

#### HEARN CONSULTING

- The ACT Playbook
- A structured guide to understanding the ACT, building a study plan, and tracking your progress from first diagnostic to test day.
- STUDENT PLAYBOOK
- Bryan Hearn, Ed.D. · [www.hearn.consulting](http://www.hearn.consulting)

#### 01

- Understanding the ACT

The ACT is accepted by virtually all U.S. colleges and is a direct alternative to the SAT. It tests English, Math, Reading, and Science, with an optional Writing section. Your composite score is the average of the four section scores, rounded to the nearest whole number.

The ACT is fundamentally a speed test. With 215 questions in 2 hours and 55 minutes, pacing is the single most important factor in your performance. Understanding the test structure — and planning your approach to each section — is where preparation starts.

#### **Test Structure**

Section	Time	Questions	Per Question	Score Range
English	45 min	75	36 seconds	1–36
Math	60 min	60	60 seconds	1–36
Reading	35 min	40	52.5 seconds	1–36
Science	35 min	40	52.5 seconds	1–36
Writing (optional)	40 min	1 essay	—	2–12

### ACT vs. SAT: Key Differences

Neither test is inherently easier. The right choice depends on your strengths.

Factor	How They Differ
<b>Pacing</b>	The ACT is significantly faster-paced. The SAT gives you more time per question. If time pressure is your biggest challenge, the SAT may be a better fit.
<b>Science section</b>	The ACT has a dedicated science section that tests data interpretation and reasoning — not science facts. If you're strong with graphs and experimental logic, this is an advantage.
<b>Math scope</b>	ACT math is broader (includes some pre-calculus) but questions are often more straightforward than SAT's puzzle-style math.
<b>Adaptive vs. fixed</b>	The digital SAT adapts difficulty based on your performance. The ACT is the same for everyone. Some students prefer the consistency of the ACT.
<b>Reading style</b>	ACT reading uses long passages (750+ words) with 10 questions each. SAT uses short passages (25–150 words) with 1 question each.
<b>Calculator policy</b>	ACT allows calculators on Math only. SAT allows them throughout + built-in Desmos.

### Score Context

Composite	Percentile	What It Means
34–36	99th+	Top 1% nationally. Competitive for most selective schools.
31–33	95th–98th	Highly competitive. Strong for most top-50 schools.
28–30	88th–94th	Very strong. Competitive for selective state flagships.
24–27	74th–87th	Above average. Room to grow in targeted areas.
20–23	50th–73rd	Average range. Significant improvement possible with focused prep.

## Required Materials

### ESSENTIAL RESOURCES

- The Official ACT Prep Guide (ACT, Inc.) — the definitive resource with real practice tests
- ACT Online Prep (act.org) — official practice questions and full tests
- ACT Academy — free practice with personalized recommendations

#### THE ACT MINDSET

The ACT rewards efficiency. It's not about knowing more — it's about applying what you know faster. Every strategy in this playbook is designed to help you work accurately at the pace the ACT demands.

### 02

- Your Diagnostic Baseline

Take a full-length, timed ACT practice test using official materials. Follow the exact timing for each section — no pauses, no phones, no exceptions. This is your starting point, and its usefulness depends entirely on how seriously you take it.

## How to Take Your Diagnostic

<b>Use official materials</b>	<b>The Official ACT Prep Guide or act.org. Third-party tests often don't match the real difficulty and pacing.</b>
<b>Time each section exactly</b>	45 min English, 60 min Math, 35 min Reading, 35 min Science. Use a real timer.
<b>Take it in one sitting</b>	With proper breaks (10 min after Math, 5 min after Reading). Simulate real conditions.
<b>Don't study beforehand</b>	The diagnostic measures where you are right now.
<b>Use a bubble sheet</b>	If possible. The physical act of bubbling takes time and it's part of the real experience.

**Diagnostic Score Entry**

Metric	Your Score
Date of Practice Test	_____
English Score	_____
Math Score	_____
Reading Score	_____
Science Score	_____
Composite Score	_____
Target Composite	_____
Gap to Close	_____
Test Date (planned)	_____
Weeks Until Test Day	_____

**Section-by-Section Reflection**

English: How did you feel about pacing? Did you finish all 75 questions? Which types of questions tripped you up?

