



## **High School Students: Testing, Testing, One, Two, Three** **By Mary Schofield**

When students reach high school, it seems they are bombarded with a battery of tests. There are enough tests offered to make it very confusing and, to make matters worse, they are titled by letters, not names, and many of the names have changed over the years. So it is hard to identify the test and what it is for. This makes it hard to tell which ones would be worth taking and which could be skipped. In this article, we'll look at a few of the most common exams:

- \* SAT Reasoning Test
- \* SAT Subject Tests
- \* PSAT/NMSQT
- \* ACT
- \* GED
- \* AP
- \* CLEP

SAT Reasoning Test -- website: [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com)

The SAT was originally named the Scholastic Aptitude Test, later renamed to the Scholastic Assessment Test, and finally renamed again to just SAT, with the letters standing for nothing. It was originally referred to as the S-A-T, not the "sat," but with the name change to letters only, most people began calling it the "Sat" (rhymes with "cat.") Most recently, it is called the SAT ("sat") Reasoning Test.

The SAT Reasoning Test is a college aptitude test which is taken by high school juniors and seniors. It covers math, writing skills, and critical thinking and is supposed to show how likely students are to succeed in college. The score is thus used by colleges for determining eligibility for admission. Most colleges have a table which correlates the SAT score to the students' grade point average (GPA) for high school. The higher the GPA, the lower the SAT score is to meet minimum admission eligibility requirements.

The current SAT Reasoning Test is 3 hours and 45 minutes long and is offered seven times from October to May in locations throughout the world. Students must register about a month prior to the date they want to take the exam, and must take the exam at an official SAT test site. The test fee is \$43. No school credit is typically given for the SAT Reasoning Test -- not college credit, and not high school credit either.

SAT Subject Tests -- website: [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com)

The SAT Subject Tests were originally called Achievement Tests, then SAT II's. Either name is still used, but most references now call this series of tests the "SAT Subject Tests." There are twenty exams available, each an hour long. The tests are used to show prospective colleges the level of knowledge and ability that a student has reached in a particular subject area.

While many colleges which do require the SAT Reasoning Test don't require the SAT Subject Tests, it's a good idea for homeschool students attempting to gain admission to a "mainstream" university to take at least three of the subject tests to demonstrate their level of knowledge. The College Board recommends that students take the SAT Subject Tests as soon as possible after completing coursework in the subject to be tested. For foreign language subject tests, students should take the SAT Subject Test after completing two years of study of the language.

The SAT Subject Tests are generally offered on the same dates and at the same sites as the SAT Reasoning Test, but students can't take both the SAT Reasoning Test and subject tests at the same sitting. Also, there is quite a bit of variation on which subject tests are available on particular test dates, so students will need to plan in advance to choose a test date which offers the exams they want to take. The subject tests cost about \$20 each. No school credit is

typically given for the SAT Subject Tests -- not college credit, and not high school credit either. However, the scores on the SAT Subject Tests may be used to determine placement in college courses upon enrollment, for example, determining that a student who has scored well on a foreign language exam should be placed in an intermediate rather than introductory college course in that language.

PSAT/NMSQT -- Test website: [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) National Merit Scholarship Corporation website: [www.nationalmerit.org](http://www.nationalmerit.org)

The PSAT/NMSQT stands for the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test. It tests math, writing skills, and critical thinking skills.

This test is generally taken by 10th or 11th grade students who fall into one of two categories (or both). First, students who plan to take the SAT tests and use the scores for college admission purposes may want to take the PSAT/NMSQT in 10th or 11th grade for practice. The test is similar to the SAT Reasoning Test and using the PSAT/NMSQT to identify weak areas can help students plan the next year or two of high school to improve. Second, students who wish to apply for scholarships should take the PSAT/NMSQT in 11th grade. The test is used by the National Merit Scholarship Corporation to assess eleventh grade students. Scores on the test are used to determine National Merit Scholars.

The PSAT/NMSQT is offered once per year, in October. It is offered at local high schools, so homeschooled students must arrange to take the test at public high schools in their communities. Because homeschooled students are given special test codes which allow the scores to be sent to their homes rather than to the school where they take the test, homeschooled students must sign up well in advance. The College Board recommends contacting the public high school where a student wishes to take the exam in June, four months prior to the test date.

