

A Basic Guide to Standardized Testing

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I recently met with a home educated student, Pam, who was preparing for her first SAT. She hoped to one day make medical research her career, but first, she had to take the SAT and begin her college search.

Initial testing to identify areas of weakness revealed almost a complete lack of high school math knowledge; she knew virtually no algebra or geometry. Pam's math program focused instead on "life skills"—her ability to handle money, balance a checkbook, and calculate interest payments were a testament to her studies, but she did not have the skills and knowledge needed to get into, or to succeed in college and beyond. In other words, she had not been preparing for a science-based college education. So, rather than preparing for her SAT, Pam faces at least two more years of high school math study to be ready for the future she envisions. Her parents were as surprised as she was to discover that, despite her hard work and good grades, she was not at all prepared for college.

True, it could be worse—but it could have been better. Consistent standardized testing, either state- or privately administered, would have given objective feedback to Pam's parents. Knowing Pam's goals, they could have chosen the curriculum that would have provided Pam with the skills and knowledge she needs to succeed. In other words, standardized testing helps an educator assess what is age-appropriate knowledge to master.

Like Pam, many students fear standardized testing. Working under pressure on a timed test, in a strange environment, can be intimidating. Familiarity with the test formats, as well as preparation in content knowledge, may ease some of that anxiety.

Testing is also scary to you, the educator. Are you being graded? Do you fear a low test score as a reflection of your efforts? When you chose to homeschool, you knew it wasn't going to be easy, but you knew it was the right choice for you and your child. Your child relies on you to ensure that his education is comprehensive and adequately aligned with the ever-changing national standards. Regularly scheduled testing allows you to systematically identify areas of slow progress for remediation. Don't be too tough on yourself, but be honest and realistic. Expect ability levels to fluctuate: a great year of social studies may result in weakened math ability. Seeing these results in standardized test scores doesn't indicate a crisis, but it does tell you it's time to refocus. If your child's vocabulary level has dropped, perhaps you should read together again for a while. Or you may see that your child was expected to know something about ratios and realize that they're now introduced earlier than high school, the time you first saw them.

The following is an overview of the most common standardized tests: what they are, when to prepare for them, when to take them, how to register for them, and the role of each test. To ensure that the student's ability is accurately represented, provide the opportunity to learn each test format. Visit appropriate websites with your student to help her become better accustomed to, knowledgeable about, and comfortable with the test style.

Since the scoring of these tests varies, look at the national percentages to gauge your child's progress and ability level. Ideally, your student's average will remain the same or increase with each testing opportunity, regardless of the test type. If the percentage on any section decreases drastically, it may be time to re-evaluate your program to fit your child's needs and goals.

ELEMENTARY AND JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

The Secondary School Admission Test (SSAT) is for students ages 10-14. Two grading scales are used, one for grades 5-7 and another for grades 8-11. Vocabulary recognition and reading comprehension are key. The math requires arithmetic skills, including fractions and decimals, percents, and basic word problems; basic algebra, including simple solving and ratios; and basic geometry. The 30-minute essay is not scored. Go to www.ssat.org to become familiar with the test format, to register, and to find a nearby test center. The SSAT is offered seven times a year, usually at private schools, but can also be administered by an independent educational consultant.

The Independent School Entrance Examination (ISEE) has three levels, spanning grades 4 through 11. It covers verbal and quantitative reasoning, reading comprehension, and math, and also requires an essay although it is not scored. Go to www.erbtest.org/pages/ERB_ISEE.html for a student guide, online registration, locations, and dates.

HIGH SCHOOL

A common error when interpreting score reports is to take the scores as an absolute. For instance, a 30% score on math should indicate to the parent an area where work is needed, not that the child has low math aptitude. Rather than avoid the low performance areas, increase instruction in those areas with the goal of raising knowledge and ability. Difficult does not mean impossible.

Allow for more frequent testing if possible—working toward a measurable goal, that is, a test score, provides the feedback needed to gauge the effectiveness of your efforts. Be flexible and expect curriculum changes. Allow the child sufficient time between tests to master the material, and do practice tests to build testing skills.

For the following tests except the ACT, registration information for homeschooling families is provided at www.collegeboard.com.

PSAT

The Preliminary SAT, or PSAT, is just that. Since the PSAT scores are not sent to colleges, the PSAT provides an opportunity to become familiar with the SAT format (it is slightly shorter and does not include the 25-minute essay) without the concern that colleges will see the scores. More important, the corrected answer sheet and test booklet are returned to the student (through the guidance office of the school administering the test), allowing for a more complete understanding of problem areas. The PSAT is given once a year in October and is the only high school level test that requires registration through a local guidance office. Contact your nearest high school in early September to register and pay for the test. Take the PSAT at least twice—as early as the completion of Algebra I.

SAT

The Scholastic Assessment Test, better known as the SAT, is a reasoning test, which means it combines logic and reasoning skills along with the knowledge gained in a classical education: good reading comprehension and vocabulary recognition; grammar and editing skills along with the ability to formulate a persuasive essay; and complete algebra and geometry knowledge. The SAT may be taken at any age (it is the cornerstone of the Johns Hopkins Talent Search program for junior high students) but is usually challenging for students below age 14.

ACT

The *American College Test*, or ACT, is a four-section test: grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension, math, and science. There is an optional essay. The ACT is similar to the SAT in that it is a nationally administered standardized test accepted by college admissions officials as part of a complete college application. The science section is not based on previously learned science information; it is the “reasoning” section in that it combines critical reading skills and graph interpretation skills to determine answers. The best way to prepare for the science section is to increase reading comprehension and become familiar with the test format.

The math section focuses more on knowledge than on reasoning skills. No formulas are provided, and only basic function calculators are permitted, as opposed to the SAT, which provides many basic formulas and allows advanced function calculators.

Information for this test is available at www.act.org.

SAT Subject Tests

The SAT Subject Tests are not logic based (an aspect of tests that people consider “tricky”). Multiple one-hour subject tests are available in many high school level topics such as math, sciences, languages, and more. Up to three subject tests may be taken on the same day. The appropriate subject test should be taken when study in a subject is complete, regardless of age.

Many colleges require at least one SAT Subject Test score as part of the application. Subject tests are especially valuable for a homeschooled student to exhibit subject matter mastery to a college’s admission board or to provide an objective “final exam” for personal use.

AP Tests

An advanced placement, or AP, test may provide proof of proficiency in a subject beyond that associated with a standard high school education. AP test scores may be accepted by a college to provide credit for a college-level course or allow a student to skip beginning level classes. Since not all colleges provide credit for high AP test scores, it is best to check with the college your student plans to attend if he is taking the test only to gain college credit. For parents looking to challenge a student, AP test preparation is a great advanced education program.

COLLEGE LEVEL

Both the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) tests and the Dantes Subject Standardized Tests (DSST) are designed to provide college credit for “information mastered” in order to speed up the college process, reduce college education costs, or to quickly move a student into advanced courses. Read more at www.collegeboard.com and www.getcollegetcredit.com.

A word of caution: a CLEP may be used to demonstrate advanced proficiency, but don't shortcut the college education drastically. These tests are best saved for adults. Age-appropriate college students are enriched by the college experience and, as you already know, there is so much more to an education than just facts.

Biographical Information

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