



STUDY FOR
THE SAT
WITHOUT LOSING
YOUR COOL

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INTRODUCTION

The SAT is obviously challenging, otherwise I wouldn't be creating this e-book. Still, we can try to view any challenge as a positive; what else would force us to review our learning and learn problem solving skills? Okay... I'm mostly kidding. Standardized test are a huge bummer, but let's stay positive, review, learn, strategize, and take this on together! Thank you for joining me to learn about studying for the SAT without losing your cool.



OVERVIEW

Let's get started with the basics of what the SAT looks like. The SAT contains a Reading section, a Writing and Language section, a Non-Calculator Math section, and a Calculator Math section. As we dive into each section, we will discuss timing, strategies, and quick refreshers that will help you to succeed. There are some strategies that, all on their own, will help you get started. Let's start there.

First of all, you really should not cram for the SAT. You might be able to pull it off, but it's certainly not a good idea. Reviewing what you've learned may not take you too long, but what about learning new material? What about learning strategies to help on questions when you get stuck? What about perfecting the timing? This isn't an attempt to stress you out; this is a reminder that learning takes time and effort, and you're in control of how much you're willing to put in.

Next, it's important to understand the difference between reviewing, learning, and strategizing. Moreover, each of those three aspects deserve your attention.

"Reviewing" encompasses going over topics you've learned in school or taught yourself. This will help you on questions that you should already be getting right but that you may make mistakes on if you've gone too long without practice.



OVERVIEW

“Learning” is just that... learning! There will be topics on the SAT, depending on what classes you’ve taken in school, that you have not studied yet. In the learning stage, it is important to prioritize. If you’ve never taken trigonometry, maybe you won’t study the radian questions, but you’ll learn the basics. Think about which topics deserve your time and which topics would be a stretch. The more practice questions you try, the more you’ll get a sense for which topics get priority.

“Strategizing” is key when you don’t know a topic or when a question is tricky. Should you plug in the answers? Should you use process of elimination? All of this is strategizing.

What else? Use the free resources out there. For example, College Board has free practice tests. Why wouldn’t you want to get the practice from the writers of the SAT? They know it best! Whether you’re working alone or with a tutor, use these resources as guidance.

Next, and maybe most importantly, never leave a question blank. There is no reason not to guess! If you’re low on time, save time to guess on the remaining section questions.

Lastly, and I cannot emphasize this enough, ask for help. Whether it is a teacher, a friend, a tutor, or a parent, you don’t have to do this alone. Talk through your mistakes with someone, even if they have no clue what you’re saying.

Now that you know the basic strategies, let’s jump in!



THE READING SECTION

The reading section is 65 minutes and there are 52 multiple choice questions. The section includes five passages, followed by related questions. Some of the questions are from older literature, some more “science-y”, some more historical, one is a paired passage, etc.

What is a paired passage? This passage is, in reality, a pair of text excerpts that are on the same topic, though the authors have different opinions. The questions for this passage come after both texts that are paired. Some questions will be about one passage, some about the other, and some about both.

How do you keep the two authors from getting mixed up in your brain? I always put a few key words above each passage right after I finish it. I do not mean writing an entire summary. When I say “a few key words”, I mean just that. You could even draw a picture, if that’s the way you process. If you’re reading a passage about an author who loves lemons, write “loves lemons, very sour”.

When you get to the second passage, you may find that the second author loves apples because lemons are too sour. In that case, you could just write “loves apples, lemons too sour” and be done. To be perfectly clear, the passages will be more complex than apples and lemons, but the learning strategy is the same.



THE READING SECTION

After answering many passages, you will start to notice patterns, types of questions that are used over and over again. Working on the common question types is a great strategy to efficiently improve your SAT performance; it's hard to improve on reading without a strategy. The main classes of questions that I feel are important to master are:

- Overall
- Word choice/meaning
- Paired evidence
- Graphs and charts
- Comparisons (for paired passages, only)

Overall questions are exactly how they sound; they ask about the overall passage. There are many ways to ask an overall question, which is why they aren't always straight forward. They could ask about the general theme, the main point, a summary, etc. No matter what the wording, process of elimination is great for this type of question. Keep in mind, this is the SAT. That means, if they pick a right answer, it needs to be 100% correct in order to be fair. Look in the answers for individual words that don't really fit. Maybe they describe a conversation as a "fight". Was it a fight? If not, that can't be the answer, even if it seems appealing. Process of elimination will allow you to find the answer that isn't wrong, and there has to be just one answer that is right!

