



Department of
Education

Five Best Practices to Support Student ACT Success

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Welcome

The vision of the Tennessee department of education is that all students will be prepared ***for their chosen path in life***. The ACT is a powerful measure of readiness in terms of the academic and critical thinking skills valued by both employers and postsecondary educators. By increasing the success of students on the ACT (or SAT¹), we can expand the opportunities that students have for success in high-quality employment and higher education.

National data from the ACT indicate that retaking the ACT typically leads to score improvement of 1-2 points. In Tennessee, our state data indicate that students who retake the ACT typically grow 1-3 points. Based on the typical growth of those in Tennessee who took the ACT a second time, we anticipate that thousands of students could avoid remediation, increase their eligibility for scholarships and financial aid resources, and be better qualified for high-quality employment. In sum, improving our students' ACT scores is one way to ensure students have more opportunities and choice after high school.

This toolkit highlights five best practices to help support your students prepare to take, or retake, the ACT. Our goal is that teachers, counselors, and administrators will find useful knowledge and ideas to help their school or district review and refine their ACT preparation strategies.

For additional information on the ACT and SAT in Tennessee, please visit <http://www.tennessee.gov/education/topic/act-sat>.

¹Given that all districts in the state currently contract with the ACT to administer their required college entrance exam, the state will not offer a retake opportunity for the SAT this year. If districts choose to administer the SAT in future years, arrangements will be made to offer a retake of the SAT.



#1: Set a SMART Goal

Reaching our state's goal of an average composite score of 21 by 2020 represents more than a number on a test. Improving the average ACT score of Tennessee students will ensure that students have more choices for credit-bearing postsecondary education and high-quality employment.

For example, because ACT scores are often used as criteria for eligibility for scholarships and merit-based aid (such as the HOPE scholarship), increases in ACT scores can reduce financial barriers for postsecondary education. A student's ACT score can also be used to predict success on the ACT's National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) which is used by employers to hire and train qualified candidates.² Starting in 2016, all student ACT score reports include an indicator of potential achievement on the NCRC assessment.³ Regardless of whether a student plans to pursue a degree, industry certification, or employment, improving one's score can expand postsecondary and career opportunities.

Every student, school, and district can benefit from setting a goal. The concept of a SMART goal refers to setting goals that are **specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound**. Whether you are a teacher, counselor, or a principal, this framework can help you find the right starting point for your ACT goals.

- **Specific** – Start with your current ACT composite averages, subject scores, and participation rates. What are your opportunities for growth? What trends have you noticed in the past 3-4 years? Based on your recent trends, set specific targets with both short-term and long-term goals in mind. For example, if your current composite average is a 17 and your long-term goal is an average of 21, set short-term goals based on your annual vision for growth.
- **Measurable** – Keep in mind that the average composite score is only one measure of growth. Your goal can also include metrics for effort such as participation in an ACT preparation course, percent of students who take the ACT more than once, or participation in events organized to educate parents and students on the benefits of meeting ACT benchmarks, etc. By including several measures of growth and participation, you can better assess which elements of your strategy are successful and which elements need additional time and/or resources.

² See <http://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/UsingWorkKeysScores.pdf>

³ View a sample student score report here: <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/sample-student-report.pdf>

- **Attainable** – Using multiple metrics will allow you to create goals that are both ambitious and attainable. As you set your goal, use your current data to decide on what would be both aggressive and feasible. For instance, if your current average ACT score is a 17 and your ultimate goal is an average score of 21, it is unlikely that your goal could be achieved in one year. In this scenario, a feasible goal might be an average increase of .5 points each year. In addition to finding the right level for your goals, celebrating your progress along the way will be key to maintaining motivation and marking significant milestones. At Marshall County High School, for example, ACT growth and progress is celebrated for all students on the “ACT Wall of Fame.” Students are celebrated for passing certain score thresholds, for retaking the ACT, and for demonstrated growth based on their highest scores. (Marshall County’s ACT strategies were highlighted in a Classroom Chronicles blog post [here](#).)
- **Relevant** – Who must you engage to achieve the desired results? What are the benefits of reaching the goal that you set? Who will benefit most when/if the goals are met? If the goals are relevant to all of your stakeholders, you will achieve more initial buy-in. While the relevance of an ACT goal might seem obvious to one group, it may need justification to another. To make your goals relevant to all necessary stakeholders, do two things. First, invite the participation of all of your stakeholders—including students!—in the creation of the goals. Next, communicate *why* the goals are what they are and *how* they will be achieved. Communication is the key to setting and maintaining the relevance of your goals.
- **Time-Bound** – Decide on the life cycle for your goals and be consistent with reviewing and resetting goals based on new information. Setting goals for each cohort in your school provides a natural rhythm to setting, monitoring, and reviewing goals each academic year. As you think about the appropriate time to review and reset goals, it is likely that those times are also appropriate for celebrating and marking your progress. As you prepare seniors to retake the ACT in the fall of their senior year, for instance, acknowledging and celebrating the percentage of seniors who sign up and retake the ACT is an opportunity to track growth. Additionally, celebrating the participation of your seniors will set a precedent and signal to underclassmen the value your school places on retaking. After students receive their score reports for the retake is another opportunity to celebrate actual score growth.

