



Building Your Standardized Testing Strategy

A step-by-step guide to choosing the right test, setting your goal, and planning your prep!

Overview

If you're feeling confused or overwhelmed about the SAT or ACT, you're in the right place. Whether you're a sophomore just starting to explore college admissions, a junior trying to plan ahead, or a senior up against deadlines, this guide will help you create a clear, strategic plan that works for you.

You'll learn how to:

- ✓ Decide whether the SAT or ACT is the better fit
- ✓ Set a realistic target score based on your college goals
- ✓ Build a timeline that matches your schedule
- ✓ Understand when to retest or go test-optional

But first...

What Are Standardized Tests and Why Do They Matter?

The SAT and ACT are standardized tests used by many colleges and universities in the U.S. They measure your skills in reading, writing, math, and (in the ACT's optional section) science reasoning.

For a long time, most schools required test scores as part of the application. Then during the COVID-19 pandemic, many colleges adopted test-optional policies, which allowed students to apply without sending scores.

Now many schools are bringing test requirements back. This includes competitive universities like Yale, Dartmouth, MIT, and large public systems like Florida and Georgia.

So, do test scores still matter?

- If you're applying to test-required schools, then yes, you need a score.
- If you're applying to test-optional schools, a high score can still strengthen your application.
- Test scores can also impact scholarship eligibility, honors program admission, and placement in college-level courses.

Bottom line: standardized tests are no longer required everywhere, but they still matter. Your job is to figure out the smartest way to approach them.

 **Tip:** You can see which schools on your list require standardized test scores in the Loper app!



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🎯 Step 1: Choose Your Test – SAT vs. ACT

Before you do anything else, you need to choose which test to focus on. Colleges don't prefer one over the other, so the smart move is picking the one that plays to your strengths.

Here's a quick comparison:

Feature	SAT	ACT
Test Format	Digital, taken on Bluebook app	Online or on paper
Timing	2 hours 14 minutes, more time per question	2 hours 5 minutes (2 hours 45 minutes with science), faster pace
Answers	Multiple choice with some grid-in math questions	All multiple choice
Reading	Evidence-based, interpretive	Straightforward and direct
Math	Desmos calculator built into the test app	Bring an approved calculator
Science	No science section	Optional science section
Scoring	400 to 1600	1 to 36 composite (English, math, and reading)

 **Tip:** Take a full-length practice test for both the SAT and ACT to decide which suits you better. Pay attention to which format and pacing you prefer and where you scored higher.

Once you've picked your test, it's time to define your target score 100



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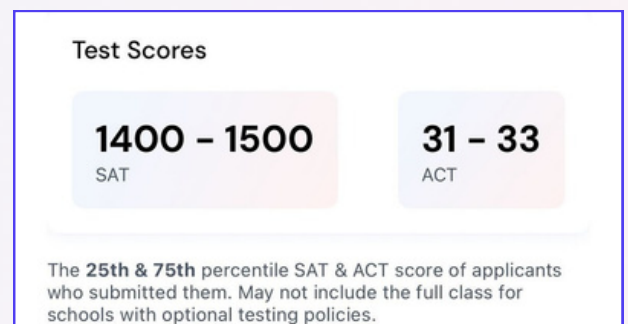
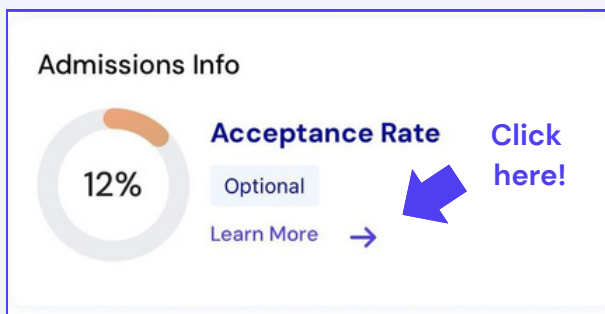
Step 2: Set Your Score Goal

Of course you want to score as high as you can, but your target score should be based on the colleges you're *actually* considering.

Establishing a target helps you track progress against your goals, plan your timeline, and decide how intense your preparation needs to be.

