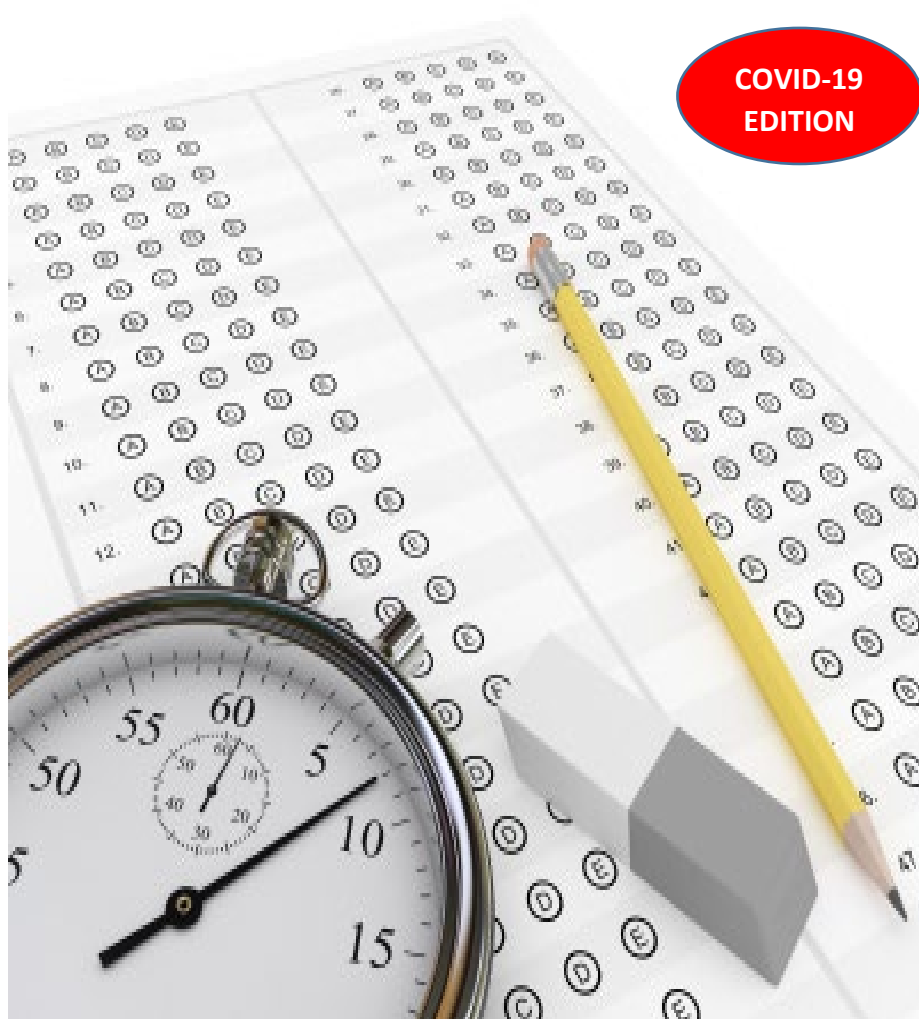


Parent Guide

ACT • PSAT • SAT

COVID-19
EDITION



Jason Franklin
Test Prep Specialist

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Why this parent guide?

I began doing ACT prep back in 1995. That was a long time ago. I was single with no children. Fast forward to today. My wife and I have eight children. There is an 18-year gap between our first and last.

I have had the privilege of working with some of the best students in Central Illinois. It has been an honor as I have seen the potential and promise of the next generation. As of this writing, I have personally trained over 20,000 students for the ACT through my in-person classes.

During that time, I also have trained students for the SAT. However, the SAT kept making changes to their test and the ACT continued to grow in popularity. It also seemed clear that the ACT was the superior test based on how colleges and universities were connecting more scholarships to the ACT than the SAT.

In 2012 we debuted my ACT prep online video class and then my SAT version in 2020. It has also been a blessing as I have learned a lot from students from around the country. My online video class students are truly exceptional, producing almost the same results as my in-person class students.

Through the years, my students and their parents graciously shared – and continue to share – what they were learning through the college selection process. This has allowed me to organize the College Bound Seminar Series, family events where I share that information with other families.

I also constantly monitor the standardized test industry to keep track of the ACT, SAT, PSAT, and other variables that may impact my children as well as my students (i.e. the PARCC exam).

When my eldest daughter entered her high school years, I knew what we needed to do based on what I had learned from thousands of my former students.

When the Illinois State Board of Education began “playing” with standardized tests – PSAE, ACT, PARCC, PSAT, and SAT – my family was not confused. I knew what was happening. However, I soon learned through emails and phone calls from parents that there was a lot of confusion being created by misinformation being spread (unfortunately) through too many high schools and media outlets.

Let me be clear: I have a lot of respect for high school administrators, guidance counselors, and teachers. They have a tremendous amount of work placed upon them. Unfortunately, the No Child Left Behind Act and Common Core have radically changed public education. It is nearly impossible for anyone working in public schools to be fully vested in their responsibilities at school while attempting to keep up with the standardized test industry, especially the increased pressure due to COVID-19.

This is why I do it. I want to be able to help families through all this confusion. A high school student has a limited time to prepare and maximize a college admissions exam score like the ACT, and families cannot afford to fall behind because of misinformation.

For years I have thought about doing this parent guide based on all the questions I have fielded over the years. I had been gradually working on it with no sense of urgency. However, that changed at the beginning of the 2017 – 2018 school year.

That year I had three daughters in a public Illinois high school, and I was surprised how much confusion existed regarding the ACT, SAT, and PSAT. Then I received an email from a parent (shared later in this guide) that made me realize that I needed to finish this guide immediately.

This guide is still a work in progress, so if you have any suggestions, please let me know. I want this guide to be a blessing to your family and others.

Sincerely,

Jason

Jason Franklin, Jason.Franklin@BetterPrepSuccess.com

The Re-Designed SAT

Common Core was launched in 2009. As part of this initiative, the White House wanted a national standardized test that would measure Common Core progress. Originally, this was going to be the PARCC exam. PARCC was a failure, so the administration asked the ACT and SAT to re-design their exams to align with Common Core.

The ACT said no. The ACT is a college performance test, measuring whether students have the academic skills to be successful at the next level – college. The ACT said they could not align their test with Common Core standards because that would mean making the test easier.

The SAT said yes, they would change their test. David Coleman, the architect of Common Core and current president of the College Board (one of the most misleading names in America as they are not affiliated with any college – they are known for the SAT and AP tests), was the person who re-designed the SAT and the new version debuted in March of 2016.

Because the ACT has been the most popular college admissions exam nationally and internationally since 2011 among college-bound students, Coleman changed the SAT layout to be more like the ACT.

Coleman believes everyone should go to college, regardless of their academic ability, so he made the SAT easier to complete. That does not necessarily mean a student will get a higher score or even get into college. Colleges and universities set the standards for admissions, not Coleman.

According to federal statistics, out of all the students that have attended a four-year university this century, only 36% graduate in four years.

An “easier-to-complete” test does not necessarily help colleges and universities pick student that will be able to meet the challenges of earning an undergraduate degree in four years.

ACT/SAT Test Components

The SAT is made up of three tests.

Reading Test:

65 minutes (1 hour, 5 minutes)

52 questions

Writing & Language Test (i.e. English):

35 minutes

44 questions

Math Test:

80 minutes (1 hour, 20 minutes)

58 questions

The ACT is made up of four tests.

English Test:

45 minutes

75 questions

Reading Test:

35 minutes

40 questions

Math Test:

60 minutes (1 hour)

60 questions

Science Test:

35 minutes

40 questions

Notice that the SAT has two tests over one hour in length, while the ACT has one that is 60 minutes and the other three are 45 minutes or less. Shorter tests tend to be better for students because it is easier to focus and pace effectively.

ACT/SAT Similarities

The “old” SAT penalized students for guessing, but that was changed to be like the ACT which has never penalized a student for guessing.

Both have a math test, a reading test, and an English test.

Both exams are approximately three hours long.

Both tests have an optional essay. This costs more and makes the test day almost one hour longer. The good news is less than 30 of the over 4,000 colleges and universities in America require the optional essay score, so most students do not need to do this.

ACT/SAT Differences

The ACT has a total of 215 questions while the SAT has 154 questions. When a test has more questions, like the ACT, a student has more room for error. That's a good thing.

The SAT uses a 1,600-point scale and does point accumulation. The ACT uses a 36-point scale, and the composite is the average of the four subject scores. This means every SAT question is worth approximately 10.4 points per question (1,600 divided by 154). Every ACT question is worth seven-tenths of a point per question (36 multiply by four divided by 215). This is important and is one major reason college-bound students prefer the ACT over the SAT.

Once you start missing SAT questions, your score starts dropping a lot. Whereas on the ACT, there is a lot more room for error, so if a student makes a simple mistake then their score is not as affected as it is on the SAT.

The SAT has two tests that are over one hour: 65-minute reading test and 80-minute math test. The ACT tests are 60 minutes, 45 minutes, 35 minutes, and 35 minutes. As mentioned earlier, shorter tests tend to be better for most students because it is easier to focus.

The ACT questions are straightforward. Questions may be long but are usually less difficult to decipher.

The SAT questions are evidence and context-based in an effort to focus on real world situations and multi-step problem-solving. In short, the SAT

questions require more critical thinking skills, which is why two of the tests are over one hour in length.

The ACT reading test is “read and remember.” Most of the answers are simply on a line somewhere in the passage. The SAT reading test is more subjective, answers are not as obvious, forcing students to think at a somewhat higher level, and spend more time eliminating incorrect choices. This is the primary reason the SAT reading test is 65 minutes compared to the ACT reading test which is 35 minutes. This makes the ACT reading test more objective than the SAT reading version.

