

When To Take the SAT (and When to Begin Preparing)

By Ender Markal

If you've opted to take the SAT over the ACT, now the question you're most likely facing is when and, if necessary, how often should you take it? Naturally, these are questions best answered by taking each student's individual situation into consideration, but there are some reasonable guidelines relevant to the majority of students. Here are some suggestions, by grade:

Freshmen, you're in luck! Students in their first year of high school should not yet be concerned with the PSAT, and almost certainly not with the SAT.

A (fairly rare) exception to this "rule" might be, for instance, if a student is performing fantastically in his or her 9th grade World History or Biology class and plans on taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses in that subject. In this case, since the material is fresh, it might be a good time to take the SAT II Subject Test in World History or Biology. Otherwise, your best bet freshman year is to expend energies toward developing a strong first-year GPA, and committing yourself to extra-curricular activities.

Sophomores might want to consider taking the PSAT or the PLAN (precursor to the ACT). Both these tests provide an invaluable opportunity for practice under real testing conditions. Not only do these tests serve as early practice, they also serve as a diagnostic for early recognition of potential problem areas. The answer key and question analysis can then be used to determine in which areas the student would benefit from additional study.

Sophomores should still be focusing primarily on their GPAs, but should also consider taking a Subject Test, if it feels appropriate. Sophomores who don't feel quite ready to take the PSAT can still find plenty of practice questions at their school or online at www.collegeboard.com (www.actstudent.org for the ACT best to stick with these official texts since all of them actual tests that have been administered in recent years).

Except under special circumstances, it is recommended that a student not take the SAT until the spring of Junior year. During the summer before junior year (since, supposedly, you'll have the time and leisure to do so!) you should start thinking about SAT preparation.

If you are also taking the PSAT, you may have done yourself a favor, since you can now prepare for the PSAT and the SAT simultaneously. While the PSAT is not necessarily something to stringently "prepare" for, students whose scores are higher than a certain will be recognized by the National Merit Corporation and thus will be eligible for certain scholarships (for more information, see <http://www.nationalmerit.org>).

Only a small percentage of students receive the prestigious recognition of Semi-Finalist; however, those who don't can qualify for other corporate scholarships. That said, for most juniors the PSAT is a practice test. In November or March of the junior year, students should take the SAT. I suggest these dates rather than the May or June dates firstly because taking them early means not taking them in the middle of final exams and secondly because you can then retake it if need to.

The SAT is offered seven times a year, and you can find the most current dates online at <http://www.collegeboard.com>. Junior year is also a great year to finish those Subject Tests if the schools you might be applying require them. Completing these exams now will make your senior year, and all the additional work it by nature entails, infinitely less stressful.

My suggestion to you upcoming Seniors is to spend the summer before your senior year downloading application forms, catalogs, and financial aid information. This way if you decide to apply for early decision you won't find yourself in a mad rush of printing and soliciting materials.

December of senior year is generally the last opportunity to retake the SAT or ACT but I highly recommend you take your last swipe at it in the fall ? firstly because you'll have given yourself the summer before your senior year to study and

secondly because the last thing you're going to want to worry about when filling out all those college applications is another pesky test that takes up 4 hours of the only free Saturday you've had in weeks.

Lastly, winter of senior year may frankly be too late for a retake. The testing deadlines of colleges and universities differ, so make sure to check the admissions page on their website to see if you're finishing your testing in time to apply.

Finally, the choice of timing is going to be entirely up to you. Decide what kind of student you are, what your strengths and weaknesses are. You know most about your study habits, learning practices and testing strategies. If you like the idea of taking the SAT while on a school break, or shortly after (when you are most likely fresh and well-slept), then consider that. If you know you're the type of student who can't even crack open the TV Guide over break, then I suggest you wait until you're back in the swing of things, motivated by the force of teacher fear, and your brain is functioning at full-speed again before taking one.

Be honest with yourself. You should only take the SAT when you feel you're best prepared. Be sure, for instance, that you've completed Algebra I and Geometry before sitting for it. If you have the option of taking a high school grammar course, and you think it will help, do so. You can practice your vocabulary and comprehension skills on a daily basis by reading good, solid, and intelligent material. Most of all, have confidence in your ability to crack the SAT after all, it was designed with you in mind.

Ender Markal is a math tutor and the founder of [SFTutors](http://sftutors.com). He has been tutoring math since 1992. He has worked with students at all levels, from first grade to college and beyond. Ender has helped many students increase their grades in school, scores on standardized tests and boost their self-confidence. His diverse background in engineering and finance gives him a unique perspective in math subjects and applications. For more information, please visit:

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