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WILLIAM R. FITZSIMMONS, Dean of Admissions, Harvard College

An Expert's Strategies  
for Getting into College

# 8 First Choices

- ▶ Choose the right colleges
- ▶ Create the most college acceptances
- ▶ Endorsed by more admissions deans than any other guide

Joyce Slayton Mitchell

*8 First choices is the #1 college guide endorsed by more top college admissions deans than all other college guides. Written within an educational framework, this college guide offers specific guidance to help students do a self-assessment, research the colleges, communicate through application, interview, and essay in order to select the top eight colleges that are the strongest fit for them. Establishing readers as anthropologists, students will learn to observe 20 campus cultures, assess each one, and research their options in American higher education. Additionally, it offers seven basic assumptions that are contrary to common knowledge about getting into college.*

# EIGHT FIRST CHOICES

An Expert's Strategies for Getting into College

by Joyce Slayton Mitchell

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## Chapter 2 - College Admissions Testing

Oh no—SATs! “Will a 2140 get me into Harvard? Yale? Cal Tech? I have to go to Brown or Berkeley or Boston College. When should I take a course to raise my SAT scores?” I say to anyone with a 650 critical reading and a 650 math score, “No, your test scores will not get you into Williams or the University of Texas; but most important, those scores won’t keep you out. And that’s all you need to know about SAT scores. And that’s all you need to worry about. Don’t waste your time and resources worrying about SATs and ACTs, when there are so many interesting and exciting learning experiences in which to invest your energy!” Whether your scores are 750–750 or 550–550, you can be sure that a lot more than SAT or ACT scores goes into the decision the colleges make about you.

Is there anything about the college selection process that makes you more anxious than taking, receiving, and sending your SAT or ACT scores? The worst part about this anxiety is that it’s useless. Most of you have learned this fear through all the SAT prep companies and tutors, private college consultants, and media that are making a lot of money on your fears. They lead you to think that if you only had twenty or thirty more points on an SAT, you would certainly get into those very selective colleges that you are aiming for. In reality, test scores always disappoint. Remember that half of those 800–800 whizzes don’t even get into Princeton and Stanford—because there is no score that gets you in. A better way to think about your SATs is what will keep you *out*. If you have a 650–650, you will not be kept out of any college in America because of your SAT scores.

Let’s take the bull by the horns right now and talk about SAT or ACT prep. When you think about it, the numbers craze on SAT and ACT scores—in the media and in your mind—is surpassed

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only by the way people talk about their weight. It's as if *you* are your test scores. Within this moneymaking SAT-prep machinery, numbers are easy to understand and to sell. And SAT numbers have been a best-seller in the media for so long, that you are beginning to believe the message.

It may be easier to understand the relevance of numbers if we think of height and weight in athletics, instead of SAT scores. For example, we can all agree that an athlete's height enters into the performance of a basketball player. Likewise, weight can be beneficial to the performance of a linebacker. But that's enough to make an athlete successful in either sport. Most of us easily understand that the numbers, seven feet tall or 275 pounds, hardly predict a winner! And even though the speed of a tennis player's serve can bring her into the top competition, most of us cannot imagine choosing the U.S. Open champion by her hundred-mile-per-hour serve. We all know it's the personality and character behind those stats that makes a champion: motivation, coachability, discipline, and attitude. SAT numbers are the same way. Test numbers are not *you*, and the deans of admissions are after the real you—the fascinating seventeen-year-old student, with great character and potential for learning—behind those SAT numbers.

Now, let's move on to how to do your best with the task that you hate the most.

### **SAT Prep**

Numerous studies to measure the effect of coaching on SAT performance have been conducted. There are varying conclusions derived from those studies, but virtually all of them indicate that becoming familiar with the test and developing thinking skills through a secondary school curriculum are the means of achieving significant improvement on SAT scores. Once you receive your

PSAT scores, you often wonder if and when you should consider special review work before taking the SAT. Such work can take the form of individual commitment to building vocabulary and taking practice exams diligently in one of the many review books on the market. Some students choose to work with a private tutor or with a test review program. No matter what method is chosen, many of my students have seen score increases once they have made a commitment to take such work seriously. There are never any guarantees since test taking is not an area where miracles occur; but if you feel anxious, know that you are being prepared for SATs every day in your rigorous high school curriculum as well as in your daily reading of the *New York Times*. The plan that is best for you depends on your history as a test taker, what scores you have now, and your own level of confidence in testing. Prepare yourself for the SATs as you would for sports: Get in shape physically, intellectually, and emotionally!

