

When is the BEST TIME to take the SAT?

I am asked this question regularly, and would like to properly address it. First and foremost, The SAT exam is offered in the following months: October, November, December, January, March, and May and June. With the new Score Choice policy (which is very tricky, and I will elaborate on it in another article), students are informed that they may take the SAT as many times as they'd like and just have to submit the scores they want to the schools they choose.

It is imperative to know that this is not entirely true. Many top schools, such as Georgetown University, do not participate in score choice (see <http://uadmissions.georgetown.edu/scorechoicepolicy.cfm>. "Georgetown University does NOT participate in the Score Choice option available through the College Board or the similar program through Educational Testing Service (ETS)" and "Georgetown requires that you submit scores from ALL test sittings of the SAT, ACT or SAT Subject Tests.")

In fact, many top schools want to see ALL student SAT scores, not merely the top ones. Secondly, many college advisors and teachers alike tell students to take the SAT (or ACT) when they are ready. While the person giving such advice may have very good intentions, I have yet to meet students who, with certainty, felt completely "ready" to take a 4 hour long exam bright and early on a Saturday morning. Many students leave the SAT wishing they invested more hours in preparing for the test, no matter how much they studied in advance.

My advice is, in short, take the SAT (or ACT) at the best time of the year, when the testing curve is in your favor, and when you will get the most bang for your buck point-wise. You should absolutely be extremely well-prepared prior to taking this test, but that does not necessarily mean that you should wait until your senior year of high school to take it.

With that being said, is it true that some months of the year are better than others to take the SAT? The answer is YES.

Hands down, the best time to take the SAT is during junior year of high school (11th Grade). However, prior to actually sitting for the SAT, students should have already taken several proctored exams. Many Kweller Prep Students, in particular those who scored in the (99th percentile), prepared 6 months to 1 year in advance intensively and took approximately 20-40 proctored practice SAT tests under very strict testing conditions at my office.

The other thing to know is that sometimes it pays, really pays, to be a "strategic tester" and to be aware that there are some times of the year that are better than others to take the SAT, and there is more to the test than just being "ready for it." After all, you could feel ready as late as February of Senior Year, but that may be too late in the college

admissions game. Besides, the test isn't even administered then.

Here's a month by month breakdown of when to take, or rather when I advise you NOT to take, the SAT:

MAY:

For some reason, the vast majority of high school juniors take the May Administration of the SAT for the first time. I think this is a mistake, for several reasons. First of all, if you take the SAT for the first time in MAY and are later unhappy with your score, you will not be able to re-take the test until at least October of Senior Year. You have to realize that the May SAT scores will not be released until at least 3-4 weeks later, and by that time, it will be too late to sign up for the June SAT as the registration for the test will have passed. (See <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/calenfees.html>: The deadline for registering for the June 5th, 2010 SAT is April 29, 2010, one week before the May 2010 SAT will even be given!)

Another reason why taking the SAT in May is not ideal is because the academic school year is particularly demanding during that month. The SAT is not the kind of test you want to take in addition to doing twenty other things; preparing adequately for this exam truly requires much of your undivided attention.

During the month of May, many students take AP (Advanced Placement) exams, IB (International Baccalaureate) exams, (<http://www.uhigh.lsu.edu/academics/ib/Exams.pdf>), complete term papers, prepare for New York State Regents exams and get ready for school finals, science projects and the like. Talk about having a lot on your plate! It is nearly impossible to adequately prepare for the SAT in May given all this divided attention and many students wind up re-taking the SAT in October of their senior year (so much for senioritis!) because they cannot manage all these significant responsibilities (but then again, who could blame them?).

Over the summer, Kweller Prep students prepared for the upcoming October SAT as many as 5 days a week-- all summer long. Needless to say, this was not their ideal summer break, and a horrible way to spend the last summer before starting their final year of high school.

Last but not least, you should consider the weather as a factor of when to take the SAT. New York finally gets its first taste of springy, sunny weather in May. After several months of bitter cold, the temptation of spending a sunny afternoon outdoors instead of being indoors studying is very great. I say take the test when it's cold outside; when you are likely to stay indoors and prepare so that you are at your optimal readiness level on test day. In short, if possible, stay away from the idea of making the MAY SAT the first time you will test.

OCTOBER:

Taking the SAT as a senior is flat out painful. Many students get trapped into taking the October SAT in their senior year (as elaborated upon above) because they unknowingly take the May SAT as juniors and, as described earlier, do not receive their scores until it is already TOO LATE to sign up for the June SAT. (See <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/calenfees.html>: The deadline for registering for the June 5th, 2010 SAT is April 29, 2010, one week before the May 2010 SAT will even be given.)