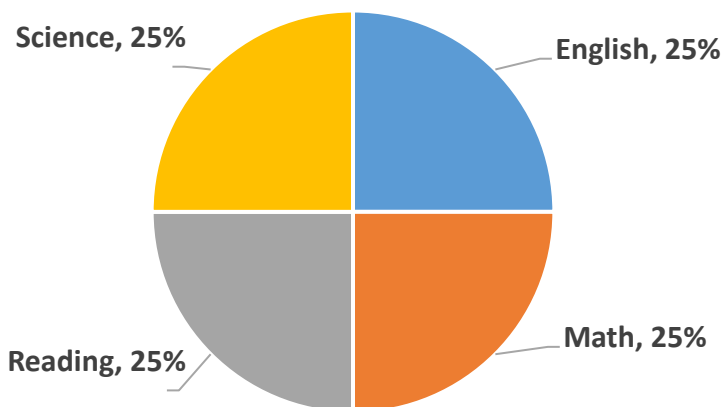
There are major differences in the math tests. The ACT allows a student to use a calculator the entire time, every question is multiple choice, and more complex formulas are included in the actual question where the formula is needed.

The SAT math test is divided into a no calculator portion and a calculator portion with a short list of formulas on the first page only. The no calculator portion has 20 questions but only 15 of those are multiple choice. Students must produce an answer for the other five questions. The calculator portion has 38 questions with 30 of them being multiple choice and eight questions where students must produce an answer.

The ACT math test focuses more on Geometry (23 of the 60 questions) and then has four Trigonometry questions, whereas the SAT math test usually only has six total Geometry and basic Trigonometry questions out of 58 questions.

The ACT scoring is more balanced. The ACT composite is the average of the four test scores, so each subject has a 25% impact.

ACT Scoring



The SAT score is half math and the other half is a combination of Reading and Writing/Language.

SAT Scoring



The SAT does not have a science test, the ACT does. This is a big deal, especially to colleges. Since 2008, there has been a national effort to encourage students to go into STEM disciplines. STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math. The ACT science test is very important to colleges and is one of the reasons the ACT is more popular than the SAT among college-bound students.

The ACT is time-sensitive, the SAT is not. Therefore, preparing for the ACT will help a student with the SAT, but not necessarily the other way around because pacing is so critical to ACT success.

I live in Central Illinois. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) requires all public school students to take the PSAT 8/9 as freshmen, the PSAT 10 as sophomores, and the State SAT as juniors. Even though the ISBE heavily promotes the PSAT and SAT in Illinois, the ACT is still more popular among high school students wanting to go immediately to a four-year college or university after high school.

Which test should a student take?

I have eight children. Some of them have already been through the ACT/SAT portion of their life. I have also been teaching prep classes since 1995, so these are my thoughts as a teacher and parent.

Some people say, **“A student should take the test that is best for them.”**

Well, there is a potential problem with that line of thinking: The only way a student would be able to determine that would be to take the ACT and SAT multiple times WHILE keeping up with all their high school courses, homework, quizzes, and tests, not to mention after school activities like sports. That's not realistic for most students.

A student should make their decision based on what other college-bound students are doing because that is their competition.

During the 20th century, there were colleges that preferred one test over the other. However, we live in the 21st century. Now, all colleges accept the ACT or SAT for admissions.

However, college scholarships are a different story. More college scholarship opportunities are connected to the ACT than the SAT, which is why most college-bound students focus on the ACT.

Do students even need to take the test?

The COVID-19 Pandemic has led to many colleges and universities dropping the ACT/SAT admissions requirement because multiple ACT and SAT test dates were cancelled because of health concerns. Some institutions have suggested that they may permanently make the ACT/SAT test scores optional for admissions.

This has led to a lot of confusion among parents and students thinking that they do not need to worry about the ACT or SAT, because they are not seeing the big picture.

COVID-19 has dramatically hindered high school education. Schools did not know how to finish up the 2019-2020 school year, so many students were given grades they did not earn. The 2020-2021 school year began with most public school students being online, potentially for three quarters. Most high school teachers are struggling to make this effective while most students are simply not engaged in the learning process. This leading to some schools being forced to fail a lot of students who are simply not showing up online while other schools are providing so much busy work that students are getting As with minimal effort. It is sad.

Colleges are worried that they may experience a dramatic drop in enrollment in Fall 2021, so they want to remove as many hurdles as possible so students will apply. One of those obstacles are low college admission scores on the ACT or SAT.

It may sound great but realize that every high school student for the next four years is going to have an asterisk by their grade point average because of COVID-19's impact on traditional instruction. The reality is colleges and universities are going to learn very quickly that college admission test scores like the ACT are going to be more, not less, important than they were before COVID-19.

Popularity: ACT vs. SAT

“My husband attended the open house at (public high school) and the Junior Dean of Students articulated information about Illinois colleges and universities only accepting SAT results. I mentioned to my husband that the information sounded nonsensical to me.” - email received from a mom

She was correct. It is illogical. All colleges and universities are required to report various statistics to the National Center for Education Statistics. One of the statistics that is tracked is the percentages of students that submit specific college admission exam scores on their college applications.

This table shows examples of colleges and universities in Illinois. These percentages represent college applications submitted in the Fall of 2017 and 2018 that included ACT scores.

Illinois Colleges & Universities

Percentage of students submitting ACT scores on their college applications:		
	Fall of 2017	Fall of 2018
University of Illinois – Champaign	85%	63%
University of Illinois – Springfield	94%	48%
Illinois State University	98%	58%
Eastern Illinois University	97%	19%
Northern Illinois University	97%	30%
Western Illinois University	96%	45%
Southern Illinois University - Carbondale	94%	55%
Southern Illinois University – Edwardsville	98%	53%
Bradley University	94%	61%
Millikin University	94%	47%
Illinois Wesleyan University	91%	66%
Northwestern University	77%	65%

The percentages dropped which made sense since the Illinois State Board of Education offered a free (i.e. tax-payer funded costing over \$50 million) State SAT test. However, notice that the percentages are higher for the better schools, and lower for the “weaker” schools.

Now, serious students simply take both tests. See the table below.

Percentage of students submitting ACT & SAT scores on their college applications: Fall of 2018

	SAT	ACT
University of Illinois – Champaign	63%	63%
University of Illinois – Springfield	76%	48%
Illinois State University	70%	58%
Eastern Illinois University	79%	19%
Northern Illinois University	51%	30%
Western Illinois University	77%	45%
Southern Illinois University - Carbondale	75%	55%
Southern Illinois University – Edwardsville	45%	53%
Bradley University	65%	61%
Millikin University	53%	47%
Illinois Wesleyan University	60%	66%
Northwestern University	45%	65%

Those are Illinois schools, and if you live in Illinois then you need to be aware of this very important fact:

**Illinois is the nation's largest net exporter of freshmen
to other states' public colleges and universities.**

Four-year college-going students from Illinois that went to college out of state in 2017 (the most recent number available) was 48.4%. Almost half of our best and brightest left!

This means those students are primarily competing with out-of-state students, so which test is more popular in the Midwest.

The following table shows major colleges and universities throughout the Midwest. Again, these statistics are from the Fall of 2018 and the percentages represent those applicants that submitted ACT scores.

Midwest Colleges & Universities

Percentage of students submitting ACT scores on their college applications:

University of Tennessee	100%
Alabama University	98%
University of Kansas	97%
University of Minnesota	91%
University of Nebraska	91%
University of Iowa	90%
University of Missouri	90%
University of Kentucky	89%
Iowa State University	86%
University of Mississippi	86%
University of Oklahoma	84%
University of Wisconsin	84%
Ohio State University	80%

That is not a misprint: every student that applied to the University of Tennessee during the Fall of 2018 submitted an ACT score!

This table shows the Ivy League schools and their percentages based on Fall of 2017 college applications.

Ivy League Schools

Percentage of students submitting ACT scores on their college applications:

Yale University	57%
Harvard University	53%
University of Pennsylvania	54%
Brown University	61%
Princeton University	54%
Columbia University	57%
Dartmouth College	48%
Cornell University	56%

This table is significant. Fall of 2017 was the first time in history that over half of Ivy League applicants submitted ACT scores. Here’s the irony: the SAT was originally invented by the Ivy League schools!

The SAT test was first used experimentally at Princeton in 1926. In 1933, it was used at Harvard University to evaluate students for scholarships. It then spread to other Ivy League schools. That was before the ACT was first administered in 1959. However, over the years the ACT has gained tremendous ground in the Ivy League schools. The SAT was their test and now most of their applicants are submitting ACT scores.

Consider the following:

The ACT has been the most popular college admissions tests nationally and internationally since 2011 among college-bound students.

Over 130 countries administer the ACT.

I live in Illinois and the ACT has been the most popular exam among college-bound students in this state since the 1960s.

Even though Illinois administers a “free” State SAT, over 60,000 students in the Class of 2018 took the ACT. That’s significant. Why? This means well over 90% of the four-year college-bound students at public high schools took the ACT.

Illinois is one of seven states that require a taxpayer funded State SAT:

- | | |
|-------------|---------------|
| Colorado | Michigan |
| Connecticut | New Hampshire |
| Delaware | Rhode Island |
| Illinois | |

There are 13 states that require a taxpayer-funded ACT:

- | | | |
|-------------|----------------|-----------|
| Alabama | Montana | Utah |
| Hawaii | Nebraska | Wisconsin |
| Kentucky | Nevada | Wyoming |
| Louisiana | North Carolina | |
| Mississippi | North Dakota | |

There are two states that offer an optional taxpayer-funded State SAT: [Idaho](#) & [Maine](#).

