



ACT Toolkit

Student, Parent, &
Educator Resource

Tennessee Department of Education | March 2021





Purpose of the Toolkit

The purpose of this toolkit is to provide practical information and guidance regarding the ACT exam. While the content is valuable for students, parents, and educators, the document is written with students as the primary audience.

In Tennessee, all public school students must participate in a postsecondary readiness assessment, such as the ACT or SAT, and completing the ACT or SAT is a graduation requirement for all students receiving a regular diploma.

Because all districts in the state offer the ACT at no cost to the student in school during a school day, this guide focuses on the ACT exam. It is important to note, however, that districts and students may choose to participate in the SAT as their preferred postsecondary readiness assessment. Both the ACT and SAT are commonly used by postsecondary institutions of all types to determine course placement, make admissions decisions, and award scholarships and financial aid.

Introduction

What is the ACT?

The ACT is a college and career readiness exam based on the curriculum you have been taught from elementary through high school. The exam takes three hours and 30 minutes to complete and is scored on a scale of 1–36. The test consists of four required subject tests (with an optional writing test): English, mathematics, reading, and science. Your composite score is the average of your four subject test scores. In 2019, the national average ACT composite score was **20.6**.¹ The table below demonstrates the test structure of the ACT.

English	Mathematics	Reading	Science
75 questions	60 questions	40 questions	40 questions
45 minutes	60 minutes	35 minutes	35 minutes

Why is the ACT important?

While you spend most of high school being told what you have to do (including taking the ACT or SAT), deciding what to do after high school is totally up to you. With so many options, it is normal not to know exactly what you plan to do. If you are thinking about going to college, it is important to know that the ACT is commonly used by postsecondary institutions (i.e., community colleges, technical colleges, and universities) to determine eligibility for admission, scholarships, and course placement. If you don't think you plan to enroll in postsecondary education, career readiness skills—such as core academic skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving—overlap significantly with the skills that you need to succeed on the ACT. ACT scores can also be used to predict success on the ACT's National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC), which is used by employers to hire and train qualified candidates.² In fact, all student ACT score reports include an indicator of potential achievement on the NCRC assessment.³

How do I register for the ACT?

You can register for the ACT through setting up an account on [MyACT.org](https://www.act.org). Once you have created a myACT account, click on "Register for the ACT" and walk through each of the registration steps. You will need a credit card or ACT fee waiver, a headshot photo of yourself to upload, and a list of your high school courses and grades to complete the registration process. Registration fee information can be found [here](#). Students who are eligible for an ACT fee waiver can receive the fee waiver from their school counselor. If you are unsure of your eligibility, check with your school counselor. Eligible students are allotted four fee waivers.

Where can I take the ACT and when are the next test dates?

¹ Source: [Profile Report - National \(act.org\)](https://www.act.org)

² See <http://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/UsingWorkKeysScores.pdf>

³ View a sample score report here: <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/sample-student-report.pdf>

All school districts in Tennessee offer the ACT on a school day. When you register to take a national ACT, you will choose the location that you will sit for the test. You can find locations where the ACT is offered using the [ACT Test Center Locator](#). The ACT offers tests on Saturdays throughout the year. You can find test dates for 2020-21 school year on the [ACT Registration Information Page](#).

How do I prepare for the ACT?

Your daily coursework provides you with the foundational academic skills needed for the ACT. By taking advanced coursework—such as honors or early postsecondary courses—you can increase your chances of earning a higher score. Beyond your daily coursework, you can prepare for the exam by familiarizing yourself with the structure and format of the exam. In the pages that follow, we lay out five basic strategies to prepare for the ACT. Whether you are a senior considering retaking the ACT or a freshman just learning about the ACT, the strategies and resources that follow can help you prepare to do your best.



Set a Smart Goal

A SMART goal is a goal that is **specific, measurable, attainable, relevant,** and **time bound**. This goal serves as a starting point for your ACT goals.

