



DEL MAR ADMISSIONS

An elite practice for ambitious students



The Digital SAT

A Strategic Guide for Ambitious Applicants

What changed, how much testing really counts,
and what score to actually aim for.

A DEL MAR ADMISSIONS RESOURCE

SECTION 01

Why We Made This Guide

Most families are preparing for a test that no longer exists. In the span of two years, the SAT changed more than it had in the previous two decades — it is now shorter, fully digital, and adaptive — and the conventional wisdom about when scores “matter” has not caught up. Meanwhile, the public messaging from admissions offices is written to reassure, not to inform: “test-optional,” “just one factor,” “we read holistically.” All technically true, and all easy to misread.

This guide is our attempt to give you the version we give our own families: what the new exam actually is, how much testing really counts for competitive applicants, what score to target school by school, and how to plan a testing timeline that produces results without swallowing a year of a student’s life. We’d rather be useful than generic.

SECTION 02

What Actually Changed: The SAT Is Now Digital & Adaptive

The single most important thing to understand: the paper SAT that most parents — and plenty of counselors — remember is gone. Since 2024, the SAT is delivered entirely on a computer through the College Board’s Bluebook application, and its scoring engine now adapts to the student in real time. Preparing with a pre-2024, paper-era mindset means preparing for the wrong test.

	Old paper SAT	Digital SAT (now)
Format	Paper booklet, No. 2 pencil	Digital, in the Bluebook app
Length	About 3 hours	About 2 hours 14 minutes
Sections	Reading, Writing, Math (calc/no-calc), Essay	Reading & Writing, Math
Passages	Long passages, many questions each	Short passages, one question each
Scoring engine	Fixed form for everyone	Adaptive — 2nd module shifts to your level
Calculator	Only on part of Math	Built-in Desmos for all of Math

The structure, briefly

The exam runs about 2 hours and 14 minutes and has two sections: **Reading & Writing** (64 minutes, 54 questions) and **Math** (70 minutes, 44 questions), with a short break between them. Each section is split into two equal modules, and it's still scored out of 1600.

Why “adaptive” changes how you prepare

Within each section, your performance on the first module determines the difficulty of the second. Do well, and the second module serves harder questions that unlock the top of the scoring band; stumble, and the second module is easier — but your maximum possible score is capped. In plain terms: the first module is disproportionately important, and there is no gentle warm-up. This is genuinely new, and it rewards students who train to start fast and clean rather than easing in.

The real takeaway

The paper-era playbook doesn't transfer. Endurance on long passages matters less; precision, pacing, and a strong opening module matter more. Practice inside the actual Bluebook app until the interface is boring — so on test day your attention goes entirely to the questions.

SECTION 03

The Honest Truth About “Test-Optional”



Here is where we'll be more direct than most free resources. “Test-optional” is a policy label, not a description of how competitive applications are actually read. Officially, many schools will tell you a score is not required and that omitting one won't be held against you. Operationally, at the most selective schools and within the most competitive applicant pools, a strong score is closer to an expectation — and its absence is noticed.

Two forces drive this. First, grade inflation since 2020 has made transcripts harder to tell apart; when nearly everyone has an A average, admissions officers reach for a common yardstick, and testing is the cleanest one they have. Second, these offices read applicants in context — against the opportunities they had and the peers they're implicitly compared with.

Be realistic about your context

Scores are evaluated relative to your environment. For students coming out of high-resource, high-performing regions and feeder schools — where the baseline for grades, rigor, and outcomes already sits well above the national average — the bar is simply higher, and a missing score stands out more. A number that looks strong nationally can read as unremarkable inside a hyper-competitive pool.

This is not about any one background being “better.” It’s about being honest that competitiveness is relative. If you come from a well-resourced setting, plan on submitting a strong score and treat “optional” as “expected.”

Your intended major matters, too

Testing carries extra weight for quantitative and pre-professional paths. For engineering, computer science, math, and business applicants, a strong Math score is effectively part of the price of admission, and a soft math number will draw scrutiny even when the composite looks fine. Align the score you present with the story your application is telling.

SECTION 04

What Score To Actually Aim For

Every selective school publishes a **middle 50% range** — the 25th-to-75th-percentile scores of its admitted class. Two things to know about that range. First, in the test-optional era it reflects only students who chose to submit, so it already skews high. Second, the bottom of the range is not a target; it’s where applicants leaning hard on the rest of their file tend to land. **Aim at or above the median, ideally toward the 75th percentile.**

School	SAT middle 50%	What it tells you
Stanford	1530–1570	Elite privates cluster tight and high.
Yale	1540–1580	A 1500 is the floor, not the goal.
Columbia	1530–1570	Aim for the top half — 1550+.
Duke	1520–1570	Class of 2029, official profile.
USC	1450–1530	Strong privates still expect ~1500+.
Michigan (Ann Arbor)	1340–1520	Public flagship; range runs wider.

Read it this way: at Duke, whose Class of 2029 range is 1520–1570, a **1550+** sits comfortably in the upper half — a genuinely reassuring score. A 1520 is technically “in range,” but it’s the floor, and it

asks the rest of your application to do the heavy lifting. Across the most selective privates the pattern repeats: strong applicants are clearing the median, not grazing the bottom of it.

Don't confuse "test-free" with "test-optional"

A few major schools won't look at your scores at all. The University of California system — including UC Berkeley and UCLA — is test-free: SAT/ACT scores are not used in admission decisions whatsoever (a submitted score is only ever used for course placement after you've enrolled). For those schools, don't spend energy chasing a number they will never read. Everywhere else on a typical ambitious student's list, the opposite is true.

