

# Essential Tips, Tricks, and Strategies for Taking the SAT and ACT

by [Erica West](#)

Looking for study tips to help you on the SAT or ACT? You've come to the right [place](#). This list of test-taking strategies will prepare you for either test—and boost your scores.

You're about to [continue](#) the long and noble tradition of high school students freaking out over, taking, and surviving one of the two main standardized tests colleges use when considering you for admission: the ACT or SAT. (BTW, a lot of [scholarship providers](#) use your test scores too!)

Nervous? Don't be. You are going to walk into the ACT or SAT with something many first-time (and second- and third-time) test takers don't have: **you are going to have a strategy**. While these study tips may not guarantee perfect standardized test scores, they can give you confidence—and hopefully a few extra correct answers. We separated this list by ACT and SAT subjects, but many of the tips can apply to multiple subjects.

## What to do before the ACT or SAT

---

- **Don't [freak](#) out.** Easier said than done, I know, but even though these tests can be scary, freaking out will do you no good. (In fact, it might actively hurt your score.) Give yourself lots of time for test prep and planning. Also include self-care in your test-prep routine: meditate, eat well, and get plenty of sleep. Besides, the PSAT is much like the SAT, so if you are an American junior or senior, you've basically already taken the SAT once and survived—you can do it again! And taking a practice ACT (or three) can give you that same peace of mind.
- **Pump yourself up before the test.** It might mean listening to an up-beat song, wearing your favorite outfit, or bringing a “good-luck charm.” It doesn't matter if you actually think it brings you luck; if it gives you confidence, you should have it on test day.
- **Come up with a calming routine.** Despite everything I said above, no one's brain is ruled entirely by logic. Have a strategy for if you do start to lose it during the actual test. This could be anything from repeating a calming mantra, playing a snippet of a happy song in your head, or taking three deep breaths. Whatever it is, it should be silent and calming. To make a long tip short, come up with an instant anti-adrenaline shot before you take the SAT or ACT.

- **Eat breakfast.** Even if your nerves are running wild and it feels like you can't eat a thing, try to down something. Don't make yourself sick, of course, but at least attempt to get something healthy in your [stomach](#). Also remember that hunger can become a distraction when you're taking the test. Ideally, your breakfast will be something with complex carbs and protein, so you'll be fueled all morning (without getting a sugar high). Go for things like multigrain cereal, avocado toast, low-sugar oatmeal, an egg-white omelet, or fruit.
- **Bring a snack and water bottle.** I promise this is the last food tip. These standardized tests can last up to five hours, but they almost always let you bring a snack. Take advantage. Just like with your breakfast (in tip #4), choose something fairly healthy, like a piece of fruit or protein bar. Drink water too!

### ACT English and SAT Reading tips

---

- **Read the questions first.** On both the SAT Reading and ACT English sections, carefully reading the whole passage as soon as you see a block of text is simply a waste of time, because there won't be questions about every single paragraph. You're better off reading the questions first and skimming the passages. The questions will often tell you exactly where you need to read by giving you specific reference numbers too. Only read the whole passage if a question asks you about the whole thing.
- **Study word parts.** Knowing lots of word parts (e.g., bio-, cert-, en-, -ly, -tive) is a great test-prep strategy for both the SAT and ACT. If you memorize a word, you only know that word, but if you know the roots, you can figure out dozens of words. The best way to learn these word parts is to **study Greek and Latin word roots** as opposed to entire lists of vocabulary. Even if you only know what half of a word means, you have a far better chance than blind guessing.
- **Homophones: they're there!** The SAT and ACT *love* throwing homophones at you. Know the difference between **common homophones** as part of your test prep, such as there, they're, and their; it's and its; where and wear; do and due; etc.
- **Less is more.** Conciseness is important on these standardized tests too. On the sentence corrections, you're often better off going with the answer that clearly states the information in the fewest number of words (while still being grammatically correct).
- **Trust your gut.** If all else fails on a sentence correction question and you have no clue, go with what sounds right. Repeat the sentence to yourself in your head (since you can't speak aloud). You've been hearing English for years. That might be all the strategy you need!

