

PSAT/NMSQT Test Taking Tips

What is the PSAT/NMSQT?

The Preliminary SAT[®]/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test is a co-sponsored program by the College Board and [National Merit Scholarship Corporation \(NMSC\)](#).

PSAT/NMSQT stands for Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test. It's a standardized test that provides firsthand practice for the SAT Reasoning Test[™]. It also gives you a chance to enter National Merit Scholarship Corporation (NMSC) scholarship programs.

The PSAT/NMSQT measures:

- Critical reading skills;
- Math problem-solving skills;
- Writing skills.

You have developed these skills over many years, both in and out of school. This test doesn't require you to recall specific facts from your classes.

The most common reasons for taking the PSAT/NMSQT are:

- To receive feedback on your strengths and weaknesses on skills necessary for college study. You can then focus your preparation on those areas that could most benefit from additional study or practice.
- To see how your performance on an admissions test might compare with that of others applying to college.
- To enter the competition for the National Merit Scholarship Program, offered by the NMSC (grade 11).
- To enter the competition for the National Achievement Scholarship Program, offered by the NMSC (grade 11). This is an academic competition established in 1964 to provide recognition for outstanding Black American high school students.
- To help prepare for the SAT. You can become familiar with the kinds of questions and the exact directions you will see on the SAT.
- To receive information from colleges, including pamphlets, catalogs, and brochures telling you about the schools.

What is on the PSAT/NMSQT?

The PSAT/NMSQT includes five sections:

- Two 25-minute critical reading sections
- Two 25-minute math sections
- One 30-minute writing skills section

The whole test requires two hours and 10 minutes.

Critical Reading

Two 25-minute critical reading sections = 48 questions

- 13 [Sentence completions](#)
- 35 [Critical reading](#) questions

Math

Two 25-minute math sections = 38 questions

- 28 [multiple-choice math questions](#)
- 10 Student-produced responses or [grid-ins](#)

Students are advised to bring a calculator with which they are comfortable. Students should have basic knowledge of 4 math categories:

- Numbers and Operation
- Algebra and Functions (but not 3rd year level math that may appear on the new SAT)
- Geometry and Measurement
- Data Analysis, Statistics and Probability

Writing Skills

One 30-minute writing section = 39 questions

- 14 [Identifying sentence errors](#)
- 20 [Improving sentences](#)
- 5 [Improving paragraph](#) questions

These multiple-choice questions on writing skills measure a student's ability to express ideas effectively in standard-written English, to recognize faults in usage and structure, and to use language with sensitivity to meaning.

When Should You Take This Test?

In 2012, high schools may administer the PSAT/NMSQT on Wednesday, October 17, 2012 or Saturday, October 20, 2012. Some people take it multiple times, in their sophomore and junior years. Taking the PSAT in the tenth grade can be good practice, but students who do so, because they are not as far along in the educational process, tend to have lower scores than those who take it in their junior year.

How Much Does it Cost?

The fee for the 2012 PSAT/NMSQT is \$14. (Note: Schools sometimes charge an additional fee to cover administrative costs.) The College Board makes fee waivers available to schools for students in eleventh grade from low-income families who can't afford the test fee. See your counselor for more information about fee waivers.

How Much Does it Count?

Think of the PSAT as practice, because that is what it is designed for. Your scores are not usually sent to any college unless you specifically request it. Even then, they do not count for admission. Most schools want to see your scores on the SAT or ACT and will use the PSAT only as a basis for sending you recruitment literature.

How to Prepare

Start by registering for the PSAT/NMSQT at your school. Once you have signed up, you will receive a bulletin that gives you sample tests, preparation hints, and eligibility requirements for scholarships offered through the NMSC. The most important factor in preparing for the PSAT is to become familiar with the format. Take the practice tests in the bulletin. Be sure you understand what the questions ask for. If you have trouble with any of the concepts, talk to one of your teachers or to your counselor.

Chances are, any problems you may have will be due to the way the question is phrased rather than the question itself. It is a good idea to become familiar with how directions on the test are given, and with taking a test under time pressure. Skip over questions you do not know the answers to until you have answered all the ones you do know. Then go back and answer as many of the more difficult questions as you can. Above all, get used to the idea of taking a test in a relaxed but alert frame of mind. If you are a person who tends to panic on a test, the PSAT is a good place to practice, since you know that the scores will not count.

There are coaching classes available for the PSAT, but I do not recommend taking them. You get a much more valid sense of strengths and weaknesses going into the tests on your own. Then, when you get your scores back six weeks later, you will know just what areas you need to work on. If you decide to get special coaching for the SAT, you will have a better idea of what to spend time working to improve on. One way you can prepare for the verbal section, no matter what specific strengths or limits you have, is to develop the habit of reading. Only through reading on your own will you develop the vocabulary necessary to really do well on this section of the test. You may also want to look at some of the books that cover preparation for the SAT. These usually include several sample tests as well as hints for general test taking.

What Do Your Scores Mean?

PSAT/NMSQT scores are reported on a scale of 20 to 80. In 2011, the average score for eleventh graders was about 48 in Critical Reading, 49 in Mathematics, and 46 in Writing Skills. The average score for tenth graders was about 43 in Critical Reading, 43 in Mathematics, and 41 in Writing Skills.

Keep in mind that scores tend to improve with every year a student stays in school, and that the more practice you have in taking standardized tests, the better you will do.

When you get your scores back, take some time to figure out what they mean for you. Were there areas in which you did especially well? Areas where you performed badly? Did you have more trouble with the format than with the questions themselves? Do you need more practice in skipping the hard questions until you have answered enough of the easier ones? Or do you simply need to review your math skills or work on your vocabulary? Use the PSAT as an opportunity to analyze your strengths and weaknesses so that you can target your preparation for the SAT.

Information provided by: <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/psat/about.html>