A simple template for organizing your SMART goals can be found [here](#).



#2: Make Practice a Habit

Practicing for the ACT can take many forms: administering ACT practice tests, aligning assignments or formative assessments to ACT standards, or offering an elective ACT preparation course in your school. One simple way to integrate ACT preparation into any course is to utilize the *ACT Question of the Day*. You can access the *ACT Question of the Day* and sample practice problems through the official ACT, Inc. website [here](#). Consider integrating the *ACT Question of the Day* into the first five minutes of any course, advisory, or study time.

ACT Question of the Day Daily Routine:

- 1) Create an *ACT Profile* account and sign up for the *Question of the Day Email*.
- 2) Project the *ACT Question of the Day* on the board or print for students (see screenshot below).
- 3) Give students one minute to answer the question. If students are doing an English or Science question with a passage, give students 5 minutes to read the passage and answer the question.
- 4) Poll student answers then discuss the correct answer **and** why the other answers are incorrect.

The screenshot shows the ACT Profile website interface. At the top, there is a dark blue navigation bar with the ACT Profile logo and links for Home, Profile, Education, and Career. Below the navigation bar is a search bar with the placeholder text "Search people by name, city, state, or email" and a magnifying glass icon. The main content area features the heading "ACT Question of the Day" and a sub-heading "Question of the Day" with a date "August 09, 2016". The question is titled "Science Question" and is labeled "Passage II". The passage text reads: "The Sun's path from sunrise to sunset varies with the time of year. A student performed the following experiments on three clear, sunny days at three- or four-month intervals throughout the course of a year to study the path of the Sun through the sky." Below the passage, the text "Experiment 1" is visible.



#3: Know Before You Go: Test Tips

Beyond academic content knowledge and skills, understanding the format, instructions, and design of the ACT is important for student success. The documents below were created to provide a basic overview of key knowledge and tips for preparing for the ACT exam.

Preparing for the ACT – General Test Tips (Teacher Guide)

Teacher Guide – A printable version is available [here](#).

The ACT is a nationally-recognized benchmark for college and career readiness and assesses students' cumulative knowledge and skills based on standards taught from elementary to high school. The statewide school testing dates for Tennessee are **March 21, April 19, and May 3, 2017**. In order to do their best, it is important that students know what to expect on the ACT and how to take the test. Below are a set of teacher tips to help you prepare students to do their best.

The ACT Subject Tests

English	Mathematics	Reading	Science
75 questions	60 questions	40 questions	40 questions
45 minutes	60 minutes	35 minutes	35 minutes

- 1. Begin with the why.** Regardless of whether students are sure of what they will do after high school, the ACT is a useful measure for planning what's next. Though commonly used by colleges as a criterion for admission, scholarship eligibility, and course placement, the ACT is not just for students who plan to pursue postsecondary education. The skills that students need to succeed on the ACT - such as core academic skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving - overlap significantly with career-readiness skills. The ACT score report includes a projected level of achievement toward the National Career Readiness Certificate. You can view a sample student score report [here](#).
- 2. Demonstrate a growth mindset.** Because the ACT is a predictable, standardized test, students can increase their scores through strong familiarity with the structure, timing, and format of the test. Opportunities to practice ACT questions before the official test will help students know exactly what to expect on the exam day.
- 3. Perfect practice makes perfect.** When students practice, you should try to replicate exactly what taking the test will be like on the test day. Even if you are only practicing five questions in one subject area, control the environment to assure that students are learning to pace themselves for an actual test. For instance, students have about one minute per problem or less on each section of the ACT.

