

The PSAT: The Test's Format and Breakdown

The PSAT is a rite of passage for high school juniors (and some lucky sophomores). The PSAT is a standardized test given to assess math, critical reading, and writing skills, but don't be confused: The PSAT is a VERY DIFFERENT test than the SAT. Below is the format and breakdown of the PSAT, as well as an explanation of the key differences between the PSAT and SAT.

The PSAT has 5 individually timed sections testing critical reading, math and writing skills. Below is the format of each section.

Critical Reading – 2 multiple-choice sections, in no particular order

Section 1:

8 sentence Completions
2 short reading passages
1 long Passage 1/Passage 2

Section 2:

5 Sentence Completions
1 short Passage 1/Passage 2
1 medium reading passage
1 long reading passage

Math – 2 sections involving both multiple-choice and short answer (grid-in) questions, in no particular order

Section 1:

20 multiple-choice questions

Section 2:

8 multiple-choice questions
10 grid-in questions

Writing – 1 multiple-choice section, always Section 5 of the PSAT

Section 1:

39 multiple-choice questions

Once again, the PSAT is a very different test than the SAT. The 5 major differences between the tests are as follows:

1. The PSAT is only PRACTICE

The PSAT is a practice run for the SAT. (Thus the “P” before SAT) **It doesn’t count!** The only time the PSAT *does* count is if you are going for a National Merit Scholarship. To qualify, a student must score an approximate 210 or better on the test. (See scoring below) Only a handful of kids nationwide have eligible scores. Once again, **the PSAT does not count. Colleges do not receive these scores!**

2. Scoring

The PSAT is scored out of 240 points. The score is comprised of three individual scores (critical reading, math and writing) scored out of 80 points each. The SAT is scored out of 2400, with each component worth 800 points.

3. Timing

The PSAT is a 2-hour exam, only half as long as the SAT. Most students are able to fully concentrate for these 2 hours. As a result, PSAT scores do not necessarily indicate future SAT scores. With twice as many questions and an experimental section (explained in a later email), the SAT drains students.

4. There is no essay on the PSAT

The Writing section on the PSAT is strictly multiple-choice, while the SAT writing section involves not only multiple-choice questions but also a 25-minute essay. This essay accounts for a full third of the SAT writing score. Therefore, the writing score on the PSAT is not a fair assessment of how well you will do on the SAT.

5. There is no Experimental Section on the PSAT

The five sections of the PSAT all count towards a student’s score. The SAT, however, uses only 9 of the 10 sections to compute a student’s score. One section of the SAT is considered experimental, and is used for research purposes only. Again, **the PSAT does not have an experimental section.**

Although the PSAT does not report to colleges, it is an excellent learning tool and confidence builder. The WilsonDailyPrep can help improve your PSAT scores by introducing students to the types of questions presented and the strategies that manifest success. By using WilsonDailyPrep for PSAT preparation, students also get a head start at improving their SAT scores.