## ACT and SAT Math tips

---

- **Focus your test prep on algebra and geometry.** The SAT and ACT math problems feature a lot of algebra and geometry. So focus your math test prep on these subjects, especially if you haven't had one of these classes yet or haven't had them for a while. Be sure to review those geometry theorems too—you can't logic your way through those like you can with the algebra.
- **Pay close attention to graphs.** Familiarize yourself with graph-question strategies for both the **ACT** and **SAT**. And when you come across a graph on test day, read it *very* carefully. (This also applies to the ACT Science section.)
- **Start with the free-response questions.** Whether you're taking the SAT or ACT, skip ahead to the math questions that require you to calculate the answers. You can always guess on the multiple-choice math questions with a shot at being correct if you need to. Self-generated responses are practically impossible to guess on, so don't save these questions for last.
- **There is no shame in a calculator.** Don't try to be a superhero. Both the SAT and ACT let you use a calculator on their Math sections. FYI: the **SAT allows most graphing calculators**, but the **ACT doesn't!** But in either case, calculators can be a real time saver on test day. Take advantage.
- **If your answer doesn't make sense, do it again.** If you end up with a triangle with two 90-degree angles, something is wrong. Math is logical and structured. If something seems completely wrong, there's a good chance it is.

## ACT Science strategies

---

- **Remember your English skills.** You know all the close-reading skills you learned in English? They can really help you in the Science section of the ACT. That's because the **ACT Science section is a lot of passage reading and analyzing**. In that way it's actually more like the English section of the ACT than the Math section!
- **Study prefixes, suffixes, and other word parts.** Science is full of long words that you can break down into word parts (see study tip #7!). For example, "photosynthesis" is made up of "photo," meaning "light," and "synthesis," meaning "make." It literally means made with light. *Study prefixes, suffixes, and other word parts.*
- **Know the graph, be the graph.** Read every graph *at least* twice to make sure you understand it. Also, keep in mind that if the ACT gives you a graph, they *will* ask you something about that graph. They didn't just feel like wasting ink. (This also applies to the Math section.)

## SAT Essay or ACT Writing tips

---

- **Actually write the essay.** Not all colleges and universities will require you to complete the essay portion of the SAT or ACT (and not all schools will require you to **take the SAT or ACT to begin with**, but that's another story). So even though it's tempting to skip the essay, it's good to do it just in case you end up applying to a college that *does* require it. It's better to have the essay and never need it than need it and never have it.
- **Don't use "don't."** Or any other contractions, for that matter. They fall into the "jargon" category and make your writing seem less formal. It may seem awkward to write out "do not," but it will be worth it. Similarly, use proper English. No slang or casual language. Remember, you're trying to show the test scorers that you're ready for college-level academics. So proper English is a must.
- **Stay in third.** English teachers (and **college professors**) are typically looking for you to stay in the third person, meaning you don't use any **first- or second-person words** like "I," "me," "mine," "you," "yours," "we," or "ours" unless you are using a direct quote. This makes your writing more authoritative, since it doesn't seem like you are letting personal feelings cloud your judgment. This may not sound like a big deal, but trust me when I say that it can make a difference.
- **Don't start a paragraph with "the."** This is hard to do, I'll be the first to admit, but it can be a helpful strategy that improves your writing immensely. By forcing yourself not to start a paragraph with "the," you tend to change your sentence structure for the better.
- **Use the active voice.** If you can help it, avoid "to be" verbs such as "is," "am," "are," "were," "was," etc. This will make sure you're writing in an active voice, which is almost always preferable (and more impressive to test scorers). For example, "It revealed a truth about the character" is active, whereas "A truth about the character was revealed." is passive.
- **Read your finished essay carefully.** Proper grammar and usage count! Know your own weaknesses and **proofread your SAT or ACT essay** with an especially critical eye for those mistakes. Go over your essay slowly and methodically on test day. If you just breeze through it, your brain will insert what you know you meant and not what you actually wrote. For once, skimming is not your time-saving friend.

## General test-taking strategies

---

- **Skip questions that stump you.** Whether you're taking the SAT or ACT, if you stare at a problem for a full minute and you have absolutely no clue whatsoever, *move on*. You can go back later. (Pro study tip: **taking timed practice tests** can help you get a sense of how much time you can devote to a question.)
- **Eliminate answers you know are wrong.** If you're struggling with a question, and especially if you're straight-up guessing on the answer, eliminate any answers you know are wrong to improve your chances of guessing the right one.
- **Never leave a question blank.** You don't lose any points for guessing a wrong answer on either the SAT or ACT. So if you have any time left at the end of the test, mark down something—literally anything—on all of your unanswered questions. Even if you don't make it to all of them, you will have a chance at getting some points. That's better than zero.
- **If you're retaking the test, be realistic.** Lots of students retake the ACT and SAT to boost their scores, but it's important to be realistic about how much you expect your score to improve from an old PSAT, SAT, or ACT score. The odds of going from a 900 to a 1600 on the SAT are slim to none, and Slim just left town. That being said, you shouldn't be discouraged. Even a few points worth of improvement is movement forward and that is nothing to be scoffed at.

**There you have it: a good, long list of study tips and test-taking strategies for the ACT and SAT. Did you learn anything new? Did we miss any SAT or ACT tips you found especially helpful? If so, let us know in the comments!**