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**Math: Did you run out of time? Were there content areas (geometry, trig, etc.) where you were guessing? How many questions did you skip?**


**Reading: Did you finish all 4 passages? Which passage type was hardest? Was time or comprehension the bigger issue?**


**Science: Were you able to read the graphs and tables efficiently? Did the conflicting viewpoints passage feel manageable?**


**Overall: Which section has the most room for improvement? Where should you focus first?**


### **Setting Your Target**

With focused preparation over 8–12 weeks, most students can improve 2–4 composite points. Gains of 5+ points are possible but require sustained, intensive work. A student going from 24 to 28 is very achievable. A student going from 24 to 32 needs a longer runway.

## BE STRATEGIC

If your section scores are uneven (e.g., English 30, Science 22), focus heavily on your weakest section. Raising a 22 to 26 has a bigger impact on your composite than raising a 30 to 32.

### 03

- Section Strategy: English

The English section gives you 45 minutes for 75 questions — about 36 seconds per question. That sounds fast, but many questions are quick if you know the rules. It tests two broad areas: conventions of standard English (grammar, punctuation, sentence structure) and production of writing (rhetoric, organization, style).

This is often the easiest section to improve because the rules are finite and learnable. If you memorize the grammar rules the ACT tests, you will see gains.

### What You'll See

Five passages, each with 15 questions. You'll see underlined portions and choose the best version.

<b>Conventions (~51%)</b>	Grammar, punctuation, sentence structure. These have clear right/wrong answers based on rules.
<b>Production of Writing (~29%)</b>	Organization, cohesion, transitions. These ask about the best way to structure ideas.
<b>Knowledge of Language (~20%)</b>	Word choice, tone, conciseness. These ask about precision and style.

### High-Frequency Grammar Rules

These rules account for the majority of conventions questions. Master these and you'll get most grammar questions right.

<b>Comma with FANBOYS</b>	<b>Use a comma before for/and/nor/but/or/yet/so ONLY when joining two complete sentences. "I ran, and I jumped" (correct). "I ran, and jumped" (wrong).</b>
<b>Comma with introductory phrases</b>	Always use a comma after an introductory phrase: "After the game, we went home."
<b>Comma with nonessential info</b>	Information that can be removed without changing meaning gets commas: "My brother, who lives in Texas, is visiting."
<b>Semicolons</b>	A semicolon connects two complete, related sentences. If either side can't stand alone, the semicolon is wrong.
<b>Colons</b>	Use after a complete sentence to introduce a list, explanation, or elaboration. What comes before the colon must be a complete thought.
<b>Apostrophes</b>	It's = it is. Its = possessive. Who's = who is. Whose = possessive. These show up on almost every test.

**English Pacing Strategy**

<p>Work at 30 seconds per question</p> <p>English is the fastest section. If you get stuck on a question, mark it and move on. The goal is to finish all 75 questions in 45 minutes. Speed comes from recognizing patterns, not from deeper thinking.</p>
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**Rhetoric & Organization**

About 49% of the section is production of writing — organization, transitions, and rhetorical choices. These are harder to teach but more predictable than you think:

<b>Transitions</b>	<b>"Therefore," "In addition," "On the other hand" — link sentences logically. Read the full context.</b>
<b>Topic sentences</b>	Each paragraph has a main point. Questions about the best opening or closing sentence test whether you understand the paragraph's purpose.
<b>Word choice &amp; tone</b>	Match the writer's tone. If the passage is formal, pick formal language. If it's conversational, pick conversational language.
<b>Sentence placement</b>	Where does a sentence best fit? Read before and after.
<b>Pronoun consistency</b>	Make sure pronouns match their antecedents (singular/plural, clear reference).

**What types of grammar errors do you make most often? List 3-4 and commit to studying them.**

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**How quickly do you read each passage? If it's taking more than 3 minutes, what can you skim?**

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04

- Section Strategy: Math

You have 60 minutes for 60 questions — exactly 1 minute per question on average. But some questions are 30-second gimmes and others are 3-minute struggles. The key is triage: know what to do fast, what to skip, and what to guess on.

ACT math is broad (pre-algebra through pre-calculus) but not conceptually deep. Most questions test straightforward skill application. The hard ones are usually hard because of multi-step setup, not exotic concepts.

