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## The Scoop on Tests for Teens

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Dear Friends,

We hope that the month of August finds you enjoying barbeques, the pool, and the hammock. Summer is a wonderful opportunity to kick back and enjoy your teens.

While you are relaxing, please know that we've been working for you! We've organized information on a number of tests that you may want to consider incorporating into your teen's plan for the next school year. Many parents of high schoolers have questions regarding the PSAT, SAT, SAT Subject, ACT, PLAN, Compass, and Explore tests. Let's take a look at each test specifically in relation to homeschooled students.

(Note: Even if your teen is unsure about attending college, we recommend that he take a college entrance test while in high school when subject knowledge is "fresh" rather than possibly having to take the test several years after high school.)

### PSAT

PSAT/NMSQT: The Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test not only prepares students to take the SAT, but it is also used to qualify for National Merit Scholarships. It's important to note that only the top 1 - 2 % of those taking the PSAT will score high enough to be in contention for these scholarships.

The [PSAT test has three sections](#) (Math, Verbal/Critical Reasoning, and Writing) and it is administered by the College Board. Your teen may register to take the PSAT in 10th grade or before for practice. However, taking the PSAT in the 11th grade (typically the third year of high school) is a necessary requirement to qualify for the [National Merit Scholarship competition](#).

Homeschoolers register for the PSAT by contacting a local public or private school in their area. Because the PSAT is offered only in October of each year and many schools place orders for the test early, parents interested in their teens taking this test should contact the school sometime in June prior to the October test date. Ask the school (where the test will be taken) for the free [PSAT Student Guide](#). The Student Guide provides test taking tips, practice problems with explanatory answers, and even a full length practice test that will enable your child to feel comfortable with the format and types of problems that he will encounter on the PSAT.

When registering for the test, provide the state-specific homeschool code for the PSAT. Using [this code](#) ensures that the test results will be sent to your home rather than to the school at which the test was taken.

If you encounter a school that will not accommodate your teen, call another one in your area. If you cannot find a school that will accommodate your teen for the PSAT and you are a member of HSLDA, please call our legal department for advice.

### College Entrance Tests

The SAT and the ACT are the two primary tests used by college officials when evaluating applicants for admission. Most colleges will accept either of these two tests, but it is a good idea to check an individual college's website to find out if one of the tests is preferred. We are often asked if it's best to take one test or the other or if both tests should be taken. This is a matter of personal preference. The SAT is a reasoning test - the student is required to take knowledge and apply it - while the ACT tests a student's knowledge of specific subject matter in four categories. Some students naturally may do better on one test

than the other, so if your teen doesn't receive the score he'd like on the SAT, then he may want to try the ACT or vice versa.

Especially in the case of a homeschooled applicant, it is important to do well on the SAT or ACT because colleges view these test scores as objective and credible indicators of a student's readiness to do college level work. These test scores are also often used by scholarship committees as part of their criteria for awarding scholarships. Therefore, we recommend that students prepare for these tests by using some type of test prep materials.

The SAT test may be taken as many times as you desire - or until your money runs out! The ACT, on the other hand, has a maximum of 12 times. Scores almost always rise when taking the test a second time simply because the student is more comfortable with the format of the test and the testing environment. Most colleges continue to use the highest test score the student achieved, and some colleges will even "super score." Super scoring refers to colleges taking the highest scores from each individual section of the test and adding them together to come up with the highest possible composite score even if the highest scores on individual sections were taken on different test dates. It's wise to check with individual college policies regarding test scoring.

When registering online for either the SAT or ACT, you'll be asked to choose a test date and location. Plan ahead and register early as the tests have strict registration deadlines.

A photo ID (such as a driver's license or passport) is necessary when sitting for the test. If your student does not have either of these, then check to see if your state motor vehicle department will issue an alternative photo ID to your teen. (The ACT also accepts other means of identification; however, be careful to follow their instructions and call its offices for clarification if needed.)

There is no definitive answer to what a good SAT or ACT score is; however, info provided at these links provides food for thought.

- <http://collegeapps.about.com/od/sat/f/goodsatscore.htm>
- <http://www.princetonreview.com/college/good-sat-score-act-score.aspx>
- <http://www.testpreppractice.net/SAT/good-sat-score-1.aspx>
- <http://collegeapps.about.com/od/theact/f/goodactscore.htm>
- <http://www.actstudent.org/scores/norms1.html>

Additionally, once your teens receive their results (on the web or through the mail), check individual college websites to compare their scores. Most colleges post the median SAT and ACT test score ranges of admitted students.

