

Understanding ACT's ELA and STEM Scores: 5 FAQs

1. What do the ELA and STEM scores measure?

For both the ACT® and ACT Aspire® tests, the ELA score measures overall performance in English, reading, and writing and is calculated as the average score across the three subjects. Similarly, the STEM score measures overall performance in math and science and is calculated as the average score across the two subjects.

2. What are the ELA and STEM College Readiness Benchmarks?

ACT's College Readiness Benchmark scores indicate whether students are likely ready for specific first-year college courses (see Table below). The ELA Benchmark is based on the same courses used for the English and Reading Benchmarks. The STEM Benchmark is based on a unique set of courses popular among STEM majors. Students who meet the ACT Aspire Benchmarks are "on target" to meet the ACT Benchmarks in 11th grade, and their performance is classified as "Ready."

	English	Reading	ELA	Math	Science	STEM
COLLEGE COURSES	English Composition 1	American History, Other History, Psychology, Sociology, Political Science, Economics	English Composition 1, American History, Other History, Psychology, Sociology, Political Science, Economics	College Algebra	Biology	Calculus, Chemistry, Biology, Physics, Engineering
BENCHMARK SCORES						
ACT ASPIRE GRADE 10	428	428	430	432	432	437
ACT	18	22	20	22	23	26

3. Why are some students "Ready" in individual subjects (e.g., English and reading) but not overall (e.g., in ELA)?

For both ELA and STEM, it's possible to meet the individual Benchmarks but not the overall Benchmarks. Conversely, it's possible to meet the overall Benchmarks but not meet all of the individual Benchmarks. These situations occur because different combinations of individual scores can lead to the same overall (average) score. Also, for ELA, performance on the writing test helps determine whether students meet the Benchmark.

4. Why do fewer students meet the STEM Benchmarks, relative to the Math and Science Benchmarks?

The ACT STEM Benchmark (26) is a higher standard than either the Math (22) or Science (23) Benchmarks. Because the first-year college courses popular among STEM majors tend to be more difficult, as a result, higher ACT scores are needed to have a reasonable chance of success in those courses. It is not uncommon for students to meet the Math and Science Benchmarks but fall short of meeting the STEM Benchmark. In general, the STEM Benchmark can be used as a higher standard to inform readiness for students considering a STEM major.

5. Did the ACT Aspire ELA and STEM Benchmarks change?

Yes, beginning in fall 2017, the ACT Aspire ELA and STEM Benchmarks were updated to be more consistent with the ACT ELA and STEM Benchmarks. Prior to then, the ACT Aspire ELA Benchmarks were equal to the average of the English, Reading, and Writing Benchmarks, and the STEM Benchmarks were equal to the average of the Math and Science Benchmarks.

