

# Subject Tests “Recommended”?

By Kevin McMullin, Collegewise Founder and President

I find that “recommending” Subject Tests is frustratingly vague. There’s enough existing confusion in the college admissions process without colleges leaving students unsure whether or not an important choice like this will somehow work against them.

Unfortunately, while I’ve occasionally met students who were not admitted and believed it might have been because they elected not to submit Subject Test scores, I’d be very cautious making a testing decision based on anecdotal evidence. It’s not uncommon for students to draw conclusions about how colleges arrived at an admissions decision, but those conclusions are usually dubious at best. The truth is that the only people who know the actual reasons behind any admissions decisions are the committee members who were in the room when the decision was made. This works both ways, too—students who submit Subject Test scores and are ultimately admitted have no way of knowing if or how much those scores helped.

But here’s a potentially good strategy to use.

## **1. First, read the testing requirements on the school’s website very carefully.**

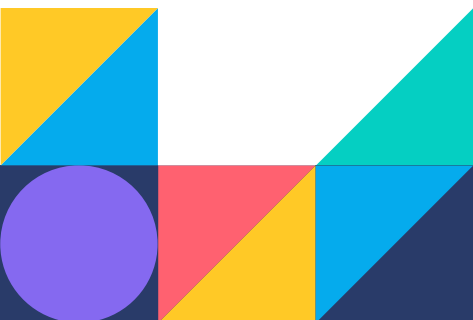
For example, based on the language I’ve pasted here from their websites, which of these schools seems to mean “required” when they say “recommended”?

Georgetown (the typos are as they appeared on the site):

*It is strongly recommended that all candidates, whether they have taken the SAT Reasoning Test or the ACT, submit three SAT Subject Tests scores. The scores from writing portion on the SAT Reasoning Test and the optional writing portion of the ACT will not be used in place of a Subject Test.*

Stanford:

*SAT Subject Tests are recommended but not required. Applicants who do not take SAT Subject Tests will not be at a disadvantage. Because SAT Subject Tests are optional, applicants may use Score Choice to selectively send their SAT Subject Test scores.*



Yale:

*SAT Subject Tests are recommended but not required. Applicants who do not take SAT Subject Tests will not be disadvantaged in the application process. We will consider your application on the basis of the other testing, and all the other information, that we receive with your application. You may wish to consider whether there are particular areas of academic strength you would like to demonstrate to the Admissions Committee. Subject Tests can be one way to convey that strength.*

While Stanford and Yale come out and say that a lack of Subject Test scores won't be held against an applicant, Georgetown's language reads to me like a student would have a hard time getting admitted without those scores.

## **2. How strong is the student relative to the others in the college's applicant pool?**

A student with a very high GPA, high SAT scores, and all 4's and 5's in multiple AP exams (as you described in your question) is likely already a very strong candidate at Lafayette, University of Delaware, and University of Georgia, all of which recommend but do not require Subject Tests. But that same student is not a strong candidate at Caltech, Duke, or Penn, where even valedictorians and students with perfect test scores are routinely turned away.

## **3. And finally, have your student ask, "If I don't submit Subject Test scores and ultimately am not admitted, will I regret that choice?"**

I am all for a student opting out of the testing craze. If your student were to decide that the testing is, in fact, overkill, that she's simply not going to play that game, and that she would happily attend another college if one of those on the "recommended but not required" list said no, I would stand up and cheer.

But if she wants to know that she did everything she possibly could have done to gain admission to particular schools, and if she's proven to have both smarts and the test-taking gene (which it sounds like she does), I'd probably have her submit those scores. Many of the schools that have this "recommended" Subject Test policy are among the most selective in the country (Brown, Dartmouth, Duke, Northwestern, Stanford, Princeton, etc.). Those are schools that ultimately need to find reasons to say no to droves of applicants. If a student really wants to attend one of those schools, be careful making any testing decision that could give them that reason. done some comparison shopping and learned what the program looks like at other colleges, too. That will help you be more specific about the strength you perceive of this particular school's offering.

*Want more expert testing tips from Kevin? Check out his blog at [wiselikeus.com](http://wiselikeus.com).*