### Content Breakdown

Topic	% of Test	Question Count (est.)
Pre-Algebra & Number Theory	~15%	~9 questions
Elementary Algebra	~15%	~9 questions
Intermediate Algebra	~15%	~9 questions
Coordinate Geometry	~15%	~9 questions
Plane Geometry	~15%	~9 questions
Trigonometry	~10%	~6 questions

### Must-Know Formulas

The ACT doesn't provide most formulas. Know these cold:

<b>Slope</b>	$m = (y_2 - y_1) / (x_2 - x_1)$
<b>Distance</b>	$d = \sqrt{(x_2 - x_1)^2 + (y_2 - y_1)^2}$
<b>Midpoint</b>	$M = ((x_1 + x_2)/2, (y_1 + y_2)/2)$
<b>Circle</b>	$x^2 + y^2 = r^2$ (centered at origin)
<b>Quadratic formula</b>	$x = [-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}] / 2a$
<b>Pythagorean theorem</b>	$a^2 + b^2 = c^2$
<b>Area of triangle</b>	$A = \frac{1}{2}bh$
<b>Area of circle</b>	$A = \pi r^2$
<b>Circumference</b>	$C = 2\pi r$
<b>Volume of rectangular solid</b>	$V = lwh$
<b>FOIL &amp; factoring</b>	Recognize $(a + b)^2 = a^2 + 2ab + b^2$

### Math Strategy: Triage

<b>Questions 1–15</b>	Usually straightforward plug-and-chug. Aim for 1 min each, faster if possible.
<b>Questions 16–45</b>	Mixed difficulty. Some harder conceptually, some just more algebra.
<b>Questions 46–60</b>	Hardest. Multi-step, can involve geometry + algebra, or require clever approaches. If stuck after 90 sec, skip.

### The Skip Strategy

On hard questions: Solve up to where you get stuck. Write down partial answers. If you run out of time, guess. You might get partial credit on grid-in. On multiple choice, even a guess at the end has a 20% chance.

### Calculator Use (Allowed on All Math)

Use your calculator for arithmetic, but not for setup. Calculators are slow; know when to use mental math or algebra instead. Graph functions on your calculator to check your work on coordinate geometry questions.

**Which math topics make you freeze? (e.g., trigonometry, coordinate geometry, sequences)**


**How do you usually run out of time? Do you get stuck on one problem, or do you rush through without checking?**


05

- Section Strategy: Reading

You have 35 minutes for 4 passages and 40 questions — about 8.75 minutes per passage. That includes reading, marking up, and answering 10 questions. Reading section difficulty comes from time pressure and comprehension, not tricky wording.

The passages are 750+ words each — long enough that you can't skim and hope. You need a strategy for reading and a system for finding evidence.

## Passage Types

Type	Content	Strategy
Prose Fiction	Short story excerpt, memoir	Track character emotions and motivation. Know what the character wants.
Literary Narrative	Humanistic nonfiction (biography, history)	Identify the main idea and supporting details. Watch for shifts in tone.
Social Science	Psychology, sociology, history, economics	Question asks about author's argument. Identify thesis and evidence.
Natural Science	Biology, chemistry, physics, astronomy	Follow the logical flow. Know the hypothesis, method, and conclusion.

## Two Approaches: Skim vs. Read

Skim-First Approach	Read-First Approach
<b>Read the first paragraph fully</b>	Read the entire passage at normal pace
<b>Skim middle paragraphs for topic sentences</b>	Go back to the passage for each question
<b>Read last paragraph</b>	More time on reading = less time looking back
<b>Faster for detail questions — you know where to find answers</b>	Better for big-picture questions
<b>Risk: Missing nuance or main idea</b>	Risk: Slower, but more confident answers

Most students do better with Read-First. You'll spend 4 minutes reading, 4–5 minutes answering questions.

### Active Reading Marks

As you read, mark: (1) Main idea of each paragraph. (2) Character names and their roles. (3) Shifts in tone. (4) The author's argument (if nonfiction). These marks are your roadmap when you go back to find evidence.

**Which passage type is hardest for you? Why?**

**How many questions do you usually get wrong? Are they inference questions, detail questions, or vocab-in-context?**

06

- Section Strategy: Science

You have 35 minutes for 6–7 passages and 40 questions. The ACT Science section is not a science exam — it's a data interpretation and reasoning exam. You don't need to know biology or chemistry. You need to read graphs, tables, and experimental descriptions and answer predictable questions.