I have several bits of advice to offer as to why October is not the optimal time to take the SAT.

First, the SAT is scored on a curve. Now, I am used to taking tests on a curve. I did so throughout college at New York University, and then all throughout Law School at Hofstra. But for many high schoolers, the day they take the SAT will be their first experience of taking a test on a curve, and it's not pretty.

Curving a test means that your score is rescaled, and during October, the readjustment of scores is NOT tipped in your favor. (see: <http://academics.hamilton.edu/biology/smiller/curve.html>)

“Normalization also requires that overly high scores be adjusted downward for conformity. Either way, data are distorted and some information is lost. Look at some data, then consider all the implications of "grading on a curve'.”

Moreover, almost all students taking the October SAT are seniors and doing well in October will be incredibly harder than at any other times of the year. I had several students score a 2100 or higher during practice tests, but only hit a 2000 for the October SAT because of the rescaled score curve. This is why I firmly believe that a student who would otherwise score a 2000 on the January administration of the SAT would only get as much as an 1850 in October, because of the stiff competition of the curve.

With regards to the weather, boy is it beautiful during the months leading up to October! This means that studying for the SAT throughout the summer will be harder than ever. It takes an incredible amount of discipline to prepare for the SAT when your friends are scheduling beach trips and your families are arranging vacations. Even my most disciplined testers missed a lesson or two throughout the summer, and I couldn't blame them. After a rigorous junior year of high school, who wouldn't want to enjoy his or her final summer before senior year?

Furthermore, because nearly all the students taking the October SAT have already taken it at least once before, statistically, their scores are likely to increase, as they have already gone through the initial stress of sitting for the exam for the first time. More prepared

testers, pleasant weather, classic senioritis symptoms, and a miserable testing curve are just a few reasons why taking the SAT in October is not optimal. If you can, stay away, or else be prepared to dedicate your summer living at Kweller Intensive SAT Prep.

NOVEMBER:

Taking the SAT senior year is rough, really rough, and I would never advise it unless you have no other choice. The real problem with November testing (and there are many more reasons than just the few stated here) is that students are likely to fall behind with the college application process since the November scores won't even be released until December. In SAT Land, the early bird truly catches the worm and no student taking the November or December administration of the SAT will be eligible to apply Early Action (EA, which is non-binding) or Early Decision ED (which is binding), since these priority deadlines are usually November 1 or November 15.

The earlier you apply to college, the better, and by taking the SAT so late in the game, you not only hurt your chances for early college admissions, but also for scholarship deadlines too. What's worse is that the later you apply to college, the later you will hear back from them. Some seniors don't know where they are accepted until as late as June of senior year (!), and the uncertainty of where you are going to college can be unbearably stressful and frustrating. My assistant, a former Director of Admissions at New York University, informed Kweller Prep students that some schools take as many as 50% of their incoming class from the Early Action and Early Decision pool, and as little as 8% from the regular decision contenders. You want to get into your dream school when the odds are the most in your favor, so make sure not to be a late tester, or else you may regret it.

DECEMBER:

Oye, what a headache it is to take the SAT in December of senior year! With the holidays fast approaching, and my favorite holiday, Thanksgiving, already passed, concentration is harder than ever. Not to mention all the mid-year academic demands—finals, papers, term projects. What's worse is that the regular decision college deadlines are fast approaching (Cornell's deadline is January 1).

The December tester not only has to worry about juggling his or her academic demands, college applications, SAT preparedness, but also risks getting locked out from his or her top choices for college because of the fast approaching deadlines. From the other end of the spectrum, the college admissions officers, who usually consist of university faculty members and professors, will be administering their own final exams to their students. Their energy will not have to be redirected into grading their college student's exams and term papers. This means that the admissions committee will meet more sparsely, which

will inevitably hurt a December tester's chances of getting into his or her dream school.

YES is it true that you hurt your chances of getting into dream school by applying late. The key is to get your application out EARLY. Warn your younger friends!!!! Hundreds of thousands of students from around the country apply to college in bulk, and you have to distinguish yourself. A serious candidate applies early in the game, and college admissions officers both recognize and reward that effort. A student who takes the December SAT will not have his scores released until Christmastime. Colleges are on winter recess and the college admissions committee meets very infrequently at that time. In short, December is not the optimal time to take the SAT.

