

Admission test scores help professional and graduate programs determine who to admit (and, in some cases, to award merit-based financial aid), so you should be very well-prepared for these tests. Some are tests of aptitude in quantitative skills, verbal and analytical reasoning and/or writing ability (e.g., GRE, LSAT, GMAT), while others are tests of content knowledge (e.g., GRE Subject Tests, CSET). Other tests, mainly for health professional schools, are combinations of general ability and content knowledge (e.g., MCAT, DAT, OAT).

Know the Test, How It's Scored, and How Your Score Will Be Used

The first step in preparation for an admission test is knowledge: learn all you can about the test well before you take it. Visit the test's website for information about the test itself and practice materials. Find out from schools how important the test score will be for their programs and how high you need to score for admission. If you repeat a test will a program average multiple scores or use the highest or most recent scores in assessing your admissibility? Can you retake the test, if needed, and still meet the application deadlines? Understand how the test you will be taking is scored. You could lose points on some tests for wrong answers (including guesses and quick "fill-in-the-blank" answers at the end of the test when time has run out). Other tests don't penalize for wrong answers or guesses.

Test Preparation Books and Software

The amount of preparation you need will vary depending upon the difficulty of the test, your ability level, and how important the test is to the admissions process; some tests require more preparation, others require less. Books, software and other resources to help you prepare can be found at the tests' websites, in bookstores, or online. If you have good test-taking skills, a fairly low anxiety level about standardized tests, and the discipline to study regularly on your own, these aids can be a good alternative to expensive courses. Preparation books are usually available for most standardized tests from the testing service itself, the UCSD Bookstore and major bookstores. Computer software is available for some tests from publishers of preparation books. Thoroughly check out the books and/or software before you buy to make sure they meet your needs. Do the books only include practice tests, or do they also provide explanations of test sections, questions, answers, study techniques, etc.?

Practice! Practice! Practice!

Thorough preparation for admission tests requires the completion of several practice tests under simulated, timed test conditions. If you study on your own with commercial preparation books or software – or even if you take a preparation course – be sure to plan time into your schedule to take *at least* three or four complete practice tests and many more additional partial tests under simulated conditions. This will require a timer and a quiet place with no interruptions, ideally at the same time of day and day of week as the actual admission test you will be taking. If you'll take the test on a computer, be sure to practice reading and studying on the computer as much as possible to "train your brain" to think while reading on a computer screen.

Do You Need a Preparation Course?

Many students can adequately prepare for admission tests on their own, and you may want to try to self-study for a while to see how well you can prepare on your own before you sign up for an expensive preparation course. That said, preparation courses can be helpful in several ways. They provide study materials and sample tests, saving time otherwise spent gathering and organizing materials (especially if the test covers content areas like biology, chemistry and physics). The high cost of these courses can motivate you to take full advantage of study time and practice tests. The structured activities provide a schedule and steps to follow if you lack self-discipline. Preparation courses can also offer group motivation and psychological support from classmates and instructors. Also, you might feel like you have a competitive advantage, since many other students take these preparation courses.

Which Preparation Course is Best for You?

Preparation courses are offered by many commercial services and university extension offices. If you decide to enroll in a preparation course, resist any impulse to sign up for the first course you learn about. Courses vary greatly and you want to investigate thoroughly before committing to one. Some questions to ask include: What is the cost? Are there scholarships, even partial, available to students in need? How long is the course? How many practice and simulated tests are given during the course? Does the course rely on classroom instruction solely, or are there study materials, audiotapes, practice sessions or other activities offered? What qualifications do the test instructors have? What have other students said about the courses? Does the course offer unrealistic promises or guarantees which they may not be able to meet? Can you retake the class for free or at reduced cost if you are not pleased with your actual test scores? Based on your study skills, test-taking ability and content knowledge, which course will meet most or all of your specific needs? After careful assessment, you may decide to prepare for the test on your own. But, if not, then your "consumer's" approach to researching courses will assure you of the best course for your needs and financial considerations. The Career Services Center keeps a list of test preparation courses and their contact information, but does not endorse any particular course.

