

Three Steps to SAT and ACT Success

By Mick Rosenblum

Step 1: Which College Entrance Exam is Right for You?

It seems like just yesterday you were leisurely working your way through your early teenage, middle school years. Suddenly, with very little warning, you're a high school student who's supposed to be thinking about college! It's no longer enough merely to focus on coursework and manage your grade point average; now you're supposed to decide which of several college entrance exams you should take.

While some colleges and universities require the SAT Reasoning Test, others prefer the ACT. Some schools may even request two or three of the SAT Subject Tests. So how do you decide which of the college entrance exams are appropriate for you? Like many of life's endeavors, you can do the leg work yourself or you can hire a professional (recommended) to help you figure things out.

If you decide to do things out on your own, you should first determine which college or university you are interested in attending and whether or not your GPA is good enough for that particular school. It makes no sense to aspire toward a school that is out of reach, only to have your dreams shattered and your time wasted. Pick a set of schools that are within your grasp and are situated in parts of the country where you would not mind living for four years. You can find several websites that will help you to locate college and university homepages to begin your search.

Once you have narrowed your search to five or six colleges or universities, check each school's admissions requirements. Incidentally, the palest ink is better than the best memory, so write everything down. If you know how to use Microsoft Excel or Access, compile your own database of colleges and universities including their requirements and contact information. This will help you to sift through a myriad of requirements and determine which paths are best for your needs.

If you have the financial resources to hire a professional to guide you in your quest, you must be careful to select an appropriate college admissions counselor. Generally, tutors, teachers, and high school guidance counselors are not the best choices for this task, simply because it is not their job to remain current on the specific requirements of colleges and universities. Instead, you should seek a private counselor who specializes in the admission process and who can help you choose schools appropriate for you. If you would like me to recommend someone, please feel free to contact me either through my website (a-academics.com) or by telephone: (858) 587-9745.

If, after all of your diligent research, you still are not sure which universities you will apply to, or you would like to reserve the option of modifying your list at a future date, then I recommend you plan to take the SAT Reasoning Test, the ACT, *and* three SAT Subject Tests. In

that way you will avoid burning the proverbial bridges and limiting your college admissions opportunities.

Step 2: Finding the Right SAT Course

Hold on a minute! Deciding which schools you would like to apply to and which admissions test to take is just the beginning of the process. You have just stepped into an arena of intense competition for which you are not yet trained. Please . . . no matter what anyone else tells you, do not take an official SAT, ACT, or Subject Test until you are properly prepared, which usually means that you will need to find an appropriate prep course. But just how do you select such a program from among literally hundreds of choices?

Several years ago, one of the major financial news magazines presented an article discussing the SAT courses that had appeared on the market at the time, many of which were ineffective or even fraudulent. Unfortunately, anyone can claim to be an SAT preparation specialist whether or not he or she has any real experience. That is why the most important question you can ask a prospective prep course representative is “how many years’ experience does the specific SAT or ACT instructor (not merely the company) have?” Back in the day, when I hired a few tutors to cover my general tutoring overflow, I can recall getting a telephone call or two from people who aspired to teach SAT and ACT for my company (A-Academics). After explaining to each of them that I am the only SAT/ACT teacher on staff, I would ask the caller (just out of curiosity) to tell me how much entrance exam teaching experience he or she has had. Typically, the answers I got were “a few months” or “I helped my little brother.” Yet it occurred to me that, unbeknownst to potential customers, a number of the SAT and ACT courses at the time were likely to hire these shockingly inexperienced, so-called prep specialists!

But what constitutes enough experience? Because many tutors are part-timers, as a rule of thumb, I would not hire an SAT or ACT tutor who has less than ten years’ experience. Also, don’t be lured into subscribing to a prep course just because you have seen the company’s ads on television or heard its sales pitch at your local high school. Many of these large well-funded SAT and ACT courses (franchises in some cases) will tempt you with remarkably impressive, expensive marketing campaigns but will have relatively little to offer you in terms of specific teacher experience. Also, don’t be fooled by “guarantees” that are really just “warrantees” in disguise. When an SAT or ACT prep course offers you a “guarantee,” ask whether or not you are guaranteed a refund if your student does not achieve a certain score. The answer that you are likely to get is either a “no” or, at best, a qualified “maybe.” Instead, the company will be willing to let your student sit through the course again free of charge. What kind of guarantee is that?

Coursework is yet another important factor in selecting an SAT or ACT coach. Even if you are able to find specialists who claim to have the requisite experience, most of them have neither written nor prepared study material for their students. This is a big red flag! My advice on this matter is simple; if you come across an SAT or ACT preparation coach who offers no preprinted study material for the student to absorb between lessons, WALK AWAY.

Incidentally, by preprinted material, I am not referring to sample test books. Rather, I am referring to notes and coursework that the tutor, himself (or herself), has written and will provide to each student as part of the coursework regimen.

A good instructor will also advise you as to when to begin your prep coursework. Ideally, you should start the summer after your tenth grade year but no later than the beginning of your eleventh grade year. Although most SAT and ACT prep organizations are happy to sell you a last-minute course to commence in the spring of your junior year, those regimens do not lend themselves to your success on any of the March, April, May, or June test sittings and will leave you the fall of your senior year to take (or retake) *all* of your entrance exams.