JANUARY of Junior YEAR:

Well, we have found our winner. There are so many fantastic reasons why January IS the opportune time to take the SAT. The chaos from the winter holidays is over, it's likely to be icy cold outside, which makes you more likely to stay in and study (hopefully!) rather than go out and shop, the semester has changed, the school curriculum is not nearly as intense as it was, and many students even switch teachers during this time.

THE BEST PART, and I do mean THE BEST part of taking the January SAT as juniors is that the curve is in your favor. This means you will get the most bang for your testing buck. I frequently joke about how my January Testers will take the SAT with room full of 12 year olds. What could possibly be more heavenly than taking the SAT, on a curve, along with a bunch of 7th graders as your main competition?

Why take the SAT in January of junior year? Because you are ahead of the masses, and you can reach your highest score because the curve is in your favor. ETS (the college board) will hate me for saying this: A senior who takes the SAT in October and scores an 1850 could have easily scored as much as a 2000 had she taken the January administration of the SAT and prepared the same way for both exams. See for yourself by check the score reports. Compare the number of questions wrong versus the final score. You can have a higher score in January and still get more wrong. That's the beauty of the January curve.

Take the SAT when you have the highest chances of doing well, and January optimal testing time because that is precisely when the odds are in your favor. Don't Delay! You may not have such a golden opportunity again.

Why are so many seventh graders taking the SAT in January? Well, Johns Hopkins University conducts a National Talent Search and seeks out the finest 7th and 8th graders around to see how they will do on the SAT. (See: <http://cty.jhu.edu/ts/grades78.html>: "CTY, a world leader in gifted education, conducts national and international talent searches to identify, assess, and recognize outstanding academic talent" and "SMPY pioneered the concept of above-grade-level testing of middle school students, using the SAT to identify exceptionally talented mathematical reasoners, then offering rigorous

programs for students who exhibit exceptional reasoning ability”) These kids have 90% or higher school averages, and if they perform reasonably well on the SAT, they can be admitted to the John’s Hopkins Summer Program for exceptionally talented youth.

Now, many students should know that a high school average of a 90 or higher does not guarantee an impressive SAT score, which is why it is likely that so many of the middle age students who have exceptional school grades may perform average, or even below average, on test day. January is the best time for a serious high school junior to take the SAT. It’s a golden opportunity, and you will be well ahead of the game.

Timing is everything: This year, the January SAT will be on January 23, 2010. Every other administration of the SAT is given during awful-- and I mean awful-- times of the year. The SAT is almost always administered during the first Saturday of the testing month. In 2008, I tutored a room filled with seniors on October 31st, because the SAT was given on Saturday, November 1. So much for enjoying Halloween! This year, the October SAT was given on Columbus Day weekend. One of my top students from New York had to take the SAT in Florida because her mother planned a family vacation months in advance and had no idea the SAT would be given on a holiday weekend. The luxury of taking the SAT in January is that all the ‘major’ winter holidays have passed.

This year, the timing of the January SAT will be absolutely perfect. The week prior to the January administration of the exam will be Martin Luther King Jr. 3 day weekend, and most students will be home from school. Moreover, many Catholic schools (like St. Francis Prep) have faculty workshops on Friday, January 22 and no students will attend school that day. The days before the SAT are critical, and having two 3 day weekends to prepare is a blessing and a luxury that no other administration of the SAT exam offers.

Sadly, far too few students take the SAT in January of their junior year of high school. I sincerely hope that this article inspires them to change their minds.

MARCH of Junior Year:

This is perhaps the second best time to take the SAT. If you are unhappy with your January scores, you will have ample time to register for the March Administration of the SAT. We are still surrounded by chilly New York weather and you are (hopefully) less likely to go out as you would in July or August.

Furthermore, by taking the SAT in March, you are testing before the MAY and June masses of students, so you are less likely to be taking the SAT in a room filled with your (ever so distracting) friends and classmates. Very few students take the March administration of the SAT. You are less likely to hit traffic, the test center is less likely to be over crowded, and the scores will be released early enough for you to register again in May if needed.

This is why taking the SAT in March of Junior Year is my runner-up.

Taking the SAT in May wins third place.

Good luck navigating the ever so convoluted college admissions process.

Frances Kweller is the founder of Kweller Prep Tutoring and Educational Services in Forest Hills. A lawyer, teacher, tutor, and dreamer, Frances Kweller has prepared hundreds of students to surpass their goals on the SAT and get into their dream colleges. She offers intensive standardized testing tutoring services, college preparation workshops, and strategic advice on the college admissions process. You can reach her at anytime by calling (917) 499 – 3913 or e-mail her at Info@kwellerprep.com.

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