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WHAT IS A GOOD PSAT SCORE? THE DEFINITIVE Guide

**A guide to the standardized test that determines
National Merit and prepares students for the SAT**



What is the PSAT?

If you're the parent of a high school senior, your child is likely focusing on the **ACT** or **SAT**, the standardized tests that are a crucial part of college admissions. But if you're the parent of a



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In this post, we'll cover what the test is, how to think of it as a part of college admissions, discuss what a good PSAT score is, and answer other important questions about this standardized test.

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What's the difference between the PSAT10 and the PSAT/NMSQT?

To begin to answer some of these questions, let's look at basic facts about the test. First, some vocabulary: You might have seen the PSAT referenced by two different titles: **the PSAT 10 and the PSAT/NMSQT**. These tests cover the same subject matter and are the same length. Generally they're the same level of difficulty, though the PSAT 10 is more geared towards a 10th-grade level.



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make different choices about when students take the test and which version of the test they take.

Students might take either test in tenth grade for several reasons. First, a score report can help a student identify which **APs** they should consider based on their strengths. Second, schools might choose to give students as much time as possible to test strengths and weaknesses for SAT prep, or to gear up for a better score on the PSAT/NMSQT the following year.

In general, if your student is aiming for a highly selective college, it makes sense for her to take the PSAT/NMSQT as a sophomore rather than the PSAT 10. Since the test is designed for juniors, it's good practice for the SAT. In addition, if she has her sights set on a National Merit Scholarship, taking the PSAT/NMSQT as a sophomore is better practice. The PSAT 10 is worth taking in 10th grade if your student hasn't taken any standardized tests before, doesn't have his sights set on a highly selective college, and just wants some practice for the SAT.

A key difference between the PSAT 10 and PSAT/NMSQT is that in the junior year, the **National Merit Scholarship Corporation** uses scores from the PSAT/NMSQT to select students for its competitive, prestigious scholarship awards for academically talented students across the country.

The PSAT 10 might also help students get other types of scholarships from participating colleges and universities, as well as organizations like the Children of Fallen Patriots, the American Indian Graduate Center, the Coca-Cola Scholars Foundation, or the Gates Scholarship. You can find a full list of foundations offering merit- and need-based scholarships [here](#).

These organizations, as well as colleges and universities, also offer scholarships based on scores from the PSAT/NMSQT. Our take: these additional scholarships alone aren't a strong argument for taking the PSAT 10, which is considered a secondary or slightly easier version of the PSAT/NMSQT.

Should my child take the PSAT as a freshman?



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The CollegeBoard does offer a PSAT 8/9, which is slightly shorter and easier in content than the PSAT. Your child should only take that test if they're *really* set on a National Merit Scholarship and want extra early practice for the PSAT.

In general, fall of your child's freshman year is likely better spent focusing on coursework and adjusting to high school, not preparing for a test that's not designed for their grade level.

Does the PSAT matter in college admissions?

Colleges do *not* look at PSAT scores when making admissions decisions. But the PSAT serves two purposes in college admission. First, it gives your child a glimpse of how she'll do on the **SAT**. Second, a high score can qualify her for scholarship money.

It's a great extra bonus for your student and can act as a barometer for how much she should study for the SAT. But it definitely shouldn't be a source of extra stress—just an indicator to prepare more for the SAT.

PSAT scoring: how it works and what it means

To understand what a good PSAT score is, it's important to first understand how the test is organized and scored.

The PSAT includes **three tests**: the Reading Test, Writing and Language Test, and the Math Test. The Reading Test and Writing and Language Test are considered as one section, and the Math Test is considered as a second section. The total score is the sum of your child's scores in these two sections. Your child's total score can range from 320–1520. Her score for each of the two sections can range from 160–760, and her score for each of the three individual tests can range from 8–38.



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The benchmarks essentially show whether or not your child is testing at grade level. If your child scores at or above the benchmark, it's likely that your child would receive a C or higher in a freshman-level college class. If your student is academically high-achieving, this readiness benchmark will likely be far below their desired score. (The ERW Reading benchmark for 10th graders taking the PSAT 10 was 430 in 2020, and 480 for Math. These are scores in the 39th and 62nd percentiles, respectively.)