### What Science Tests

<b>Data interpretation</b>	<b>Read graphs, tables, and charts. Identify trends. Predict values. (Most common)</b>
<b>Experimental design</b>	Understand what scientists are testing, what variables they control, what they measure.
<b>Conflicting viewpoints</b>	Two scientists or theories disagree. You identify their positions and evaluate evidence.
<b>Science content</b>	Very minimal. You don't need to memorize periodic tables or anatomy. Context is given.

### Passage Types & Frequency

Type	Count	Focus
Data Representation (graphs/tables)	2–3 passages	Read axes, trends, extrapolation
Research Summaries (experiments)	2–3 passages	Method → Results → Conclusion
Conflicting Viewpoints	1 passage	Compare positions, use evidence to evaluate

### Science Pacing Strategy

	<p>30 seconds per question</p> <p>Science is fastest if you're comfortable with graphs. If a question stumps you after 45 sec, skip and come back. Many questions are quick pattern-matching: "Look at Figure 2. What's the trend?"</p>
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### Graph Reading Essentials

<b>Axes</b>	<b>Always read the labels. X-axis? Y-axis? Units? Is it linear or logarithmic?</b>
<b>Trends</b>	Does it go up, down, or stay flat? Is the relationship linear or curved?
<b>Extrapolation</b>	Questions often ask "If X continues, what happens to Y?" Extend the trend.
<b>Multiple lines</b>	Which line is which? Read the legend. Identify the difference in slope or position.
<b>Anomalies</b>	One data point doesn't fit the trend. Acknowledge it but recognize the overall pattern.

**How comfortable are you reading graphs? (1 = panicked, 5 = confident)**


**What trips you up most: reading the graph axes, identifying trends, or predicting values?**


**07**

- The Optional Writing Section

The ACT Writing section is optional and comes after a 10-minute break. You get 40 minutes to write one essay in response to a prompt with multiple viewpoints.

**When to Take It**

Take the Writing section if: (1) Your target school requires or recommends it (check their website). (2) You're a strong writer. (3) You want a backup skill if one section goes poorly.

Skip it if: (1) Your target schools say it's optional and don't use it. (2) You're weak on time management. (3) You haven't practiced ACT essays.

### Essay Scoring & Framework

Score Range	What It Means	What to Emphasize
11–12	Excellent	Clear position, sophisticated analysis, specific examples
9–10	Proficient	Clear position, good use of evidence, mostly well-organized
7–8	Adequate	Clear position, some evidence, meets basic requirements
5–6	Partially adequate	Position may be unclear, limited evidence
Below 5	Weak	Lacks position, minimal evidence, disorganized

### Essay Structure (40 minutes)

<b>Read the prompt (2 min)</b>	<b>Identify the three perspectives and the central issue.</b>
<b>Plan your position (5 min)</b>	Do you agree with one view? Synthesize multiple? Pick a position.
<b>Draft your essay (30 min)</b>	Introduction, body paragraphs with evidence, conclusion.
<b>Edit &amp; revise (3 min)</b>	Check for clarity and flow. Fix obvious errors.

Your essay should:

1. State a clear position in your introduction.
2. Use one body paragraph per main point (usually 2–3 paragraphs).
3. Reference the three perspectives given in the prompt.
4. Use specific examples (from personal experience, current events, or history).
5. Write 3–5 paragraphs total (quality over length).

**Why are you considering the Writing section? What's your target school's policy?**


**What's one area of essay writing you'd like to improve before test day?**


08

- Building Your Study Plan

The most effective ACT prep is structured, focused, and data-driven. You're not doing random practice. You're targeting your specific weak spots and tracking your progress.

### **Weekly Study Template**

Day	Task	Time
Monday	Content review (grammar rules, formulas, passage types)	45 min
Tuesday	Timed practice (one section)	50 min
Wednesday	Error review from Tuesday. Drill weak topics.	40 min
Thursday	Timed practice (another section or mini-test)	50 min
Friday	Error review. Update tracker. Plan next week.	30 min
Saturday	Full-length practice test (optional or every other week)	3 hours
Sunday	Review Saturday's test or rest	Variable

### Core Study Principles

<b>Do timed practice</b>	<b>Untimed practice is not practice. Always use a timer.</b>
<b>Review errors deeply</b>	Don't just check the answer key. Understand why you missed it.
<b>Track your patterns</b>	Use the Error Log. What types of questions trip you up?
<b>Focus on your weakest section first</b>	Then balance across all four sections.
<b>Take full tests every 2–3 weeks</b>	See how sections interact under pressure.
<b>Adjust based on data</b>	If your English score plateaus, spend more time on production of writing.

