



Introduction to *The Digital SAT*

What's New, Why It Matters,
& How To Prepare Strategically

From the Admittedly Counseling Team
& the Advantage Testing Tutoring Team



The SAT Has Evolved *In Recent Years*

Beginning in 2024, the SAT transitioned to a fully digital format administered through the College Board. For students preparing today, the Digital SAT is now the standard version of the exam.

Although the format has changed, the role of standardized testing within competitive college admissions remains largely the same. At highly selective universities, including Harvard University, Yale University, Brown University, and Dartmouth College, standardized testing continues to serve as an important academic signal within a holistic review process.

Even at universities that maintain test-optional policies, strong scores often strengthen an application. Only two universities within the T10 remain test-optional: Duke and Northwestern. Admissions officers reviewing thousands of highly accomplished applicants frequently rely on testing to provide an additional academic benchmark that allows them to evaluate readiness across schools, grading systems, and levels of academic opportunity, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, given the rise in grade inflation.

For families navigating the new format, it is helpful to understand both what has changed and how students should approach preparation thoughtfully and strategically.

What's New In *The Digital SAT*

The Digital SAT was designed to create a more streamlined and efficient testing experience while maintaining the academic rigor expected of the exam.

While the structure of the test has evolved, the core skills being assessed remain closely aligned with college readiness.



➤ A Shorter Testing Experience

The Digital SAT now takes approximately two hours to complete, down from three hours required for the previous paper-based version. The exam includes two primary sections: (1) Reading and Writing and (2) Math.

Each section is divided into two modules. Students complete the first module and then move to a second module that continues to assess the same subject area.

➤ Adaptive Testing Structure

One notable feature of the Digital SAT is its adaptive structure. After a student completes the first module in a section, the second module adjusts slightly based on their performance.

This format allows the exam to measure student ability more efficiently while maintaining accuracy in score reporting. Strong performance on the first module typically leads to a more advanced second module, while the exam still ensures that all students are assessed across key skill areas.

➤ Shorter Reading Passages

The Reading and Writing section now presents shorter passages paired with individual questions. Instead of reading a long passage followed by several questions, students encounter concise texts that require focused analysis.

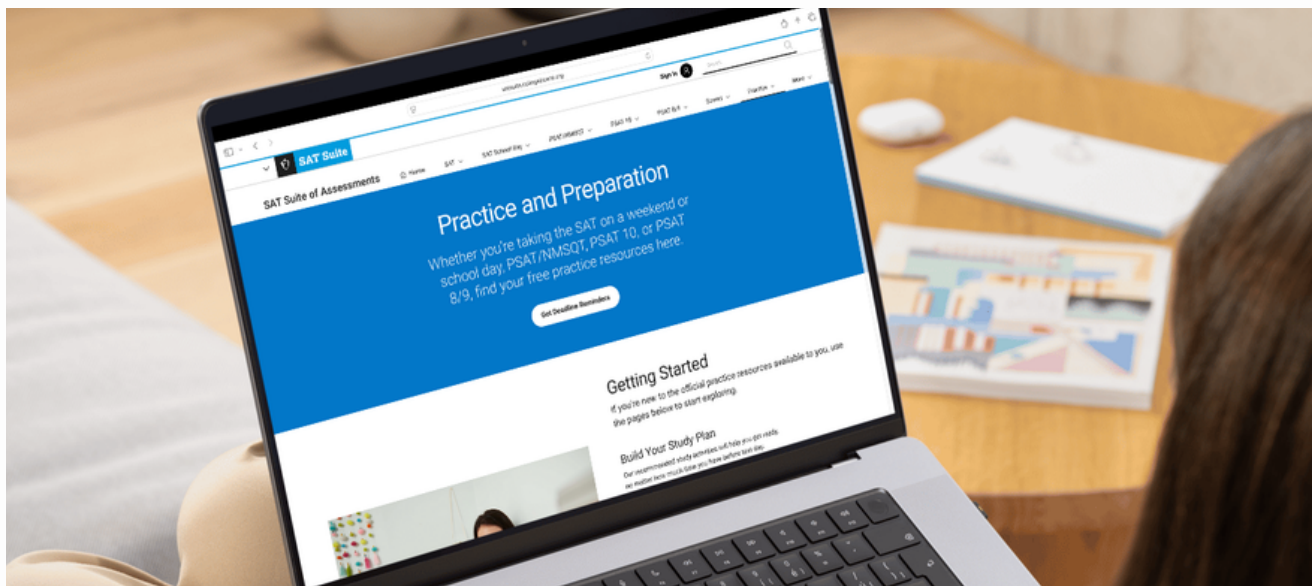
This change reduces endurance reading and places greater emphasis on precision, vocabulary in context, grammar, and rhetorical reasoning.

➤ Built-In Digital Tools

Students take the exam on a laptop or tablet using the College Board's testing application. The testing platform includes several built-in tools designed to support the digital experience, including:

- A calculator available for the entire Math section
- Annotation and highlighting tools for reading passages
- A digital reference sheet for common math formulas

These tools do not change the exam's academic expectations, but they do make the testing experience more efficient and accessible.





Why SAT Scores *Still Matter In Highly Selective Admissions*

Although the format of the SAT has changed, its role in the admissions process remains familiar.

