

# Standardized Test Tips

## In General

- Maintain a healthy diet and sleep routine. Your body notices when it's not getting the right "fuel" and rest.
- Don't study too intensely the day before the test. Studying the night before a big test can lead to cramming and staying up late, which are detrimental to test performance.
- Go to sleep early enough to ensure a full night's rest before waking up early on test day.
- Wake up early enough to eat a breakfast full of protein, fiber, and no (or very little) sugar.
- Bring water and (protein) snacks for the breaks between test sections (depending on testing center rules). Taking a test while you're hungry is no fun at all.
- Within each module, you do NOT have to work in order. Do the easier-looking questions first and leave the harder questions for last.
- Once you have selected an answer, *do not change it* unless you know for sure that you marked an incorrect choice **and** are certain what the correct one is.

## Reading and Writing

- Each reading passage includes all the information you need to answer the question(s) for it. You don't need prior knowledge of the subject matter.
- The questions and answer choices are specifically worded such that there are three incorrect choices and one correct choice. If any part of an answer choice is incorrect or does not apply, then it's an incorrect choice. The correct answer will be exactly correct for the question. Try not to justify a bad answer that happens to contain a word from the passage.
- Colons ( : ) are used when setting off a list **or** when providing proof or an example of the previous statement. Before the colon, there needs to be an independent clause (complete sentence); after it, there might not be.
  - List – We can use many things in the ocean: food, transportation, temperature regulation, and more.
  - Example – I learned one thing for sure in school: I don't know everything.
  - Proof or explanation – We know that the sun shines during the day: it is bright out during the day.
- Semicolons ( ; ) are used **just like a period** in a sentence, meaning that they separate two independent clauses (full sentences) without using a coordinating conjunction; the sentences are related in some way, so the author chose a semicolon to indicate that instead of a period. Semicolons can also be used to separate list items when those items include words or phrases set apart by commas.
- Dashes ( — ) work like parentheses, setting apart extra (non-essential) information from the rest of the sentence. If a piece of added information—a parenthetical—has a dash (also called an em-dash, which is longer than a hyphen) *in front of it*, it should have another dash *after it*, not some other punctuation device.

- Subject-Verb Agreement means that the form (or tense) of the verb needs to make sense regarding the noun that is “doing” the verb. Find the subject of the clause or sentence and note whether it is singular or plural. In your mind, say that noun and then the verb in question right after. “The *dog* with three legs *runs* toward the house.” You wouldn’t say “The dog run toward. . .” The prepositional phrase “with three legs” doesn’t change that. ***Ignore prepositional phrases, adjectives, and adverbs when choosing verb tense.***
- Commas are used for various reasons, and you will want to review those reasons before the test. If the answer choices are all the same except for having different comma placement, ask yourself if the one with the fewest commas makes sense when reading straight through the sentence. Every comma needs a specific reason for existing. Here are the reasons that you will want to understand before taking the SAT, PSAT, and ACT:
  - Separating items in a ***list of more than two***: “I enjoy *hiking, driving, and writing*.”
  - Setting apart non-essential elements: “*After all is said and done*, you will do well to know these rules before taking the test.”
  - Linking an ***independent*** and a ***dependent clause***: “Though it seems difficult at first (*dependent clause*), learning how to ace the exam is entirely possible (*independent clause*).”
  - Joining ***two independent clauses*** with help from a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*): “I have studied hard, and I’m going to do well.”
  - Commas ***do not*** go before a prepositional phrase or separate a subject from its verb in a clause.
- Conciseness means using as few words as possible while still conveying the message. If all four answer choices say the same thing but in various lengths and/or phrasing, chances are good that the shortest one is the most concise (and the right answer).
- Active Voice means that the subject of the sentence or clause is the person or thing causing the action. Choose the answer choice where this is the case rather than where the action is being done to the main person or thing. “*The scientist (subject) conducted (action verb) the research*” is better than “*The research (subject) was (“be” verb) done by the scientist.*”

## **Math**

The SAT has two math modules, each comprising 22 questions with a time limit of 35 minutes. That makes an average time per question of just over a minute and a half (about 95 seconds).

If you take longer on a question, it reduces your time available for other questions. Many questions won’t take you a full minute and a half to answer. Some will be easier and take less time. (The ACT math test has 60 questions to answer in 60 minutes; it’s longer and faster-paced with a one-minute-per-question average.)

***Seek out easier questions and do them first, leaving more time for the harder questions.***

If you answer, for instance, 10 easier questions first, regardless of order, and it takes you only 30 seconds for each, you’ve only used up about five minutes. Then you have about 30 minutes left for the remaining 12 questions, a new average of **two and a half minutes per question!**

You are provided a **reference page** for each SAT math module with important formulas and notes. (The ACT does not provide this page, but you will want to look at the information on the SAT reference before taking either test.) One mistake students sometimes make is forgetting that this reference is available to them. Review this sheet before the test to familiarize yourself with the information available.

Some formulas that are not on the reference page are the circle equation and the quadratic formula.

- The circle equation (graph of a circle in the x-y plane) is  $(x - h)^2 + (y - k)^2 = r^2$  where  $(h,k)$  is the center of the circle and  $r$  is the radius.  $(x,y)$  is any point on the circle.
- The quadratic formula can be used to find the *solutions (roots, x-intercepts, zeroes)* of a quadratic function from standard form  $ax^2 + bx + c$  (parabola on the graph):

$$x = \frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a}$$

- The expression under the radical is called the **discriminant**:  $b^2 - 4ac$   
When a question either asks or tells you how many real solutions a quadratic function has, the discriminant will tell you. Put the quadratic expression into standard form, then put the coefficients and constant into the discriminant.
  - If the discriminant is negative,  $b^2 - 4ac < 0$ , there are **NO real solutions**.
  - If the discriminant is **equal to zero**, there is exactly **ONE solution**.
  - If the discriminant is positive,  $b^2 - 4ac > 0$ , there are **TWO real solutions**.
- Plugging in the answers to get to the right one is usually the slowest way to do math problems. If you must do this, start with one of the middle answer choices. They are usually listed from lowest value to highest value. If you start with the smallest or highest number, you might have to work through all four (SAT) or five (ACT) answer choices. Beginning with the middle value will give you a clue as to whether you need to go up in value or down for the next try.
- Guessing should be the last resort and only done during the final five or ten minutes of the exam.

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