

How to Prepare for the ACT

The ACT is an interesting test. With a unique science section and more advanced math topics than those tested on the SAT, it looks more like an academic achievement test than the College Board's counterpart. Another big difference between the tests is the scoring system. The ACT's narrow score range – only 36 points in each of four test sections, which are then averaged – demands big jumps in performance to effect score improvement.

How much will test prep raise your scores? That answer is extremely variable – and anyone who promises you a magic number is making things up! However, most students who put in a full course of study and analyze their practice tests raise their scores significantly in each section. Improving your score in the test – comprised of English, Math, Reading and Science sections (the Essay section is rarely required) – depends a lot on your particular strengths and on the nature of each section.

The Science section is quite different from anything else on this test. It requires strict pacing and the ability to grasp the essence from a wide range of scientific data very quickly. Once students have mastered pacing for this section, they'll see their scores improve dramatically. The English and Math sections respond best to specific learnable skills, so they are generally easier sections to raise one's score in than the Reading or Essay sections. Reading improvement usually results from doing a lot of reading in challenging and varied resources on a daily basis, building vocabulary assiduously – starting as early in high school as possible on that path. Your reading skills will naturally mature as you do by the time you take the test for the final time at the end of junior year, or even a couple months later. Essay improvement is the most nebulous, requiring the most work – and probably reaps the lowest reward, since almost no colleges require it anymore.

In 2021, the SAT Essay was eliminated, so the ACT Essay's demise is probably not long off. The vast majority of colleges will NOT be interested in your ACT essay score, but if you are a non-native speaker of English, you may want to take it to demonstrate your proficiency in English writing. If you do want to take the ACT with Essay, you'll improve your score through writing practice – and as you develop composition skills through your English and History/Social Studies classes at school.

So, time to get started! Below are the first key steps to take to raise all those scores.

1. Take the PreACT if it's offered at your school. If not, take a practice ACT.

Some schools offer sophomores the [PreACT](#), a paper-based test that offers a preview of the ACT test experience, like the PSAT for SAT-test takers. The [test report](#) includes a breakdown of performance by skill set and topic, which is very helpful as a guide to follow-up study. If your school does not offer the PreACT but does offer a free ACT

practice test, take that – as long as you know that you will receive a copy of the test booklet along with your answers and the answer key afterwards.

2. Use your PreACT or practice ACT as a learning tool.

Once you receive your PreACT or ACT results, try to rethink and redo the questions you missed; then look at the correct answers. Try to analyze WHY you chose the answer you did and how you can avoid that error next time. Many errors fall into one of two categories: silly error or lack of knowledge/skillset. If you are making a lot of silly errors, especially in the beginning of the test on easy questions, you know you need to slow down and give those easy questions more respect! Remember: all questions are worth the same on this test, easy or hard. So, it behooves you to make sure you don't leave any easy questions on the table! If the error was due to lack of knowledge or a particular skill (such as a vocabulary word, a math formula), add that to your notes for that section of the test and build from there.

3. Register for the ACT.

Whenever possible, choose the best [test dates](#) to take the ACT: **December** of junior year and then **April and June**. I recommend students take the ACT on all three of these dates, starting with December of junior year. These are dates that the ACT offers "[Test Information Release](#)" or "TIR" (only in the US). For an additional fee, you'll get a paper copy of the test you took and its answer key, along with a record of your errors. It's an excellent study tool to prepare for the next time you take the ACT.

NEW: The ACT now offers even more test dates for TIR, including September and February, so check the website link above for which tests are eligible on which dates. All are for Saturday testing only, except April and February, which are offered for other days, as well.

July before senior year is a great test date to lock down, too, if offered in your state. Having the option to take the test once more before you get busy with senior year and college applications takes a lot of the pressure off in April and June of junior year.

Do not take the ACT every time it's offered; give yourself time to build your skills (and have a life). Taking the test repeatedly without extensive study in between is not likely to raise your scores much, if at all.

4. Plan your long-term testing schedule.

Don't discover in May of junior year that it's too late to register for the June ACT – or expect to take it in July or September and find that there are no seats left for these very popular test dates. Register EARLY and get your choice of dates and test center.

If you are requesting testing accommodations, those requests must be made early in the game, especially if they are for accommodations that require extra proctors or special testing conditions. If you are turned down at first, you will need time (in months) to prepare supporting documentation to argue your case to the ACT and get their response. Note that in order to request any accommodations for the ACT, you must register for a test. (This differs from the SAT accommodations request procedure.) So, register for a test early in junior year or even sophomore year – you don't have to actually take the test on that date. But make sure you have been granted the accommodations you need so you know that you'll be okayed for them when you are ready to test.

