

## The Best ACT Prep Study Resources

*by master test prep tutor Karen Berlin Ishii, [www.karenberlinishii.com](http://www.karenberlinishii.com)*

There are many ways to prepare for the ACT: take a class, work with a tutor, do an online program, or study on your own. Allow yourself at least 8-12 weeks to craft a full study plan and use only the best texts and online materials to guide you. An important factor in choosing ACT study materials is whether you will be taking the test on paper or on a computer screen.

All ACT test administrations outside the US and its territories are now [computer-based](#). That's right: no more test booklets! The ACT is expanding its computer-based testing in the US, too, so check the ACT website to see whether your test will be on paper or a computer screen. Although computer-based testing offers some small advantages to test takers, the prime benefits accrue to the test makers: it's a money maker and money saver for them. Most students, however, prefer a paper-based test in which they can read entire passages – Reading and Science sections, in particular – without scrolling, make their own notations on the test pages, endure less eye strain, etc. Another reason to be wary of taking the computer-based ACT is that it is being scored directly against those taken on paper, which puts the computer-based test taker at a disadvantage.

Nevertheless, the ACT might be the better – or only – choice for you. Here's a collection of the top prep materials for ACT study, however you take the test:

[The Official ACT Prep Guide 2024-2025](#) This is the latest edition of the official ACT book of practice tests. Some of the material in these practice tests is recycled from older exams and the online question bank is recycled material from [ACT for Dummies](#), which is not a recommended study guide (I served as Technical Editor for that book, so I know it well!). Nevertheless, it is the only official guide and has some benefits: real test questions and answer explanations. For those taking the test by computer – which includes ALL students taking the test internationally – one free official practice test in real CBT format can be accessed [HERE](#) (scroll to bottom of the page). This test is the same test as the downloadable pdf from the same link.

The ACT now offers shorter guides to the individual sections of the test: English, Mathematics, Reading and Science. These feature recycled older test material in drills, but may be useful for focused prep in individual challenge areas. Order them from the ACT website [HERE](#) or on Amazon.

### **How to use The Official ACT Prep book:**

After taking Test 1 and analyzing your results, get to work with the [Applerouth](#) guide to the ACT (see below) in a steady course of study. Every 2-3 weeks, take another practice test from **The Official ACT Prep Guide** (purchasable from the ACT [here](#), in stores, or on [Amazon](#)) and analyze your results as you did for the first one. Remember: despite the

presence of what appear to be test tips and lesson pages in this official study guide, it is NOT a course. Use it only for its set of practice tests to gauge your progress through whatever course of study you are using to prepare for the ACT. Taking weekly practice tests is not a substitute for comprehensive ACT study in a course or through a course book such as the [Applerouth](#) guide.

After taking Test 1 and analyzing your results, get to work with the [Applerouth](#) workbook and guide (see below) in a steady course of study. Every 2-3 weeks, take another practice test and analyze your results as you did for the first one.

[Applerouth's Guide to the ACT 4th Edition](#) Applerouth is terrific in all sections of the test. In my opinion – as an ACT prep tutor with over 20 years' experience – it's the best by far! And unlike the more famous test prep publishers (e.g. The Princeton Review, Kaplan, Barrons'), when Applerouth rolls out a new edition, they change more than the cover art and a few random pages: Every new edition is substantially revised with added material and depth in new areas, based on recent real ACTs, and revised chapters for topics in which students were seen to be struggling. The math chapters are particularly excellent – and challenging! The practice tests are among the best approximations of the ACT there are. Highly recommended! This book is available for purchase only from the [Applerouth website](#). Editions you may find on Amazon or on eBay may be older.

\*TIP: When you order the Applerouth book, be sure to register a user name and password. This will enable you to login to the Applerouth website and access an online pdf version of your book. Very convenient for travel – or while waiting for arrival of the bound copy of your book!

#### **How to use this book:**

This book is a great tool for self-guided study or work with a tutor. Set a manageable pace through all multiple-choice sections of the test – English, Math, Reading and Science – reading each chapter, doing example questions as you go. Then do the drills at the end of each chapter or section, marking errors, rethinking and revising them when you are done.

