

Studying for the SAT is a big undertaking, and you might not know where to start. A good way to get yourself into gear is to learn about the structure of the test and different ways you can adapt your strategy to improve on each section. In this article, I'll provide you with a comprehensive list of the top 21 tips (broken down by section) that you should be using to get your best scores ever on the SAT.

Overall SAT Study Tips

Tip #1: Follow the Fundamental Rule

The most important rule to remember for the SAT is that **there is only one correct answer for each question, and you should be able to eliminate all the others.** This means that your number one strategy on the test is process of elimination. If you're struggling with a question, try to find reasons to rule out most of the answers rather than reasons why certain options could work.

Learn to be extremely picky about which answers to eliminate. This especially applies to the Reading and Writing sections. **If a question seems subjective, keep reminding yourself that it's an illusion.** All incorrect choices are incorrect for good reasons, and it's your job to find those reasons until you narrow your answers down to one possibility.

Tip #2: Always Understand Your Mistakes

This is vital if you want to see dramatic improvements. If you take the time to understand each mistake you make on practice questions, why you made it, and what you will do to avoid it in the future, you're virtually guaranteed a good score on the test.

Mistakes usually fall into one of four categories:

1. Content weakness
2. Time pressure
3. Question comprehension issue
4. Careless error

After you finish a practice test, **catalog all the questions you answer incorrectly so you can work on detecting error patterns.** Did you consistently answer a particular type of math question wrong (content weakness)? Did you keep missing the words "except" or "least" (careless error) in questions? Did you consistently miss questions at the end of sections (time pressure)?

Whatever your issues, you have to understand them completely so you can fix the problems you're having and see positive changes in your scores!

SAT Reading Tips

Tip #3: Pay Attention to Connotation and Context

This tip is critical for answering tough questions in the Reading section. **Look for words that indicate positive or negative connotation** in the part of the passage that the question references. This can help you to eliminate at least a couple of choices even if you have no idea which of the remaining choices is correct.

Context is also very important! Don't just look at the exact line that is referenced in the question - look at the sentences around it too. **Look for contrast words such as "however", "rather than" or "still"**. You should also pay attention to strong adjectives that might help you to determine connotation.

Tip #4: Use Find the Evidence Questions to Your Advantage

The new SAT contains questions that ask you to choose an excerpt from the passage that serves as the best evidence for your answer to the previous question. These new questions can help you tremendously in identifying mistakes and clearing up ambiguities. For example, say you've picked out two answers that you think could be correct for a reading question. If the next question is one that asks you to identify the best evidence for your answer, you can read through all the options it gives you and see which choice makes the most direct connection to one of your two potential responses. In almost every case, **it will become abundantly clear which of the two choices is correct because only that one will have a corresponding tidbit of direct evidence tucked away in one of the answer choices for the find the evidence question.**

Tip #5: Read Passages Strategically

Try to nail down a good [passage reading strategy](#) for the SAT before test day. This will save you time and stress later. There are a few methods you might use depending on how comfortable you are with the test and where you are in your reading comprehension skills.

Method #1: Skim the Passage First

This is the method I would be most inclined to recommend. You can get a sense of the main ideas of the passage without wasting too much time reading it closely. To skim effectively, **just read the introductory paragraph, conclusion paragraph, and first and last sentences of each body paragraph.**

[Answer main idea questions first](#) while the overall point of the passage is still fresh in your mind. Then you can read specific sections of the passage more closely as needed to answer [questions about smaller details](#).

Method #2: Skip Straight to the Questions

Because the SAT gives you line numbers for questions on the Reading section, **skipping the passage altogether can be an effective initial strategy.** If you do this, you should **answer questions about small details in the passage first**, so you end up reading a bit of the passage while answering questions. Then, when you move on to main idea questions later, you'll already have a solid sense of the message of the passage as a whole.

Method #3: Read the Passage in Full

If you're both a quick and thorough reader, you might be able to pull this off without any problems. **Just make sure it's not slowing you down.** There's more material to read on the new SAT, so this strategy might be less feasible than it was in the past. If you're reading this way and find you can save a few minutes (and not lose any points) by using one of the other methods, then you should do that instead. **It's always better to have extra time at the end so you can double check your answers!**

Tip #6: Don't Ignore Passage Introductions

At the beginning of every passage on the SAT, there is a little italicized blurb giving you a bit of context about the passage and its author. **This introductory blurb contains valuable information, and if you skip it, you could miss out on easy points.** At the very least, it gives you context for what you're about to read so you aren't too confused about who's who or where the passage is set. Even if your method of attack for SAT passages is to skip straight to the questions, **you should still make a point of reading the italicized intro before you do anything else.**

Tip #7: Get Interested in the Passages

If you want to retain information as you're reading passages on the SAT, the best way to do it is to **force yourself to engage with the material.** Treat this as a learning experience, not a chore, and you'll find it much easier to remember what happened in the passage. If your brain is in "wow, interesting" mode rather than "blah, blah, just have to get to the questions" mode, you'll have a more pleasant experience on the test and a better time answering the questions overall.

