

Getting Ready for the ACT and SAT



Take realistic practice tests

The most effective way to develop your time management skills is to put them to work through practice tests and simulations. It is impossible to over-emphasize the importance of this point. Therefore you are strongly encouraged to take at least a few mock SAT/ACT exams, and to try to simulate the actual testing environment as closely as possible (meaning no breaks, snacks, music, phone calls, etc.).

Recognize the ascending order of difficulty

SAT and ACT math questions become more difficult as you go through each section. If you are nearing the end of a section and find that you cannot figure out the last few questions, don't waste your time trying to answer them. Your time will be better spent reviewing your answers to the questions in the beginning and middle of the section. Keep in mind that all the questions are weighted the same. You won't get extra points for answering the hardest questions. Furthermore, a few blank answers will not make a material impact on your score.

Don't waste time

This probably sounds like self-evident advice. However, we mention it because we've often had students tell us how they inadvertently wound up wasting precious test time by going back to re-read directions after the test had begun, or by not making it back from their hourly breaks promptly. Remember, these activities will take time away from working on the questions.

Read the questions carefully

As silly as this piece of advice may seem, it can make a big difference in your test score. The undisciplined test taker will feel the stress of the clock during the timed sections and will try to cut corners to save time however and whenever possible. As a result, they read questions hastily and often misinterpret them. Test writers are well aware of this tendency and are happy to exploit it. We guarantee that you will encounter questions on the test that offer incorrect answer choices that are deliberately designed to exploit a common misinterpretation of what the question is really asking.

Avoid random guessing in the multiple choice sections

The SAT and the ACT differ in the fact that you are penalized for incorrect answers on the SAT while the ACT only counts correct answers to your overall score. Therefore while it is better to leave an answer blank on the SAT than answer it incorrectly it is advantageous to make an educated guess on the ACT. However you should attempt to avoid random guessing on both tests. Instead with the ACT attempt to eliminate the choices that you know are wrong and then make an

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educated guess from the remaining options. With the ACT it is better to make an educated guess than to leave the answer blank.

With the SAT if you have absolutely no idea what the correct answer is to a question, we suggest that you simply skip it and move on. It will be advantageous for you to guess at the answer, however, when you can eliminate at least one answer choice as incorrect. Eliminating even one incorrect choice will improve your odds of selecting the correct answer. The only exception to this rule is when you face a problem solving question that requires you to write in an answer. In that case, obviously, you don't have a set of answer choices to give you a clue as to the correct solution. All you can do is solve the problem to the best of your ability and write in your answer.

Eliminate the deliberately deceptive wrong choices

With practice, you should begin to recognize how the SAT and the ACT present deliberately deceptive incorrect answer choices. There are several common patterns here that will begin to become apparent as you proceed through your preparation.

Practice, practice, practice

As we stated at the top of this page, there are tips and techniques to taking the SAT and ACT that will raise your overall score significantly. As a result, these are tests that you can prepare for – despite what the test-makers state. We strongly encourage you to take practice tests that use actual questions from previous exams, as we have detected a material difference in the quality of the test questions prepared by the test writers and those written by the test prep companies. (Unofficial test prep books are, however, superior to the official prep guides in their advice on study and test-taking techniques.

Finally, while we believe every test taker will benefit by reviewing each SAT or ACT exam section, we encourage you to spend the most time studying and practicing questions in your weakest subject area. This will provide you with the most efficient use of your test-prep time.

Thoughts on Retaking the SAT or ACT

Obviously, it will be in your best interest to do your best on the SAT and ACT the first time you take it. If, however, you believe your test score is not indicative of your best ability, it will generally not hurt you to retake this important exam. Most colleges will only look at your highest test score. Many of the admissions officers we know will even be favorably impressed if you show an improvement in your test scores.