



# What you need to know about the SAT and ACT

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## SAT/ACT Study Primer

There are essentially four approaches to studying for standardized exams:

1. Not doing anything.
  - a. Pros: Waste no time or money. The wallet stays fat and you can play video games all day.
  - b. Cons: This plan of taking the test cold is only recommended for the arrogant genius who will possibly get a less than stellar score.
2. Self-studying.
  - a. Pros: Save a load of cash. You can work on your own schedule, you don't have to go anywhere (except get yourself to a desk), and you can decide for yourself what subjects you want to study.
  - b. Cons: You will have to design your own study plan and you will have to teach yourself concepts that you may be unfamiliar with.
3. Taking a test prep course in a large classroom setting
  - a. Pros: If you have issues regarding some of the test's content, the class will likely help you review these concepts. You also get to meet your peers who are also in the same situation as you.
  - b. Cons: When teaching a large class, instructors teach to help the average student. This means that students who are naturally above average learn little and get bored quickly. Likewise, students who are below the standard can fall behind.
4. Get a private tutor.
  - a. Pros: You get actual face-time with a human being who is qualified to teach the SAT. It is likely that the tutor was successful with his/her own SAT score, so he/she is able to relate well to the student. In addition, private tutors can tailor their instruction to specific situations. You won't have to go through hours and hours of math review if you're already scoring an 800.
  - b. Cons: Private tutors are professionals, and charge a "professional" rate.

It may or may not be apparent which of the above four methods is ideal for you. However, it should be apparent that choice #1 is not the best. From our own experience, we have learned that the a combination of the second and fourth approaches is the most effective route to acing these tests for students who have a good grasp of academic concepts. Usually these students just need to "refine" their score, where personal SAT/ACT tutoring can help the student learn how to "disassemble" the SAT/ACT. However, there is never a substitute for honest, hard work.

*Where do I find a good private tutor?* Ivy Planners does offer private, premier academic tutoring for standardized tests (particularly the SAT and ACT). Our team members have all scored in the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile on the SAT and/or ACT. However, Ivy Planners is not just a standardized test tutoring company. We specialize in helping students succeed in high school, and we help students present and distinguish themselves in their college application.

*How do I go about self-studying?*

1. Be prepared to prepare at least 2 months before the SAT/PSAT.
2. Buy (don't borrow) *The Official SAT Study Guide*
  - a. You will do the bulk of your studying with this juicy, thick blue book that come with a load of official practice tests, and it costs less than \$20 new. You can also find this book at resellers.
3. Take practice tests like crazy.
  - a. Keep in mind that you don't have to take a full-length practice test in one sitting. In fact, at first, it may be better to break the test into sections and maybe do a few sections a day.
  - b. Also, breaking the practice test into sections is great especially when only one section of the SAT is your weakness. For instance, if you are weak at Critical Reading but you are very strong at Math and Writing, then we would recommend that you only work the Critical Reading sections of the practice tests, especially if you are crunched for time.
  - c. You should, however, take at least a few practice tests in one complete sitting. This is so you understand the timing and stamina needed for the SAT.

Follow the same method for studying for the ACT, just replace *The Official SAT Study Guide* with *The Real ACT*.

A note about 3<sup>rd</sup> party practice exams: One problem that we've found with practice tests by 3<sup>rd</sup> party companies is that they are rather inaccurate – they are either too difficult or too facile. Both extremes are not at all helpful when it comes to preparing for standardized tests because they paint an inaccurate picture of what the actual test will be like. For this reason, you should get acquainted with the official practice tests first, before you ever consider taking a look at the inferior materials written by *Kaplan*, *Princeton Review*, or *Barron's*.

**Secret standardized test tip:** Most standardized tests that high school students take (SAT, ACT, and AP) are not computerized and are still taken on paper. One of the easiest things you can do to save time on the test is to use a pencil with thicker lead (0.9 mm lead), or use a bunch of blunt wood pencils. How does this save time, you ask? Well, bubbling by hand does take time, and using thicker lead makes the process of bubbling in your answers exponentially quicker. Think about it – if you can save a couple of seconds bubbling on each question, that's almost an extra minute of time on a 24-question reading section!

## To SAT or to ACT – that is the question

No matter what college you apply to – big or small, Ivy League or state – you will more than likely have to take a standardized test. There are two main tests, the SAT and the ACT. Of course, the typical question is: which test is better?

The truth is one test is not better than another. They are different. So what are the differences between the two beasts? To be succinct, the SAT is a more difficult test which allows more time to the test-taker. On the other hand, the ACT is an easier test which is taken under a greater time constraint. Bottom line: if you enjoy solving slightly more difficult problems under less of a time constraint, take the SAT. But if you feel that you perform well under pressure, we recommend the ACT.

The SAT is an aptitude test that allows for you to showcase your reasoning and verbal abilities. The ACT is an aptitude test that allows for you to show what you have learned in school.