The PSAT/NMSQT is two hours and ten minutes long. The test fee is \$13. No school credit is typically given for the PSAT/NMSQT -- not college credit, and not high school credit either.

ACT -- website: [www.actstudent.org](http://www.actstudent.org)

ACT originally stood for "American College Testing" program and the test was called the A-C-T, but the name has been changed to just "ACT" (rhymes with "fact.") The ACT is a college aptitude test and, like the SAT, is used to determine the knowledge and skill level attained by high school students applying for college admission. The ACT is just under three hours long and tests English, Mathematics, Reading, and Science. There is an optional 30-minute writing test which, if taken, makes the total ACT about the same length as the SAT Reasoning Test.

Some colleges require applicants to take the ACT (with or without the writing component), others require the SAT Reasoning Test, and many require that students take one or the other, but leave the choice of which one up to the student. Since ACT and SAT tests differ, it's likely that students will perform better on one than the other. Thus, students who are applying to colleges which accept either test, and where admission is very competitive, should probably take both tests and then submit the better score to the college.

The ACT is offered about six times per year at test centers throughout the world. The fee is \$30, with an additional \$14.50 for the optional writing portion. No school credit is typically given for the ACT -- not college credit, and not high school credit either.

GED -- website: [www.acenet.edu](http://www.acenet.edu)

The General Educational Development Test, called the G-E-D, is a program of the American Council on Education (ACE), and is administered in every state, in Canada, and in the U.S. military, and in some foreign locations. The exam was originally offered in 1942 and was designed for World War II veterans to finish their high school education and transition back into civilian life. The current modern format of the test is designed to show that an individual has attained the academic knowledge, critical thinking skills, and "real-life" contexts as what would be expected after attending a four-year high school program. The GED is thus used to establish equivalency to a high school diploma. According to ACE, more than 65 percent of those who take the test do so to gain entry into postsecondary education, while 30 percent take the test for employment reasons -- presumably to meet job requirements for a high school diploma.

The GED is given in five separate sections, covering reading (interpreting literature and the arts), writing skills, mathematics, science, and social studies respectively. Since it is used to demonstrate equivalence to a high school diploma, each state sets its own requirements related to who can take the exam and what score is required to pass. Some states require students to be 16 years old; others require students to be 18. However, some states with lower age requirements allow out-of-state students to test there, so it may be possible for a 16 year old who lives in a state which requires test takers to be 18 to take the exam in a neighboring state which allows 16 year olds to take it. Because of the variations, students must contact the governing authority in their own states (usually the state department of education) for specific information.

The test is offered at official GED testing centers only and warnings have recently been issued regarding entities who falsely claim to offer the GED online or via correspondence programs. The test is commonly offered several times a month and, since the total exam takes about 7 1/2 hours, the different parts may typically be taken on different days. While fees vary, expect to pay about \$100.

No school credit is typically given for the GED -- not college credit, and not high school credit either. However, since the test is used to show equivalency to a high school education, course requirements for high school graduation would effectively be waived and the student who passes the GED would be considered as equal to a high school graduate.

AP -- website: [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com)

The Advanced Placement Program (pronounced A-P) is administered by the College Board, and includes both courses and exams. This is a widely used program which was designed for high school students who are academically advanced -- ready for college-level work while still in high school. Students who pass an AP test are generally awarded up to a year of college course credit. (The actual amount of credits varies and often depends upon whether the college follows the quarter system or the semester system.) As the AP system grew, many high schools began offering "AP courses" which are college-level courses that advanced high school students may take. Because the scores on the AP are tallied for each high school offering them, having lots of students do well is a plus for a high school's own academic reputation. Thus, many high schools which offer the AP exam and preparation courses control who may take the AP exam. Very often, high schools will only allow students to sit for the AP exam if they have successfully completed the AP course offered by the school.