- 4. Communicate and celebrate.** Just as preparation for the ACT must start well before the test date or the junior year, communicating the purpose and potential impact of the test should take place well before a student takes the exam.
- 5. Make the connection.** Many of the tested standards on the ACT are based on concepts and skills that students build from the second to ninth grades. In order to make the connections more visible, we have created the [***ACT Connections***](#) document to help Tennessee educators connect the Tennessee Academic Standards to the ACT subject tests.

Preparing for the ACT – Student Test Tips

Student Guide –The document below is intended as a student-facing document that can be printed and distributed. A printable version is available [here](#).

The ACT is a test based on the curriculum you have been taught from elementary to high school and is commonly accepted as an indicator of college and career readiness. The exam takes three hours and 30 minutes to complete and is scored on a scale of 1–36. The test consists of four required subject tests: English, mathematics, reading, and science. Your composite score, the average of your four test scores, is often required for entry and course placement in postsecondary. Additionally, your ACT score can determine your eligibility for scholarships and financial aid or be used as an indicator of your readiness for employment.⁴ The table below demonstrates the test structure of the ACT.

English	Mathematics	Reading	Science
75 questions	60 questions	40 questions	40 questions
45 minutes	60 minutes	35 minutes	35 minutes

Below you will find a list of basic tips that can help you prepare to do your best on the ACT. In addition to working hard in your classes, use these test tips to score your highest!

- 1. Pace Yourself.** After accounting for time to read passages, questions, and charts, you typically have 30-60 seconds to answer each question. If you get stuck on a question, skip it and come back to it if you have time.
- 2. Answer the easy questions first.** Some questions will be easier for you than others. Try moving quickly through questions when you are confident you know the correct answer. Then, go back to more difficult questions.
- 3. Read each question carefully.** To get the answer correct, it is important to know what the question is asking. Since all ACT questions are multiple choice, a clear understanding of what the question is asking will help eliminate answers that do not make sense.
- 4. Eliminate wrong answers first.** Use logic to identify wrong answers (e.g., an answer with incorrect grammar). Even if you have to guess for your final answer, eliminating an obviously wrong answer increases your probability of choosing the correct answer.

⁴ When you take the ACT, you will receive a score report that will indicate your potential achievement on the National Career Readiness Certificate, an indicator used by employers to identify candidates to hire, train, or promote. You can view a sample score report here: <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/sample-student-report.pdf>

5. **Answer every question.** There is no penalty for wrong answers; you are awarded points for any question you get correct. Thus, you never want to leave answer spaces blank.
6. **Erase completely.** If you change an answer, be sure to erase completely. Also, pay attention to unintended pencil marks in your answer booklet. Smudges and double-answers can lead to incorrect scoring.
7. **Don't read the directions on test day.** Yes, **do not** waste time reading the directions on test day. Instead, familiarize yourself with the test directions *before* test day so that you can save time by getting straight to work. If you are ready to get started, you can find a full practice exam here: <http://www.actstudent.org/testprep/>.
8. **Be prepared on the test day!** Be sure to get plenty of rest in the days leading up to the test day. On test day, be sure to arrive on time with all required materials and eat a healthy breakfast.

More tips and test preparation resources can be found at: <http://www.actstudent.org/testprep/>.



#4: Rehearse

In the same way that one prepares for a competition or performance, taking practice exams is a great way for students to “rehearse” before taking an official test. Whenever possible, students should take the practice ACT under completely simulated conditions, including taking the entire test at once. Gaining comfort and confidence with the pace and duration of the ACT is one of the most important preparation strategies. To be successful, students need to move quickly through each test in addition to having the mental stamina to stay focused for the full three and a half hours.

Giving full-length practice tests can help students build their stamina. For instance, in some districts freshmen and sophomores take a full-length practice ACT on the same day as the statewide test date for juniors. Giving students this opportunity to “rehearse” helps students know what to expect on the test day and gives teachers and schools actionable data for academic planning.

For more frequent practice, shorter practice sessions can also help students perfect their pacing in order to answer all questions within the time limits. Whenever students practice for the ACT limit their work time to the average time per question for the specific subject matter you are practicing. For math, for example, students have about 60 seconds per question.

Listed below are free ACT practice test resources that can be printed or accessed online.

ACT Practice Tests to Print and/or Download

- [Study Guide: Preparing for the ACT](#) (offered by the ACT, Inc.)
- Free official ACT and SAT Practice Tests:
http://www.powerscore.com/sat/help/content_practice_tests.cfm

ACT Preparation Center via the Tennessee Electronic Library

- [Tennessee Electronic Library “College Preparation Center”](#)
- [User Guide for the Tennessee Electronic Library “College Preparation Center”](#)



#5: Send Free Score Reports

When a student creates an *ACT Web** account, the student will be allowed to select up to six colleges (including technical colleges, 2-year colleges, and 4-year universities) or scholarship agencies at a time to send score reports (see screenshot below). **The first four score reports are included in the registration fee.** Each college and/or scholarship agency is assigned a code that can be found on the ACT's website ([here](#)).