There are two states that offer an optional taxpayer-funded State ACT: [Arkansas](#) & [Kansas](#).

However, this is the most telling fact. There are five states that let each school district decide which test they want to administer – ACT or SAT: [Minnesota](#), [Ohio](#), [Oklahoma](#), [South Carolina](#), and [Tennessee](#).

In all five states, most of the districts chose the ACT over the SAT. For example, Oklahoma has 425 public school districts and all but ten chose to use the ACT. The ten that chose to administer the SAT tended to be lower-performing districts.

There are 1,245 public high schools in Ohio and approximately 95 percent of those chose to administer the ACT. Like Oklahoma, the few that chose to use the SAT were lower-performing districts.

Why would lower-performing schools choose the SAT when the ACT has more straightforward questions? Time. The ACT is time-sensitive, so it's very hard for lower-performing students to finish. The SAT provides a lot of extra time, so students are able to finish and "feel good" that day, even though they may score very low.

Again, I have eight children. As a parent, I have had to help my children with the ACT/SAT. They took both, because Illinois provides a taxpayer funded State SAT, but I had them focus on the ACT because it is the most popular of the two, and that's what most college-bound students are doing.

Most Illinois private high school students take the ACT. Over 80% of Illinois private high school graduates go directly to a four-year university while less than 25% of public high school students do the same.

Earlier I shared that over 60,000 students from the Illinois public school class of 2018 took the ACT. They represented approximately 43% of the entire class; again, over 90% of the Class of 2018 that went on to a four-year college took the ACT.

Because more college-bound students are taking the ACT, colleges and universities tend to connect more scholarship opportunities to the ACT.

“It is shameful that with everything else, parents also have to be guarded about information received from schools advanced under the auspices of a student's well-being... disgraceful and unnecessary.” - email, same mom

When should students start taking the ACT?

My three oldest daughters took their first ACT tests as seventh graders. I have had over 100 middle school students go through my classes. If the middle school student is a strong reader, then they will do well. Every one of those middle school students scored 20 or higher on the ACT. The three highest 8th grade scores achieved (students who took my class) have been 28, 29, and 30.

That debunks the myth that students MUST take certain classes in high school before taking the ACT. Those middle school students had not yet taken advanced high school math classes or Biology, Chemistry, or Physics. All of them were strong readers, had good logic skills, and were disciplined. They came to class and paid attention. They learned how to prepare and took advantage of the information they received. You reap what you sow.

The following chart outlines the basic annual timeline of the ACT.

ACT Test Dates	
Test Date	Registration Deadline
September	middle of August
October	middle of September
December	early November
February	middle of January
April	early March
June	early May
July	early June

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of starting the ACT process early; therefore, I will not. Instead, I will let Jim tell you via a letter he sent

me. Jim took my summer ACT prep classes between his sophomore and junior years of high school.

Jim's Letter

I had several reasons for taking your summer course. I wanted to get a head start on preparing for this very important test. My sister took your class and told me that it really helped her. I, looking for a rewarding and constructive summer activity, listened to her advice and signed up for the class.

Many people are misinformed about the ACT and form unrealistic or arbitrary goals about what they want their results to look like. I, however, do not fall into that category. I understand that an ACT score in the high 20s is very pivotal to my future plans.

I have had the desire to attend the University of Illinois for a very long time. Understanding the importance of the ACT for acceptance at the U of I, I wanted to do everything within my power to achieve a good score. That was the primary reason for taking your summer class. Initially, your class didn't pay quite the dividends that I expected. That was my fault. I was overwhelmed by the ACT. At my high school, we don't cover any ACT material until the 11th grade. I was completely ignorant when it came to the ACT. I was intimidated by all of those bright kids who were in their comfort zones, already knowing what they were doing. They would always do so well on those practice tests you gave out; meanwhile, I was terribly confused.

I listened to most of the things you said. I read for usually two hours a day, I really wanted to do well, and I signed up for the September test. Leading up to the September test, I began feeling some anxiety. In response, I basically stopped studying and prayed that my natural abilities would take over come test day. I didn't take the ACT on September; it took me.

A couple of weeks later, I came home from school and got the news from my mother that I got a 20! I was demoralized and embarrassed. I knew that score didn't accurately represent my abilities. I ended up having to shrug it off and pretend like it never happened.

Unfortunately, I told my English teacher about you and my September test and my plans to improve my score. She told me that I was making too big of a deal about the ACT. She thought it was foolish to take the ACT early and often and told me that it was improbable to change my score by that much. With the exception of Emma (a Christmas Break student of yours who took the February test), no one in my school took the ACT before the (state test). My peers and teachers found out about me taking the ACT early and they were thoroughly confused. The concept of taking the ACT a couple of times was completely foreign to them. They thought I was crazy.

It was November, basketball had just started and our school musical was coming up. I was very busy and this helped me keep the ACT out of my mind. The December ACT kept on approaching. Around Christmas time I found out that I score a 25 on it.

I was very happy with my score. I knew I needed to improve it by a few points. My oldest brother scored a 27 and my sister got a 26. Both were accepted into the General LAS program at U of I. I wanted to beat both of them and get accepted into the very same program.

With basketball season in full swing during January and February, I put the ACT thing to rest for a little bit. In mid-March I started studying a lot. I memorized all of the Math formulas and shortcuts. I went over my English rules. Your information about the Reading and Science tests really helped me. Basically, I sucked it up and learned how to comprehend those passages. Your strategies on looking for key words and really analyzing the graphs helped me tremendously. The National April ACT came and I was in the zone. Everything went perfectly.

The day of the (state test) was a very interesting day. That morning I found out that I got a 28 on the National April ACT! I was filled with excitement from my good news. I was in the school's gymnasium. All of my classmates were in there with me. We took the (state test). Most all of my classmates didn't feel like the day went well. The whole day was a complete circus.

It is funny. The people who thought I was crazy for taking the ACT four times are now jealous of the fact that I have a 28 under my belt. They are anxiously awaiting their results and are preparing for the June ACT test. I do

not care if those scores ever come back and I am thrilled that I do not have to worry about the ACT any longer.

I want to thank you, Mr. Franklin, for introducing me to the ACT. I strongly believe that all students should take your class the summer before they become juniors.

Learn from Jim's classmates. Jim's classmates thought he was crazy for taking a summer ACT class before his junior year. Jim's teachers discouraged him from taking the test early and often. And yet when April rolled around, Jim was the one who was prepared, not his classmates. Jim's classmates didn't do anything extra to prepare and paid a price. The ACT is an international competition against the best students in the world; students need to do extra to get ahead.

I'm not suggesting students should start in middle school. However, I do think it is a good idea for a college-bound student to take their first ACT either by April or June of their sophomore year, so they – and their parents – know where they are at.

I have been teaching test prep classes since 1995, and I have never had a student regret taking the test too early. On the other hand, every year I have quite a few seniors in my summer and fall classes who share their regrets for not taking the test earlier.

Before COVID-19 hit, I had a dad contact me about his daughter. She was a great runner, had D1 schools interested in her, but she did not meet the NCAA eligibility requirements because she had a 14 on the ACT and she was a senior. My first thought was, *"Why are you waiting until February of her senior year to contact me."*

It was too late for her to start my winter/spring classes in preparation for the April ACT, so this was the plan:

1. She would do my ACT prep online video class.
2. She would take the April ACT and order the TIR (discussed later).
3. I would analyze her TIR and then meet with her to go over analysis.
4. She would take my June ACT prep in-Person class.
5. She would take the June ACT.

The June ACT would be her last chance to earn scores to be eligible to receive scholarship offers and get admitted to those schools.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 unexpectedly hit our country. The April ACT was cancelled nationally. The Illinois governor imposed extremely strict lockdown rules, so I was not allowed to teach in-person classes from the middle of March to the last week of June. Because of the governor's restrictions, the June ACT was cancelled in Illinois.

Unfortunately, the girl did not get to take the ACT and did not go to college this past fall. There are a few lessons from her story. First, do not put sports before academics. Academic issues (which is what a 14 on the ACT clearly indicates) cannot be fixed quickly. Second, do not push things off to the senior year, because it may be too late.

Middle Timeline

Regardless of when a student starts taking college admissions test, I think the middle of the timeline is very important.

Ideally, every junior should take the December ACT. This test date is special because it allows you to buy back a copy of the test and the student's answers: this is called a test information release (TIR).

This is invaluable. It allows a student to learn from their mistakes. A student will receive their December scores before Christmas, and then the TIR will arrive around the middle of January. That December TIR will then help the student prepare for a later exam.

A public school junior may be taking a state ACT or SAT in late March or in April. For example, Illinois students take a taxpayer-funded state SAT usually the second week in April, depending on when Easter is during the spring.

For example, during the Spring of 2021 the National April ACT is Saturday, April 17. The Illinois State SAT is Tuesday, April 13. Public school juniors could use the State SAT as a warm-up for the April ACT.

A private school student would want to take the National April ACT. The national April ACT is like the December test, students can order a test information release. The scores will be out in late April and the TIR will arrive by the middle of May.

If a student does this then they will have taken two or three exams and have at least one TIR since December. Those results will help the college-bound student prepare for the most popular college admissions test day of the year: the June ACT.

The Target: June ACT Test

The June ACT test is now the most popular college admissions test date, which is administered the second or third Saturday after Memorial Day.

There are many reasons why this date has become the most popular: school is out so there is no seven-hour school day, no homework, no quizzes, no tests, no AP exams, no Prom, no spring break, no more school sports or other extra-curricular activities.

Most students have at least a two-week window between the end of school and the June ACT test date when they can solely focus on that test. It's an ideal time to prepare.