5. Take a practice test under timed, test-like conditions.

At the start of any ACT course you take, you'll probably be given a full-length practice ACT to be taken in one sitting, just like the real thing. If you are studying on your own or about to work with a tutor, you should take a full test, as well. By taking practice tests at regular intervals, you'll gain familiarity with the test sections, order, content and pacing. Go over your results as you did with the PreACT or previous practice ACT: rethinking and redoing those questions you got wrong and analyzing your errors. You can skip the Essay, the final section of the test, as it is far less important than the multiple choice sections. If you eventually choose to take the test with the Essay, you'll do better writing a practice essay after you've begun studying for it.

A caution about "free" tests:

Many high schools have relationships with big test prep companies. The schools and their students benefit from the convenience of having test prep offered at school, often at a discount. The test prep companies benefit by having a monopoly on you, the student! You can – and should – take advantage of any free diagnostic ACTs offered by these companies at your school or elsewhere. Make sure, however, that you will be getting your practice test back within a couple weeks and that you will be able to take the test booklet and your results home with you. There is very little benefit in taking a practice test and getting nothing but a score – or being forced to register for the course to see your results in full. These companies may nevertheless try to rope you into one of their paid courses, but understand that you are under no obligation to register with them just because you took the free practice test!

6. Know whether your ACT will be given on paper or computer.

The ACT is moving to computer-based testing (CBT), gradually expanding it throughout the United States. Internationally, the ACT has already gone [all-computer](#). Find out whether your test will be on paper or by computer and be sure that, as much as possible, your practice tests are in the same format as the real test. Information about the ACT

CBT, including one online practice test can be found on the ACT website [HERE](#) (scroll down for "Computer-Based Practice Tests").

7. Choosing your study plan 1: What kind of student are you?

Your answers to the following four questions will help you decide on the prep method best suited to you.

1. What is your family's budget for test prep?

While there is no direct correlation between cost and quality, in general, better and more personalized teaching will be more expensive. In-person courses will cost more than online and video courses, and one-to-one tutoring will cost more than all the rest. Among personal tutoring options, experienced tutors will charge more than young grads.

2. How self-guided and motivated are you?

Do you think you can study well on your own, taking an online course or working through a textbook and/or online resources by yourself? Do you have the self-discipline and the time to do so? If you believe the answer is "yes," give it a try before you get into high season for ACT prep, say, early summer after sophomore year. If it's going well and you think we can keep it up, great! You can always supplement self-paced study with a session or two with a tutor or take a course later. If you find yourself bored, frustrated or falling behind your goals, switch to a program with a real live teacher.

3. Do you do better with a teacher guiding you? (Most people do.)

Some students –particularly the most advanced ones – do great studying on their own. They love independent projects, find research a breeze and take satisfaction in accomplishing tasks at their own (generally high) speed. Most people, however, do better at test prep and other challenges with the help of a class or tutor to guide, encourage and coach them.

4. How much time can you afford to commit per week to your ACT course without compromising your schoolwork?

If considering a class you would have to travel to, include that time commitment in your calculations, too. Do you have time for the class hours PLUS homework? However you choose to study for the ACT, recognize that you MUST do homework. Listening to lectures and skimming through book pages or video lessons is not sufficient for real score improvement.

How long do you need to prep for the ACT – or, how high is the moon?

Really, you could study for the ACT continuously from sophomore year through the fall of senior year, but you probably have some other things to do – such as go to high school! A good rule of thumb for an ACT foundation course is 8-10 weeks of lessons that

entail 2-3 hours of lesson time generating 2-4 hours of homework per week, plus 4 practice tests (and analysis of your results after each one). This is ideally accomplished during the summer between sophomore and junior year, when you have more time. Then, either continue at a lighter pace through your ACTs of junior year, or regroup for a refresher in the 5-6 weeks before your test.

A word about "boot camp" ACT courses:

Boot camp, or intensive, ACT courses typically last a week or less, with up to 6 hours of lessons every day and a couple of hours of homework every night. They are seen by some students and parents as the only way to shove an ACT course into the student's already fully-scheduled life. If this is the only way you can schedule your ACT study, it will have to do, but it has some big drawbacks. First, it's impossible to learn all you need for the ACT in one week: with the massively condensed learning period, you don't have the time to absorb, learn and practice new skills and knowledge and you can't learn it all in one week, anyway – no matter how intensive the program. Second, by the time you take the ACT, you will need a refresher course, as crammed knowledge is poorly retained in the long term.

If you choose to study boot camp-style, be sure you get guidance from your teacher on how you can keep your skills sharp and continue learning gradually from the time your course ends until you actually take the ACT. If, on the other hand, you've done some prep already, you might consider an intensive ACT course to finish your program, and take the ACT shortly after completing the course.