- **Specific:** If you have already taken an official or practice ACT, start with your current ACT composite and subject scores. Think about where you can improve and what scores you want. Set specific targets with both short-term and long-term goals in mind. For example, if your current composite is a 17 and your long-term goal is a 21, set short-term goals to improve on specific subject areas or specific types of ACT questions.
- **Measurable:** Keep in mind that the average composite score is only one measure of growth. Your goal can also include metrics for effort such as participation in an ACT preparation course or enrolling in rigorous courses like honors, dual enrollment, or Advanced Placement (AP). By including several measures of growth and participation, you can better assess which elements of your strategy are successful and which elements need additional time or attention.
- **Attainable:** As you set your goal, use your current scores (either official test scores or practice test scores) to decide what would score goal be both aggressive and feasible. It is a good idea to consult a teacher or counselor to help you make an aggressive but attainable goal.
- **Relevant:** While the relevance of an ACT goal might seem obvious, remember the scores can be used for a variety of pathways. As you research your college and career options, make note of the ACT subject scores and/or composite scores required for admission or the coursework necessary for achieving your goals.
- **Time Bound:** Depending on your current grade level, review the “Four-Year Plan for ACT Success” table (page 8) to determine if you are on track for the actions and knowledge needed to meet your goals. Having a clear deadline for when you will accomplish your goal will provide urgency and purpose to your daily actions. Whether you are a freshman or a rising senior, setting time-bound goals will help you move toward your larger college and career goals step by step.

A template for organizing your SMART goals can be found [here](#).



Perfect Your Practice

Practicing for the ACT can take many forms: taking an ACT preparation course, completing ACT practice tests on your own, enrolling in advanced coursework like honors or [early postsecondary courses](#), and simply building your confidence through daily practice.

Practice like you play

Just like preparing for an athletic event or artistic performance, it is important to practice under conditions that simulate exactly what the real thing will feel like. Whenever possible, practice for the ACT under completely simulated conditions, including taking the entire test at once. Gaining **comfort** and **confidence** with the **pace and duration of the ACT** is one of the most important preparation strategies. To be successful, you will need to move quickly through each test in addition to having the **mental stamina** to stay focused for the full three and a half hours.

Students say:

“Preparing for the future in everyday things now will give me the best chance for making it in college.”

Pace yourself

For more frequent practice, shorter practice sessions can also help perfect your pacing to answer all questions within the time limits. Even when answering a single daily question, a 10-question practice quiz, or a full subject test, make sure you are aware of how much time you spend per question. In the math section, for example, you will have about 60 seconds per question.

Practice daily

One simple way to get used to ACT questions is to utilize the *ACT Question of the Day*. You can access the *ACT Question of the Day* and sample practice problems through your MyACT account. You can register or sign-in to your account [here](#).

Target your weaknesses

After taking practice tests, be sure to review any questions you answered incorrectly or were unsure about. Make note of why you chose the wrong answer (e.g., you ran out of time, you did not know the content, you did not understand what the question was asking, etc.), and make sure you understand what the correct answer is and why.



Know Before You Go: Basic Test Tips

The test tips below are general suggestions for how to approach the ACT. As you gain more experience with the ACT exam, you should make your own decisions about which strategies work best for you.