### 10-Session Prep Plan (8–12 Weeks)

Session	Focus	Deliverable
1–2	Diagnostic test + error analysis	Understand weaknesses
3–4	Content review + targeted drills	Master grammar rules, formulas
5	Full-length practice test	Track improvement
6–7	Section-specific strategy practice	Improve pacing & accuracy
8	Full-length practice test	Refine strategies
9	Final weak-spot drills	Polish skills
10	Final full-length test	Confidence & final adjustments

	<p>Study Rhythm</p> <p>Consistency beats intensity. 45 minutes a day, 5 days a week for 10 weeks will outpace weekend cramming every time.</p>
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<b>What's your realistic weekly study time? How many hours can you commit?</b>

<b>Which section will you tackle first, and why?</b>

- Practice Test Tracker & Error Log

Data is your friend. Track every practice test and every error. Over time, patterns emerge. You'll see that you miss most of the trig questions, or that you misread comparison questions, or that you run out of time on science. Once you see the pattern, you can fix it.

### Score Tracker

Fill in your score after each full-length test:

Test	English	Math	Reading	Science	Composite	Date
Diagnostic	—	—	—	—	—	—
Practice 1	—	—	—	—	—	—
Practice 2	—	—	—	—	—	—
Practice 3	—	—	—	—	—	—
Practice 4	—	—	—	—	—	—
Final	—	—	—	—	—	—

### Error Log Template

After each test, fill this out for every question you missed or left blank:

Section	Q#	Type	What Happened	Root Cause
English	23	Grammar	Chose wrong answer	Confused comma rules
Math	42	Algebra	Skipped—no time	Took too long on earlier questions
Reading	34	Inference	Misread passage	Didn't mark main idea
Science	8	Data interp	Misread axis	Skimmed graph labels

### Error Categories

<b>Careless/timing errors</b>	<b>You knew the concept but rushed or made a silly mistake.</b>
<b>Conceptual gaps</b>	You don't fully understand the rule or method.
<b>Strategy error</b>	You approached the problem wrong or misread what it's asking.
<b>Time management</b>	You ran out of time before finishing.
<b>Misread the passage</b>	You didn't understand what the text or graph was saying.

**After your first full-length test, what patterns do you notice in your errors?**


**Which error category happens most? (Careless, conceptual, strategy, timing, or misreading)**


- Mental Game & Test Anxiety

The ACT is designed to create time pressure. Your brain gets flooded with adrenaline. Some students channel that into focus. Others panic. The mental game is learnable.

### Pacing Mindset

The ACT is a marathon with sprints. You don't need to finish every question. You need to finish most questions accurately. Speed comes from confidence, not panic.

	<p>Permission to skip</p> <p>Hardest truth: Skipping a question in 10 seconds and moving on is better than burning 3 minutes on a problem that'll stump you anyway. Finishing all 60 questions in Math means some of them are rushed guesses. Getting 50 questions correct at 45 questions confident is a smarter play.</p>
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### Anxiety Management Strategies

<b>Before the test</b>	<b>Sleep the night before. Eat breakfast. Review formulas, not new content. Arrive 20 minutes early.</b>
<b>During the test</b>	If panic hits: close your eyes, breathe for 10 seconds, read the next question. Tunnel vision helps.
<b>Time awareness</b>	Check the time every 10 questions. If you're on pace, keep going. If you're behind, triage (skip harder questions).
<b>Thought reframing</b>	"This is hard" = "I'm being challenged, which means I'll learn something." "I'm running out of time" = "I'm using my 60 minutes, which is the strategy."
<b>After the test</b>	Don't obsess over one question. You can't change it. Shift focus to what you learned.

### Reframing Hard Questions

Hard questions are not failures. They're information. If you get stuck on a hard question, you have two good options:

1. Skip it, come back to it with fresh eyes at the end.
2. Make your best guess and move on. You don't lose points for wrong answers.

