ACT Compass English as a Second Language (ESL) Placement Exam

The ACT Compass ESL Placement Exam is an internet-based exam that helps place students into appropriate English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses at Columbia College and maximizes their chances for success. To inquire about whether you need to take the exam, contact the Admissions office prior to contacting the Testing Center.

The placement test has four components:

1. **Grammar/Usage** - This test assesses a student’s ability to recognize and manipulate Standard American English in two main areas:
   - Sentence Elements, including verbs, subjects and objects, modifiers, function words, conventions (punctuation, capitalization, spelling), and word formation.
   - Sentence Structure and Syntax, including word order, relationships between and among clauses, and agreement, as well as how grammar relates to communication beyond the sentence level.

2. **Reading** - This test assesses a student’s ability to recognize and manipulate standard American English in two major categories:
   - Referring (reading explicitly stated material)
   - Reasoning (inferential reading)

3. **Listening** - This test assesses a student’s ability to understand Standard American English. Listening tasks increase in difficulty across multiple proficiency levels with the rate of speech, vocabulary, diction, and use of idiomatic and metaphorical language, all increasing at higher levels.

4. **Writing** - This test assesses a student’s writing skills. Students are asked to provide a single writing sample in response to a specific prompt. The assessment produces six scores: a single overall score and the following five subscores: organization, development, focus, language use, and mechanics.
TIPS for taking the ACT Compass ESL Placement Exam

• **Getting Started**
  - Turn off your cell phone.
  - Sit at a computer station. You will use a computer mouse and a headset for the exam. You may bring your own earphones/earbuds. If you don’t know how to use a mouse, ask the testing proctor.
  - Type in your name and seven-digit Student ID #.
  - Answer background information questions. When you have completed the background information, you will begin the test. The test has four parts: (1) Grammar, (2) Reading, (3) Listening, and (4) Writing.

• **Grammar**
  - Follow the instructions to complete a practice test. Select “begin test” when you are finished.
  - Answer the grammar questions. The grammar test measures your ability to recognize and manipulate (1) sentence elements (verbs, subjects, objects, etc.) and (2) sentence structure and syntax (word order, agreement, etc.).
  - Once you select “go on,” you may *not* go back and change your answers.

• **Reading**
  - Follow the instructions to complete a practice test. Select “begin test” when you are finished.
  - Answer the reading questions. The reading test measures your referring and reasoning skills. Once you select “go on,” you may *not* go back and change your answers.

• **Listening**
  - Put on your headset (or earphones/earbuds).
  - Follow the instructions to complete a practice test. Select “begin test” when you are finished.
  - Answer the listening questions. The listening test measures your understanding of (1) speech rate; (2) vocabulary; (3) diction; and (4) idiomatic language. You may be asked to select pictures that go with spoken words or phrases or to answer inferential questions about academic lectures and dialogs. Once you select “go on,” you may *not* go back and change your answers.

• **Writing**
  - Log into the computer again by typing in your name and seven-digit Student ID #.
  - Answer background information questions. When you have completed the background information, you will begin the test.
  - Read the information about the test.
  - You will be given two prompts to write about. Select your choice.
  - You will have 30 minutes to complete the writing exercise. This section of the exam is timed.
Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about the ACT Compass ESL Placement Exam

1. Who takes the ACT Compass ESL Placement Exam?
   
   Students who want to enroll in ESOL courses at Columbia College must take the placement exam. ESOL courses are for students whose primary language is NOT English. Results from the exam will place you in the appropriate level (high intermediate or advanced) of ESOL coursework.

   You do NOT have to take the placement if you have:
   
   • a TOEFL (iBT) composite score of 61 or above (with no individual subset score below 15);
   • an IELTS overall band score of 5.5 or above (with no individual band score below 5);
   • an SAT minimum critical reading subscore of 430 or above; or
   • an ACT minimum English subscore of 17 or above.

   The following also excludes you from having to take the placement exam:
   
   • A grade of C or higher from an English composition course completed at a regionally-accredited U.S. institution and deemed equivalent by the Evaluations Department to the Columbia College ENGL 111 course.
   • Successful completion of a U.S.-based ESOL or Intensive English Program (IEP) and a letter of recommendation from the institution endorsing full academic admission.

2. How long does it take to complete the ACT Compass ESL Placement Exam?
   
   Writing is the only component of the exam that is timed at thirty minutes. Most students complete the exam in one to one-and-a-half hours.

3. Can I use a dictionary during the exam?
   
   You may NOT use a dictionary during the exam. You may take notes. Pencil and paper are provided.

4. What should I bring with me to the exam?
   
   You must bring a form of ID (Student ID, passport, driver’s license, etc.) and your seven-digit student ID #. If you’d like, you may also bring your own earphones/earbuds to complete the listening component of the exam.

5. What does the exam cost?
The exam is free to all admitted Columbia College students.