There are some rules of logic to follow right before and during the exam. We know that the SAT test is a reasoning test. Cramming the night before does *not* help. Instead of overwhelming your brain, get a good night's sleep. Be sure to eat a normal breakfast—a meal that is larger than you usually eat can make you sleepy because your body isn't used to digesting so much food. Students with the highest SAT scores concentrate best for the full three hours. Others “get sick of the test,” slow down, and often give up. Look at the clock. Take each question as it comes and give it your best shot. The easy answers count as much as the hard ones. When you go into the third hour, eat some raisins or candy that you've brought with you. Psyche yourself up, tell yourself you are just as fresh this third hour as you were when you walked in. You're young: Three and a half hours of concentration is easy at sixteen and seventeen! Chances are that you won't be devastated with some horrible score. In fact, SAT scores are almost always consistent with your grades at school. And remember that long-

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term grades count for more than one SAT exam that only shows what you can do in three and a half hours!

For many of you, college admissions testing often began in freshman year when you took the June SAT Subject Test in biology. About 750,000 of you took the Preliminary SAT (PSAT) in October of your sophomore year, which is for most of you, the first major college admissions test that you took or will take. Sophomores headed for the most selective colleges have also taken the chemistry and math SAT Subject Tests. Juniors will all take the PSAT.

### **Preliminary SAT (PSAT)**

The PSAT is a short version of the SAT: Reasoning Test. A record 2.75 million students took the PSAT in 2009. It measures verbal reasoning, critical reading, math problem solving, and writing skills that you have developed over many years, both in and out of school. You won't have to recall facts from literature, history, or science. You won't have to define or use grammatical terms. You won't have to write an essay. And you won't need to furnish math formulas; in fact, some formulas will be given on the test for reference. Sophomores take it for practice, but juniors take it to qualify (usually among the top 4 percent in your state) for the National Merit Scholarship Program. The PSAT recognizes outstanding black and Hispanic students as well.

If you are a learning disabled student, accommodations such as extended time, special forms, and verbal proctoring of the test are available if you qualify. Check out your questions with your guidance counselor or the College Board Web site. If you are an American studying abroad or an international school student who wants to get an idea of the American testing system, the PSAT is given in most American and international schools. Contact the

College Board through their Web site ([www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com)) to find out the testing site closest to you.

### **The SAT and ACT Tests**

The SAT is a three-and-a-half-hour test that measures critical reading and mathematical reasoning abilities, as well as writing skills. The critical reading section tests your ability to analyze reading passages, sentence structures, and connections between pairs of words. The mathematical section tests your abilities in arithmetic, algebra, and geometry. The SAT Subject Tests are one-hour tests in specific subjects. Subject tests measure your knowledge of particular subjects such as English Literature, foreign languages, mathematics, science, and history. You should choose which SAT Subject Tests you will take according to the strengths of your academic courses.

The ACT, administered through the American College Testing Program, differs from the SAT in that it covers four subject areas: English, Math, Reading, and Science. While the ACT is similar to the SAT Subject Tests, there are some major differences between the ACT and SAT basic exams. For example, there is no penalty for wrong answers on the ACT and there is a  $\frac{1}{4}$  point penalty for a wrong answer on the SAT. The ACT has no essay. Because there is no essay, many colleges require that students using the ACT take the ACT Writing exam in addition to the basic exam. The ACT is all multiple choice, while the SAT has “student-produced responses” in their mathematics section.

Some families and coaches think that students do better on the ACTs because the numbers are higher on the ACT. Other students like the ACTs better because the SAT has a stronger emphasis on vocabulary while the ACT focuses on grammar and punctuation. Of course the SAT tutors like both exams and often encourage you to take both because they can make a lot more money if you do.

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What you should know is that it is also a matter of geography. The College Board is located in the East and therefore Eastern high schools tend to use the SAT exam. The ACTs are headquartered in Chicago and the high schools in the Midwest and South tend to promote the ACT exam. There is now a market-share war going on between the two testing companies (high profits in testing) and it is easy to find either test everywhere. What you may not know is that the traditionally SAT colleges use a conversion chart to convert ACT scores to SAT equivalents. Also, let's all remember that a few points on any test does not determine the college decision. Whichever test your high school recommends is probably the one that you will take.