Highly selective colleges review applications holistically, meaning that admissions decisions are based on a combination of academic performance, intellectual engagement, personal qualities, and contributions outside the classroom.

Admissions officers typically review a range of factors, including:

- Grades earned over four years of high school
- The rigor of a student's curriculum and whether they maximized the rigor available at their high school
- Teacher recommendations and classroom engagement
- Extracurricular activities and leadership
- Essays and personal qualities
- Standardized testing

Each of these elements contributes to a broader understanding of a student's readiness for demanding academic work.

Grades provide evidence of sustained performance in the classroom. Course rigor demonstrates the level of academic challenge a student has pursued. Standardized testing offers a common benchmark that helps Admissions Officers evaluate applicants from thousands of high schools with different grading systems and academic environments.

For students applying to highly selective institutions, a strong SAT score can reinforce academic readiness and provide additional clarity within a competitive applicant pool. Many universities continue to maintain test-optional policies. However, when testing is accessible and preparation has been thoughtful, submitting strong scores often strengthens an application.

Choosing not to submit scores can sometimes leave admissions officers with less academic information when evaluating a student's preparedness for rigorous coursework. Testing, therefore, remains an important component of the overall application, particularly for students pursuing admission to highly selective colleges and universities.

How Students Should Prepare *For The Digital SAT*

Although the delivery of the exam has changed, the fundamentals of preparation remain consistent. Effective preparation focuses on strengthening academic skills, becoming familiar with the testing format, and planning testing timelines thoughtfully.

Timing Preparation

Most students benefit from beginning structured preparation in late sophomore year or early junior year. At this stage, students have typically completed foundational coursework in algebra, geometry, and analytical reading.

Beginning preparation at this point allows students to build skills steadily while leaving enough time to sit for the exam more than once if improvement is needed.





Many students complete their final SAT testing by the fall of their senior year.

Students should take a diagnostic exam early in their preparation to focus their studying on the areas that will most improve their score.

Understanding The Digital Format

Because the SAT is now delivered digitally, it is important that students become comfortable with the testing platform. Practicing in the official digital interface helps students become familiar with navigation tools, timing, and the structure of the modules.

When the testing environment feels familiar, students are able to focus their attention on the exam's academic content.

Focusing on Core Academic Skills

Successful preparation emphasizes the development of strong academic skills rather than memorization of isolated strategies. **Key areas of preparation typically include:**

Reading & Writing

- Grammar and sentence structure
- Vocabulary in context
- Logical organization of ideas
- Efficient analysis of short passages

Mathematics

- Algebra and linear equations
- Problem solving and data analysis
- Geometry and basic trigonometry

The Digital SAT emphasizes reasoning, clarity of thought, and efficient problem solving rather than obscure or specialized content.

Strategic Testing Planning

Most students take the SAT two or three times. This approach allows students to become comfortable with the format and improve through targeted preparation between sittings.

Additional testing beyond three attempts often produces limited improvement, unless a student makes a significant change in their test-preparation strategy. For this reason, preparation should focus on meaningful skill development and reflection between exams rather than repeated testing without clear goals.

Common Questions *About The SAT*

➤ How many times should a student take the SAT?

Two to three sittings is typical. This allows students to gain familiarity with the exam while providing opportunities for improvement through focused preparation and, potentially, the opportunity to superscore across sittings.

Beyond three attempts, score gains are often modest without significant preparation.

➤ Should my student take the SAT or the ACT?

Both exams are widely accepted by colleges. Some students prefer the pacing and structure of the ACT, while others perform better on the SAT.

A diagnostic test of both exams can help determine which aligns more naturally with a student's strengths. Once a test is selected, preparation should focus on that exam rather than dividing effort between both.

➤ What score should my student aim for?

For highly selective colleges, a practical goal is to fall within or above the middle 50 percent score range published by the institutions on a student's college list.

Scores are always evaluated alongside other elements of the application, including GPA, course rigor, extracurricular involvement, essays, and recommendations.

➤ Can a strong SAT score compensate for weaker grades?

In most cases, it cannot. Admissions officers place significant weight on sustained academic performance in the classroom. A strong SAT score can reinforce academic readiness, but it does not replace four years of academic work reflected in a student's transcript.

➤ What if my student's score is weaker in their intended academic area?

Subsection scores may draw attention when they conflict with a student's academic focus. For example, a lower math score may raise questions for a prospective engineering or business applicant.

Admissions officers will also consider a student's grades and AP scores (or predicted IB scores) in relevant coursework when reviewing the application. Strong classroom performance can provide helpful context, and in some cases, a student may choose to retest if improvement is achievable.



Integrating Testing into a *Broader Admissions Strategy*

Standardized testing represents only one component of a comprehensive college application. However, for students targeting highly selective colleges and universities, testing remains an important academic signal that complements a strong transcript and meaningful extracurricular engagement.

Preparation is most effective when it is integrated into a broader admissions strategy that includes thoughtful academic planning, intentional extracurricular involvement, and well-informed school selection.

Through our partnership with [Advantage Testing](#), families can access individualized preparation focused on building strong and enduring academic skills and thoughtful test-taking strategies.

Families interested in learning more about how testing preparation fits into a broader admissions plan are welcome to [book a complimentary strategy call with our team](#). We are always happy to serve as a resource for families navigating these important decisions.