act assessment®

Using ACT Scores in Admission and Placement Decisions: An Update

This booklet discusses two important current issues in college admission and placement decisions:

- Testing writing skills
- Addressing the impact of changes in college admissions tests

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Testing Writing Skills

You've probably been hearing a lot lately about writing skills–particularly about how they are critical for success in college. We at ACT have long believed that writing is one of the essential skills for college readiness. That is why the ACT Assessment has always included a multiple-choice English Test that measures students' understanding of the conventions of standard written English and rhetorical skills. Also, in response to interest from some institutions in a direct measure of writing, we are adding a 30-minute writing test as an optional component of the ACT Assessment, to begin in February 2005.

By making the ACT Writing Test optional, we are acknowledging the diversity of American postsecondary education. Our research showed that about one-third of US colleges and universities already had a writing assessment in place on their campuses; one-third appeared happy with the information they already received; the remaining one-third were interested in a new writing test.

We have always considered it ACT's primary mission to offer responsive services, to provide information that schools need and want. With an optional writing test, institutions can make their own decisions about whether to require it. And students will decide whether to take the writing test depending on the requirements of the schools they are considering. They won't have to take a test they don't need to take, thus incurring unnecessary expense.

Early responses from postsecondary institutions support our "optional" decision:

- 50% of the schools responding will not require the Writing Test
- 32% will require the Writing Test
- 18% will recommend but not require the Writing Test

If your institution **will not require** the ACT Writing Test, you do not need to make any changes to your admissions and course placement procedures. The meaning of the ACT Composite score will not change. The only change being made to the ACT Assessment is the addition of the optional ACT Writing Test. Students who take the ACT Writing Test will simply receive additional Writing/English scores and information.

If you **will require** ACT Writing Test results, we invite you to participate, at no charge, in an institution-specific Writing Test validity research study. The results of this research will help you understand how to incorporate Writing Test scores into your admissions and course placement decisions. Until the results of this research are known, we encourage you to compare an applicant's writing sample (which will be available via the Internet) with other writing submissions from that applicant, and consider this information in course placement decisions.

Using Results from the ACT Writing Test

ACT adheres to the ***Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*** of the American Educational Research Association. These standards govern the technical requirements for educational tests. They require that test developers provide users with the rationale for each recommended interpretation and use of test scores, together with a comprehensive summary of the evidence and theory based on the intended use or interpretation (AERA, Standard 1.1, 1999, p. 17).

Because the ACT Writing Test is a new test, we are conducting a number of research studies to ensure it is in compliance with the standards and to examine the likely contribution of the test to college admission and course placement decisions across a spectrum of institutions. The results of these studies will be available in spring 2004.

Many institutions are currently considering whether they will be using the results of the new test in their admission and course placement decisions and, if so, how they can best use this information. Because the use of these results may differ across institutions, we strongly recommend that institutions participate in an institution-specific validity study. The purpose of such a study is to examine how the Writing Test will function for admission decisions at a particular institution and how the test results can contribute to the accuracy of course placement decisions. We will provide the research support needed to conduct this research at no charge to the institution.

Institutions that participate in ACT's validity research studies for the new Writing Test before it is introduced nationally must:

- Administer the ACT English and Writing Tests to a large representative sample of their first-time entering students
- Return the essays and the answer sheets to ACT for scoring
- Report students' course grades and overall GPAs to ACT at the end of the semester

We will provide:

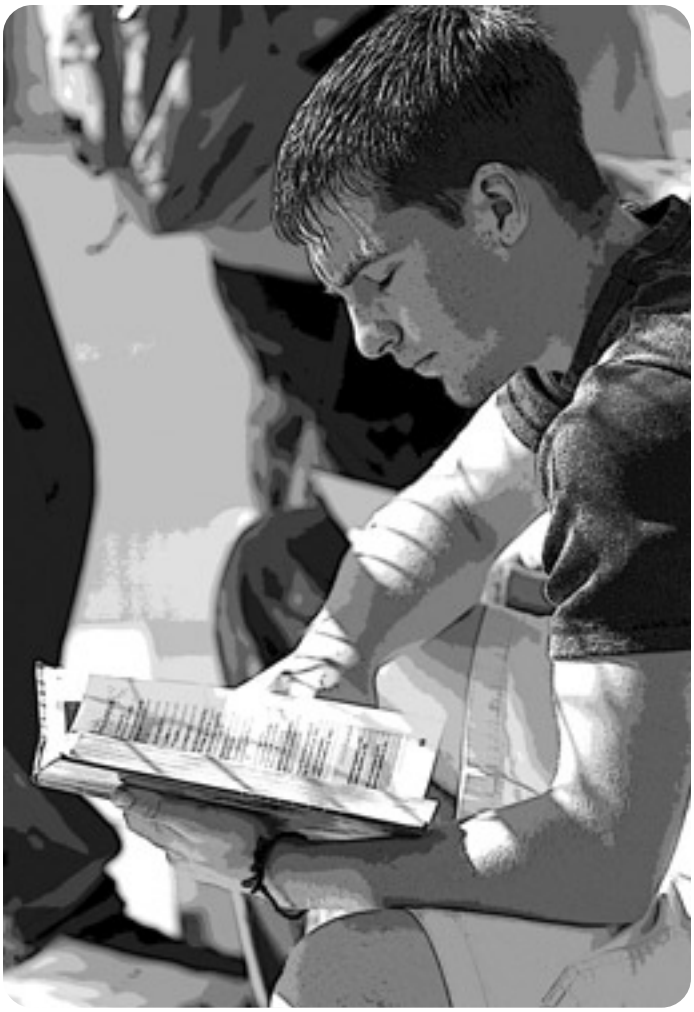
- An electronic file of students' scores
- A report on predictive validity

