

PSAT vs. SAT

The difference is more than just one letter

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The PSAT is a rite of passage for many high school sophomores and juniors. Like the SAT, the PSAT is a standardized test given to assess your math, critical-reading, and writing skills. (How good of a job these tests do at assessing these skills is open for debate.) Unlike the SAT, however, the PSAT isn't used to evaluate your candidacy for admission to college--and that's not the only difference.

Five key differences between the PSAT and the SAT:

1. It's only practice!

In a student's life, SAT day might be compared to the World Series and the Super Bowl rolled into one. Whereas the SAT is the big game, the PSAT is more along the lines of a scrimmage. It's great practice but doesn't count toward your final record.

You see, the P in PSAT stands for "preliminary"--the test is meant to give you a preliminary idea of how well you'll score on the SAT. But your PSAT scores do not predestine your SAT scores. Actually, many students significantly improve their SAT scores from their PSAT scores through a lot of hard work and preparation. In summary, use the PSAT as a practice test and don't get bummed if your score is not where you want it to be.

2. Essay MIA

While the tests pretty much mirror each other, there is one notable exception. The newly added essay on the SAT is nowhere to be found on the PSAT. So if you're looking for real practice for the SAT essay, your best bet is to look elsewhere, namely test-preparation books and courses.

Another slight content difference is in the math section. The SAT tests math at a higher level: algebra II. While these more difficult questions are few, they're absent altogether on the PSAT.

3. Sprint vs. marathon

Coming in at 3 hours and 45 minutes, the SAT is a test of endurance. The PSAT, on the other hand, isn't nearly as taxing. It clocks in at 2 hours and 10 minutes. While it's nice to get out of the classroom earlier, the shorter PSAT doesn't fully prepare you for the SAT "marathon." Your best bet in building up the necessary endurance is through full-length SAT practice tests.

4. Prestigious scholarships

Usually when you see the acronym PSAT, you'll also see NMSQT alongside it, which means National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test. High scorers on the PSAT (95th to 99th percentile) may qualify for the prestigious National Merit Scholarships and Letters of Commendation. Qualifying for either of these looks great on college applications, one reason why you may want to put in some study time for the PSAT.

While the SAT is not used as an evaluative tool for this particular scholarship, most other scholarships you encounter will use SAT scores as a factor in their decisions.

5. Just add a zero

The last big difference between the two tests is how the scores are reported. Each section of the SAT is scored from 200 to 800 for a total maximum score of 2,400. (The test includes three sections: math, critical reading, and writing.) The PSAT, on the other hand, scores each section (once again, three sections) from 20 to 80 for a possible score of 240. Want to get an approximate idea of how you would have done if the PSAT were the actual SAT? Just add a zero to your PSAT score.