#### **ACT prep - what's next?**

In order to achieve your best scores, you should complete all of the Applerouth lessons and practice tests, the official online practice test, and the book of ACT official practice tests on paper. That's a full 3-6 months of after-school and weekend prep. But what if you want more? Continue with the resources below – or weave them into your study from the start:

#### **- Take more real ACTs.**

There are more real ACTs out there and whenever possible, practice with a real one. The

facsimile tests created by the big name publishers are pretty terrible, which will be obvious to you after you've immersed yourself in the real ones. Bad tests are poor training, so don't use them! The ACT is released three times a year to US-based students who order [Test Information Release](#) service (offered for most tests in December, April and June and also some other dates. Check the ACT website for relevant dates for your state). Copies of many of those tests are floating around the Web for the creative Googler. Reddit.com users often post resources to download copies. Currently, you can find a big selection [HERE](#). It is not necessary to sign in to Google to access and download these files.

#### **A few caveats about using older real ACTs:**

- Pre-2015 tests have seven passages in the Science section, while the current exam has six. The allotted time for the section is unchanged (35 minutes), but having one fewer passage will affect your pacing.
- The Writing test (Essay) is going away, as its comparable test, the SAT Essay, was eliminated in 2021. Most college admissions experts are no longer recommending that students take this optional portion of the test.
- Some test sections from older exams have been grafted onto "new" tests in the [official guidebook for the ACT](#). Preview any test you plan to take as a practice test or timed section to be sure you haven't already done it in the book.
- Test sections in recent ACTs tend to be more challenging overall, or at least include some material that is more difficult what you will find than older exams.

#### **- Read a variety of articles in a challenging periodical – daily.**

Build your reading comprehension and vocabulary for the ACT English, Reading and Essay sections by spending at least 10 minutes per day reading short articles in the New York Times or other challenging newspaper. (Get a monthly subscription to the NYT for @\$4 if you don't have one already in the family, or see if your school offers free or discounted subscriptions for students.) Try a sampling of the top stories but at least read the headlines. Then read whatever topic in the paper interests you and also the opinion pieces (editorials, movie reviews, etc.) to build rhetorical skills and comprehension.

Other good publications for challenging writing and vocabulary: The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, The Guardian (UK newspaper), Sports Illustrated, Smithsonian Magazine, New York Magazine, The New Yorker, The Atlantic, WIRED, National Geographic, GQ, Vanity Fair, Esquire.

If you want to look up 1-3 words you encounter each time, that's good, too.

#### **- Build your vocabulary by learning 1-2 new words daily.**

Download the free [Visual Vocab CORE app](#) for your iphone or android phone.

#### **Here's how to best use this app:**

- On the Home screen, touch the star at top right so it becomes white inside. This will activate "My Deck" which is your personal collection of words from the bigger list. You'll

see "My Deck" at the top of each word's picture screen so you know you have it activated.

- Then, still on the Home screen, go to the red square at top left. Click on that to access the entire word list.
  - Click the star on right side of the words you want to study TODAY. The star should turn white inside.
  - Now, you will only see those words you've starred as you flip through the flashcards in "My Deck."
  - Only quiz yourself on words you've studied with the app or kinda-sorta already know. Do not flip through the entire batch of words randomly! This will cause you to confuse the words – which is worse than not learning them at all.
  - Add 2 words/day and just drill yourself on those words. Do not do the entire list or the built-in quizzes until you've mastered the ENTIRE collection.
  - When you've mastered a word so well you don't want to see it again, unstar it in the word list or go to the left side of the word list and put an X to block it out.
- Use this app while riding on the bus or in the car or any in between time you have for a total of no more than 5 minutes a day. If you enjoy it and are learning the words, buy the advanced versions (EPIC and/or PRO), which each contain the first 50 words as review and an additional 250 new words. Before you take the SAT or ACT your final time, you should definitely know every word on the full collection of Visual Vocab apps.

Whatever course of ACT study you choose, set yourself challenging but realistic goals that keep you moving forward at a pace that does not compromise your school work. Although you may feel the going is slow – especially in math, where one or two sticky problems can easily suck up a half hour of your time – don't despair! Everything you learn through these study materials will eventually translate into points on the test. While your ACT improvement may seem inconsistent, you will see your knowledge grow – with new vocabulary, better grammar, swifter math abilities. Trust in yourself, stick to your study plan, and you can be confident that you're taking ownership of this test and will achieve your best results in the process.

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**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](http://www.karenberlinishii.com).