Ranges also move year to year — always check each school's latest published class profile before setting a target.

SECTION 05

How Many Times To Sit It



The sweet spot is **two to three sittings**. Two gives you a real attempt plus a targeted retake; a third leaves room to consolidate. Most schools also **superscore** — combining your best Reading & Writing and best Math across dates — which makes a second or third sitting genuinely worthwhile.

Why we generally stop at three

Beyond three attempts, the returns fall off a cliff. It rarely moves the number more than a rounding error, it consumes weekends and mental energy you can't get back, and — candidly — a flat score across four, five, or six sittings can quietly work against you. To an admissions reader it suggests the ceiling has been reached and that more testing isn't the issue.

This isn't a comment on anyone's intelligence. Plenty of excellent students simply test at a given level, and that is completely fine. The strategic mistake is pouring months into chasing ten more points when that same time would compound far more in coursework, a deeper extracurricular commitment, or stronger essays.

Rule of thumb: plan for two, leave room for a third, and stop there unless something structural in the preparation actually changes.

SECTION 06

When To Start & How To Prepare



Most students should begin structured preparation in late sophomore or early junior year, once they've built the algebra, geometry, and close-reading foundations the test assumes. Beginning here leaves enough runway to sit the exam more than once and still finish — comfortably — by the fall of senior year, before applications consume every free hour. The English section is more subjective — but usually students tend to do better as rising juniors rather than rising sophomores purely because they'll have more exposure to literary analysis and grammatical reasoning questions.

Preparation works best when it builds durable skills rather than memorizing tricks. The test rewards clear reasoning, careful reading, and efficient problem-solving; those are the things worth practicing. Concretely, we encourage students to:

- Take a full-length diagnostic before studying anything, so prep targets real weaknesses instead of guesses.
- Practice inside the official Bluebook app, not on paper, until the digital interface feels routine.
- Review every missed question to find the pattern behind the miss — that's where points actually come from.
- Simulate real timing, including the fast, clean start the adaptive first module rewards.
- Space sittings roughly two to three months apart, with focused work in between rather than back-to-back retries.
- Commit to one test (SAT or ACT) early, and stop dividing energy between them.

SECTION 07

SAT vs. ACT — And What Just Changed on the ACT



Every school that accepts one accepts the other, with no preference between them, so the only question is which test fits the student. Worth knowing: the ACT was redesigned in 2025, so old assumptions about it are now out of date, too.

The “enhanced” ACT, in plain terms

Starting with online national tests in April 2025 and all Saturday testing by September 2025, the ACT became shorter and more flexible. The Science section is now optional, and the composite score (still on the 1–36 scale) is the average of just three sections: English, Math, and Reading. If a student takes Science, it's reported as a separate score (and folded into a STEM score alongside

Math) but no longer drags on the composite. The essay remains optional, and both digital and paper formats are available.

Section	Questions	Time	Status
English	50	35 min	Core — counts to composite
Math	45	50 min	Core — counts to composite
Reading	36	40 min	Core — counts to composite
Science	40	40 min	Optional — reported separately
Writing (essay)	1	40 min	Optional

The core ACT is now about **131 questions in 125 minutes** — noticeably lighter than the legacy version, with a little more time per question. Adding Science brings it to roughly 171 questions in 165 minutes.

How to choose

Take a diagnostic of each and let the scores decide — the difference is usually visible immediately. Historically the ACT rewards steady pace and quick processing, while the digital SAT is shorter and adaptive; a student who used to lean on strong science reasoning should note that Science no longer feeds the ACT composite. One caution: a few STEM-heavy programs still recommend or expect the ACT Science section, so if a student is aiming that direction and performs well on it, taking Science is the safer call. Whichever test wins the diagnostic, commit and prepare for that one.

SECTION 08

FAQs



Can a great score make up for weaker grades?

In almost all cases, no. Admissions officers put the most weight on four years of sustained performance in the classroom. A strong score reinforces academic readiness; it does not rewrite a transcript. A **very** strong test score *may* help a subpar transcript, but this is usually wishful thinking.

My score is weaker exactly where my major is strongest. How bad is that?

It draws attention. A soft Math score for a prospective engineer or business student invites questions, and readers will look at your grades and AP/IB results in those subjects for reassurance. If the weak section is improvable, that's a strong reason to retest with a specific target.

Should I submit if I'm below a school's median?

It depends on the school and the rest of your file, but as a default: if you can realistically reach the median with another sitting, do that before deciding. A score that sits well below a school's middle 50% usually adds less than a thoughtful omission — except where testing is expected, in which case the better move is to earn the score.

Is “test-optional” a trap?

For competitive applicants from well-resourced backgrounds, effectively yes — read it as “strongly preferred” and plan to submit a strong score. For students without reliable access to testing, a genuine omission is understood. Know which situation is yours.

SECTION 09

Where Testing Fits — And Where We Come In

Testing is one signal inside a much larger case. It complements a rigorous transcript, a coherent set of activities, and essays that sound like a real person; it never replaces them. The strongest applications treat the score as one deliberate move within a plan — not as the whole game, and not as an afterthought.

That planning is exactly what we do. Del Mar Admissions builds the full strategy around each student — academics, testing timeline, activities, and narrative — so every piece is pulling in the same direction. If you'd like to talk through where testing fits in your student's plan, we'd love to hear from you.



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