Every year, I am constantly amazed by how many of my students improve three or more points on the June ACT from their April ACT, even though there is usually less than a two-month gap between those test dates.

I recently had a student who was in my June test crash course. Prior to the class, she had taken the ACT four times and got a 29 each time. School was out, she took my crash course, and then scored a 33!

Those that take the June ACT will have their scores back ten days later, and then they are ready to focus on college visits. More importantly, they get to enjoy the rest of their summer!

How much is too much?

The ACT is not a one and done test. For most students it takes three, four, or five attempts to maximize a score. It's just like sports.

A high school basketball team does not practice all season for one game. The competitive schedule usually begins with a non-conference portion, followed by the conference games, and then the season ends with the state tournament. The early games allow the team to work out the kinks, so they are better prepared for the conference contests. The conference calendar then leads to the state competition – the finale. The ACT should be approached the same way.

I do think it helps to start early, which is why I recommend students take their first ACT no later than April or June of their sophomore year. However, I have had students wait until their junior year and do the February ACT, State SAT in April, and then the June ACT and they did fantastic.

A lot of college-bound students will take the ACT multiple times to maximize their scholarship offers. The key is to have a plan that is realistic, and make sure it incorporates the June ACT test.

Second Chance: July ACT Test

In 2018, the ACT added their seventh national test date in July. Colleges and universities asked the ACT to do this for students who were wanting to do early admissions and need a higher score before submitting applications which are usually due before the end of August.

At first, I thought the July ACT had the potential to be a disaster. My thought was, *"Who wants to take the ACT in the middle of summer vacation?"* I was wrong.

Like the June ACT, the July ACT is not competing with a seven-hour school day, five days a week, homework, tests, and the other stresses associated with the school year. Summer gave students the opportunity to focus on

preparing for the July ACT. I have seen impressive results from students who truly understood the value of hard work.

However, I need to warn anyone who is considering taking the July ACT. You must be self-motivated and work hard. I will have a few hundred students in my summer classes preparing for the July ACT; you will be competing against them.

When is the last time a student should take the ACT?

This depends on the student and their score.

I do not think a student should take the ACT during their senior year unless colleges they are considering have told them that if they achieve a certain score then they will have a better chance of getting accepted or get a scholarship offer increase.

One year I had a senior in my spring class and she was taking the April ACT because her number one choice told her that if she scored one more composite point on her ACT they would increase her scholarship \$20,000.

I've had many students negotiate scholarship offers just like that with schools. If a higher score means more money, then do it!

What is the Test Information Release?

Not all ACT test dates are the same. Three test dates are special: December, April, and June. Those three test dates allow you to purchase a copy of the test and the student's answers.

This is called a Test Information Release (TIR) and it's invaluable. It allows a student to see exactly what they missed, what concepts caused them trouble, and what test-taking errors were made.

Every student should make sure their timeline incorporates some of the December, April, and June ACT test dates.

View the Test Information Release (TIR) like sport competitions. My daughters played high school basketball. The scoreboard tells me if their team won or lost. That's nice, but it does not necessarily help them improve as players. We videotaped their games, so they could see what they needed to work on. The TIR allows a student to see what they did on every question in relation to the entire test and that's invaluable.

I had a student purchase the TIR for the June ACT she took right after her sophomore year of high school. She scored a 26 on English, missing 12 questions, but seven of those were related to semi-colons.

She was in my summer class, so I went over the semi-colon rules with her. She took the test again in September and her ACT English score improved from 26 to a 35. She took advantage of the TIR, and it paid off!

TIR Analysis

The test information release will be a packet with a clean copy of the test and a one-page printout showing the correct answer for each question and then what the student chose for each question. That is it. You want to use that information to determine how you did and what you need to do to improve.

Upon request, I will analyze a student's test information release. This usually takes one hour. Once that is completed, then I set up a meeting with the student to go over the analysis. This meeting usually last about one hour. It allows me to show the student their content errors, test-taking mistakes, and I use that information to set-up a preparation plan for their next test.

PSAT: Is it worth it?

I attended a public high school in Illinois back in the 80s. We took the PSAT (now called the PSAT/NMSQT) in October. We were told the PSAT was good practice for the ACT which we would take later in April. That was it. We live in a different world. Unfortunately, the PSAT has become an unnecessary SAT gimmick that makes them a lot of money.

The PSAT is tied to national merit scholarships but that only applies to the top ½ of the top 1% of students in the country. That's the equivalent of a 34+ on the ACT. Therefore, the PSAT score does not help 99.5% of the students.

Some students like the extra standardized test practice since it is given during the school day. However, college-bound students tend to take harder classes, especially their junior year, so they need to determine if missing a half day of school is worth it.

Taking the PSAT also does not necessarily replace getting a head start on the ACT, which is going to have a much greater impact on academic scholarships for most students.

If a student has already taken the ACT and achieved a 32 or higher, then I would encourage them to take the PSAT because they may have a shot at becoming a national merit scholar.

If a student has not achieved a 32 or has not taken the ACT yet, then they may want to consider not doing the PSAT, stay in their classes that day, and start preparing for the December ACT test.

PSAT 8/9 & PSAT 10: Do not be fooled

In an effort to make even more money, the College Board created the PSAT 8/9 and PSAT 10. These are practice SAT tests but with a different scoring system and lower standards. In theory, the PSAT 8/9 covers what an eighth or ninth grader should be learning in school via Common Core. The PSAT 10 covers what a sophomore should be learning in school via Common Core.

These tests did very little. One, no college or university in America uses PSAT 8/9 or PSAT 10 scores for admissions. Two, why not just have students take a real ACT or SAT?

These tests are simply another way for the College Board to make money off taxpayers. For example, the State of Illinois requires all public schools to administer the PSAT 8/9 to freshmen, the PSAT 10 to sophomores, and a

State SAT to juniors. Some districts even fund the PSAT/NMSQT for juniors AND sophomores. Has it helped? The following are the Illinois public school State SAT score averages from the past three years – the only years that test has been administered.

Year	ELA	Math	Total
2017	511.5	504.4	1015.9
2018	505.7	501.4	1007.1
2019	497.5	497.0	994.5

Despite all the “free” practice via PSAT tests, scores went down not up.

This should make sense. If you want your child to be a better basketball player, they need to practice with a regulation basketball on a regulation rim. You don’t give them a smaller ball and lower the rim when they are in middle school, let alone high school.

Standardized test taking – which is an academic competition – needs to be approached the same way we prepare athletes to compete at a higher level. We do that by simulating the higher level. This is why preparation with the right instructor is so important. Students need to learn how to train for the test.

ACT then College Choices

Many parents will contact me and ask the following:

“How can my student get a high enough ACT score to get into the college they want?”

I believe there is a better way to look at this. An ACT score can help a student determine which school he or she is better suited to attend.

When I was a public school teacher, I taught a statistics class for a few years. My seniors set up teams to determine a topic to study. One year a group chose college graduation rates. They made arrangements to meet with a University of Illinois college professor who had been studying how to

determine in high school which minority students will be successful in college.

The seniors videotaped the interview. His research showed that the most reliable factor in determining college success was the ACT score regardless of ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. Ironically, he asked my students not to use his name in their research. Why? Because his findings were not what those in the academic world wanted to hear.

We want to believe that grades tell the whole story. I am sorry, but they do not. The reality is grades are not fair. Grades are fair within one teacher's classroom because everyone in that classroom is being graded by the same teacher with the same criteria. That is fair. However, as soon as students walk out of the classroom, the grade is no longer "fair" in the sense that the grade from one student cannot be compared to another student from a different classroom or a different school.

Schools are different, grading systems are different, curriculums are different, and teachers are different. Colleges understand this. Colleges do consider grades but keep them in perspective based on the above. However, COVID-19 school-forced shutdowns and virtual learning has made grade point averages much less reliable when evaluating a student's academic abilities.

The ACT is different. On a given Saturday everyone has the same test: same questions, same choices, and the same amount of time. That is fair.

That allows a university to compare a student from, say, Bloomington to a student in Champaign, Peoria, Springfield, California, Texas, Florida, Germany, and Africa. As mentioned earlier, the ACT is now given in over 130 countries.

It is no longer a state competition or national competition: it is an international competition. And just like an athlete prepares for athletic competition, a student needs to prepare for this competition.

The reality is that choosing a college works two ways:

1. A student chooses what schools to apply to.
2. A university chooses the students they want on campus.

Measurements like the ACT help make sure both the student and the university are not wasting time.

Parents need to find out how their student is REALLY doing.

One reason I recommend that all students take the ACT in either April or June of their sophomore year is to see where they compare to others nationally. Scores do not lie. Amanda did this a few years ago and her story confirms why this is so important for students and parents.

Amanda attended a private high school, was an A/B student, took the ACT in June right after her sophomore year and scored a 14. Her parents were shocked! She was traumatized. She immediately took my summer ACT class and then scored a 19. A five point improvement is fantastic, but her parents were still upset.

I met with Amanda and her parents to discuss the situation. I had Amanda in class and knew her scores were reflecting her ability. In my opinion, she had major reading issues and struggled remembering basic rules in English and Math. These are important skills for the ACT and college. So why did her parents have different expectations? Her parents just assumed she should score a 30+ because she attended a private school and got As and Bs. That's not how the system works.

At the meeting I asked specific questions about how Amanda's grades were computed at her high school. She revealed that a majority of teachers put heavy emphasis on homework completion. She was definitely a hard worker, so her homework grades were perfect; however, her test and quiz grades were very low: Cs and Ds. That explained her ACT score: high school test grades of Cs and Ds are consistent with someone scoring between a 13 and 18.

