



Mastering the ACT®

A Teacher's Comprehensive
Guide with Progress Learning

A More Intentional Approach to ACT® Preparation

Why Traditional ACT® Prep Falls Short

Preparing students for the ACT® requires more than exposure to test questions. It **requires a structured approach that helps educators understand how students think**, where skills begin to break down, and how to respond with targeted instruction over time.

In many schools, ACT® preparation is compressed into short windows or disconnected from daily instruction. Teachers may administer practice tests and review results, but without a clear system for translating those results into instructional action, the impact is limited. Scores often arrive too late or lack the detail needed to guide meaningful changes in teaching.



A More Connected Approach to Preparation

A more effective model connects assessment, instruction, and intervention into a continuous cycle. Instead of treating ACT® prep as a standalone event, **schools integrate it into ongoing instruction and use data to guide next steps.**

In practice, this means students are regularly exposed to ACT®-style questions, educators review performance data throughout the year, and instruction is adjusted based on identified needs. Preparation becomes part of the instructional process rather than something added on at the end.



Progress Learning supports this approach by providing ACT®-modeled benchmark assessments, aligned instructional resources, detailed reporting, and tools for targeted intervention. These components allow educators to move from general preparation to precise, data-informed instruction.

Understanding the ACT®

What the ACT® Measures

The ACT® is a college readiness assessment that evaluates student performance across core academic areas, including English, Math, Reading, and an optional Science section, along with an optional Writing component.

Each section requires students to apply academic skills under strict time limits. Students must read efficiently, interpret information quickly, and make sound decisions within a limited testing window. This combination of content knowledge and pacing is a defining feature of the ACT®.

Students who perform well are not only those who understand the material, but those who can apply it efficiently across multiple sections without losing focus or time.

What This Means for Instruction

Because the ACT® measures both skill and efficiency, **instruction must prepare students to do more than arrive at the correct answer.** Students must learn how to approach questions strategically, manage time effectively, and maintain accuracy under pressure.

In the classroom, this often means shifting from isolated practice to structured application. Teachers model how to break down questions, eliminate incorrect answer choices, and make decisions within a limited time frame. Students benefit from repeated exposure to these conditions so that the format becomes familiar and predictable.



What's Changed in the ACT® (2025 and Beyond)

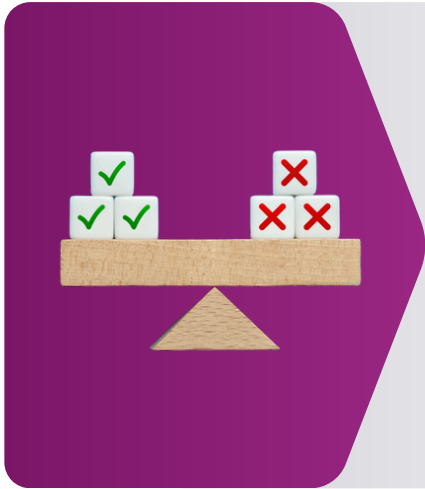
Recent updates to the ACT® have changed how students experience the test while maintaining its core purpose.

The test is now shorter, with fewer questions overall, and provides more time per question. Math questions include four answer choices instead of five, and reading passages are shorter while maintaining the same level of rigor. Students also have the option to take or opt out of the Science and Writing sections, and they can choose between paper and digital formats.

These changes reduce fatigue and allow students more time to process each question, but they do not reduce the level of thinking required. Students are still expected to demonstrate strong reasoning, comprehension, and problem-solving skills.

A Framework for ACT® Preparation

Effective ACT® preparation is not a one-time event. It is a process that unfolds over time and is guided by data. A structured framework helps educators move from broad preparation to targeted instruction by following a consistent cycle.



Step 1: Assess

- The process begins with **establishing a clear understanding of where students are starting**. Benchmark assessments provide a baseline that reflects both content knowledge and test readiness.
- Educators can use this data to **identify strengths, pinpoint areas of need**, and determine which students require additional support. This replaces assumptions with measurable insight and creates a starting point for instructional planning.



Step 2: Analyze

- Once assessment data is available, the focus shifts to **understanding what it reveals about student performance**.
- Educators **examine reports to identify patterns across classrooms, grade levels, and student groups**. Item-level analysis helps uncover specific misconceptions, while performance trends highlight where instruction has been effective or where adjustments are needed. Pacing issues can also be identified and separated from content gaps.

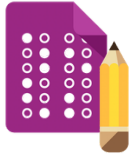


Step 3: Act

- The final step is using that **insight to inform instruction**. Teachers adjust lessons, provide targeted practice, and group students based on shared needs.
- This step ensures that assessment **results lead to meaningful instructional changes**. It also creates opportunities to monitor progress across multiple checkpoints, allowing educators to evaluate whether interventions are working.

Benchmark Assessments That Reflect the ACT® Experience

Why Authentic Practice Matters

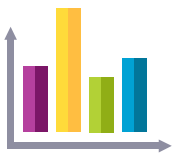


Students are **more likely to perform well when they are familiar with the structure and expectations of the ACT®**. Authentic practice reduces uncertainty and allows students to focus on applying their skills.

Progress Learning provides ACT®-modeled benchmark assessments that reflect the timing, structure, and rigor of the actual test. These assessments serve both instructional and diagnostic purposes.