1. **Don't read the directions on test day.** Familiarize yourself with the test directions *before* test day so that you can save time by getting straight to work.
2. **Answer every question.** There is no penalty for wrong answers! During each subject test, the test proctor will give you a five-minute warning. Once you are down to the last five minutes, be sure that leave yourself time to bubble in all questions (even if it is a total guess).
3. **Pace yourself.** After accounting for time to read passages, questions, and charts, you typically have 30–60 seconds to answer each question on the ACT. If you get stuck on a difficult question, skip it and come back to it if you have time.
4. **Do easier questions first.** Questions on the ACT have varying levels of difficulty, so some of the questions might seem quite easy while others are difficult or confusing. By completing easier questions first, you may be able to save yourself time that can be spent on more difficult questions. If you do skip questions, mark them in your test book so that you can quickly come back to those questions if you have time.
5. **Read each question carefully.** While you need to move quickly, don't rush through reading the question itself. You need to fully understand what the question is asking in order to quickly choose the correct answer.
6. **Eliminate wrong answers first.** Some of the wrong answers are obvious. Once you eliminate answers that are clearly wrong, it can be easier to identify correct answers or make an informed guess.
7. **Erase completely.** If you change an answer, make sure you completely erase and clearly mark your intended answer. Messy bubbling can cause your test to be incorrectly scored.
8. **Be calm and confident.** Get plenty of rest and eat a healthy breakfast before you take the exam.



Send Your Free Score Reports

When you take the ACT, you are provided with four score reports that you may send to colleges and/or scholarship agencies. Even if you are unsure about whether you plan to enroll in postsecondary, go ahead and **send your scores** to local colleges and universities. When postsecondary institutions receive score reports, they add students to their communication lists and will begin sending information about their institution and how to apply. Each college and/or scholarship agency is assigned a code that can be found on the ACT's [website](#).

Register to Test

- Your Personal Profile
- Your Interest Inventory
- Your Test Selection**
 - Select Where to Test
 - Registration Information
 - Test Date and Option
 - Your High School
 - Your High School Courses
 - Score Report Choices**
 - Your Future Plans
 - Test Center
 - Final Review
 - Submit Payment
- Exit

Your Score Reports and College Choices

Your Test Date: **September 10, 2016** Your Test Option: **The ACT (no writing)**

Your Score Reports: You will be able to print your full student score report from your ACT Web account as soon as the report is ready. A PDF of your full student score report will be available for approximately six months. A score report will also automatically be sent to your high school.

- List up to six colleges and scholarship agencies in priority order. The first four choices are included in the basic fee. [What if I need more?](#)
- You can come back to add, change, or cancel your choices until noon central time on Thursday, September 15, 2016. After that deadline, there is a fee per choice.

Your Selections So Far

Priority	Code	Name	Fee	Remove
No selections made yet				

[← add choice](#) [add a choice](#)

When all your score report choices are listed in priority order, please [Continue](#)

If you take the ACT exam at school, you will receive a paper score report three to eight weeks after the test date. You can also create an online account for viewing and sending test score reports at [myact.org](#). MyACT accounts will also now link the state testing day scores along with the national ones you do on your own.

Ready to plan your future?



Create a plan, set goals, and learn more about the next steps for college and career using [collegefortn.org](#). CollegeforTN.org is for students, parents, and educators and is a single-stop resource for learning about postsecondary opportunities in Tennessee.



Take the Test More Than Once

Why retake the ACT?

Like almost anything else in life, a second chance provides an opportunity to learn from past experience and improve your results. By taking the ACT more than once, you have the potential to grow your score, opening more doors for opportunities after high school. **National data from the ACT, Inc. indicates that retaking typically leads to score improvement of 1–2 points.** Higher scores may allow you to avoid remedial courses (college courses that cover skills you should have mastered in high school), increase eligibility for scholarships and financial aid, and be more competitive for high-quality employment.

Because the ACT is a nationally normed and research-based test, your scores on the subject tests are connected to your likelihood to succeed in college-level courses, such as English composition and college algebra. For each subject area, the ACT designates a score as the **College Readiness Benchmark**. College Readiness Benchmarks are “scores on the ACT subject-area tests that represent the level of achievement required for students to have a **50% chance** of obtaining a **B or higher** or about a **75% chance** of obtaining a **C or higher** in corresponding credit-bearing first-year college courses.”⁴ The table below lists the benchmarks for each subject test.