This is why students need to take the test early: it helps set a realistic objective for the student **AND** parents. In the story above, after the second

ACT and our meeting, Amanda's parents realized that they needed to re-examine how they were helping their daughter. They were unintentionally creating unrealistic goals which put a lot of negative pressure on Amanda.

Once Amanda's parents accepted where their daughter was at and focused on helping her with reading deficiencies and retention, then she was able to move forward. She went through my winter/spring class and scored a 22 on her third attempt. I was very proud of her and so were her parents. She had improved eight total points and, more importantly, dramatically increased her reading comprehension skills and became a much **better test performer** which helped her in her remaining high school classes. In short, she had worked hard in order to prepare herself for college and this was reflected in her ACT score improvement.

National Percentile Ranks

When students, parents, and even high school faculty think about the ACT score, they think 20s and 30s. That's not what colleges are considering.

Universities focus on the national percentile rank. The score is not just based on how your student does; it is also based on how everyone does on the same test.

ACT Composite	National Rank
16.....	27th
17.....	33rd
18.....	40th
19.....	46th
TOP 50%: 20+	
20.....	52nd
21.....	58th
22.....	64th
23.....	69th
TOP 25%: 24+	
24.....	74th
25.....	78th
26.....	82nd
27.....	85th
28.....	88th
29.....	91st
Big Deal: 30	
30.....	93rd
31.....	95th
32.....	97th
THE ULTIMATE NUMBER: 33	
33.....	98th
34.....	99th
35.....	99th
36.....	100th

Standardized test developers at this level are experts. Before the test is given, they have a general idea how many questions will be missed and they are pretty accurate. It's a very precise science. Honestly, it is a little scary.

The test has to be designed in a way that allows a college to compare current students to previous students who have already graduated. The national ACT is given seven times a year and has to be designed in a way that keeps the tests similar regarding level of difficulty. This allows students taking, say, the December ACT to be accurately compared to those taking the February, April, and June ACT tests.

Percentages can vary from year to year. The percentages in the table are based on the high school graduates from the Classes of 2017, 2018, and 2019.

It is not possible for every student to score a 20 or higher. It is not possible for every student to score a 24 or higher.

It is possible for everyone to score a 36 assuming no one misses any questions but that is not realistic. The test is designed to separate students.

Families need to understand this very simple concept: The ACT works for the colleges by separating students with a composite score.

*Based on this score, accept this student.
Based on another score, do not admit this student.*

*Based on this score, give this student a scholarship.
Based on another score, don't give this student anything.*

*Based on this score, give this student \$10,000 per year.
Based on another score, give this student \$25,000 per year.*

Various scores mean certain things. In theory, when a test is given, the scores are ordered from least correct to most correct, the system goes to the middle, and that number is 20.

Percentages then determine the other scores. Since composite scores are rounded to whole numbers the national percentile ranks seem to have somewhat strange relationships.

An ACT composite score of 20 typically divides the country in half. A score of 20 or higher means that a student can go to a four-year college - not every four-year institution, just some. If a student scores below 20 that does not mean they cannot get into a four-year college. However, as the previous chart shows, the student's national rank is much lower and the score indicates the student may be better suited to start at a community college.

An ACT composite score of 24 is a great score as it usually ranks a student in the top 25 percent in the country. That's a big deal. Research shows that students who score a 24 or higher are more likely to go to college and graduate in four years. A score of 24 along with a solid academic record will get a student into over 95 percent of the schools in America.

The next magic number is a composite score of 30: typically, the top five percent in the country but recently "dropped" to top seven. Many colleges and universities will require a 30 or higher to be eligible for top level scholarships or honors programs that eventually lead to more scholarships.

For decades the ultimate number for colleges had been 32. Now, it is 32 or 33, depending on the school. It represents the top students "outside" the top one percent. Actually, a 32 was also the 99th percentile up until 2014. Now, 34 is the "bottom" of the top one percent. Regardless, a 32/33 is still a very powerful score and gets the attention of most colleges and universities. At this level, all students are highly academically talented. Schools will then look more in-depth at how well-rounded these particular students are.

That's the simple explanation of the scores. However, remember the following very important point: All colleges view the scores differently. Ask each school how they use the ACT to admit students and award scholarships.

I am going to give specific examples but keep in mind schools can change their standards every year. The key is to ask the schools and make sure you have a clear understanding of what scores are needed for admissions and various scholarships.

A few years ago, Indiana University had an academic scholarship that started at 26, another level at 28, and then another level at 30. The University of Missouri offered a scholarship to any out-of-state student who had a 27+ which almost eliminated the out-of-state additional tuition. One year Northern Illinois University offered scholarships at 22 and the amount increased with each additional point.

Be careful: Do not assume a school will tell you how to get more money with a higher ACT.

One Memorial Day Weekend a mom called to register her son for my summer ACT classes. During the conversation the mom mentioned that they knew how important the ACT was because their older son, John, had just graduated from high school and would be attending Olivet Nazarene University next fall. Because he scored a 25 on the ACT, he was awarded an \$8,000 per year scholarship. I immediately asked if he would have gotten more with a higher score. The mom was taken back; she didn't know. Her son only took the test once.

I encouraged her to call ONU on Tuesday and ask. She did and learned that if John had scored a 27 they would have awarded him an additional \$4,000 per year. This did not make her happy. The family had been looking at ONU for over a year and this was never mentioned. She asked why she was never told and received the following response:

"You never asked."

Colleges want your student to come to their institution and spend as much as possible. Your goal is to get your student into the college while spending as little as possible. In one sense, the college and your family are working against each other. It is just like buying a house or a car. You need to negotiate and ask plenty of questions like any major business transaction.

At this point John's mom was furious as she felt information had been purposefully hidden from the family. She asked if her son took the ACT in less than two weeks (June ACT test date) and earned the additional two points, would they increase his scholarship. They said yes. Most would have assumed ONU would have said no. After all, the son was already coming to ONU, he had already graduated from high school, and it was already summer vacation. So why did they say yes? They wanted to keep her happy. There is nothing more dangerous than an upset mom and Facebook. Besides, \$4,000 is a lot of money to a family, but it is not much to a college.

11 days went by, John took the test, and went two points the wrong way. He scored a 23. His mom was not deterred. She called ONU again and made her sales pitch: this was not fair; he had less than two weeks to prepare. Jason Franklin would be teaching a summer ACT class at ONU and she wanted to know if her son took that class and then took the September ACT and earned the 27, would ONU honor it?

Most would say John's mom was pushing her luck. Her son would already be in college for almost a month by the time the September ACT test date arrived. However, ONU granted her request. Why? View it from ONU's perspective: the student just dropped his score. The odds of him getting a 27 were not likely, so it was a good gamble, and they were keeping the mom happy. Besides, \$4,000 is not much to a college.

John took my summer ACT class, went to ONU, took the September ACT, and did not score a 27. He scored a 29! That score earned him an even higher scholarship: \$16,000 per year (\$64,000 total)!

Let us review what happened:

- 1.) John's mom made two assertive, bold phone calls.
- 2.) John took my summer ACT class and worked very hard. There is no magic pill for this test. A student has to put in the effort to get the desired results.
- 3.) John's four-year scholarship package doubled from \$32,000 to \$64,000.

How much money did your student earn last summer? John earned \$32,000 studying for a three-hour test. That is a good investment.

Never be afraid to ask for more money. The college may say no but at least you asked. Remember, it is YOUR money that is being discussed!

Realistic Goal

Let me begin with a warning: earning straight As in high school does not mean a student will earn a 36, a 30, or even a 20. High school success does

not necessarily translate into ACT or college success. Students need to have a reasonable goal for the ACT. I spend time in every ACT class helping students realize what is realistic for them.

Let's assume a student realizes that their goal is a 24 based off practice and previous test results. The following is what they would need to do in order to reach their goal. These numbers are based on the July 2020 scoring table. Every test is scored differently. However, I can tell you based on years of experience the scoring from test to test is very similar.

ACT Goal: 20 – Top 50% in the country		
Subject	Questions correct	Percent
English	43 out of 75	57.3%
Math	28 out of 60	46.7%
Reading	22 out of 40	55.0%
Science	19 out of 40	47.5%

ACT Goal: 24 – Top 25% in the country		
Subject	Questions correct	Percent
English	54 out of 75	72.0%
Math	34 out of 60	56.7%
Reading	28 out of 40	70.0%
Science	27 out of 40	67.5%

ACT Goal: 30 – Top 7% in the country		
Subject	Questions correct	Percent
English	65 out of 75	86.7%
Math	48 out of 60	80.0%
Reading	34 out of 40	85.0%
Science	35 out of 40	87.5%

ACT Goal: 34 – Top 1% in the country		
Subject	Questions correct	Percent
English	69 out of 75	92.0%
Math	54 out of 60	90.0%
Reading	37 out of 40	92.5%
Science	38 out of 40	95.0%

Much can be learned from those tables. I cover this in depth in my ACT classes, but it is important that parents understand this as well.

The ACT does not grade like high school teachers. When students look at those percentages, they are surprised how low they are. At most high schools the percentages for a 24 would be two Cs, a D, and an F. When I ask students what good percentages are, most respond saying 90s and upper 80s. However, is that accurate?

If an athlete plays professional baseball and hits 40 percent (.400) they will make billions of dollars as that feat has only been accomplished once in the history of major league baseball (Ted Williams). If an athlete plays professional basketball and shoots over 55 percent behind the three-point line for their career then they will be the greatest long-range shooter ever. Percentages are subjective based on the situation.

High school instructors teach students that high percentages are required in order to be successful. In the high school arena, that makes sense. High school tests are based on content that has already been taught, so students should – percentwise - perform at a higher level. Most high school teachers provide very detailed review packages, give partial credit when grading, usually include extra credit, and will even provide re-test opportunities depending on the school district. That's not the ACT.