### ***Registering for the SAT and ACT***

Most students download the registration forms found on the ACT or College Board Web site at [www.ACTstudent.org](http://www.ACTstudent.org) or [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com). You can also pick up the necessary registration forms for your SAT, ACT, and SAT Subject Tests in your guidance counselor's office. You will need your high school CEEB code number for the SATs. Be sure to use the exact same name each time you register for a College Board test. The College Board's computer system will send all your tests together, but only if you write your name and address exactly the same each time.

### ***Score Choice***

In past years the College Board has offered a "Score Choice" option allowing you to choose which scores you want sent to the colleges from a single test. This gives you a chance to choose your best SAT set scores (dates taken) and SAT Subject Test scores by individual test before you decide whether to send them to the colleges. Many students will use Score Choice when they apply to



college if their freshman and sophomore Subject Tests are a lot lower than in junior year. A word of caution here about Score Choice. Many selective colleges will not accept Score Choice. They feel that it is like your transcript and want to see all of your grades and test scores, not just the high ones. The University of Pennsylvania, for example, and USC, Pomona, and Stanford want to see all of your SAT scores. In other words, they will not accept Score Choice. No matter what you hear from others, keep in mind that it is always your responsibility to check with each college to find out what their admissions testing policy is for that particular college application. It's important that you notice that Score Choice can work well for freshman, sophomores, and junior scores. It's another story for seniors. The deans of admissions at other selective colleges caution their applicants to think twice before using Score Choice as a senior test taker. If seniors wait to receive their scores in senior year, and then ask the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to release those scores and send them to the college, the scores often arrive too late for the colleges to use them. Other times, students may forget they opted for Score Choice and just assume the colleges have the scores when they don't. Given that most of the selective colleges use a student's three highest SAT Subject Test scores, it isn't clear to the college deans how the student ultimately benefits from this option. What is clear to them, from this past year's experience, is that "Score Choice exposes the senior to the risk of not having a college receive his or her scores in a timely manner."

So remember these three things: (a) Having an incomplete folder is not the way to win the dean's heart; (b) if you had hung around your high school guidance office last year and listened to the horror stories of seniors trying to get their SAT Subject Test scores to the colleges on time, you would never use Score Choice in your senior year. The moral of this story is— (c) don't even *think* of using Score Choice for senior year testing.

### ***Test Centers***

Many of your high schools will not be an SAT or ACT test site, so you will need to register to take your tests elsewhere. The registration bulletins provide a list of possible test sites for your state. Look for the most convenient sites; you will be asked to list two choices. The earlier you register, the better chance you have to take your SATs in your choice of sites. Check out the dates and deadlines as soon as you know which tests you have to take.

Juniors, you probably won't take any SATs until May of your junior year, and your SAT Subject Tests should always be taken in June at the end of your coursework. Usually the deadline for registration is about one month ahead of the test date. For example, if the SAT test date is May 5, the international deadline (that is, for international students and Americans abroad) will be March 27, and the deadline for students in the United States will be March 29.

### ***Fee Waivers***

Fee waivers are available for students who cannot afford to take the college entrance exams. Your guidance office has the fee waivers and the guidelines for using them. Do not hesitate to ask for a waiver! Many counselors are far too busy to inform you of the fee waivers, but they do exist. Ask for information regarding waivers for college applications and specifically for the PROFILE, which is a part of the College Board's College Scholarship Service (CSS). Check with your counselor for the proper forms before you register for SATs or ACTs.

### ***Nonstandard Testing***

Nonstandard testing is helpful to those who have a diagnosed and properly documented learning disability or physical handicap. ETS offers extended time, large print, and other accommodations for

those who qualify. Talk with your guidance counselor to learn more about this testing option.

### ***When to Take the SAT***

Juniors will take the SAT or ACT in May. Everyone will give you different advice on when to take your SATs. Let's remember that you are, like a scientist, learning to collect the data before making a decision. Always be aware of where the advice is coming from. If your SAT tutor says to take the ACT and the SAT in your sophomore year, or January or March of your junior year, just realize what's in it for them for you to take the tests often. Some of your families may think it makes sense to take the SAT during spring break when you aren't as pressured with schoolwork and finals. Just know that the research shows that the longer you are in school, the harder you are working, the more those little gray cells are putting in overtime, and the better your test results will be. Believe it or not, your vacation is *not* the best time to take the SAT, even though it may first appear that way.

Many seniors take the SAT a second time in the fall or winter of their senior year, depending on their junior scores. The colleges will look at your test scores as late as March of senior year when making their decisions (but you won't be winning the dean's heart by not having your tests there when they are ready to look at them). December of your senior year should be your latest date for taking college tests (although there are always exceptions to everything you are going to do in this process).