<b>When you get stuck on a hard question, what do you usually do? Is that helping your score?</b>

<b>What self-talk can you use when time pressure hits? (e.g., "I'm on pace," "I can skip this.")</b>

11

- Test Day Preparation

Test day is not the day to try something new. You've done the work. Now it's execution.

### **One Week Before**

<b>Review your error log</b>	<b>Skim your most common mistakes. Brief reminders only.</b>
<b>Taper your study</b>	Wednesday or Thursday, take one more full-length test. Then rest.
<b>Confirm logistics</b>	Know the test center address, parking, arrival time. Get there 20 minutes early.
<b>Prep your materials</b>	Approved calculator, ID, pencils (#2), eraser. Put them in a bag.
<b>Sleep</b>	Get 8 hours Thursday and Friday nights. Don't stay up cramming.

### **Night Before**

Review one page of notes (formulas, grammar rules). Then stop. Your brain has absorbed what it's going to absorb. Cramming now only breeds anxiety.

Lay out your clothes. Eat a normal dinner. Get to bed on time.

### **Test Day Morning**

Eat a real breakfast (protein + carbs). Avoid caffeine if you're not used to it. Get there early. Use the restroom before you enter the room.

### **During the Test**

<b>English (45 min)</b>	<b>36 sec/question. If stuck, skip and mark to return.</b>
<b>Math (60 min)</b>	1 min/question average. Triage hard questions at the end.
<b>Break (10 min)</b>	Bathroom, water, breathe. Don't talk about the test.
<b>Reading (35 min)</b>	Read passages fully, mark actively. Answer confidently.
<b>Break (5 min)</b>	Similar to the 10-minute break.
<b>Science (35 min)</b>	Read graph axes carefully. Identify trends. Answer.
<b>Writing (optional, 40 min)</b>	Plan 5 min. Draft 30 min. Edit 5 min.

**After the Test**

Don't obsess. You can't change it. Focus instead on: Did you execute your strategy? Did you manage time well? What will you do differently on a retake (if needed)?

Your score report comes in 2–8 weeks. When it arrives, review which sections improved and which stalled. That informs your next move.

<b>What's your plan to manage anxiety on test day?</b>

<b>What will you do immediately after the test to celebrate your effort?</b>

- Multi-Year Timeline & Score Strategy

The ACT is part of a longer college application arc. Plan your testing timeline, understand superscoring, and know your options for retakes.

### Testing Timeline Options

<b>Junior year (fall)</b>	<b>October or September ACT. Results in by November. Leaves time for a retake in December.</b>
<b>Junior year (winter)</b>	December ACT. Results by February. Retake in February if needed.
<b>Junior year (spring)</b>	April ACT. Results by May. Limited time for retakes, but some colleges accept June/July scores.
<b>Senior year</b>	September or October ACT. Do this only if junior year testing didn't go as planned.

### Understanding Superscoring

Most colleges use superscoring: They take your best English score from any test, your best Math from any test, etc., and combine them for your best composite.

Example: Test 1 (English 32, Math 28, Reading 30, Science 29 = 29.75 → 30 composite). Test 2 (English 31, Math 31, Reading 30, Science 31 = 30.75 → 31 composite). Your superscore is English 32, Math 31, Reading 30, Science 31 = 31 composite.

Implication Retaking is often worth it. One section improved on your second test? That can push your composite even if other sections didn't budge.
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### Retake Strategy

Take the test once. Get your score. Decide:

1. You're happy with it → Submit.
2. One section dragged you down → Retake in 4–6 weeks after targeted prep.
3. You felt rushed → Retake with better pacing and time management.

Most students who retake see improvement. Plan for the possibility, but don't assume you'll need it.

### College Submission Checklist

<b>Score reporting</b>	<b>Ask ACT to send your score(s) to schools (free for up to 4 schools).</b>
<b>Deadline</b>	Know your schools' application deadlines. Some are early action (Nov 1), some are regular decision (Jan 1–15).
<b>Score choice</b>	Some schools want all scores; some allow score choice. Check each school's policy.
<b>Confirmation</b>	Schools typically confirm receipt of scores within 1–2 weeks.

<b>When do you plan to take the ACT? (Month of junior year or senior year)</b>

<b>What composite score will make you happy? What's your reach score?</b>