As mentioned before, the job of the ACT is to separate students. The test provides a score that tells colleges the following:

- This student has a good chance of being successful in college.
- Accept this student but reject this one.
- Give this student a scholarship but give this student nothing.
- Give this student, say, \$10,000 and give that student \$20,000.

The ACT is very good at what they do. For over a half century the ACT score has been a greater predictor of college success than a high school grade

point average (again, COVID-19 has made grades less helpful to colleges). Therefore, the test must grade hard. If it was easy to get most of the questions correct, then the ACT could not separate students and thus would not be doing its job. More importantly, besides separating students, the test also grades like most colleges which makes sense given the fact that the test is measuring a student's ability to perform at the college level. Luke learned that the hard way.

During my early years of teaching I taught Calculus. One of my students, Luke, was truly brilliant. He scored a 35 on his ACT without any preparation. He went to the University of Illinois with an academic scholarship in pre-Med (he's a doctor today). During winter break of his college freshman year, he and I had a conversation at a high school basketball game. I asked how college was going, and he said it was eye-opening.

His first test was in an Honors Chemistry course that had approximately 450 students. On his first test he scored a 49 percent! Luke had been a straight A student his entire life. Not only was he smart, but he studied hard. I could not believe what I was hearing. I told him that I could not believe he failed a test. His response:

"I didn't fail the test. I had the highest grade in class. I got an A."

I asked him if that made him feel better. He said, "No, not really." He said the entire semester was like that. His highest test grade was in the 70s. He also got an A on every test.

He had a professor that used a curved grading scale. The professor would first score the exams, put them in order from lowest to highest, and then use percentages to determine how many As and Bs would be given. In that class, only five percent of students received an A, 10 percent got a B, and then the rest of the grades were based on the performances of the A and B students. This is very similar to how the ACT grades.

There are college professors that use the traditional model of grading like most high school instructors. There will also be college instructors who use a curve. Welcome to the next level of higher education.

Each test grades differently. Looking back at the previous chart for a 24, notice that all the percentages are different and yet they are all scores of 24. English grades the hardest which makes sense since 40 of the 75 questions are grade school concepts. Math grades the easiest. Our country is not strong in math compared to other advanced countries around the world. Reading and Science can easily fluctuate because there are only 40 questions on each test.

For example, on the April 2019 ACT science test, a student who got 35 questions correct out of 40 possible scored a 34. However, on the July 2020 ACT science test a student who got 35 correct scored a 30. This goes back to what we discussed earlier, a student's score is not just based on their performance but also on the results of others taking the same test. Apparently, the July 2020 ACT science test was easier than the April 2019 science test, which is why the ACT had to readjust the scoring.

Be prepared to miss. From a test taking standpoint, the most important numbers are the following: to earn a 24 a student can miss 21 on the English test, 26 on Math, 12 on Reading, and 13 on Science. I know a few students who honestly thought they would get a perfect score on the ACT without any preparation. Unfortunately, they “learned” this in high school from their teachers because they were used to getting 100 percent on all their tests in school. Then they took the ACT, came to a question they didn't know, and they panicked because they had never experienced those feelings before on a high school test.

Students need to learn how to execute a “clean” test. It's okay to miss questions; one just doesn't want to miss questions they should get correct. This is where knowing the number of acceptable misses can help. If a student can miss 21 on the English test and comes to a question they don't know, then that will be one of the 21 questions the student misses. Knowing this helps the student relax during the test. Controlling one's emotions is so important on the ACT.

This is a test-taking strategy that will help a student throughout college and serves as an example of how the ACT is a strong predictor of college success.

Know your goal. I encourage students to take the test early. Scores do not lie. The first set of test scores will give the student – and more importantly the parents - a better idea of where the student is ranked compared to the rest of the country.

I also tell my students to be happy with their first set of scores. This does not mean they have to be satisfied with them. Too often students wait until April of their junior year to take their first ACT only to find out a few weeks later where they are at nationally. Unfortunately, many students are disappointed and now must play catch-up.

The TIR Analysis can really help a student set a realistic goal.

ACT Super-Score

As mentioned earlier, the ACT composite is the average of the four subject tests: English, Math, Reading, and Science. The SAT is the accumulation of the ELA and math scores.

Over 90 percent of colleges and universities super-score the SAT, because the SAT has encouraged it.

The ACT discouraged super-scoring until May of 2017, and then changed their policy because research showed that the ACT super-score was a better predictor of college success.

Now that the ACT is giving their “blessing” to super-scoring, every fall more colleges are using it for admissions **AND** scholarships. The COVID-19 Pandemic has accelerated this among colleges and universities, because super-scoring encourages more students to apply.

The following is an example of how a super-score is calculated.

Aiden takes the ACT three times his junior year and achieves the following scores:

Test Date	English	Math	Reading	Science	Composite
December	22	18	23	22	21
February	27	20	27	23	24
April	28	24	23	20	24

A school that super-scores reviews all of Aiden's test scores and then identifies the top subject scores regardless of test date:

Test Date	English	Math	Reading	Science	Composite
December	22	18	23	22	21
February	27	20	<u>27</u>	<u>23</u>	24
April	<u>28</u>	<u>24</u>	23	20	24

The school then adds those scores.

$$28 + 24 + 27 + 23 = 102 \text{ total points}$$

The school then divides the total points by four.

$$102/4 = 25.5$$

Scores are rounded up or down when necessary. In this example, the score would be rounded up to 26.

Even though Aiden's best ACT composite was a 24, when applying to a school that super-scores, the college will use the 26. That's a big deal!

During the 2019-2020 school year, I had a daughter that is a senior in high school. She is my third child, so when visiting schools, I have always asked if a super-score can be used for admissions.

During her junior year, we visited Indiana Wesleyan University – the largest private school in Indiana – and one of my daughter's top choices. At the time, they did not super-score.

My daughter was homeschooled, making me responsible for her high school transcript, so I included her best ACT score as well as her ACT super-score. After submitting the transcript, the IWU admissions officer contacted her

requesting ACT score reports to verify her super-score. I was confused by the request, so I asked my daughter if I could speak to him.

He explained that during the summer of 2019 (my daughter had visited the previous fall), that they had changed their policy. I then asked when the last time was she could take the ACT to increase her super-score. He said test scores must be submitted by April 15 for the ACT and/or SAT of the student's senior year.

Ironically, that spring the April ACT was April 4 because Easter was late. The ACT would start posting scores ten days later: April 14. I knew that, so I asked if she could take the April 4 ACT even though it was possible the scores could come a day or two after April 15.

He was not sure and said he would check. About 30 minutes later he called back and said the Admissions Office decided that students could submit April 4 ACT scores during the Spring of 2020 to be used for scholarship increases. I was excited, but then I thought...

“What about all the other parents that don’t know this simply because they did not ask?”

I cannot overemphasize the importance of communicating with colleges to learn how to increase scholarship offers. (This is one of the focuses in my College Bound Seminar Series.)

Beginning in September 2020, the ACT was going to allow students to re-take individual subject tests as desired. For example, I had a daughter composite score was being held back by a lower science score. The science test is the last one given. Under current rules, she must take the entire test just to get her science score up.

Unfortunately, because of COVID-19 and the need to limit the number of students at a test center due to health safety concerns, the ACT has postponed the subject only re-taking option.

Under the new rules that are coming, a student in a similar situation as my daughter could simply just take the science test. That creates a huge

advantage: the student will not be fatigued from taking three previous subject tests that morning and the student can just prepare for the one test.

Having said that, students need to be careful. Most of my students improve all four of their subject scores after taking my class. What if one of those students had decided to only take, say, Reading. Then, they would have missed out on score improvements on the other three which would have also increased their super-score.

To be eligible for a subject only re-take, a student must first have already taken the full ACT. Second, they must do the re-take online which means they must take it at a test center that offers online option. Online testing can disadvantage a student compared to traditional paper/pencil standardized test taking.

Solving math problems online can be much slower than paper/pencil. For example, when a student needs to write out steps or draw pictures, it is more productive to do it write next to the actual problem in the test booklet as opposed to looking at a monitor then paper then the monitor, etc.

The English test requires a student to edit five drafts. I edit college application essays for students. The first thing I do is print out their essay and then edit with a pen. Once I have done that, then I put my editing comments into their Microsoft Word document. Editing the ACT English test is a lot easier and faster when you can just make marks on the actual test booklet, something you cannot do online.

One of the most important skills I teach in my classes is how to effectively mark on the graphs, tables, and charts on the ACT Science test. This makes that test much easier. Students lose that ability if they do it online.

For years, research has shown reading online is not as effective as reading traditional books. I believe this is especially true with the ACT. I also think it extremely helpful to be able to quickly scan larger groups of questions, so students know when they should, say, skip questions. This cannot be done online.

Honestly, online testing is easier and more cost effective for the “non-profit” corporations that administer standardized testing. Ironically, they do not seem to appropriately lower the pricing for the consumer (i.e. parents). In summary, I do not believe online testing is advantageous for students when the goal is get the highest score possible.

I shared one example of a school, Indiana Wesleyan University, that now uses an ACT super-score. Here are a few more examples of schools that also use it:

Baylor	Purdue
Boston College	Southern Illinois - Edwardsville
Butler	Stanford
Cornell	Syracuse
Duke	University of Chicago
Florida State	University of Colorado
Georgia Tech	University of Maryland
Indiana	University of North Carolina
Johns Hopkins	University of Tennessee
Miami (FL)	University of Vermont
MIT	Virginia Tech
NYU	Wake Forest
North Carolina State	Washington University (St. Louis)

You will notice that there are Ivy League, Big Ten, and other prestigious schools on that list. Every year more and more colleges are using an ACT super score. There is a good reason for this.

