

The Digital SAT vs ACT Paper/pencil

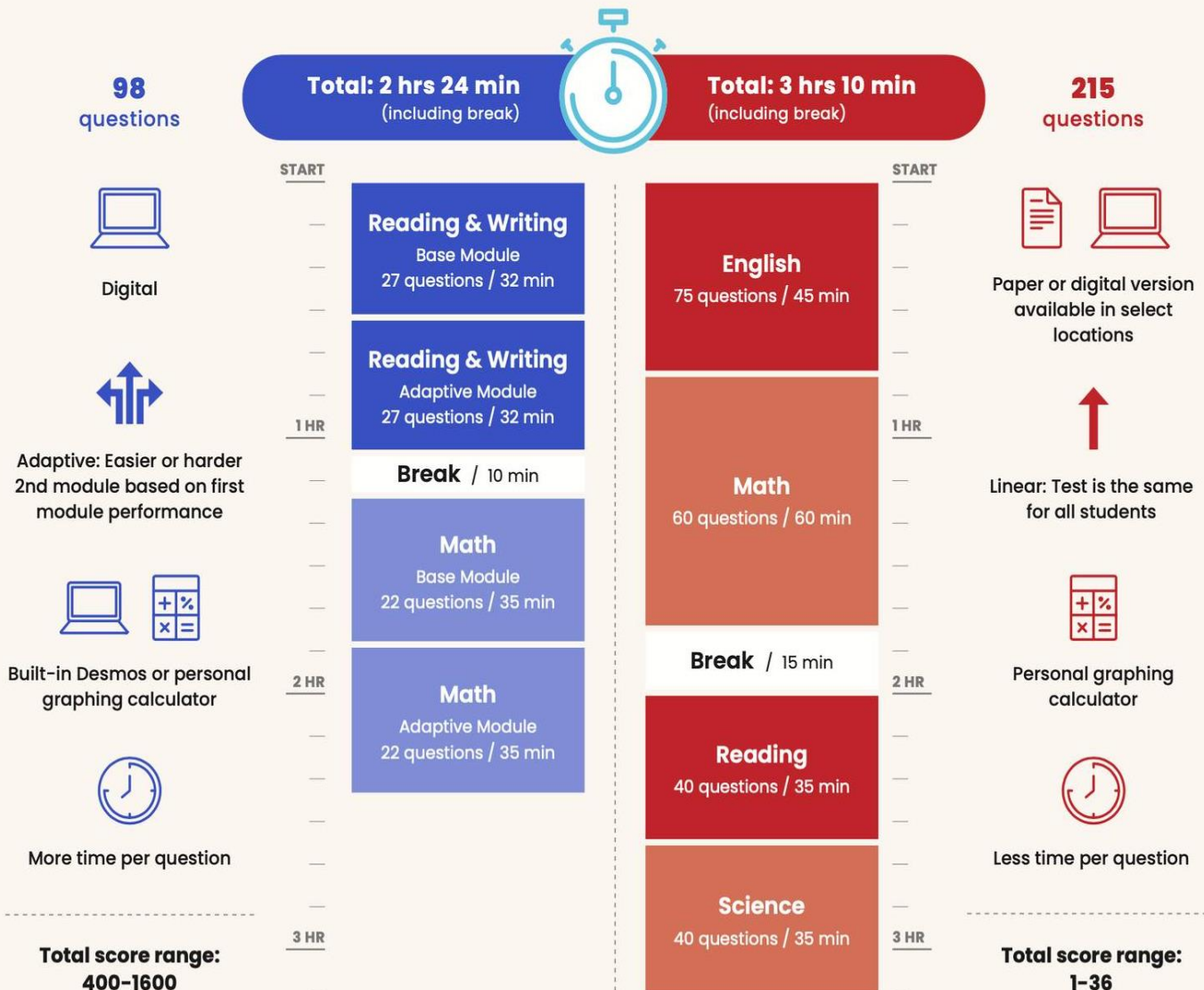
Does not consider the new ACT scheduled to debut in the Fall of 2025

