences, misplaced modifiers, and lack of parallelism (from Barron's How to Prepare for the ACT, p. 99).
- There may be up to EIGHT (this is an estimate) questions in the grammar section that have to do with redundancy. If a sentence appears to be verbose or sound awkward, it probably is. You want the response that is the most clear, concise, or to the point.
- Note that some passages are anecdotes or narratives written in an informal or first-person point of view. Some questions want you to select the best answer not based on grammatical correctness but on general flow and how the underlined portion fits (or does not fit) with the rest of the passage. Consider style and tone of the whole passage. (Getting Into the ACT, p. 60)

Mathematics Section Information and Tips

The second section is 60 minutes long with sixty math questions. A bit over half the test covers algebra. The rest is over geometry, such as area, plane geometry, coordinates, and basic trigonometry (SIN/COS). You may use an appropriate calculator ONLY during this section. This section has five answer choices instead of four. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ACT_test)

- Remember that NONE of the math questions require the use of a calculator to be solved. If a calculator makes you feel more comfortable, bring one you have used before and one you feel comfortable using. Ensure that it works properly.
- Note that mathematic diagrams may not be drawn to scale. Do not assume that because an angle appears smaller than another that it is, etc. Use mathematic reasoning to determine the answer – do not guess by studying the diagram.
- While diagrams may not be drawn to scale, you can assume as fact that geometric figures lie in a plane and that the word *line* means a straight line.
- Ensure that you have the correct type of calculator. Graphing and advanced scientific calculators are unnecessary but are allowed. View the types of calculators you can use at www.actstudent.org. Generally, a four function calculator is acceptable. Your text will be taken away and you will receive a zero score if you attempt to use a prohibited calculator.
- When you study the question, think about if the answer is positive, negative, a fraction or decimal, etc. Immediately remove answers that do not fit these criteria.

Reading (Comprehension) Section Information and Tips

This section is 35 minutes long and contains 40 questions that measure your reading comprehension skills. Several passages are included from books, journals, or magazines. Some are fictional, and some

are factual. The following topics may be included: history, economics, psychology, politics, anthropology, art, music, biology, chemistry, physics, or others. Basically, the passages can be about almost anything and can be a bit dry or boring. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ACT_test)

- Study the main verb or verbs in the question. If you are to *compare*, *contrast*, or *define*, then be sure that your response aligns with that verbiage.
- For any questions regarding vocabulary, think about root words or if the word sounds positive or negative in connotation. For example, the word *harsh* actually sounds harsh when it is spoken, as opposed to the word *airy*. (Vocabulary, synonyms, and analogy words applied to the SAT only, but analogies were removed in 1995. The following is an example of a simple analogy is: *shoe is to foot as key is to lock*).

Science Reasoning Section Information and Tips

This section is also 35 minutes long and contains 40 questions, so you have less than a minute per question. There are seven passages followed by approximately five questions for each passage. The passages involve data analysis, research summarization, and conflicting viewpoints. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ACT_test)

- Remember that in the science passages, the paragraph, diagram, or chart, graph, or table contains all of the information you need to know to answer the question. Just calm your mind and think. The answer is there for you.
- There is no specific Social Studies or History section on the ACT, but those topics can be covered briefly in the Reading section.

Writing Section Information and Tips

The Writing section is optional and occurs at the end of the exam. It is 30 minutes long. You must respond to a prompt regarding a social issue that is applicable to high school students. It is scored by two people. You must use a number 2 pencil and make it legible and on-topic. The scores are combined. A third reader is involved if the two scores vary by more than one point. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ACT_test)

- You do not have to follow a specific essay format, but the FPT (five-paragraph theme) essay is a good place to start. Write an introductory paragraph that captures the reader, contains a thesis, and states your opinion. Write a few paragraphs of support in the body of your essay and then conclude your essay with a paragraph that summarizes your opinion and points. Stay on topic and do not leave the reader with a new question at the end.
- Practice writing an essay in thirty minutes based on a current event or social issue to prepare for this exam. A sample prompt is included below.

Independent Prompt Example

Your college administration is considering whether or not there should be a physical education requirement for undergraduates. The administration has asked students for their views on the issue and has announced that its final decision will be based on how such a requirement would affect the overall educational mission of the college. Write a letter to the administration arguing whether or not there should be a physical education requirement for undergraduates at your college.

(Do not concern yourself with letter formatting; simply begin your letter, "Dear Administration.")

Cited from <http://www.act.org/caap/sample/essay.html>.