There is no fee for participating in this study. If your institution is interested in participating, please contact your ACT regional office.

We will continue to provide validity research support for the ACT Writing Test in the future through our Prediction Service. This service enables you to document the accuracy of admission and course placement decisions, and to set cutoff scores for course placement. It is also offered without charge to ACT user institutions.

For more information about the ACT Writing Test, visit www.act.org/aap/writing/guide

Addressing the Practical Impact of Changes in the ACT and the SAT I



The only change being made in the ACT Assessment in February 2005 is the addition of an optional 30-minute Writing Test. No changes are being made in the four current ACT tests or in the scores currently reported. Therefore, if your admission, placement, and scholarship criteria are anchored in the ACT Assessment, you can continue to have confidence in your interpretation and use ACT scores, just as you do now.

The concordance between ACT and new SAT I scores will be affected, however, because of the major changes being made in the verbal, mathematics, and writing test sections of the SAT I.

ACT adheres to the ***Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*** of the American Educational Research Association. These standards govern the development, interpretation, and use of test scores. They require that, when substantial changes are made in test specifications, either scores should be reported on a new scale or a clear statement should be provided to alert users that the scores are not directly comparable with those on earlier versions of the test (AERA, Standard 4.16, 1999, p. 59).

When changes are made in the content of a test, the interpretation of resulting test scores changes as well. These changes impact:

- Use and interpretation of test scores in admission decisions
- How accurately the revised scores function in course placement decisions
- Relationships with other test scores
- Interpretation of test scores over time (i.e., longitudinal data comparisons)

If, in addition to ACT scores, your institution also accepts SAT I scores, you should conduct local validity studies to examine and evaluate the impact of the SAT I test changes on your admission, course placement, and scholarship decisions before using them.

New concordance between ACT and new SAT I available in 2006

Many institutions are asking us how the new SAT I scores relate to ACT scores. The most widely used method for relating these scores is through a concordance table. However, since the new SAT I is expected to be dramatically different from the current SAT I, the existing concordance tables between the SAT I and the ACT will no longer be accurate. We need to conduct new research and construct new concordance tables. To do so, we must have matched scores from eleventh- and twelfth-grade students who have taken both the ACT and the new SAT I. These data will not be available before the summer of 2006, so new concordance tables will not be available prior to fall 2006.

If your school receives both SAT I and ACT scores, we recommend that you develop **separate ACT and SAT I prediction equations** for use in admission decisions as an alternative to concording scores. This will result in predicted scores for admission that can be directly compared, no matter which test the applicant takes. We will develop this ACT prediction equation for your institution free of charge. The research will identify the independent variables (such as test scores, high school grade point average, high school rank, and other variables) that are most effective in predicting success in the first year of college at your institution. Any prediction based on actual test scores will be more accurate than a prediction based on concorded test scores.

So what should institutions do in the meantime?

If your institution will not require the ACT Writing Test, you will not need to make any changes to your admissions and course placement procedures. The meaning of the ACT Composite score will not change. The only change being made to the ACT Assessment is the addition of the optional Writing Test.

If many of your students currently submit SAT I scores, you may want to require ACT scores for all of your fall 2006 freshman class, allowing you to have a stable, valid, and reliable measure of college readiness. The additional information provided by the ACT Assessment may also be particularly useful in making decisions about students who are on the borderline for admission, course placement, or scholarships.