Tip #8: Look for Direct Evidence

Though questions on SAT reading may sometimes seem subjective, the reality is that **you should always be able to find direct evidence in the passage or chart you are referencing to support your answers.** Even [inference questions](#), which ask you to look beyond the literal facts in the passage, will be backed up by logical deductions that can be made from the evidence that is presented. This is a situation where you might end up looking beyond the sentence referenced in the question to find the evidence you need. It's always in there somewhere!

If you're thinking about choosing an answer that seems like it could be correct, but you can't find any evidence for it, hold off. **Any answer that can't be backed up by specific information in the passage has to be incorrect.**

General tips for high SAT scores

Relax the night before the test

Don't cram. You are being tested on knowledge that you have accumulated over the course of the year. And over the past few months especially, you've been taking SAT prep. Studying at the last minute will only stress you out. Go to a movie or hang out with a friend -- anything to get your mind off of the test!

Rely on the strategies you've learned through SAT test prep

The SAT help you've gotten over the past few months has included a number of specific strategies that are guaranteed to increase your score during SAT testing. The tips below highlight a number of these strategies. If you need a refresher, be sure to check out the [SAT practice test](#) available here at Peterson's.

Test specific tips for high SAT scores

Evidence-Based Writing

This section requires you to decide if passages can be improved by making changes to the words, punctuation, or sentence order. Read each passage aloud quietly to your self and see if you can identify errors in grammar.

Evidence-Based Reading: Reading Comprehension

The Critical Reading test now includes both long and short reading passages. Skim each passage to see what it's about. Don't worry about the details -- you can always look them up later if you need to. Just look for the main ideas. Then tackle the questions that direct you straight to the answer by referring you to a specific line in the passage. If you have time afterward, you can try solving the harder questions.

Evidence-Based Writing: Multiple-Choice Questions

There are three types of multiple-choice writing questions on the SAT. The first group, Improving Sentences, tasks you with selecting the correct version - the one that is clearly written and grammatically correct -- of an underlined portion of a sentence. Sentence Error questions ask you to figure out which part of a sentence contains an error. Those on Improving Paragraphs test your ability to organize and clarify information. For all of these question types, think about the simplest, clearest way to express an idea. If an answer choice sounds awkward or overly complicated, chances are good that it's wrong.

Math: Multiple-Choice Questions

As you work through the multiple-choice math questions, you'll be given reference information (formulas and facts), but you'll need to know how to use them. In part of this section, you're allowed to use a calculator, but it won't help you unless you know how to approach the problems. If you're stuck, try substituting numbers for variables. You can also try plugging in numbers from the answer choices. Start with the middle number. That way, if it doesn't work, you can strategically choose one that's higher or lower.

General tips for the ACT

Relax the night before the test

Don't cram. You are being tested on knowledge that you have accumulated over the course of the year. Studying at the last minute will only stress you out for very limited gain.

English

When searching for sentence errors, start by reading the sentence or paragraph carefully, listening in your head; usually the word or phrase that contains an error will sound wrong. If no errors pop up, look for the four most common types of errors:

- Errors in the relationship between the verb and its subject
- Pronoun errors
- Sentence structure errors
- Awkwardness, verbosity, and incorrect use of idioms

Mathematics

As soon as you find the right answer, mark it and move on -- there are no "degrees of rightness" to be considered. Marking up diagrams or sketching simple drawings when none are available can help you "see" the answers. The questions generally focus on mathematical reasoning, not your ability to perform calculations; if you find yourself spending too much time figuring the problem out, then you've probably overlooked a simple shortcut.

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Reading

Use the three-stage method (previewing, reading, and reviewing) to get the most out of each reading passage. Focus on the big ideas in each passage, not the small details. Look for connections among ideas in each passage. To help you find answers quickly, take notes as you read, marking the main ideas or connections with your pencil.

Science Reasoning

Use the same three-stage method (previewing, reading, reviewing) for each science reasoning passage. In data representation passages, focus on what is being measured, relationships among variables, and trends in data. Don't be confused by irrelevant information or technical terminology -- most science reasoning passages have them, and they can almost always be ignored.

Writing (Optional)

Essays are scored holistically, which means that the final score is based on an overall impression. To make that overall impression a good one, be sure to organize your ideas into a standard essay format. A well-organized essay consists of four to five paragraphs, including an introduction, supporting paragraphs, and a conclusion. Aim to have at least two body paragraphs to develop and support your ideas.