Impact on Students and Instruction

For students, **benchmark assessments provide repeated exposure to the format of the exam**. They build confidence, improve pacing, and help students develop endurance for a multi-section test.



For educators, these assessments provide actionable data. Teachers can identify which students are not completing sections, determine whether errors are due to misunderstanding or timing, and prioritize which skills need to be retaught. Over time, benchmark data can be used to track growth and measure readiness.

Using Reporting to Guide Instructional Decisions

Turning Data into Action



Assessment data becomes valuable when it is **used to guide instruction**. Progress Learning provides reporting tools that organize performance data in a way that makes it easier to identify patterns and take action.

Educators can examine which standards are consistently missed, compare performance across different groups of students, and track changes in performance over time.

Applying Insights in the Classroom



This level of visibility **allows teachers to make targeted adjustments**. Instruction can be modified to revisit specific standards, small groups can be formed around shared gaps, and targeted assignments can be created to address missed skills.

At the school or district level, leaders can use this data to align instruction, identify trends across campuses, and ensure consistency in how ACT® preparation is implemented.

Identifying Skill Gaps Across ACT® Sections

Common Areas of Need



Assessment data often **reveals consistent patterns across ACT® sections**. Students may struggle with grammar and sentence structure in English, multi-step problem solving in Math, inference and analysis in Reading, and data interpretation in Science.

Pacing is also a common challenge, even when students understand the content.

Instructional Response



These **insights allow educators to focus instruction more effectively**. Rather than reviewing entire units, teachers can target specific skills that are limiting performance. Instruction becomes more efficient and more closely aligned to student needs.

Targeted Intervention and Remediation

Responding to Student Needs

Once gaps are identified, **targeted intervention ensures that students receive the support they need**. Progress Learning provides tools that connect assessment results directly to instructional resources.

Students can be assigned individualized study plans, and teachers can provide remediation tied to specific missed skills. Adaptive intervention tools allow students to work at their own level while continuing to build toward readiness.

Classroom and District Impact

This approach **supports differentiation within the classroom and helps ensure that all students are working on the skills that matter most**. At the district level, it allows for more consistent and scalable intervention practices.



Teaching ACT® Strategies

Building Strategic Thinking



Students must **learn how to approach the test**, not just what content to apply. Strategy instruction helps students navigate the structure and pacing of the ACT®.

Classroom Application



Teachers can **model how to approach questions, guide students in eliminating incorrect answers, and provide opportunities for timed practice**. Reviewing incorrect responses as a class and discussing reasoning helps reinforce these strategies.

ACT®-Aligned Curriculum Support

Connecting Instruction and Assessment



Preparation is **most effective when it is embedded into daily instruction**. Progress Learning provides curriculum resources aligned to ACT® expectations, allowing educators to integrate preparation into regular teaching.

What This Looks Like in Practice



Teachers can **incorporate ACT®-style questions into lessons, use warm-ups and bell ringers** to reinforce key skills, and connect assessment results directly to instructional planning. This creates a more consistent experience for students and strengthens the connection between learning and assessment.

Supporting Student Engagement

Why Engagement Matters

Sustained **practice is essential for improvement**, and engagement plays a key role in maintaining consistency.

Supporting Consistent Participation

Progress Learning **supports engagement through interactive practice, immediate feedback, progress tracking, and individualized learning paths**. When students can see their growth and understand their goals, they are more likely to stay engaged in the process.



Supporting Educators Through Professional Development

Building Capacity Across Teams



Effective implementation depends on educator understanding and alignment. Professional development ensures that teachers know how to interpret data, adjust instruction, and use available tools effectively.

Impact on Instruction



When **educators are aligned in their approach**, students experience more consistent instruction across classrooms. This leads to stronger implementation and more reliable outcomes.

A Real Example of ACT® Success

Elmwood School District in Elmwood, WI

Elmwood School District in Elmwood, WI began by administering benchmark assessments to establish a clear baseline of student performance. This initial step allowed educators to identify specific areas of need across grade levels and content areas.

In the following year, the district expanded its use of Progress Learning to include ACT®-aligned curriculum and targeted intervention tools. Teachers used benchmark data and reporting to adjust instruction, provide focused remediation, and support students with individualized practice.

Students reported that the benchmark assessments closely reflected the format and difficulty of the actual ACT®, which helped reduce uncertainty and improve confidence.



As a result of this structured and consistent approach, Elmwood School District achieved a record **22.8 average composite ACT® score**, placing the district among the top-performing schools in Wisconsin.

Key Takeaways for Schools and Districts

This example highlights several important practices:

- ✓ Establish a baseline early using benchmark assessments
- ✓ Use data to guide instructional decisions throughout the year
- ✓ Provide targeted intervention based on identified skill gaps
- ✓ Integrate ACT® preparation into daily instruction
- ✓ Maintain consistency across classrooms and grade levels
- ✓ Build confidence through exposure to ACT®-modeled assessments

Turning Preparation into Progress

ACT® preparation is most effective when it is structured, aligned, and responsive to student needs. With Progress Learning, schools and districts can implement a system that connects assessment, instruction, and intervention, providing educators with clear insight and students with a stronger path to success.



Ready to learn more?

Visit www.progresslearning.com or contact us at info@progresslearning.com