

SAT Subject Tests – An Overview

Subject Tests are hour-long, content-based tests that highlight a student's achievement in specific subject areas. Some colleges require Subject Tests, others recommend them and still others do not even mention them. Regardless, the tests give students a chance to demonstrate their strengths and differentiate themselves to colleges. Students should plan to take any test on which they will receive a strong score.

Optimally, Subject Tests are taken shortly after a student has completed the relevant high school coursework. However, for the language tests, it is best to wait as long as possible to take the test to maximize a student's exposure to the language. Some tests require preparation that goes beyond the scope of a typical high school course. In those cases, it is recommended that the student start early preparation for the test or wait to take it after they have had adequate time to prepare.

Which tests to take

The College Board administers 20 SAT Subject Tests that fall into five general subject areas: English, history, languages, mathematics and science. Students should take the tests that are required or recommended by the colleges that they're interested in and should also consider subjects they excel in or may want to major in, to showcase strengths and interests.

Schedule of Test Offerings

Subject tests are offered six times per year, on the same day as the regular SAT. No Subject tests are offered in March. On each of the official SAT test dates, students have the option to either take up to three Subject tests OR the regular SAT. Because both the regular SAT and the Subject Tests are offered on the same dates, students should plan a testing schedule well in advance and coordinate their preparation accordingly. ACT tests are administered on alternate dates and do not conflict with Subject Test dates.

The Language tests with listening are offered only in November. Some other language tests are given only once or twice a year.

Registration

Up to three Subject tests may be taken on any given test date. Each test is 1 hour. Except for the Language with Listening tests, students may choose to change the test they take on test day. Students may register for tests online at www.collegeboard.org.

Retaking Tests and Score Reporting

Tests may be retaken. Students may choose which scores they want sent to colleges.

Scoring

Each score is reported out of a maximum of 800 points. The number of questions and the scoring scale vary from test to test. The following chart outlines the differences between the tests.

Test Comparison

Average Subject test scores vary from test to test, primarily because different students are taking each test.

- Scores should not be compared from test to test or to regular SAT scores.
- Some tests require students to answer fewer questions correct in order to get the same score.

Subject Test Score Comparison

| Test | Average Score * | Number of Questions | Approximate # correct to score 700 or above |
|------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Biology – Eco | 604 | 80 | 61 |
| Biology - Mol | 635 | 80 | 61 |
| Chemistry | 648 | 85 | 61 |
| Physics | 656 | 75 | 45 |
| Mathematics Level 1 | 610 | 60 | 38 |
| Mathematics Level 2 | 654 | 60 | 35 |
| Literature | 576 | 60 | 46 |
| US History | 608 | 90-95 | 65 |
| World History | 607 | 95 | 61 |
| French | 622 | 85-90 | 50 |
| French with Listening | 646 | 85-90 | 60 |
| Spanish | 647 | 85 | 67 |
| Spanish with Listening | 663 | 85 | 70 |
| Latin | 611 | 70-75 | 51 |

*Average Subject Test scores for 2011 college-bound seniors. Source: www.collegeboard.org

As a comparison, average SAT scores for 2011 college-bound seniors were:

Critical Reading: 497

Math: 514

Writing: 489

The Tests

Biology

Who & When? *Students who have completed and excelled in Honors Biology or AP Biology, usually after 9th or 11th grade*

Whether the student has taken an honors course in Biology or AP Biology, it is likely that the course has not covered all topics on the test. Additional preparation is advised. Students should check with their teacher to find out which topics will not be covered during the year and learn this information independently. Starting early in the year is best. There are two options when taking the Biology Subject test: one with an ecological emphasis (E) and one with a molecular emphasis (M). Of the 80 questions on the test, the first 60 questions are identical on these tests and the last 20 questions are specialized to these topics.

Chemistry

Who & When? *Students who have completed and excelled in Honors Chemistry, usually after 10th grade*

Like the other science tests, typical high school chemistry courses do not cover all topics that are presented on this test. These topics usually include organic and nuclear chemistry but might also include other topics. It is important to check with the classroom teacher to determine which additional topics the student should study. The format of some test questions is unique. Practice answering actual test questions is essential to success on this test.

Physics

Who & When? *Students who have completed Honors Physics or AP Physics, usually after 11th grade*

Most high school Physics courses do not cover all topics on the Physics Subject test. Additional preparation is strongly recommended. Since AP Physics is divided into two specialized subjects (Mechanics and Electromagnetism) neither of these courses adequately prepares a student to take the Subject test. However, with some additional preparation AP students usually do well on this test.

Mathematics

Mathematics Level I

Who & When? *Students who have completed Geometry and Algebra II, After 10th or 11th grade*

Mathematics Level II

Who & When? *Students who have completed Honors Pre-Calculus with Trigonometry, usually after 11th*

Most students who feel comfortable with math should be able to successfully take the Level 1 test. Only Honors level math students should take the Level 2 test. It is strongly recommended that students use a graphing calculator and have knowledge of all the features.

Literature

Who & When? *Students who are well versed in American and English literature, usually after 11th grade*

This test is similar to the critical reading portion of the regular SAT but also includes poetry and literary terms. The test contains mostly English and American literature and is evenly split between poetry and prose, with a small amount of drama.

History

United States History

Who & When? *Students who have taken AP US History, at the end of 11th grade*

World History

Who & When? *Students who have taken AP World History, usually at the end of 10th grade*

There are two different History subject tests available: United States History and World History. The AP courses that students take in ninth, tenth or eleventh grade are great preparation for these tests. The AP tests are given in early May, so it makes sense to take the SAT subject tests in May as well. Students in AP courses usually do well on these tests.

Languages

French and Spanish

Who & When? *Students who excel at language and have studied at least three or four years at the high school level, at the end of 11th grade or beginning of 12th grade*

The language tests are best taken after a student has studied the equivalent of three or four years of high school language. There are two subject tests in both French and Spanish: a fully written test and one with listening. Both tests assess reading skills with questions that address vocabulary, structure and comprehension of passages. The listening tests also assess the student's ability to understand the spoken language. This test is offered only in November and requires the student to bring a portable CD player.

Latin

Who & When? *Students who excel at Latin and have studied at two to four years at the high school level, at the end of 11th grade or beginning of 12th grade*

This test is intended for students who have completed two to four years of high school Latin. It measures a wide range of Latin knowledge with questions covering reading comprehension, translation, grammatical forms and vocabulary.

Other Tests: Modern Hebrew, Italian, Chinese with Listening, Japanese with Listening, Korean with Listening, German, German with Listening
