

SAT vs. PSAT Prep: What's the Difference and When Should Your Child Start?



Fall often brings questions about the PSAT, SAT, and how much preparation students need. The good news: they are related tests, and the PSAT can help students get familiar with the skills they'll use on the SAT.

Still, they serve different purposes. Knowing what each test is for can help you plan without adding unnecessary pressure.

PSAT vs. SAT at a glance

	PSAT/NMSQT	SAT
Main purpose	Practice, progress feedback, and possible National Merit Scholarship Program consideration	A test score some colleges may consider as part of admissions
Typical timing	Usually fall of 10th or 11th grade	Often taken during 11th or 12th grade
Scoring	320–1520 for the PSAT/NMSQT	400–1600
Who arranges it?	Usually the student's school	Students typically register for a test date, unless their school offers it

"PSAT" can refer to different tests, including the PSAT 8/9, PSAT 10, and PSAT/NMSQT. Ask your child's school which one it offers.

What's the difference between the PSAT and SAT?

The PSAT is a practice and progress check

The PSAT/NMSQT helps students see how they're doing in Reading and Writing and Math. Its score report can point to areas that may need attention before the SAT.

For students who take the PSAT/NMSQT in 11th grade, it is also the qualifying test for the National Merit Scholarship Program. Meeting the program's requirements involves more than a total score, so families can check the [National Merit Scholarship Corporation](#) for current program details.

The PSAT 10 and PSAT 8/9 are also designed to show students' progress, but they are not the National Merit qualifying test.

The SAT may be used in college admissions

The SAT measures Reading and Writing and Math skills. Some colleges consider SAT scores during admissions, while policies vary by school. A student's score is one part of an application, alongside other factors such as grades and coursework.

PSAT scores are generally for students and schools to use for feedback. They are not the same as SAT scores and should not be treated as a prediction or a promise of a particular SAT result.

The tests have similar content, but different score scales

Both tests cover Reading and Writing and Math, and both are digital. The SAT is scored from 400 to 1600. The PSAT/NMSQT and PSAT 10 are scored from 320 to 1520. Because the scales differ, compare a student's performance with the guidance on their score report rather than converting one score directly into the other.

For current details, visit College Board's guide to the [differences between the PSAT-related assessments and the SAT](#).

When should your child take each test?

PSAT/NMSQT: usually in fall

Schools typically schedule the PSAT/NMSQT in the fall, most often for 10th- and 11th-graders. The 11th-grade test is especially relevant for students who want to be considered for the National Merit Scholarship Program. The school sets the exact date, so check with your child's counselor or testing coordinator.

The PSAT 10 is generally offered to 10th-graders in the spring. The PSAT 8/9 is intended for students in 8th or 9th grade, depending on the school's schedule.

SAT: often during junior or senior year

Many students begin considering the SAT during 11th grade, once they've had time to build skills in the subjects it tests. Some take it again later if another attempt fits their plans. The right timing depends on a student's coursework, readiness, application timeline, and the colleges they may apply to.

Check the [official SAT dates and deadlines](#) and your school's calendar before making a plan. Test dates and registration deadlines can change.

How to prepare for both tests



1. Begin with a low-pressure baseline

An official practice test can help your child get used to the digital format and see which skills feel comfortable. College Board offers practice through its [Bluebook app](#) and free [SAT practice with Khan Academy](#).

Treat the results as a starting point, not a label. A practice score helps identify what to work on next.

2. Focus on skills, not just question volume

After a practice test, look for patterns. Is your child finding it hard to manage time, understand a passage, choose an approach to a math problem, or check their work? A focused practice plan is often more helpful than repeating full tests without reviewing mistakes.

For example, a student who misses several questions involving linear equations may benefit from re-visiting the underlying concepts before working through more test questions. Understanding why a strategy works can make it easier to apply on a new problem.

3. Build familiarity with the digital experience

A little practice with the testing platform can make the actual experience feel more familiar. Your child can learn how to move through questions, keep track of time, and use the available tools. College Board explains the [SAT's sections and structure](#).

The goal isn't to make every practice session feel like test day. Regular, manageable sessions can help students build skills without turning preparation into a source of stress.

4. Use PSAT results to plan SAT prep

Once the PSAT score report arrives, review it with your child. Notice strengths as well as areas to practice. If the report shows a skill gap, give your child time to work on that skill before the SAT.

Keep the conversation encouraging. The PSAT is a checkpoint: it can offer useful information about what to practice next.



When might tutoring help?

Some students want a clear structure for preparing. Others benefit from someone helping them slow down, understand a tricky concept, or practice a test-taking approach. A tutor can help turn a broad goal like “get ready for the SAT” into smaller steps that fit the student’s needs and schedule.

At The Genius Sprouts, our test prep support for the PSAT and SAT is personalized to each student. We focus on building a strong understanding of Reading and Writing and Math concepts, not just memorizing shortcuts. Students can work with us in person or online, with attentive support in a welcoming learning environment.



A calm plan can make a difference

The PSAT and SAT are connected, but they do different jobs. The PSAT helps students practice and understand their progress; the SAT may provide a score for colleges that consider it. Your child's school can clarify which PSAT it offers and when, while College Board's date information can help with SAT planning.

Start with your child's current skills, make room for steady practice, and adjust the plan as you learn more. If your family would like support, explore [The Genius Sprouts](#) or [book a free academic assessment](#) to talk through your child's learning needs.