Even if students are unsure about whether or not they intend to enroll in postsecondary education, students should be encouraged to send their scores to their local institutions. When postsecondary institutions receive student score reports, students are typically added to their communication lists and will begin receiving targeted communications about applying. As a result, sending out score reports will help students become better aware of their opportunities.

The screenshot shows the 'Register to Test' sidebar on the left with 'Your Test Selection' expanded to 'Score Report Choices'. The main content area is titled 'Your Score Reports and College Choices' and displays the test date as 'September 10, 2016' and the test option as 'The ACT (no writing)'. A text box explains that students can print their full score report and that a PDF will be available for six months. Below this, two bullet points state that up to six colleges can be listed in priority order (with the first four free) and that choices can be modified until noon on Thursday, September 15, 2016. A table titled 'Your Selections So Far' shows no current selections. At the bottom, a note says 'When all your score report choices are listed in priority order, please *Continue*'.

Priority	Code	Name	Fee	Remove
No selections made yet				

***Seniors participating in the *ACT Senior Retake Opportunity* will need to create an *ACT Web* account to register for the Oct. 22, 2016 test date. Additionally, any student who uses a fee waiver during the junior or senior year will also have an *ACT Web* account if registering for the test online.**

Overview of Tennessee Postsecondary Institutions

Technical Colleges ¹	ACT/GPA Requirements ²	Estimated Tuition Costs (2016-2017) ³	Fall 2016 Application Deadline ^{4,5}	Eligible for Lottery Monies	Eligible for TN Promise
Tennessee College of Applied Technology	Open Admission with HS diploma or GED	\$234 for 1-40 hours	Trimester schedule	YES	YES
Public 2-Year Colleges ¹	ACT/GPA Requirements ²	Estimated Tuition Costs (2016-2017) ^{3, 4}	Fall 2016 Application Deadline ⁵	Eligible for Lottery Monies	Eligible for TN Promise
Chattanooga State Community College	Open Admission with HS Diploma (with ACT score) or Min GED score: 2,250	\$175.40 per credit hour, \$2,031.50 for 12 credit hours (including fees)	Enrollment Deadline: August 25	YES	YES
Cleveland State Community College	Open Admission with HS Diploma (with ACT score) or GED	\$207.25 per credit hour, \$2,021.50 for 12 credit hours (including fees)	Enrollment Deadline: August 12	YES	YES
Columbia State Community College	Open Admission with HS diploma or GED (with ACT Score)	\$156 per hour, \$1,872 for 12 credit hours (not including fees)	Enrollment Deadline: August 16	YES	YES
Dyersburg State Community College	Open Admission with HS diploma or GED (with ACT Score) or GED	\$193 per credit hour, \$2,021.50 for 12 credit hours (including fees)	Enrollment Deadline: August 18	YES	YES
Jackson State Community College	Open Admission with HS diploma or GED (with ACT Score) or GED	\$195 per credit hour, \$2,014.50 for 12 credit hours (including fees)	Enrollment Deadline: August 24	YES	YES
Motlow State Community College	Open Admission with HS diploma or GED (with ACT Score)	\$193.50 per credit hour, \$2,025.50 for 12 credit hours (including fees)	Enrollment deadline: August 15	YES	YES
Nashville State Community College	Open Admission with HS diploma or GED (with ACT Score)	\$166 per credit hour, \$1,984.50 for 12 credit hours (including fees)	Registration Deadline: August 14	YES	YES
Northeast State Community College	Open Admission with HS diploma or GED (with ACT Score)	\$200 per credit hour, \$2,028 for 12 credit hours (including fees)	Registration Deadline: August 19	YES	YES
Pellissippi State Community College	Open Admission with HS diploma or GED (with ACT Score)	\$221 per credit hour, \$2,042 for 12 credit hours (fees included)	Application deadline: August 12	YES	YES
Roane State Community College	Open Admission with HS diploma or GED (with ACT Score)	\$199 per credit hour, \$2,023.50 for 12 credit hours (fees included)	Classes start: August 22	YES	YES
Southwest Tennessee Community College	Open Admission with HS diploma or GED (with ACT Score)	\$219 per credit hour, \$2,029.50 for 12 credit hours (fees included)	Classes start: Aug. 22	YES	YES
Volunteer State Community College	Open Admission with HS diploma or GED (with ACT Score)	\$199 per credit hour, \$2,018.50 for 12 credit hours (fees included)	Fees due: Aug. 11	YES	YES