### ***When to Take the SAT Subject Tests***

SAT Subject Tests are taken in June of any high school year. Biology students in ninth and tenth grades are usually the first to take the SAT Subject Tests. A student takes the SAT Subject Test

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whenever a course such as biology or chemistry is completed after ninth and tenth grades. Some math students take the Math Level I test as soon as they have completed Algebra II and geometry. Most selective colleges require two SAT Subject Tests in addition to the SAT. Juniors usually take mathematics, foreign language, science and a third test on history or another foreign language or science. Doesn't that make sense? Now listen to a story, one of many "misguided advice" stories that I hear all too often.

Last summer a rising senior came over to my home to discuss colleges with me. After talking a while about what she was looking for in a college, I commented, "With those grades in that tough curriculum, and those super SATs, you must have killed those SAT Subject Tests!"

"I didn't take them," she answered.

"You didn't take them??? Didn't you say that you took honors biology in junior year?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't take the SAT Subject Test when you finished the course??"

"No, my guidance counselor said to wait for senior year to take our SATs."

"Does that make sense to you?"

"No."

The moral of this story is that no matter where the advice comes from, it must make sense to *you*! If you want to go to a selective college, take the SAT Subject Tests in June of the year that you finish the course—it's a given. I don't care if it's Prince William who is giving you advice or the nicest guidance counselor in the whole wide world, if it doesn't make sense to you, ask again or ask someone else.

Seniors will take SAT Subject Tests in December only if they need a third test or want to try for higher scores. There are eighteen different subject tests, and they are content oriented. They measure

how much math, English, physics, French, or U.S. history you know. Because they are subject oriented, these are tests that can and should be studied for. Each test lasts one hour; you may take up to three on any test day. Many colleges require at least one of the two math tests. Others require particular tests, and still others require none for admission. It is up to you to check out what each college on your list requires.

How do you know which Subject Tests to take? Always take the math. If you are in doubt about which level of math or which second subject to take, discuss your testing options with your teachers and guidance counselor. Your best bet is to consider your grades in the subject, your teacher's recommendation, and how well you do on a practice test. These factors will help you make a sound decision. You will find a practice test for every SAT Subject Test in a free booklet from the College Board called *Taking the SAT Subject Test*. Ask your guidance counselor for a copy.

### ***How Many SAT Subject Tests Do the Colleges Require?***

Every college is different in their test requirements, so make sure that you check online or with the college rep to get the official word about required testing. Harvard and Princeton require three SAT Subject Tests, but Williams, Pomona, Yale and most of the other highly selective colleges require two Subject Tests. "What do the colleges require?" is the wrong question. The right question is, "How many courses of my high school achievement can I document through the SAT Subject Tests?"

You are in high school to build as strong an academic record as you can. At the end of every science course, foreign language sequence, history and English course, take the Subject Test. The more and varied academic areas you can document by nationally tested strengths, the stronger record you can show the colleges. The top students for the most competitive colleges will submit six

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or more Subject Test scores over the course of four years. With Score Choice in place, there is no down side to taking the Subject Tests. If you don't do well in the physics Subject Test, then use the biology results. The point to be made here is that you are taking these exams for *you*—it's your record, and you want it to represent you in the best way that is possible. Don't even ask the colleges what they require because you are not looking for minimum requirements to get in to college—you are looking at how well you can document your achievement on a national level. Doesn't that make sense? You are going to say to yourself, "Let me document my academics from freshman year through first semester senior year, do my best, and then see which colleges are interested in me with this record." Period.

### *Score Reports to Colleges*

At the time you register for the SATs or ACTs, you will have an opportunity to list four colleges (by code number) to which you can have your scores sent without additional fees. There is a charge for sending scores to each college after the first four. You, not your high school, are responsible for sending your official SAT or ACT scores to your colleges. All your SAT scores go to the colleges unless you opt for Score Choice (explained earlier). Most colleges use your highest scores. You should be aware that they usually look at the highest critical reading and the highest math, not necessarily the highest *set* resulting from an individual testing date. SAT scores are mailed directly to your home and high school about three weeks after the test is taken. Scores will also be mailed to the colleges that you designated when you registered for the test.

**NOW HEAR THIS! Students** must request that the Education Testing Service (ETS) officially send their ACT or SAT scores to the colleges. The scores on your transcript are not official. Your college application will not be complete until the college receives

your ACT or SAT scores directly from ETS or ACT. (Seniors, does it sound like I'm making way too much of this little point? If you only knew how many seniors think that if it's on their transcript, they don't have to send it. Woe is me trying to get that second point across—you know the first point, right? Here it is again: SAT Subject Tests in June after you finish a course, no matter what.)