The maximum total score on the PSAT is 1520 (recall that on the SAT, the maximum score is 1600) but you can look at your child's PSAT score pretty much as a one-to-one indicator on how she might've scored had she taken the SAT on that day. For example, as the CollegeBoard notes on their blog: "a PSAT/NMSQT score of 1200 is a strong indication that you're likely to score about 1200 on the SAT."

So, with this information in mind—what is a good PSAT score on test day?

Getting a “good” PSAT score: the importance of PSAT percentiles

As with many standardized tests, the score matters only as much as it indicates your child's percentile—in other words, scoring is relative to the larger population of high schoolers in the country. A good score means performing better than many or most high schoolers who sat the test that day. If your child scored in the 50th percentile, it means they scored higher than 50 percent of students who took the test over the past three years. The higher the percentile, the better your student has done relative to their peers.

A score in the 50th percentile is about “average,” a score in the 75th percentile is “solid,” in the 90th percentile is “great,” and in the 99th percentile as “outstanding.”

Using 2021 [statistics from the CollegeBoard](#), we've listed total score ranges/cutoffs for the top percentiles.



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- 50th percentile (“average”): 920

For 11th grade students:

- 99th percentile and above (“outstanding”): 1460–1520
- 90th percentile (“great”): 1280
- 75th percentile (“solid”): 1150
- 50th percentile (“average”): 1010

National Merit: What scores qualify for scholarships?

Another metric by which to define a “good” PSAT score is whether your child’s score qualifies them for a National Merit Scholarship. How does the National Merit Corporation award scholarships?

There are different tiers to National Merit awards: Recognition, Commended Students, Semifinalists, Finalists, and Winners. According to the [National Merit Scholarship Corporation](#), about 50,000 students out of the 1.5 million who enter receive recognition. About 34,000 of *those* students receive a Commended Student letter. Commended students are those who scored in the top 3–4 percent of test takers in their state. Commended Students don’t advance in the competition, but they might still stand a chance at certain scholarships.

Meanwhile, about 16,000 of the 50,000 recognized students continue in the competition to become Semifinalists—i.e. the students who score in the top 1 percent of test takers statewide.

Semifinalists then need to submit an application proving their high academic standing in order to be considered for the finalist round. This includes their grades, a record of completed courses, a list of planned future coursework, and an endorsement from their principal.. About 15,000 of the



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on the PSAT and then doubling the sum, resulting in possible scores ranging from 40–220. For example, if your child scored a 33, 29, and 31 on Reading, Writing & Language, and Math, respectively, their Selection Index would come out to 186.

What is a qualifying Selection Index? It varies from state to state, but the 2021 average Selection Index comes in around 215.

Final thoughts

What determines a “good” PSAT score depends on your family’s priorities. If earning a scholarship in some form is your child’s goal, they should shoot for a score in at least the 96th percentile as a junior. If your child wants an additional metric by which to stand out nationwide, they can aim for 90th percentile or above.

Ultimately, the PSAT shouldn’t be stressful. This test is intended to show your child where she stands in terms of college preparedness and readiness for the SAT. Yes, there’s the added bonus of potentially qualifying for a scholarship, but there are plenty of other ways to qualify for merit and need-based college scholarships (you can find a list [here](#)). Treat the test as it’s intended to be treated—as practice.



About the Author



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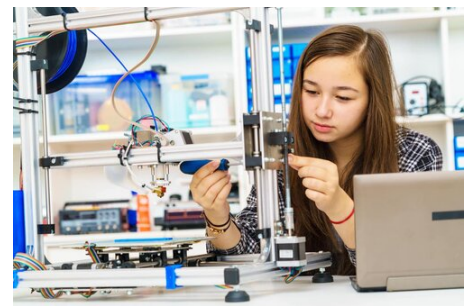
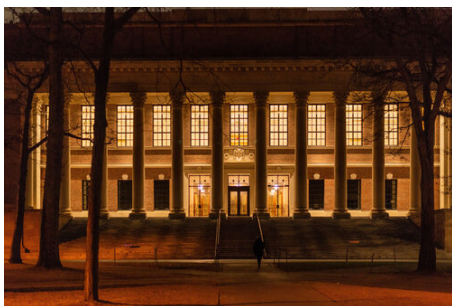
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