Colleges compete against each other for quality applicants. Better students take the ACT multiple times to maximize their scores for admissions and scholarships. The ACT super score is one way colleges can attract better students by rewarding those who cared enough to take the ACT multiple times.

One year I had a student whose best ACT composite was a 27. However, her ACT super-score was a 30! That made a big difference when it came to scholarship packages.

Writing Option

Our national government often comes up with ideas that sound good in theory but when implemented do not meet their promises. College is government, and colleges really run the ACT. That's why the acronym stands for **A**merican **C**ollege **T**est.

When a student applies to a college, they typically write at least one application essay. As an example, James applies to ten different schools, so he sends out ten essays. How many different essays did he write? He only wrote one essay; he sent the same one to the different schools. Colleges know this happens frequently. There is nothing wrong with this.

What do colleges do with the application essays? They read them. Some grade them. They are taken very seriously. One year the University of Illinois denied admissions to an applicant who had straight As and a perfect 36 on the ACT because of his application essay, which was supposed to be around 300 words. He only wrote this: "The University of Illinois will accept me because I got a perfect on the ACT." That student assumed the admissions office would not read his essay because of his strong academic record. Unfortunately for him, they did read it and they were not impressed.

Application essays put a financial burden on bigger universities. The University of Illinois had over 40,000 students apply during the Fall of 2018. UCLA typically receives over 100,000 applications each year. That's a lot of essays to read. Universities must pay people to read the essays. In the example mentioned earlier with James, ten different colleges are paying people to read the same material. That eventually helped lead to this "great" idea.

What if the ACT offered an essay option? The ACT could grade the essay, that score would be submitted to the colleges, all the universities would be using the same score, so that would be fair. This would speed up the application process and remove that expense from all colleges and universities. In theory, this sounded like a great idea.

The problem was implementation. The ACT would need to have the students write the essay the same day the test was given so they had evidence (photo identification) verifying that the student was writing their

own essay. The ACT did not want to disrupt the actual test, so the student would need to do the essay after taking the ACT. The ACT did not want the test day to be too long, so the writing would be limited to 40 minutes. The ACT can be given almost anywhere, i.e. a cafeteria, so the student would need to use paper and pencil to produce their work.

A college application essay is supposed to be a student's best work. With the writing option, colleges were asking students to do their best writing AFTER taking a three hour test, complete it in 40 minutes, use paper and pencil, and produce only one final draft – no peer review of any sort. We live in the 21st Century; no one writes like that.

The writing option was first introduced in the spring of 2005 and most colleges and universities were initially in favor of it. However, schools quickly realized that the writing option was a bad idea and most have removed the writing option as a requirement for admissions.

As mentioned earlier, less than 30 colleges and universities require the writing option out of over 4,000 schools in the USA. I suspect the COVID-19 Pandemic and its impact on college enrollment may completely eliminate the writing option.

If a college really cares about your writing ability then they will evaluate your college application essay.

Let me be clear: Colleges and universities can change their admission policies every year if they choose. Regarding the writing, usually if a school changes their policy, they decide not to require it. However, it is best to check directly with the schools.

Test Anxiety

I mentioned earlier that my eldest daughter took her first ACT in June right after her seventh grade year. I had her take my June ACT Test Prep Crash Course in order to make sure she had a strong feel for the test. I was very concerned that she would be intimidated walking into a test center surrounded by students so much older. The class really helped her. She was very confident and felt prepared.

However, around 2 AM the morning of the test, I heard someone walking around the house. I got up and it was my daughter. She “felt” sick and told me she was not sure she would be well enough to take the test. She thought she was sick, but I suspected she was nervous.

I told her that I did not care how she did on this test. She was only in seventh grade. I reminded her that every year she was going to get smarter, but the test was not going to get harder. There really was no pressure.

She was taking the test with her older cousin who also did my classes. They went to the test center together and I knew he would help her calm down.

(If you do decide to have a younger student take the test, it really does help if they take it with someone older that they know.)

When she came home after the test, she was so excited! She thought she did very well and was already talking about taking the test in December of her eighth grade year. When her scores came in, we were even more excited because she tested at or above the college readiness levels in two of the four subject areas.

My daughter took it for the second time in December and her composite score improved three points and again tested at the college readiness level in multiple subjects. More importantly, she said she was much more confident in part because she knew what to expect when she walked into the testing center since she had previously taken the test.

For those who do not live in Central Illinois, I have an online video class that allows students to receive the same type of preparation that I provide in my in-person classes. The online video class can start whenever the student is ready and be used wherever the student has internet access. The online class is everything I would like to teach in my live classes but am unable to due to time constraints.

I have worked with over 20,000 students and those that start preparing prior to their junior year tend to do better when it counts: the National June ACT test of junior year.

Students that have test anxiety tend to shy away from taking tests. This is the wrong approach. Students who know they struggle taking tests often need to take the real ACT more often in order to feel more comfortable in the actual testing environment.

This is one reason was PSAT tests offered at school are just not as effective as doing the real ACT at an actual test center surrounded by students from other schools. A basketball team can scrimmage as much as they want during practice, but at some point, they need to play **REAL** games against **REAL** opponents to see where they are really at in order to be able to improve.

Emily was a nervous wreck when it came to tests. She took her first ACT and scored a 22. She was not happy with her score, told me she was not a good test taker, and asked me what she should do. I told her to take it again. The next time she scored a 23. Again, she was not happy, told me she was not a good test taker, and asked me what she should do. I told her to take it again. She did and scored a 24. We went through this same scenario two more times and she scored a 25 and 26, respectively.

Emily was thrilled with her 26! Her five ACT test dates were September, December, February, April, and June of her junior year of high school. She took my ACT prep class the summer before her September test, so her ACT journey was approximately 12 months. It was a joy to watch her overcome her test anxiety, learn how to control her emotions, deciding to no longer allow tests to control her, and achieve a great score. She earned a higher score, but more importantly she better prepared herself for the challenges she would face in college.

Parent Tips

I am often asked by parents what they can do to help their student prepare for the ACT. Hopefully, the information you have already read has helped. The following are tips, one per subject, that I believe can make a difference and can be easily implemented and supported by parents.

ACT Reading Parent Tip: READ, READ, READ!!!

The most important activity students can do is read. This current generation has grown up with so much technology that reading has almost become a forgotten skill. Students go online to get summaries of classics and, unfortunately, can get great grades in school despite not reading at appropriate levels. Again, this is the most important activity parents can encourage their students to do.

One summer I had twelve seniors-to-be improve their ACT reading scores 7+ points from their April to September ACT tests. I asked all twelve what they thought made the difference. All of them gave the same answer:

"I just started reading one hour a day like you said in class."

I do recommend seven hours a week (ideally one hour a day). One of those students drove approximately 90 minutes one way to get to my summer class. Her April ACT reading score was 17 and her composite was 23. She decided if one hour was good then two hours a day would be better. Her work paid off. Her reading score improved to a 29 and her composite jumped to a 29 as well!

I had another student who was ADD (attention deficit disorder). Her December ACT composite score was 20. She told me she just could not sit still and read for 60 consecutive minutes. I spoke to her mom about it and gave the family the following challenge.

During the month of January, the girl would read 15 minutes a day, every day. The family would have a chart located in the kitchen so everyone could see it. The chart was an actual calendar, so the girl could mark down "15" when she completed the reading for that day. The calendar allowed her family members to help keep her accountable.

During the month of February, she would increase the amount of reading to 30 minutes per day. That number would rise to 45 minutes during the month of March and then 60 minutes during April. Even when her family went to Florida for spring break, she read (they emailed me a picture of the girl reading on the beach).

The girl read every day thanks to her family constantly encouraging her. The results were fantastic! Her ACT composite improved from a 20 to a 28. More importantly, the girl told me she started doing better in school because she actually started reading textbook chapters assigned by teachers and was able to participate in class because she was keeping up with the reading, which led to her doing better on quizzes and tests in school.

Reading is the key to every standardized test. The better a student reads, the better a student will perform. The great thing about reading is that it is free...it just takes time.

Reading is also a habit. If you have younger students, then encourage them to READ, READ, READ!!!!

I am currently doing an experiment with my oldest son (13 years old as of this writing). Every time he reads a chapter book, I record it. Every time he reads 25 chapter books, he gets \$25. As of this writing, he has read over 400 chapter books.

I got the idea from a parent who attended one of my College Bound Seminars. She had previously attended some type of business leadership workshop and the following story was shared.

During the 70s, a small business owner gave his high school son a list of 100 books to read. Every time he read one of those books, the son received \$25. These were not ordinary books: These were books on business leadership, positive mental attitude, and self-improvement. The son read all 100 books, receiving a total of \$2,500. That was a lot of money back in the 70s.

That boy ended up receiving a full academic scholarship – free college education – and eventually became a multi-millionaire. That father made a wise investment.

What about my son? Well, after finishing seventh grade in the Spring of 2020 during the COVID-19 Pandemic and after having his April and June ACT

test cancelled, he finally took the ACT in July and scored a 24. His reading skills made a big difference.

ACT Math Parent Tip: Story Problems

The ACT math test has 60 problems. They can be separated into the following disciplines:

Pre-Algebra	14 questions
Algebra 1	10 questions
Geometry	23 questions
Algebra 2	9 questions
Trigonometry	4 questions

Notice that most of the math is Geometry or earlier, so it is not advanced math concepts that lead to lower ACT math scores. For most students, it is the story problems that are the issue.

There is a tremendous amount of reading on the math test. It is approximately 60 percent story problems and most of the other 40 percent includes a sentence or two explaining what to do. Most high school math tests do not include that much reading.