## SAT

The SAT is given about 7 times a year. Homeschooled students register for the test directly online with the College Board. When registering, use the special homeschool code of 970000. Also, take advantage of the four free test score reports by indicating on the application the colleges you would like to receive the test scores even if your teen has not yet definitely decided on the colleges to which he will apply. Future test score report requests will incur a nominal fee.

The SAT is comprised of three sections including:

- **Math**
- **Verbal/critical reading**
- **Mandatory written essay**

More general details on the test may be found at the College Board website. This website also provides much helpful information including a full length practice test, general tips on test taking, sample essays and how essays are scored, free online tools called SAT in Focus that give advice on test and academic preparation, and much more.

## ACT

Unlike the SAT, the ACT is a knowledge-based test covering English, reading, math, and science. Students who do well academically in these areas will likely do well on the ACT. Visiting the ACT website, <http://www.actstudent.org/faq/answers/what.html>, will give you in-depth information on each section of the test as well as sample questions and test taking tips and strategies.

The ACT is offered 6 times a year and homeschoolers should register online to take it, <http://www.actstudent.org/regist/index.html>, using the homeschool code of 969999. The site also lists [helpful test day procedures](#), to help ease any of your teen's uncertainties. The ACT differs from the SAT in that it has an optional writing test.

Check with your colleges of choice to determine whether the writing section is required.

Last, if your teen has documented learning difficulties, investigate the options that the [College Board](#) and [ACT](#) make for special test accommodations. HSLDA's special needs coordinators are available to our member families to assist in applying for these accommodations.

For more information than you could ever use (or want!) regarding the SAT and ACT, you may wish to consult Wikipedia: [SAT](#) or [ACT](#).

## **SAT Subject Tests**

The SAT Subject Tests given by the College Board were previously known as SAT II Tests. There are 20 different SAT Subject Tests covering five major subject areas. Similar to the general SAT test, these Subject Tests require students to reason and apply knowledge in a particular subject. Some colleges may use the tests as part of their admissions criteria, but most colleges use them for placement purposes only. Other colleges do not require the tests, but will consider high scores on the subject tests as an optional part of a student's portfolio when applying. More detailed information on the SAT Subject Tests can be found at the [College Board](#), and on the [FAQ's section](#). The best time to take an SAT Subject Test is immediately following completion of a course in that particular subject.

The College Board provides [tips for taking the Subject Tests](#), specifics on [each test](#), and a free SAT Subject Test [preparation booklet](#).

Reasons for a homeschooled student to take an SAT Subject Test include:

- a particular college requires one or more SAT Subject Tests as an objective indicator of the work a student is capable of doing,
- a student desires to give a "boost" to his/her application by showing academic aptitude in a given subject area; or
- for placement purposes when college courses are selected.

Homeschooled students register directly online with the College Board to take an SAT Subject Test, and there are [six test dates](#) from which to choose. A maximum of three subject tests may be taken on any given test day.

## **PLAN**

The [PLAN](#), test is administered by the ACT as a preliminary to the ACT college admission test. It is usually given in the sophomore year and is used to predict how a student will score on the ACT. The PLAN tests knowledge in English, reading, math and science and the scoring ranges between 1 and 32. The results can be used to indicate areas of strengths or weaknesses in your teen's knowledge.

## **EXPLORE**

The EXPLORE test was developed to be taken in the 8th and 9th grades as preparation for the PLAN which is in preparation for the ACT. Do you see where all of this is headed?!

It is our opinion that if you are not enamored with test preparation and administration, then it's best to forego both the PLAN and EXPLORE tests. Rather, focus on a well-rounded academic high school program as good preparation for taking either the SAT or ACT test.

## **Compass Test**

Another test developed by the ACT is the [Compass Test](#). Some community colleges use the test to determine placement for

their incoming students as well as to enroll homeschool students in dual credit classes. Four year institutions may also use the test during freshmen orientation for placement purposes.

The test components include reading, writing skills, writing essay, math, and English as a second language. The test is an untimed, computerized test and students receive their results at the completion of test taking. The scores give the school an assessment tool as to the student's academic strengths and weaknesses.

Whew!! This is a lot of information to digest, but the good news is that you don't have to remember it all. When needed, you'll be able to access the information on the aforementioned websites. Our hope is that having an introduction to the tests will help you to decide which ones will be essential for your teen to study for and take. If you are a member of HSLDA and have questions about any of this information, please do not hesitate to contact us.

In next month's newsletter, we plan to help you get your noses out of the books, the lesson plans, and the activity calendars! Doesn't that sound wonderful? Join us in September as we look beyond all of these temporal items and concentrate on ... eternity.

Until then, rest in knowing that the Lord loves and cares for you and your children,

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HSLDA High School Coordinators



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