Tier	SAT Range	ACT Range	Examples
T20 / Ivy Level	1500+	34–36	Harvard, Stanford, Columbia, MIT, Duke, Vanderbilt, Yale, Brown
T50 / Competitive	1350–1500	30–34	Boston College, NYU, Tulane, Lehigh, UNC, Wake Forest, Villanova
T100 / Strong Options	1200–1350	27–32	Clemson, TCU, Elon, Loyola Marymount, Drexel

💡 Tip: To establish your personal target, look at the SAT/ACT score ranges for each of the schools on your list in the Loper app. Aim for a score between the 25th and 75th percentile for your top-choice school (the closer you get to the 75th percentile, the better!)



Now that you know your test AND your goal, let's define your testing timeline 



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Step 3: Choose a Prep Timeline

Different students need different amounts of time to prep. Your ideal timeline depends on:

- How far you are from your goal score
- When your test date is
- How much time you can realistically study each week

Here are three timeline options that work for most students:

6-Month Plan

Best for: Students starting early who want to improve steadily without cramming.

- Months 1–2: Take a full-length SAT and ACT to choose a test. Identify weak areas.
- Months 3–4: Focus on building skills section by section (starting with weak areas).
- Months 5–6: Shift to full-length tests once a week. Practice under real conditions & adjust.

3-Month Plan

Best for: Students with a test date this semester who want structured, consistent prep.

- Week 1: Take a diagnostic test. Identify weak sections.
- Weeks 2–8: Alternate targeted review and timed section practice.
- Weeks 9–12: Take full-length tests weekly. Build endurance and refine pacing.

1-Month Plan

Best for: Students with minimal time to prep or who are retaking the test.

- Weeks 1–2: Focus on weakest sections with short, daily practice.
- Week 3: Add timed section tests. Review mistakes closely.
- Week 4: Take 1 or 2 full-length tests to reinforce key strategies, then rest before test day.

You may be done after your first test, but if you're not happy with your score you've got options...



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✓ Step 4: What to Do if You Don't ❤️ Your Score

Not every student hits their goal score on their first try. If your SAT or ACT score is lower than you were hoping for, you've got some options!

🔄 Option #1: Retake the Test

Most students improve when they retake. A retake is a good idea if:

- You're within a few points of your goal
- You have time before application deadlines
- You have a clear idea of what went wrong or didn't study very hard for your first attempt

Tips for a better retake:

- Review your last score report to identify weak sections
- Focus your prep on the specific question types or sections that held you back
- Take full-length practice tests under real timing & testing conditions

Note: If you've taken the test 3 or more times, think carefully before retaking. Your time might be better spent on other parts of your application, like essays, grades, or extracurriculars.

🚫 Option #2: Go Test Optional

Some colleges don't require test scores at all. This is a smart route if:

- You're out of time before application deadlines
- Your test score is significantly below your target school's average
- You've already taken the test many times and studied intensely with little improvement
- Your GPA, coursework, and extracurriculars are stronger parts of your application

Here are the main testing policies you should know:

- **Test-Required:** You must submit SAT or ACT scores to apply. No exceptions.
- **Test-Optional:** Choose whether or not to send scores. If you do, they'll be considered.
- **Test-Blind:** Colleges will not look at test scores at all, even if you send them.

💡 You can check testing policies for all of the schools on your list in the Loper app!

Now let's wrap it all up and recap what we learned!



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Quick Recap

Standardized tests aren't one-size-fits-all. Whether you're testing, retesting, or skipping them altogether, the smartest move is choosing the path that plays to your strengths.

Here's what to remember:

Pick the right test

Try both the SAT and ACT, then commit to the one that feels more natural, matches your skills, and/or where you got a higher score without studying.

Set a realistic score goal

Base it on your college list, don't stress yourself out trying to get the highest possible score for no real reason. A great score can open doors, but it's just one part of your application.

Choose a timeline you can stick to

Give yourself the right amount of time to prep. A rushed plan adds significant stress to the process. Starting early gives you tons of time to prep without cramming.

Know your next move

Didn't get the score you hoped for? Retest if you think you can improve and need a higher score for your top choice. If not, go test-optional or strengthen other parts of your application.

Closing Words

You don't need to obsess over test prep to be successful. You just need to make smart, informed choices early so you're not scrambling later.

Here's what actually gives you an edge:

- Knowing whether the SAT or ACT fits you better
- Understanding what your goal score should be
- Giving yourself the right timeline for prep
- Being honest about whether a retake helps or hurts
- Keeping testing in perspective (because the rest of your app matters too)

If you do that, you're already ahead of most students. Good luck – you've got this!!

Want more resources to help with ACT & SAT test prep? Check out the free resource library at getloper.com/resources!