If your student struggles completing math story problems, go to Amazon, type in math story problems, and you will find many good resources.

Unfortunately, high school students who do not like doing story problems learn to work around them in high school math classes. Translation: They can still get an A in a high school math class without mastering story problems. Unfortunately, it is impossible to get a good ACT math score without being good at story problems.

Math story problems are difficult to teach in a classroom setting, which is a major reason most high school math teachers do not spend much time as they would like on story problems. However, working with a teacher one-on-one can make a big difference.

If your student has issues with story problems, or math in general, encourage them to work with their math teacher before or after school once or twice a week. It can really make a difference.

There is also a great website that uses online videos to teach math concepts for a variety of disciplines. It is MathHelp.com. You must pay for it. It is approximately \$50 per month but you determine the number of months you need it. That is a lot less than a tutor. The subscription gives you access to all the videos. It covers fifth grade through college math courses. It also covers the math on many standardized tests including the ACT.

One of my daughters really struggled with math. She used that site for nine months (she also took my ACT prep class at the same time) and her ACT math score improved 9 points! We were thrilled!

ACT English Parent Tip: Texting vs. Grammar

Because I have been doing ACT prep for over 20 years, I have seen a lot of changes during that time. One of those is the negative impact of texting and other “advanced” technologies on the younger generation.

I am convinced that most parents would score very high on the ACT English test. My K-12 education took place during the late 70s and 80s. Grammar was emphasized. It had to be. Personal computers were very, very basic and not as useful as they are today. The Microsoft Windows environment had not yet been created. There was no spell check or auto-correct. It was “you” correct!

As technology became more accessible, public education began to integrate computer learning into the curriculums. Unfortunately, there is only so many hours in the day and grammar lessons have slowly been removed from the upper grades over the years.

The good news is that the ACT English score is the easiest score to improve. A student simply needs to review grammar rules learned in grade school and middle school.

Go to Amazon, type in Cliffs Quick Review Grammar, and the first book that appears is the one you want. It is usually around \$10 and does a great job reviewing the major grammar rules. (If you cannot find the book, just email me and I will send you the link.)

I have had many students get that book, studied it, and their English scores improved 6+ points. It helped one of my daughters improve her English score from a 23 to a 34!

ACT Science Parent Tip: Unfamiliar Science is the Key

The ACT reading score improves the more a student reads. A student should be improving their math skills every time they take another high school math class. A student can review grammar rules in order to prepare for the English test. Science is different.

The best way a student can practice for science on their own is to expose themselves to material they have not seen before and then quickly answer questions on that material. This means taking practice science tests.

There are plenty of prep books on the market that have a lot of practice. Keep in mind that most prep books have practice that is harder than the actual ACT test. This is a good thing...just do not allow that to discourage the student when preparing.

One of my younger daughters struggles with ACT science material, so I was looking for something extra to help her. I found the book *For the Love of ACT Science* written by Michael Cerro. I had four different students use the book at the same time they were doing my ACT prep classes. All of them said the book was helpful and their ACT science scores increased 5+ points.

Because I have taught ACT prep classes for so many years, I rotate my materials. The materials are great for extra practice. If you are interested in accessing those, please send me an email. I tell my students that my classes are simply to give them a head start on preparing by showing them how to prepare effectively. However, they need to practice what they learn. This can be done with extra practice.

Little things can make a big difference.

COVID-19, Character, & Encouragement

Sports do not build character, they reveal character. As a former coach, I learned a lot about my athletes by observing how they interacted with

teammates, how they handled certain practices, and how they rose – or fell – in the heat of competition.

As a high school teacher, I saw the same thing in my classroom. I learned a lot about my students by observing how they interacted with classmates, how they handled certain class assignments, and they rose – or fell – in the heat of competition (i.e. test).

When I worked in the public schools, I also learned that a lot of students “float” through high school. They did what they were told, nothing more and nothing less. They were provided structures by teachers, coaches, club sponsors, etc. and they operated within those constructs. The trouble is most of those types of students do not learn how create their own plans to maximize their potential whether it for sports, academics, or other areas of their lives. Unfortunately, schools do not push all students to be more independent during their high school years.

When I worked in the public schools, I also realized that a lot of students did not understand the value of seeking out counsel from their parents and other trusted adults. Too often, these students would pursue “wisdom” from friends or unproven adults who would tell those students what they wanted to hear.

Unfortunately, “floating” and not seeking wise counsel seems to help explain the struggles Millennials and Generation Z have. That may be most of those groups, but that is not all of them.

In my test prep classes, I meet the hard workers. Students who are willing to go the extra mile with no guarantee of return. These students tend to rely more on their parents, can better discern between which adults can be trusted for advice and which should be carefully examined with a dose of skepticism. Often, they are over-achievers and, every time I teach a class, I am humbled by many of the young people I meet.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and its impact on public education has really widened the gap between the “floaters” and the hard workers. I marvel that so many student-athletes became physically inactive just because their sport season got cancelled. Online gaming and iPhone usage dramatically

soared among teenagers once schools were shutdown. This fall due to the many students that are being forced to do their high school work online, public schools are reporting a dramatic increase in the number of students failing because those students are simply not showing up online. It is sad.

However, there are students taking advantage of the pandemic to make themselves better. I am ending this guide with just a few of these stories to serve as an encouragement to parents and students. After all, when life gives us lemons, we can choose to complain, do nothing, or make lemonade.

You are going to read the emails they sent to me. When appropriate, I included a table.

Ade's Story

Hello, Mr. Franklin, I just wanted to let you know that I scored a 31 on my ACT! I would just like to thank you for all of your help and your advice that you've given me through email as well as your online class. Your strategies worked very well for me, and I was able to figure out new approaches that fit with my test-taking style. I'm very ecstatic that I received this score, and I know that I wouldn't have been able to do it without your help.

Once again, thank you so much for all that you've done.

Much gratitude, Adepoju

Ade's Results	English	Math	Reading	Science	Composite
Before class	30	23	27	29	27
After class	35	25	31	31	31

Anna's Story

Hello Jason! We want to thank you for doing what you do! Our daughter, Anna, took your courses online back in May and June. She was finally able to take the ACT in Oct (after a quick review of your material) and received her score. She previously had a 21, with the goal of getting a 26 this time. She surpassed that and received a 29! She was blown away.

Thanks again, Debbi (Anna's Mom)

Grayson's Story

Dear Jason,

I'm sure you are receiving tons of scores today, but I figured I would let you know my scores as well.

First, I would like to thank you for your class. The resources that you gave us were beyond valuable, but the motivation that you gave me changed how I will study for years to come.

For reference, I consider myself an extremely dedicated student, and when I received my first ACT score of 23, I almost threw up. I'm a high-achieving student in school, and I spent upwards of a month trying to justify that the test was rigged against me. I had plans to apply to top-tier schools and my ACT score was 100% holding me back.

Instead of just changing my goals, I changed how I viewed and prepared for the test. When I started your class I scored a 23 on my first practice test, so I figured out that the test was not rigged. Until your class I had been reading a book a week of nonfiction to improve my score, and by the time of the September test I had read almost 75 books.

When your class started I started my intense studying. For about 5 months (because tests kept getting cancelled), I completed about 1/2 of a test a day. While doing this, I also read 1-2 hours a day. Some days I took almost a full test while others I took breaks.

I slowly started to see my scores increase, with my first 30 coming in March. The scores kept increasing until I scored a 36 on a practice test. At that point, I was at 55 practice tests. From that point onwards, I saw many ups and downs in my scores. I could tell when I was not focused, and I also learned strategies that worked for me. By the time of the test, I had read for 75 weeks in a row, and I had taken almost 70 practice tests.

Fast forward to test day. I felt confident and was able to finish all sections on time. I felt smooth throughout. To my disappointment, math did not go as well as I had hoped. It was very hard, which hurt my chances of a perfect

36. In reading and science, I felt amazing. My test proctor was awesome and let us take off our masks during the test which really helped. I left the test center feeling really good with my performance.

Today, I got my scores back. I scored a 34 in every section. A 34 was my goal going into the test, so seeing it made me almost cry. I no longer am behind others in terms of admissions. I am not a genius, I am just a person who challenged myself and mastered my mistakes.

Thanks, Grayson

Nate's Story

Hi Jason,

I have some exciting news to share!

Following the test analysis you did for me, I began to prepare for my September test by doing a multitude of practice tests leading up to test day.

After I finished my test, I felt pretty good about how I had scored, hoping for at the very least a 30 composite with a 32 in math for scholarship requirements. The only concern for me was the last 2 science passages as I was crunched for time to complete a typical passage as well as the conflicting viewpoint. Regardless of the second guessing I did until I got my scores, I ended up with a 32 composite!!

I am so thankful that you took time to meet with me personally, as that motivated me to study hard and succeed. I appreciate all the accommodations you made for your students during the stay at home order, and beyond it.

Thanks again. Sincerely, Nate

Nate's Results	English	Math	Reading	Science	Composite
Before class	22	27	18	20	22
After class	32	34	32	28	32

Each of these students achieved their success during the COVID-19 Pandemic. They could have easily quit. They could have easily given up when their test dates got cancelled and thought, *"It was not meant to be."*

Instead, they took advantage of their time. They made lemonade, and I am confident that each of them – all seniors – will be rewarded in the Spring of 2021 with wonderful scholarship offers. More importantly, each of them demonstrated quality character that will serve them well through their upcoming college years.

What will your student's story be?

I hope you found this guide helpful. This is an ongoing draft so if you found any grammar errors, please let me know.

If you believe there is a topic that needs to be addressed, please let me know.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. I am here to help.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jason". The script is cursive and fluid.

Jason Franklin

Test Prep Specialist

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