Word choice questions are a bit more straight forward. They often ask what a word means in context, giving you a line number. Don't forget the context! The word being a synonym isn't enough. Would it also make sense in the context of the story or passage?



THE READING SECTION

Paired evidence questions are the toughest for most students. The questions come in pairs: the real question, followed by finding the evidence for your answer. You can answer these questions in either “direction”. Maybe the first question is obvious. Answer it, and then work on the second question by finding which quote (they give line numbers) is most helpful in proving your previous answer. What if the first question isn’t very clear? Read the options, then go to the second question and (quickly) skim the quotes. Does any quote perfectly answer the question? If so, pick that quote and the answer it points to. So, while these paired evidence questions may be the hardest, there are strategies you can work towards perfecting!

There are also some graphs and charts to interpret in the context of the passage. Always read the labels and axes of the chart; these can be incredibly helpful. Other than that, just remember to consider what you have read as you interpret the chart. These are generally rather straight forward in comparison to some of the other questions.

Lastly, there are comparison questions that you’ll find in paired passages. As I’ve said, paired passages have some questions about each passage, but there are a few questions that ask you to compare and understand both passages at once. This is where those quick summaries come in. When you read the question, they will refer to the authors of passage 1 and passage 2.



THE READING SECTION

This can be confusing to keep straight in your mind. Instead, fill in the author's summary to better understand the question. For example, look at how the summaries help here:

What would the author of Passage 1 think of the author's opinion in Passage 2?

What would the person who likes lemons think of the person who prefers apples because lemons are too sour?

Notice, I filled in a brief summary and the question suddenly seems more straight forward. Once you've done this, the multiple choice options are much easier to sort out.



THE WRITING SECTION

The second section is the writing and language section, which is 35 minutes for 44 questions. Similar to the reading section, there are passages followed by questions, though in this case there are only four passages. The writing and language section imitates an editing process. For most of the questions, the question correlate to an underlined section of the passage. You are deciding whether to leave the segment as-is or change it to one of the other three options.

Though there are many strategies that can be used as you edit the passage, there are a few main types of questions and a few main grammar and punctuation rules that can help you rather quickly.

The majority of questions have no instructions, just four options (one of which is “no change”). In this case, it is assumed that you make the best overall decision, as if editing the text. These are generally related to grammar, punctuation, or word choice. Shortly, we will go through the common mistakes you are asked to fix.

Sometimes, there are questions that have brief instructions. Though these sometimes still test grammar, punctuation, and word choice, the most important thing to find is something that achieves the goal of the instructions.



THE WRITING SECTION

Another type of question you will see will ask you whether or not you want to delete an underlined section. Of the four multiple choice options, you will have two that are “yes, but have different reasons, and two that are “no”, also with different reasoning. Like paired evidence questions, you can answer these in two directions. The most obvious way is to first determine if you should logically delete that segment, narrow it down to two options, and then find the most accurate reason. The other way to answer, if you’re unsure of whether it should be deleted, is to look at the reasoning first and consider which reasoning best fits the circumstance and the yes/no answer it is matched with.

Lastly, and most painfully, there are questions that ask you to rearrange some of the sentences. These, to be blunt, are not fun. They involve rereading multiple sentences in order to best determine the order that the sentences should be placed in to be most logical. Though these are not awesome, you can use a strategy similar to the paired passages! If you take each of the sentences in question and summarize them (quickly) down to a few words, you can more easily think, which order makes the most sense for these thoughts? These questions take time, so if that is something you struggle with, you should practice but also plan to prioritize other questions on the real test.

Always remember: every question in a section is worth the same number of points. So, if you spend three minutes to get one really tough question right when you could have gotten three easier questions right, that may not be the best use of your time.



THE WRITING SECTION

There are also some quick grammar and punctuation rules that we see all the time on the writing and language section. Though grammar can be complex, we can simplify some of these concepts into brief rules that you'll find over and over again.

- A semicolon will only be used between two full sentences. A proper use of the semicolon should be able to be replaced with a period.
- A colon should be used before a list (when there isn't a leading phrase like "such as") or before an "aha revelation moment".
- Two full sentences can be connected with a comma and then one of the FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). Two full sentences cannot be connected with just a comma.
- When you see a sentence with the word "while", reread it carefully. You'll notice it greatly impacts the grammar of the sentence, so read it carefully and trust your gut. In the following example, when I simply add a "while" at the start, we no longer need one of the FANBOYS because the first segment is no longer a full sentence.