Walters State Community College	Open Admission with HS diploma (with ACT Score)	\$156 per credit hour, \$1,872 for 12 credit hours (fees not included)	Classes start: Aug. 22	YES	YES
Public 4-Year Colleges¹	ACT/GPA Requirements²	Estimated Tuition Costs (2014-2015)³	Fall 2016 Application Deadline^{4,5}	Eligible for Lottery Monies	Eligible for TN Promise
Austin Peay State University	20 ACT composite OR 2.85 GPA	\$332.65 per credit hour, \$3,844.50 for 12 credit hours (fees included)	Regular Admission: Aug. 10	YES	YES
East Tennessee State University	19 ACT composite OR 2.3 GPA	\$383 per credit hour, \$4,170.50 for 12 credit hours (fees included)	Regular Admission: Aug. 15, Scholarship Eligibility: March 1	YES	NO
Middle Tennessee State University	22 ACT composite OR 3.0 GPA OR 19 ACT composite AND 2.7 GPA	\$345 per credit hour, \$4,140 for 12 hours (fees included)	Regular Deadline: July 1 Priority for Scholarship: Dec. 1	YES	NO
Tennessee State University	19 ACT composite OR 2.25 GPA	\$324 per credit hour, \$3,628 for 12 credit hours (fees included)	Regular Admission: Aug. 12	YES	YES
Tennessee Tech University	17 ACT composite AND All ACT sub-scores \geq 15 AND 2.5 GPA	\$365 per credit hour, \$4,101.50 for 12 credit hours (fees included)	Regular Admission: Aug. 1 Scholarship Priority: Dec. 15	YES	NO
University of Memphis	No guaranteed admission, Avg. ACT composite 20-26 Avg. GPA 3.36	\$426 per credit hour, \$4,562.50 for 12 credit hours (fees included)	Regular Admission: July 1	YES	NO
University of Tennessee, Chattanooga	18 ACT composite AND 2.85 GPA OR 21 ACT composite and 2.5 GPA	\$546 per credit hour, \$4,272 for 12 credit hours (fees included)	Fall 2017 Deadline: May 1	YES	NO
University of Tennessee, Martin	21 ACT composite AND 2.7 GPA OR 19 ACT composite AND 3.0 GPA	\$353 per credit hour, \$4,232 for 12 credit hours (fees included)	Confirmation of attendance due: Aug. 18	YES	NO
University of Tennessee, Knoxville	Average ACT Score: 24-30, Average GPA: 3.89	\$451 per credit hour, \$6,362 per semester (fees included)	Priority Deadline & Scholarships: Nov. 1 Regular Deadline: Dec. 15	YES	NO

¹ All institutions listed accept credit for AP Scores of 3 or higher but score and amount of credit vary by subject and institution.

² ACT and GPA Requirements listed for non-transfer applicants under the age of 21 not deficient in high school coursework.

³ Fees included does not include specialized courses with supplemental fees (for example: truck driving). Tuition costs also do not include grants or scholarships.

⁴ Tuition fees listed for community colleges for in-state students not participating in TNPromise.

⁵ IMPORTANT: The FAFSA deadline is earlier than the application deadline. The TNPromise deadline is January 17, 2017.

Closing

While preparing juniors and seniors to take (and retake) the ACT successfully is important, “test prep” in isolation will not be sufficient to meet our state goals of a majority of our students scoring at or above a composite score of 21 and successfully completing postsecondary. Our state offers the resources for every student to access postsecondary education, and a majority of ACT-tested standards are taught before high school. It’s the job of every K-12 educator to empower their students to be ready for their chosen path. The largest tool for success on the ACT, as well as in postsecondary and career, is comprehension of complex texts. All educators should be using grade-level text in their subject areas every day.

The ACT is not just another assessment, it’s a robust single measure of readiness—a valuable tool for students, educators, and employers to gauge readiness for postsecondary and career. Even students not planning on attending postsecondary directly after graduation can gather valuable information about workforce from the ACT and be prepared for their future. Thank you for supporting our students as they prepare for the ACT. If you would like to provide feedback or input on future versions of this guide, please contact Jerre.Maynor@tn.gov.