Anxiety Alleviation and Other Test-Taking Tips

Many factors come into play when preparing for and taking standardized tests. Do you historically panic, freeze or become overly anxious during such tests? If so, learn some anxiety-reduction techniques while you are preparing for the test. Activities such as deep-breathing, muscle relaxation and guided imagery can be useful to reduce anxiety before and during tests. (UCSD's Psychological and Counseling Services, online at <http://psychservices.ucsd.edu> or at 858.534.3755, can assist you with anxiety reduction techniques.) Since certain kinds of food or drink can hinder your performance during a test (like sugar or caffeine "crashes" or too many sleep-inducing, heavy carbohydrates), you'll want to avoid "bad test foods" – even during your practice sessions. Additionally, get used to rising early and being awake during the test period and ensure a good night's sleep before the test, by altering your sleeping schedule beginning several days to a week before the test.

Test-Takers Needing Accommodations

Most standardized tests allow persons with disabilities of various kinds (e.g., learning or reading disabilities, visual or hearing impairments, physical disabilities, etc.) special testing arrangements, including time extensions, a reader or other assistant, or a special room. Also, many tests regularly offered on Saturdays offer alternative test dates for Saturday Sabbath observers. If you need such arrangements, follow the instructions in the test registration information to set up any necessary special accommodations. There may be an extra fee for these services, but most needs can be accommodated. You may be required to provide proof of your need along with your request for special arrangements.

Information for Test-takers

Many tests' registration and information booklets are available in the Career Services Center, or are available online at the websites listed in the chart below. For more information about the graduate or professional school application process, visit <http://career.ucsd.edu> or call 858.534.4939 to schedule an appointment with an advisor.

Test	Website	When Offered	Length of Test	Subjects Covered	Guessing Penalty?
CBEST (Cal. Teach)	www.cbest.nesinc.com	Feb., April, June, Aug., Oct. & Dec.	4 hours	Reading, Math and Writing Skills	No
CSET (Cal. Teach)	www.cset.nesinc.com	Jan., March, May, July, Sept. & Nov.	5 hours	Multiple Subjects and Single Subject (incl. math, Eng., foreign lang., science, social sci., P.E., art, & music)	No
DAT (Dental)	www.ada.org/prof/ed/testing/dat/index.asp	Daily (computer based)	4 hrs. 15 min.	Bio., Chem., OChem., Math, Reading Comp., Perceptual Ability	No
GMAT (Business)	www.mba.com/mba/TaketheGMAT	Daily (computer based)	3 hrs. 20 min.	Verbal, Mathematical, and Analytical Writing Skills	Yes
GRE General (Grad Prog.)	www.gre.org	Daily (computer based)	~4 hours	Analytical Writing, Verbal, and Quantitative Skills	Yes
GRE Subject (Grad Prog.)	www.gre.org	Nov., Dec. & April	2 hrs. 50 min.	(offered individually) BioChem/ Cell/MolecBio., Bio., Chem., Computer Sci., Eng. Lit, Math, Physics, & Psych.	Yes
LSAT (Law)	www.lsac.org	Feb., June, Oct. & Dec.	3 hours	Reading Comp., Analytical Reasoning, Logical Reasoning, Writing	No
MCAT (Medical)	www.aamc.org/students/mcat/start.htm	~22 times/year (computer based)	4 hours and 30 min. plus breaks	Bio., Chem., OChem., Physics, Verbal Reasoning, Writing	No
OAT (Optometry)	http://www.opted.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3444	Daily (computer based)	4 hrs. 45 min.	Bio., Chem., OChem., Physics, Reading Comp., Math	No
PCAT (Pharmacy)	www.PCATweb.info	June, Oct. & Jan.	4 hrs. 30 min.	Verbal Ability, Bio., Chem., Reading Comp., Math, Writing	No