College Course	ACT Subject-Area Test	ACT Benchmark Score
English Composition	English	18
College Algebra	Mathematics	22
Social Sciences	Reading	22
Biology	Science	23

When you receive your score report, you will also get an indicator for your achievement on the National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC), the ACT’s measure of foundational work skills important in many industries and occupations. Knowing where you stand in terms of college and career readiness can help you decide if you should retake.



⁴ <https://www.act.org/content/act/en/education-and-career-planning/college-and-career-readiness-standards/benchmarks.html>



General ACT Preparation Timeline

The timeline below is a sample 10-week plan for preparing for an official ACT exam. Use this as a guide to make your own plan.





Four-Year Plan for ACT Success

Grade	Key Actions	Key Knowledge
Grade 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Begin taking aligned courses to a personalized education and career plan. ○ Experiment with different organizational and study methods to see what works best for you. ○ Take a career aptitude or interest assessment to explore your career aspirations and possibilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ I understand the connection between GPA and ACT scores and their impact on early postsecondary opportunities and postsecondary admission, scholarships, financial aid, etc. ○ I understand how to backwards plan from my career goals to what I should be focusing on in high school.
Grade 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Update your postsecondary plan with your counselor and have a conversation about your eligibility/competitiveness for admission or employment. ○ Research course offerings for your junior year, including early postsecondary opportunities such as advanced placement, dual enrollment and dual credit, or work-based learning. ○ Learn about ACT prep course offerings in your school or community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ I understand the structure and content of the ACT. ○ I understand the different postsecondary options available to me and the criteria required for admission or employment. ○ I understand how the ACT impacts financial aid and scholarships, postsecondary admission, and demonstrating workforce readiness.
Grade 11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Enroll in an ACT prep course offered at your school or utilize resources in this document to familiarize yourself with the test. ○ Use the timeline and resources in this document to prepare for the spring statewide exam day ○ Send score reports to at least four institutions. ○ After the exam, discuss with your counselor how your scores impact your postsecondary plans. ○ Consider retaking the ACT as a senior. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ I understand the importance of the ACT. ○ I understand how my scores impact my postsecondary plans. ○ I understand I can retake the exam in my senior year.
Grade 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Participate in the senior retake opportunity. ○ Create and follow a study plan to prepare for the retake. ○ Send score reports to at least four institutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ I know what subject scores or composite score I need to reach my goal score for postsecondary.

College & Career Planning Tools

MyACT

- Students who have a [MyACT](#) account can access free college and career planning assessments and interactive tools for students.

Big Future (College Board)

- The [Big Future website](#) allows students to search and compare postsecondary options with filters for key information such as majors, graduation rates, financial aid, and other information that students identify as important to them.

CollegeforTN.org

- [CollegeforTN.org](#) is a free, one-stop resource for college and career planning for students, parents, and educators provided by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC).

Free ACT Resources

ACT Practice Tests

- [Preparing for the ACT](#) (2020-21 Edition)
- [Preparing for the ACT](#) (*for students with accommodations*) (2020-21 Edition)
- [Preparing for the ACT](#) (2015–16 Edition)
- [Preparing for the ACT](#) (2014–15 Edition)

Official ACT Test Prep

- Sample classes, free online practice, and the ACT Official Online Practice Test can all be accessed through the ACT “Test Prep” center: <https://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act/test-preparation/free-act-test-prep.html>
- Additional Free Practice tests and ACT’s Question of the Day can be accessed through student’s [MyACT](#) account.

Free SAT Resources

Are you planning to take the SAT? Below are free preparation resources.

Khan Academy

- Free personalized practice for the SAT: <https://www.khanacademy.org/sat>

SAT Educator Guide

- Educator resource for the SAT and SAT subject tests:
<https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/pdf/sat-educator-guide.pdf>

SAT Fee Waivers

- Information regarding SAT fee waivers and college application fee waivers:
<https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sat/register/fees/fee-waivers?excmid=VT-00100>