The misconception that the ACT is not accepted at prestigious schools is false. Although the ACT was developed mainly for schools in the Midwest, it is growing in numbers across the nation. In fact, more students took the ACT compared to the SAT in 2011. College admission departments regard both tests equally.

**An aside:** Let us tell you a true story. One of our friends took the SAT as a junior and received a decent, but not earth shattering score. This same friend went on to take the ACT later that year and ended up being one of a handful of people in that nation to receive a perfect ACT score of 36. If that story doesn't prove to you that SAT performance does not necessarily predict ACT performance (and vice versa), then we don't know what will.

	<b>SAT</b>	<b>ACT</b>
Highest possible score	2400	36
Guessing penalty	Yes	No
Emphasizes	Writing and reading comprehension	Science and logical reasoning
What topic areas are covered?	Critical reading, Writing (includes an essay), and Math	English, Math, Reading, Science, and Writing (optional, but <b>highly recommended</b> )
Highest possible score	2400	36
Length	3 hours, 45 mins	3 hours, 25 mins (w/ writing)
Structure	10 sections (w/ 1 experimental)	4 sections (5 sections w/ writing)
TI-89 calculator allowed?	Yes	No

## FAQs about the SAT and ACT

*What is Score Choice (SAT)?*

A feature recently introduced by the College Board, you can decide which SAT exam sittings you want to submit to your prospective schools. For example, if you do terribly on your first SAT exam but great on your second exam, you can choose to send only your second SAT exam to your colleges. However, not all schools participate in Score Choice. Notably, Rice and a few other schools require all SAT exam scores. However, you can decide which ACT exam sittings you want to submit for all schools. Colleges cannot require you to send all your ACT exams.

*I've heard about this thing called the super score. Is that when Superman takes the SAT?*

Unfortunately, no. Many schools will examine your highest reading, math, and writing scores across different SAT exam dates. These scores can be calculated into a new composite score. Super scoring with the ACT is less typical.

*Is the writing section important?*

Some schools do not count the writing section. For example, Cornell University does not even report their average SAT writing scores. Despite this attitude, recent studies have shown that it is the best measure of collegiate success. Because of this, more schools are weighing writing as heavily as the other two sections. Therefore, it is important that you focus on all sections.

## SAT Study Plan

Preparation materials:

- *The Official SAT Study Guide*, 2nd edition
  - This is the foundation of the SAT preparation as it contains ten (10) official practice exams from the actual test-maker; also called the “The Blue Book.”
- Proprietary, in-house material from Ivy Planners

Please complete SAT Practice Test 1 in *The Official SAT Study Guide*, and treat it like the real thing. Take the test under timed conditions and score yourself. While taking the test, circle any questions which you are even slightly unsure about. You should review these questions later and make sure that you understand why you got them wrong or right; it is quite likely that you will see these questions in some form on the actual exam. After all, the SAT is a *standardized* test.

If you run out of time for any of the sections while taking the test, mark where you finished, and come back to these questions and any others that you skipped after scoring the test – these questions will still be good practice.

Also, as far as vocabulary building goes, the earlier you start the better. There are two options: mugging up word lists or learning new words gradually by reading well-written publications (i.e. *The New Yorker*, *The Economist*) and upper-level fiction/nonfiction while keeping a notebook of the definitions of any new words you come across. This second method helps the words and their definition to stick and also prepares you for the critical reading section.

## Example SAT Study Schedule

### Objective 1

- SAT/PSAT
- Review SAT Practice Test #1
- Discuss self-study schedule

### Objective 2

- The Never-fail Essay Strategy
- HW: Complete essay section for SAT Practice Tests #2, 3, and 4

### Objective 3

- Grade and review essays
- Math review
- HW: Complete Math section for SAT Practice Tests #2, 3, and 4

### Objective 4

- Address Math Questions
- Writing review
- HW: Complete Writing section for SAT Practice Tests #2, 3, 4

### Objective 5

- Address Writing Questions
- How to Ace Critical Reading Passages
- HW: Complete and grade/review the passages for SAT Practice Tests #2, 3, and 4

### Objective 6

- Address Critical Reading questions
- Strategies for Sentence Completions
- HW: Complete and grade the Sentence completion questions for SAT Practice Test #2, 3, and 4
- Take SAT Practice Test #5

### Objective 7

- Review SAT Practice Test #5
- HW: Take SAT Practice Test #6

### Objective 8

- Review SAT Practice Test #6
- Math refresher
- HW: Take SAT Practice Test #7

### Objective 9

- Review SAT Practice Test #7
- HW: Take SAT Practice Test #8

### Objective 10

- Review SAT Practice Test #8
- Writing refresher
- HW: Take SAT Practice Test #9

### Objective 11

- Review SAT Practice Test #9
- HW: Take SAT Practice Test #10