Even though many high schools don't allow "outsiders" to sit for the AP exams at their school, there is a way around this. Since the College Board does not require students to complete a course in order to be eligible to take the exam, homeschooled students can ask the College Board to assign them a separate test site number. This will allow a student who takes an AP exam at the local high school to avoid having his score attributed to that high school. With the removal of the possibility of having an unknown student's score affect the school's pass record, they may be willing to allow outside students to sit for the exam. It also may help to offer to pay the proctor a fee for allowing the student to sit for the exam.

The AP exams are given nationwide on the same day in May, so students have to plan ahead. There are over 30 different AP exams, each two to three hours long, on a variety of subjects including Art History, Biology, Calculus, English Literature, foreign languages, etc. As already discussed, testing centers are typically public high schools. The fee for each exam is \$84.

The AP has an excellent reputation and is probably the most widely accepted exam for obtaining college credit. The exams are rigorous and usually test the knowledge that a student would be expected to gain by attending a full-year course at college, although some exams are designed to test a semester's worth of material, and these exams tend to be two hours long rather than three.

College credit is generally awarded for passing an AP exam, however, each college sets its own requirements in this regard. Most colleges award a full semester or year of credit -- typically three to six semester credits, depending on the individual AP exam taken -- but some award fewer credits or even choose not to honor the AP exams at all. Therefore, students will need to check with the college they plan to attend to find out what is allowed.

In addition to earning college credits while still in high school, many students take AP exams to fortify their homeschool transcripts by showing, for example, that an "A" in Physics wasn't just a gift from a sympathetic homeschool mom. Also, while high school credits aren't usually given just for passing an AP test, a passing score can

be a good indicator that the student has independently studied the subject well enough to earn a year's worth of high school credit.

Further, the high school credit will usually be listed awarded as "honors" level, meaning that grade point averages are boosted a full point (an "A" is equal to five grade points rather than the typical four.)

CLEP -- website: [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com)

The College-Level Exam Program, called the CLEP (rhymes with shlep) is another program by the College Board. Most CLEP exams are designed to test knowledge equivalent to what would be covered in a semester-long first or second year college course, although some test a full year's worth of material. Thus colleges which grant credit based on passing a CLEP exam typically award the same number of credits for passing the exam that they would award for successfully taking a similar course. Available are over 30 exams in various college subject areas.

Colleges have their own "cut scores" on CLEP tests as they determine when to give credit or when to allow the test to stand as fulfillment of a course requirement, but without credit, thus allowing the student to have some flexibility in not repeating the study of material they already know but going on to substitute another course with "new" content. Some colleges also actually require tuition for the hours they are posting on a student's transcript via CLEP testing -- and this, too, varies greatly both in terms of a proportion of the credit hour fee vs the whole fee and based upon whether the student is going to pay for substitution hours. The bottom line is that "one set of rules applies to all" simply is not the case.

Anyone can take a CLEP exam at any time; there is no age requirement. Each college sets its own requirements as far as granting credit by exam, how many credits per exam, and which exams will work. There is a wide variation and that changes from state to state and even among different regions of the country. Therefore, students must check with each college to find out what their policy is. For example, in California, it is quite common to have colleges allow up to 30 credits by exam, which is the equivalent of about one year of study. However, which exams are acceptable to the college varies. A lot of California's colleges allow some CLEP exams but not others. This seems more common here than a straight yes or no to CLEPs.

CLEP exams are offered at test centers throughout the world, usually local colleges or private test center businesses. The tests exams are available any time the test center will schedule them, as opposed to being offered nationwide on a specific date. So students can generally contact a test center and schedule an exam at their convenience. Fees for the exams are \$65 each, although test centers generally charge an additional fee for proctoring the exam.

In addition to earning college credits, homeschooled students are often awarded "honors level" credits in the subject for which they took and passed a CLEP exam. This is typically handled in exactly the same way as for AP exams.

#### Conclusion

Just as there is a variety of tests available, the acceptability of tests varies among states, regions, and schools. For college admissions, ACT seems to be more commonly used in the East and Midwest, while SAT is more common in the West. For high school equivalency, the GED is recognized nationwide, but eligibility requirements vary. For earning college credits, one generality that seems to hold true is that the APs are more widely accepted than the CLEPs, but again, each college sets its own testing requirements just as they set their own admissions requirements.

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