



## THE INS & OUTS OF COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

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As we move into spring (please!), high school juniors are focusing on the ACT. Many already have taken the test once, but the April and June dates

will see high registration from juniors. The general public will swear that the ACT is the most important measuring stick for college admission. It is not (rather, GPA and course rigor are), but standardized tests surely play a strong supporting role.

There are three keys to standardized tests: the "What, How, and When." By "What" I mean the content of the test, i.e., the material you will be expected to know. In English, knowing the rules of formal grammar and clear writing will be important. In Math, you will need to know basic arithmetic rules, various levels of algebra and geometry and some trig. In Reading, you will have to demonstrate proficiency over four genres (prose/fiction, social studies, humanities and natural science). Finally, the Science section will test your ability to read charts and graphs, interpret data, compare experiments and understand conflicting hypotheses. (There also is an optional Writing/Essay section. My advice – sign up for it.)

By "How" I am referring to the test format, i.e., how will you be asked to demonstrate your mastery of the content. This can be boiled down to test familiarity. It is crucial to know the types and format of questions in each section, how not to be seduced by certain incorrect choices, whether the questions are in any order or difficulty and how to use process-of-elimination to your full benefit.

Another important criterion is the "When." This pertains to the time you will be given to complete each section. The ticking clock is a huge challenge, especially in the Reading and Science sections. It is imperative for students to know the time parameters for each section and to practice "on the clock." If the ACT were a free throw shooting contest, it is not just how many free throws you can make. Rather, it is how many you can make in a finite amount of time.

It is sometimes said that you cannot really "study" for

standardized tests, but you can "prepare." I agree. Studying implies focusing on a specific set of material that has been introduced and taught to the student over a rather compact time frame prior to the test date. The ACT is far too broad for which to study per se, although "shaking out the cobwebs" on such things as basic grammar rules, mathematical concepts and formulas, reading shortcuts and the scientific method can be most useful. Nevertheless, you can prepare for the ACT by learning specific test-taking strategies (such as time and question prioritization) and drilling yourself on sample questions. Often, folks introduce me as their child's ACT "tutor." I resist, preferring "strategist." The first implies studying; the latter implies preparing.

Often attributed to Einstein is the phrase, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result." I am reminded of this pearl of wisdom when I hear of students taking the ACT over and over (and over) again. Did you know that approximately 70 percent of those who take the ACT a second time see their composite scores go down, stay the same or rise a mere one point? The results are not any more encouraging when taking it the third or fourth time. Am I recommending that students only take the ACT once? No, but I am saying that merely taking the test repeatedly without doing anything differently (proactively) will not likely result in appreciable gains.

This brings me to test results and student (and parent) expectations. It is rare for students with a sub-3.0 GPA to score highly on the ACT, but it is extremely common for students with a 3.5 GPA or considerably higher to score in the 20-24 range (48th-74th percentile nationally). Students and parents have an expectation that a high GPA will automatically translate into a commensurately strong ACT score. It does not! Students are rewarded with strong grades in school for a variety of reasons (class participation, submitting assignments on time, being neat and organized, attendance, politeness, being an overall "good kid" etc.). Sure, test and quiz scores are an important component of high school grades, but remember that these are based on material that was recently covered in class. Frankly, the ACT answer sheet with its 215 multiple choice questions does not care if you have 20 tattoos, 15 piercings and spew vulgarities regularly. All it cares about are the bubbles you fill in and many of the various ways you have earned your high GPA will be of little to no use on that tension-filled Saturday morning.

Speaking of high GPAs but pedestrian ACT scores, I cannot resist making a few comments about grade inflation. You may

have noticed that a growing number of high schools are dispensing with class rank on their students' transcripts. Why? It is not at all uncommon for students at high schools in our area to have a 3.3 GPA (B+), yet barely be in the top half (50th percentile) of their class. It seems that the achievement demographics of Prairie Home Companion's Lake Wobegon (where "all of the children are above average") have spread. No kid or parent wants to have a transcript with a cumulative 3.3 GPA be blemished with a class rank of, say, 149 out of 302. Thus, schools with the highest achieving students (as measured by GPA) are often the first to no longer report class rank. Additionally, growing enrollments in AP courses with their weighted grades contribute to this grade inflation phenomenon.

Finally, much controversy surrounds the issue of "teaching to the test." I am not one who generally advocates for classroom curriculum to be dictated by standardized tests (some might call that the tail wagging the dog), but this I can say rather confidently: Much of the specific content that is included on the ACT is not addressed regularly in the classroom. The arcane (and, yes, boring) rules of English grammar are not standard fare, nor are the word (story) problems that can comprise a good one-third of the 60 Math questions. Reading strategies are seldom taught or addressed once a student reaches high school and the ACT Science section requires very little specific knowledge of the courses and disciplines taught in high school. In saying this, I am not intending to be critical of teachers or school administrators. Many districts are instituting ACT workshops, and a good many teachers are incorporating ACT questions into their classroom instruction. Nevertheless, what is taught in the everyday high school classroom is not easily transferrable to the ACT.

To be quite honest, I believe that standardized tests for college admissions are on the "wrong side of history" and that we will see them diminish in importance and, perhaps, someday disappear. (Just check out the growing number of schools on the FairTest website ([www.fairtest.org/university/optional](http://www.fairtest.org/university/optional)) who seem to agree.) Until then, prepare.

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