THE WRITING SECTION

- Transition words are often tested to be sure you understand appropriate placement. When there is a transition between two sentences or two thoughts, you should first decide if the sentences “agree”, in which case you want a transition word like “moreover”, or if they “disagree” or contrast, in which case you want a transition word like “however”.
- The difference between “its” and “it’s” continues to baffle students. Always remember that “it’s” can be elongated to “it is”, while “its” is possessive.
- Way back when, you learned the differences between “their”, “they’re”, and “there”. Hopefully you remember... but just in case... “their” is possessive, “they’re” means “they are”, and “there” is used everywhere else.

Don't just read these rules over and over again. Apply them to your writing, edit writing for others, and work on many (many) practice questions. These seem easy, and they can be, but if you're going to learn the rules, you want to get every relevant question right. This requires practice and understanding.



THE MATH SECTIONS

There are two math sections on the SAT: the non-calculator section followed by the calculator section. The non-calculator section has only 20 questions in 25 minutes, while the calculator section has 38 questions in 55 minutes. Unlike the other sections we have discussed, within each math section, questions generally go from easiest to hardest (with one exception that we will discuss). This means you can think about the two sections as if you're in a race car.

The non-calculator section is like going from 0 to 60 mph in a lap of the track. You go from easy to hard, and you don't have long to get there. The calculator section is longer, so it's more like going from 0 to 60 mph in 2 laps. You go from easy to hard, and you spend a bit more time at each speed because you have two full laps to get there. Keep this in mind as you practice the two sections. Some feel overwhelmed when they take the non-calculator section; it feels like it's getting hard too quickly. That's okay! It is! The calculator section will give you more questions at your level.

What is the major exception to "questions generally go from easiest to hardest"? The end of each of these two sections has a set of "bubble-in" questions. Instead of multiple choice, there are questions that you solve and bubble-in the number you got instead of just A, B, C, or D.



THE MATH SECTIONS

These are very important to practice; it's a whole different experience compared to multiple choice. One thing is most important: these questions start back at "easy" and go easiest to hardest on their own. This means that, on the non-calculator section, #16 (the first bubble-in question of the section) should be significantly easier than #15 (the last multiple choice question of that section).

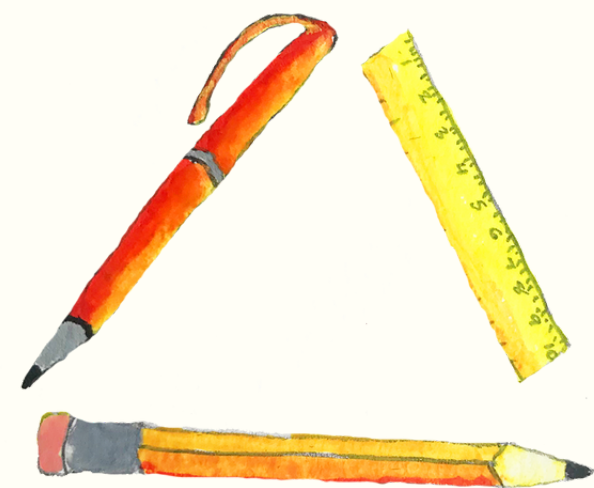
There aren't many of the bubble-in questions, so they go 0 to 60 mph in a quarter of a lap. You may only find that one or two counts as "easy" for you. Still, when you're getting stuck as you reach the end of the multiple choice questions, remember that the start of the bubble-ins will be more manageable, and remember that they count for the same number of points as the other questions in the same section.

What is the best way to get a sense for what you need to review, learn, and strategize within the math sections? Practice! Take practice tests and then, instead of just correcting your work, correct it and look for patterns. Do you always get the systems of equations wrong? Do you always forget exponents? The list goes on, but if you find a pattern, it's the time to review, learn, and strategize.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hannah Sieber is the owner of TriTutoring LLC, founder of TriTogether Corp, and a former high school science teacher. She graduated from Simmons College with degrees in physics and computer science, and is now a software engineer. She has been tutoring and teaching for over ten years and brings her passion for education to the TriTutoring and TriTogether philosophies. We are about teaching the whole student, building confidence, and finding the perfect balance of the three keys to tutoring: foundations, strategies, and effort.



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