SAT HIGHLIGHTS

Shorter reading passages
More difficult text complexity, more vocabulary
Fewer math topics, but more in depth
Students use their own devices (tablets and computers)

ACT HIGHLIGHTS

Longer reading passages, less vocabulary
More straightforward but faster paced questions
Greater variety of math topics with simpler problem-solving
Emphasizes science reasoning and graphical literacy



The Digital SAT vs. Paper/ Pencil ACT

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The new SAT digital (dSAT) format provides new discussion around the differences and similarities between the dSAT and the ACT. Firstly, neither test penalizes for wrong answers, and both formats are equally accepted at all universities. Both tests are ‘achievement-based,’ meaning that they are testing what your student **actually learned** in high school (*as opposed to yesteryear’s aptitude testing*). *Each the SAT and ACT have strong advantages, starting with the most obvious: The new digital SAT will take 2 hours and 14 minutes, versus the ACT’s 3 hours, BUT the big advantage for the ACT in 2024 is that it is a time-tested, reliable test format.*

Further differences in content, timing, presentation, and scoring should be explored to ensure students select the format that best suits their strengths.

The administration

The ACT continues to be administered using the traditional paper/ pencil format, and students will fill out a scantron form.

The new dSAT uses the Blue Book app on a computer. Students should evaluate how they will perform reading materials off a screen and using scrap paper for the math. (Some students may qualify for a paper/ pencil accommodations for the SAT)

The Timing of the Tests:

The ACT is administered in February, April, June, July, October, October and December. The dSAT is given in March, May, June, August, October, November and December. Students should consider how the timing aligns with their busy sports season, extra-curriculars, AP testing, summer schedule, and other commitments. Students heavily involved in Spring sports often prefer the ACT given the mid-June and mid-July options (the last SAT of the academic year is the first weekend in June). *Some schools also provide an in-school option in March.*

The Order

Both the SAT and the ACT test a student’s endurance; many students report being fatigued by the end, clearly an advantage for the new, shorter SAT. With this in mind, a student should consider the order of the tests. If a student excels in math, they may lean towards the SAT, where the last two sections are both math. The ACT’s last two sections are reading and then the science section.

The Test Packet

The ACT allows students to order the test packet three times a year (in 2024-25, this will be the Oct, Feb and April administrations.) to provide a learning opportunity. The new Digital SAT platform does not allow for this.

Math Section:

SAT math questions focus more on real-world applications of algebra concepts and less on geometry. The questions are a mix of multiple choice and student-response questions. A Desmos calculator is built into the program. The SAT contains two modules and is “adaptive:” the first module contains a mix of easy to medium problems. Your student’s performance will determine if their “module two” will progress to be more challenging. The ACT contains one math section, all multiple-choice questions arranged in ascending order of difficulty. A calculator is permitted. There are more geometry, trig, and statistics questions. Note that the SAT Math counts for 50% of a student’s total composite but only 25% of a student’s composite ACT score.

Reading Section:

The ACT reading questions focus more on literal comprehension and are thus more straightforward than the SAT. However, the ACT pacing is quite fast; the section consists of traditional, long passages. The SAT reading/ English questions are intermixed in one section and is presented as short paragraphs. The section is again provided as two modules, with the student’s performance on the first determining which level of difficulty is provided for the second. The SAT features more inference-type questions, which require more analysis and critical thinking skills.

English Section:

Both test similar rhetoric, punctuation, and grammar skills. However, the ACT has 75 questions, while the SAT provides the English questions intermixed with the reading questions.

Science Section:

Only the ACT has a science section, which tests students’ comprehension of data and trends in charts, graphs, and tables. Only basic science knowledge is required. The SAT does not have a science section, but science-oriented graphs and concepts are interwoven into the math and reading sections.

Pacing:

The SAT provides more time per question, while the ACT requires students to work more quickly in order to complete each section but the questions tend to be less complex. With practice and coaching, many students acclimate to a pacing strategy.