### *Optional SATs and ACTs*

Some admissions deans of liberal arts colleges are so disgusted with the \$3 billion industry that has grown around SAT and ACT tutoring, that they elected to make the SAT optional rather than required. Likewise, officials for a few large state universities decided they would have more applicants if they created an optional test choice. Some of those same colleges still require SAT Subject Tests though. And chances are that of the current seventy five or so colleges that do not require SATs, at least one college on *your* list will require them. So don't even think of not taking them! That means that even if Bowdoin and Middlebury have an optional SAT, you probably have Colby, Colgate, Claremont McKenna, and a couple more on your list that do require it.

So take the SAT or ACT. Decide after you get the results if you are going to send them to the optional test colleges. The advice I give my students is that if you have at least a 550–550, send them. You don't want the deans of admissions to assume that your scores are much lower than a 550 and that this is your rationale for withholding them. If you are one of the very few students whose top grades in a rigorous curriculum and SAT Subject Tests are a hundred points above your SATs, then this option is designed for you! Here are some of the current list of colleges that have the SAT option, and it's growing: Bard, Bates, Bowdoin, College of the Holy Cross, Connecticut College, Denison, Dickinson,

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Franklin and Marshall, Gettysburg, Guilford, Hamilton, Hampshire, Hartwick, Hobart and William Smith, Lake Forest, Lawrence, Lewis and Clark, Middlebury, Mount Holyoke, Muhlenberg, Pitzer, Rollins, St. John's College (MD and NM), Saint Lawrence, Sarah Lawrence, Union, Ursinus, Wheaton (MA), and Worcester Polytechnic Institute.

Check the testing requirements for each of your colleges to be sure you comply. Colleges are different and many change their testing requirements from year to year. You are responsible for knowing the admissions requirements for every college or university to which you apply. Find the latest test optional colleges online at [www.fairtest.org](http://www.fairtest.org).

### **Advanced Placement Tests**

Advanced Placement (AP) tests are given in May. These tests are designed to measure your mastery of college-level work in specific courses. Even though most students take an AP exam at the end of an AP course, that is, a prescribed curriculum for a college-level course administered by the College Board, students can also take the exam without taking the course. For example, many competitive high schools offer a strong enough curriculum in English and U.S. history that students do well on the AP exams. The point of the exam is to earn college credits. For some students that means saving a year's tuition because they start college with thirty college credits, giving them advanced standing. Students who speak a second language, or if English is their second language, often take an AP test in their other language—Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Hebrew, or whatever their language is—without taking the AP course. As the scores are your own, you don't have to send them to the colleges, and if you have the money for each exam, many of you should go ahead and see how well you do.



AP exams are scored from 1 to 5, a 5 being the highest score. Many students record a 3 and above (or 4 and 5 if applying to the most selective colleges) on their transcript for added documentation of their academic achievement. Senior scores on these tests have no impact on the college admissions process because the test is given after all admissions decisions have been made. Enrolling and doing well in an AP course, however, will show up on your transcript, and a junior AP score of 4 or 5 is a strong academic credential for your college application. There is nothing that helps more in the admissions decision than doing well in AP or IB courses, which are by definition the most rigorous offered at your high school. But remember—the key words here are “doing well.”

Taking APs for how they will look on your transcript is not a sound principle for curriculum decisions. Many students are crying their eyes out in October of their senior year over the impossible AP calculus or AP biology course. Or they begged to get into AP European history because they wanted an AP on their transcript but are now getting a C– or D in the work. Qualifying for one course isn’t the only question at hand; the balance of your whole course load also must be considered. Of course you could do an AP or two if that’s all you had to do, but how likely is that? You have a lot more on your plate, right? Listen to your teacher recommendations before you sign up for APs. Look at your exam score in the last course, not just the final grade, which also reflects homework and discussion or participation grades. And *never* base a decision on how it looks to others.

### ***International Baccalaureate Examinations (IB)***

Students will take an IB exam only in schools that offer an IB curriculum. Many students and parents ask, “Which do the colleges like best, the IB or AP programs and exams?” The answer

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is that colleges like whatever you do and learn from! They want to know if you are taking the most rigorous curriculum offered at your high school. They don't care if those courses are called by the names AP, IB, Honors, or simply described as the most rigorous courses on the school profile. There is no "best" curriculum name; the best one is the most competitive course load as described by your school officials.

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