8. Choosing your study plan 2: Weigh the PROS and CONS of each.

• **Online course or self-guided study**

PROS: generally cheapest option, good for self-motivated and advanced students. Convenient; no travel required. Less time wasted on material or lessons that you already know than in an in-person class if the online course enables you to skip easy stuff – or drill deeper into material you particularly need to build your skills in. If you will be taking the ACT CBT, rather than the paper-based test, an online course which offers online practice tests may be advantageous.

CONS: requires the most self-discipline and organization, offers the least amount of personal attention. This matters because even if you study hard and complete all the assignments, if your technique is faulty, you won't have anyone to point that out to you or teach you a better approach.

Here's an example: A student of mine solved all math problems involving right triangles on her ACT practice tests by using the Pythagorean Theorem. Looking over the answers, she even found that the textbook explanations used the Pythagorean Theorem. But a good teacher would have told her right at the start that it's rare to have to use this equation on the ACT. If you use it more than once on the test, it's a sure thing you are

doing something wrong. Why? Because it's a time-sucker that prevents you from having enough time to solve other, harder questions. When you see a question that seems at first glance to require the Pythagorean Theorem (or some other long solution), your immediate thought should be how to get around that step by using savvier math skills.

In short, without personal feedback, you won't necessarily know that you are doing things the wrong or less effective way, and as a result, you may inadvertently reinforce bad techniques or misunderstandings.

- **Class**

PROS: cheaper than private tutoring, more social than other options

CONS: little or no personal attention, and class level may be too high/low for you individually. Class difficulty levels, if organized at all, tend to be based on the math results of an initial practice test, so if your math and verbal (reading, writing and grammar) skills are uneven, you will likely be unhappy in one section or the other. Classes also require time and energy to go there and back. A certain amount of your time in class is wasted, too, in organization, waiting for other students to get settled, waiting through the teacher's explanations of material that you already have mastered, etc.

- **Tutor**

PROS: most convenient, most flexible and adaptable to your own study needs and style. Generally, one-to-one tutoring is the most effective use of your time and energy. With an excellent tutor, you'll learn the best techniques, personalized for YOU. And it should be the easiest to quit if you are dissatisfied.

CONS: generally, the most expensive option

TIP: If private tutoring is out of your budget, see if you have one or two friends with whom you are fairly evenly matched academically and who might want to join you in a semi-private (2 students) or small group (3-4 students) course. Most tutors and test prep companies would be happy to accommodate you and your group. You'll save money over one-to-one private tutoring, enjoy studying with your friend/s and possibly be able to arrange the lessons in the convenience of your home or theirs.

Ask these questions before you sign up for any study program:

- Read the fine print: Find out whether you can take a complimentary trial lesson or pay for a single lesson before committing to a course.
- If you've paid for a packet of lessons or a full course, will you be issued a full refund for lessons or classes remaining if you decide to quit?

- If taking a classroom course, will you be tested to determine which class is the better fit for you? (Most classes, if they divide students up by level at all, do it by their math scores: High math scorers go to the advanced class for both Math and Reading/Writing.)
- Will you get any personal attention in the class or online course? If you have questions on homework or a practice test that aren't answered in class or online explanations, will the teacher be available to help you with them? Does the course limit you to a specific number of extra help minutes or hours (either by contract or in practice)?
- How many students will be in the class? If that is not known in advance, find out whether the class size is limited.
- Will you be offered real, recent ACT practice tests and how soon after you take each test will you get it back to review? (Some classroom courses don't return practice tests to students for a week or even longer, by which time students may have forgotten their thinking on the questions, making the tests a lot less useful as study tools.)
- Will the teacher/tutor/class go over the practice tests in full?
- In an online or in-person class, will a teacher assign Essay section practice and then read, annotate and score your practice Essays?

Once you've started on your ACT prep, you'll find the process in some ways less stressful than you may have imagined. You'll encounter specific areas in reading, grammar and usage, and math that you find you need to work on. You'll have your resources lined up – a textbook, online tools, a teacher, a class, or some combination of these – to address your areas of weakness and build your skills and knowledge overall. Taking regular practice tests will help dispel test anxiety and as you learn more, you'll start to take ownership of your achievements.



About the author, Karen Berlin Ishii:

Karen Berlin Ishii, a Brown University graduate with over twenty years' experience as an academic and test prep teacher, tutors students via video chat all over the world. She specializes in reading, writing, grammar, math, and preparation for the SAT, ACT, SSAT, ISEE and other standardized tests.

Learn more about Karen and find test prep tips and goodies at www.karenberlinishii.com.