

# 7 Wrong Answers About the Tests

SAT and ACT myths debunked—and tips on prepping. BY NED JOHNSON



Does a friend say the ACT is way easier than the SAT? Does your aunt tell you that no one can get into an Ivy without taking five subject tests? What's a stressed-out high schooler to do? Chill! As a test-prep geek and founder of the educational consulting firm PrepMatters, I'm here to debunk a few myths on standardized testing.

## Myth 1: Standardized tests are IQ tests.

Knowing the meanings of laconic, loquacious, or lugubrious does not prove you are smart. Nor does knowing how many real roots there are for a quadratic or the rules of logarithms, apostrophes, or parallel structure. Mastery of that information demonstrates knowledge, not intelligence. In her book *Mindset*, psychologist Carol Dweck details the benefits of approaching learning with an understanding that intelligence can grow through hard work. The first step in test prep, therefore, should be to shift how you view these tests. Combine dedicated preparation with the belief that you can (and will!) do well. You will not only perform at your best, but what your “best” can be will also keep increasing!

## Myth 2: Taking both tests will double your changes of doing well.

Yes, these tests matter. But so, too, do your grades, activities, family, friends, and oh, yeah, your sanity! If you are remarkably better at one test, it should become evident pretty quickly after some practice. If it doesn't, then you are probably like most kids and will do equally well on either. Pick the test you feel more comfortable with.

## Myth 3: The ACT is the easier test.

The ACT is a different test, not better or easier. In fact, most kids will get similar scores on both. Note though that most doesn't mean everyone—and might not mean you. For instance, you might do better on the ACT if you are a highly academic student prone to test anxiety (because the ACT does not lean on working memory as much as the SAT), or if you're a fast reader or are comfortable with the more advanced math tested on the ACT (trigonometry, conic sections, and logarithms). You might do better on the SAT if you are a sharp wiseguy (or wisegirl), since the SAT rewards those who look for “the angle,” or if you have a killer vocabulary and can decipher even the densest text, or if you are a slow reader but can approach a question analytically. It is worth exploring both tests to see if one is better for you.

## Myth 4: The SAT is more coachable than the ACT.

I hear this a lot, principally from folks who know the SAT

really well but for whom the ACT is still newish. The tests are different. So should be the preparation. Familiarize yourself with both. Take a practice test of each. Then, compare not just your scores but also your relative strengths and weaknesses on each test. Which areas of weakness are likely to be the easiest for you to improve?

## Myth 5: “Good” colleges require the SAT.

I worked with a kid for whom the ACT was surely his test. His ACT score of 34 was fantastically stronger than his PSAT scores and practice SATs. Dad, however, wondered whether “good schools” would “take” the ACT. While this concern may have been well placed years ago, it isn't now. William Fitzsimmons, dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard, states, “We accept ACT and SAT scores on an absolutely equal basis.” Good enough for me. Moreover, many “good” colleges are test-optional. You can find a list at [www.fairtest.org](http://www.fairtest.org).

## Myth 6: You should take the SAT or ACT as often as you can.

Unless you plan to start on the varsity SAT team, you are probably better served by taking the SAT only a couple of times. I am all for a lot of practice tests. Both the College Board (which owns the SAT) and ACT publish books with practice tests. There is also a wealth of other test-prep books, CDs, tutors, classes, and online options. So, please, do practice but keep in mind that some colleges may ask for all of your scores. That doesn't mean you should be afraid of taking tests more than once, but don't treat the official SAT or ACT as practice. Practice tests are for practice. The real thing is the real thing.

## Myth 7: If you take the ACT, you don't need SAT subject tests.

It's true at Yale. It's not true at Harvard. It's true at Tufts. It's not true at Williams. In short, it's all over the place. Subject tests are one-hour exams on a variety of subjects. Some colleges and universities (but certainly not all) require

or recommend one or more in addition to, or sometimes in place of, the SAT or ACT. You don't want to stress about a subject test that you won't need, but you also don't want to be unable to apply to a school because you didn't meet its basic testing requirements. Visit schools' websites, see what tests they require or recommend, and plan to take those tests. ♦

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