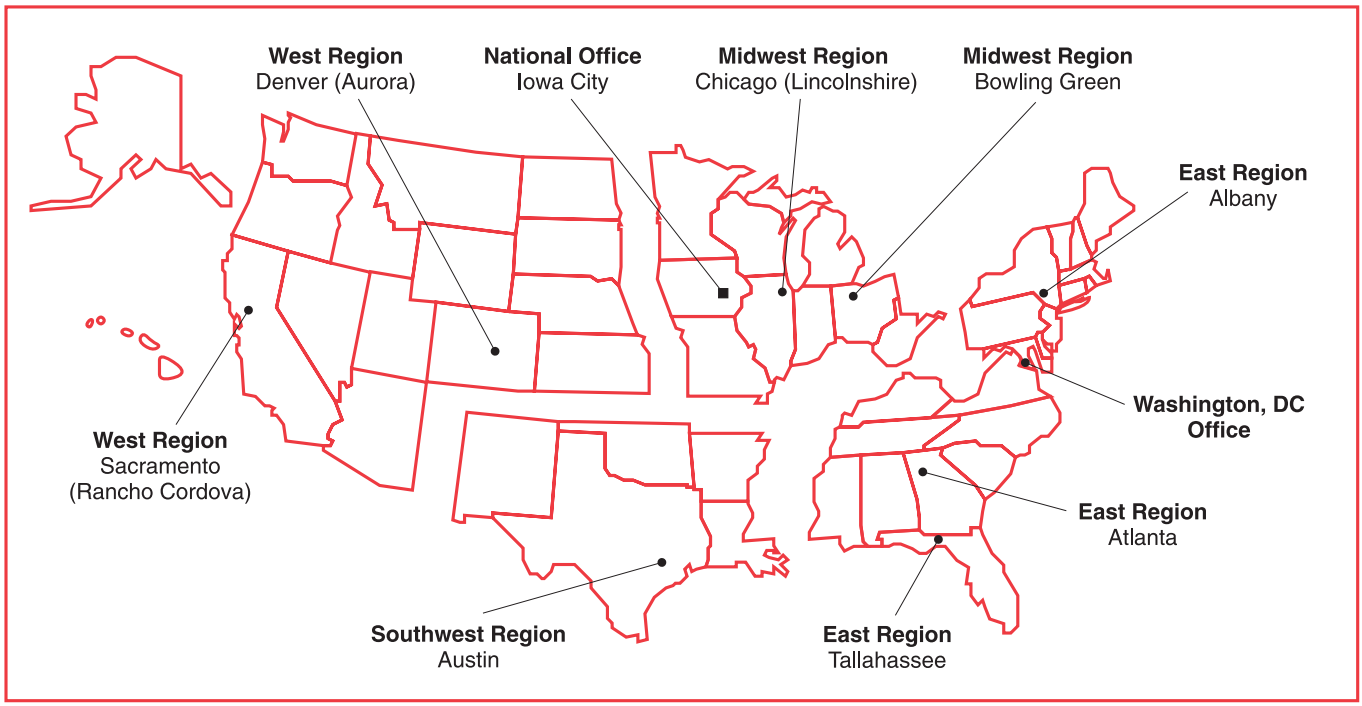
Some institutions may elect to implement a two-step concordance by first converting new SAT I scores to old SAT I scores, and then using an existing concordance between old SAT I scores and ACT scores. Because this procedure depends on the accuracy of the concordance at each step, the inaccuracies at each step are compounded. Many (probably most) institutions will want a concordance between the new SAT I sum score (Mathematics + Reading + Writing) and the ACT Composite score. Given that the old SAT does not have a writing measure, we cannot predict the accuracy of a concordance between sum scores on the new and the old SAT I. Therefore, we cannot endorse the two-step approach.

Other institutions may consider constructing a new concordance table by matching percentiles from ACT's national user norms to percentiles from norms initially reported for the new SAT I. Matching percentiles requires data from students who have taken both tests. ACT's user norms are based on data from ACT-tested students, virtually none of whom will have also taken the new SAT I. Percentile comparisons will be unequal and problematic due to differences between ACT-tested students and students in the initial SAT I norm group. This approach is the least desirable and is likely to be even less accurate than trying to adapt existing ACT-SAT I concordance tables.

We recommend that institutions develop separate prediction equations for the ACT and the SAT I. We believe institutions will find the results to be a more accurate way to predict student success and a fairer representation of a student's actual probability of success in college.

For more information about concordance, visit www.act.org/aap/writing/postsec/concord.html

For more information, please contact the nearest ACT Regional Field Office.



ACT National Office
500 ACT Drive
P.O. Box 168
Iowa City, Iowa 52243-0168
Telephone: 319/337-1000

Washington, DC Office
One Dupont Circle NW
Suite 340
Washington, DC 20036-1170
Telephone: 202/223-2318

Regional Field Offices

West

Sacramento Office
2880 Sunrise Boulevard
Suite 214
Rancho Cordova, California 95742-6549
Telephone: 916/631-9200

Denver Office
3131 South Vaughn Way
Suite 218
Aurora, Colorado 80014-3507
Telephone: 303/337-3273

Midwest

Chicago Office
300 Knightsbridge Parkway
Suite 300
Lincolnshire, Illinois 60069-9498
Telephone: 847/634-2560

Ohio Office
412 East Wooster Street
Suite A
Bowling Green, Ohio 43402-2926
Telephone: 419/352-5317

Southwest

Austin Office
8303 MoPac Expressway North
Suite A-110
Austin, Texas 78759-8369
Telephone: 512/345-1949

East

Atlanta Office
3355 Lenox Road NE
Suite 320
Atlanta, Georgia 30326-1332
Telephone: 404/231-1952

Albany Office
4 Pine West Plaza
Suite 403
Albany, New York 12205-5564
Telephone: 518/869-7378

Florida Office
1315 East Lafayette Street
Suite A
Tallahassee, Florida 32301-4757
Telephone: 850/878-2729

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