

When Should Students Start SAT or ACT Prep? A Testing Timeline for College Applications

Even students from the most well-resourced families do not consistently earn top SAT or ACT scores without a thoughtful preparation plan. Research from Opportunity Insights found that most students whose parents are in the top 1% of income still do not achieve SAT or ACT scores in the top 1%. That finding helps explain why one of the first questions many families ask is, "When should my child start preparing for the SAT or ACT?"

The answer is that no single timeline works for every student. However, a proven framework works well for most. Students typically benefit from starting structured SAT or ACT preparation in the winter of junior year, after they have completed more advanced math and English coursework and begun building their college list. Many students then take their first official SAT or ACT in the spring of junior year, leaving time to retake it before senior year if needed.

This guide walks through the SAT and ACT preparation process step by step, explaining what students should focus on from sophomore year through senior year, when to take official tests, and how to stay on track with college application deadlines.

The Short Answer

Timeline most college counselors recommend:

- Start thinking about SAT or ACT preparation in the fall of junior year, and begin a structured study plan in the winter.
- Take your first official SAT or ACT during the spring of junior year.
- If needed, plan additional testing during late spring, summer, or early fall of senior year, depending on your college application deadlines.
- Students applying to highly selective colleges may need to start earlier, depending on their college list.

A Simple SAT/ACT Preparation Timeline

SAT and ACT preparation is just one part of the college application process. Here's what students should focus on each year.

Sophomore Year

- Enroll in challenging coursework that includes all core subjects, taking Advanced Placement or Honors courses when possible.
- Be sure to sign up for a practice SAT (Preliminary SAT) or ACT for the fall of your sophomore or junior year.

Junior Year

- **Fall:** Look into Test Prep options and book SAT/ACT test dates for the winter/spring of junior year.
- **Winter:** Begin Test Prep with your practice test scores factored into the plan, and with your goals in mind.
- **October:** Take the PSAT/NMSQT if you want to qualify for National Merit scholarships.
- **Spring:** Take your first official SAT or ACT.
- **Late spring or summer:** Decide whether a retake makes sense based on your scores and the potential to raise your score.

Senior Year

- Finalize your college list during the summer before senior year and decide whether submitting SAT or ACT scores will strengthen your applications.
- Complete college applications and required writing in the fall.
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- Complete the FAFSA after it opens on October 1.
- Submit Early Decision and Early Action applications in November and Regular Decision applications by their deadlines, which are often around January 1.
- Review admissions and financial aid offers in the spring.
- May 1st is National College Commit Day - Pay your deposit and organize your housing.

Behind Schedule? Here's How to Catch Up

If you're starting later than planned, focus on choosing test dates that still allow enough time for scores to reach your colleges before application deadlines. A structured study plan can help you make the most of a shorter preparation window. If you need guidance creating an efficient catch-up plan, Pivot Tutors can help you prioritize your study time and select the right testing schedule.

If you're unsure how to build an efficient catch-up plan, working with a structured test prep program like [Pivot Tutors](#) can help you identify the most effective study priorities and create a realistic testing schedule. Always confirm testing deadlines for the colleges on your list before registering for an exam.

Current SAT Test Dates (2026–2027)

Once you have a testing plan, the next step is choosing the right test date. The tables below show the current SAT and ACT testing calendars for the 2026–2027 school year:

SAT Test Date	Regular Registration Deadline
August 22, 2026	August 7, 2026
September 12, 2026	August 28, 2026
October 3, 2026	September 18, 2026
November 7, 2026	October 23, 2026
December 5, 2026	November 20, 2026

SAT Test Date	Regular Registration Deadline
March 6, 2027	February 19, 2027
May 1, 2027	April 16, 2027
June 5, 2027	May 21, 2027

Scores are typically released about two to three weeks after each test date. A late registration window is available after the regular deadline for an additional fee.

Current ACT Test Dates (2026–2027)

The ACT is offered seven times during the 2026–2027 school year. Registration deadlines fall roughly five weeks before each test date. Confirm exact deadlines at act.org, since they are finalized closer to each administration.

ACT Test Date	Registration Deadline (approx.)
September 19, 2026	Mid-August 2026
October 17, 2026	Mid-September 2026
December 12, 2026	Early November 2026
February 27, 2027*	Late January 2027
April 10, 2027	Early March 2027
June 12, 2027	Mid-May 2027
July 10, 2027**	Early June 2027

Note:** Multiple-choice scores are typically released within two to three weeks after each test. The February ACT is not offered at test centers in New York, and the July ACT is not offered in New York or California. Always confirm test dates and registration deadlines on the official ACT website before registering.

Getting the Right Support at the Right Time

Standardized testing is only one piece of a much bigger process. While structured test prep helps students hit their SAT or ACT target score, the rest of the journey- building a balanced college list, writing standout essays, and navigating deadlines- benefits from a different kind of guidance. Students focused specifically on test scores often work with a dedicated program like [Pivot Tutors](#), while families seeking support throughout the entire admissions journey often turn to an independent counselor like [KC College Consulting](#). Used together, testing support and admissions guidance can make junior and senior years feel far less overwhelming.