Yet another important aspect of SAT and ACT training is the environment itself. A good prep instructor should attempt to duplicate, as closely as possible, actual test conditions. Naturally, it would be practically impossible to provide services in the same room in which your student will take the exam, surrounded by fifty or so other nervous SAT test takers, at the same time of day, with the same proctor, etc., but the instructor *can* maintain certain conditions. Does the instructor provide a controlled, proctored, environment *somewhat* similar to that in which your student will take the actual test or does he or she provide services in an area in which other students are disruptive, telephones are ringing, or visitors are entering and exiting the premises? Does the instructor require that students turn off their mobile telephones? Does the instructor have the student use actual SAT and ACT answer sheets or merely circle answers on a sample test? Does the instructor require his or her students to wear an appropriate, non-digital wristwatch and to use it on every section? Clearly, if the instructor makes little or no attempt to duplicate proctored test conditions, then you will miss out on an important aspect of your training. I also recommend that the instructor not come to your home. In-home tutoring is not as convenient for the client as you might think, because everyone else in the house has to remain silent and inactive during the tutoring process. I have also found that, for whatever reason, students will tend to perform differently (sometimes better, sometimes worse) at home than they will in another setting, so the instructor may not be able to gauge your progress accurately.

Finally, you must be able to determine whether or not an SAT specialist truly understands the nature of the test; that is, whether or not he or she takes a reasoning approach to the teaching process. The SAT is, primarily, a test of reasoning (hence, the title SAT Reasoning Test) and not accumulated knowledge. That is not to say that you don't need some knowledge to score well on the test, but if you ignore reasoning and, instead, grind each question out the long way, you will run out of both time and energy. Although I don't make it a firm rule of thumb, I tend to look with suspicion at any SAT or ACT course that permits student to use calculators from day one. I have found that students prepped with calculators will fail to learn the reasoning skills necessary to master these tests, so I do not permit my students to use a calculator until close to the end of their training. Invariably, my students come to discover that the vast majority of the questions don't require a calculator at all. Indeed, in most cases, calculator dependence will hinder a student's performance. So, listen carefully as the instructor describes the nature of his coursework to you. If, regarding SAT prep in particular, you do not hear the word "reasoning" at least once, proceed with caution. Also, just for good measure, ask the prospective instructor how

many sections comprise an SAT Reasoning Test. If you do not hear “ten, including one experimental section,” don’t just walk away . . . RUN!

Step 3: The Art of SAT Scheduling

Congratulations! By now you have successfully determined which tests you must take in order to apply to the colleges and universities on your list, and you have found a suitable SAT or ACT prep course. The next question to ask is “When should I take these tests?” Well . . . the simplest answer is “Whenever you are ready!” While, on the surface, this may sound like a wise guy response, it is truly the best advice anyone can give you. Without a doubt, you will encounter dozens of well-meaning souls willing to give you *their* “good advice.” Unfortunately, these well-intentioned folks will unintentionally misguide you nearly 100 per cent of the time! Why? Simply because SAT and ACT scheduling does not lend itself to initial impulses or knee-jerk common sense. Rather, it is a process that requires careful consideration and a willingness to go against the flow.

In order for you to understand this remarkable phenomenon, allow me to present to you the path that all too many high school juniors will take. Midway through the eleventh grade year, the student will begin to think about SAT and ACT test prep. Because you have read the first two articles in this series, you already know that these students should have begun their prep no later than the beginning of the school year. As the spring of the junior year approaches, however, someone will suggest that these as of yet unprepped students take an SAT and ACT in March or April “just to get a baseline score.” By the end of April, students who have followed this path are usually left with dismally low scores and no preparation or training.

The next piece in the bad advice puzzle is to take the SAT again in May, the SAT Subject Tests in June, and another ACT in June. Maybe this sounds familiar to you! This sorry route leaves most students with two low SAT scores, two low ACT scores, two or three low Subject Test scores and the prospect of retaking all five tests in the fall of the senior year. What a nightmare!

The bright side to this unfortunate mess is that the nightmare is so very easy to avoid, so long as you accept the fact that you will be walking alone on a deserted road in search of your best SAT and ACT scores, while everyone else (including all of your friends) will trudge blindly along the ever-crowded bad-timing highway. First, as I mentioned earlier, you should begin your SAT Reasoning Test prep and ACT prep no later than the beginning of your junior year (most of my students begin their coursework the summer after tenth grade). If you are ready to test in November, December, or January, so be it. If not, then you can reasonably consider taking both tests in the spring. If you intend to take the SAT Subject Tests, I recommend you schedule three tests in May and three tests in June and begin your prep in January. In that way, if you to retake any test from the May sitting, you can do so in June and be done with the Subject Tests forever (we do not want to revisit those tests in the fall when the you have forgotten much of the subject coursework and may need to retake the SAT Reasoning Test).

If, on the other hand, you do not have to take any of the Subject Tests, I recommend you retake the SAT Reasoning Test, if necessary, in May and June. In either case, students who are well-prepared should take the ACT in June of their junior year, because it does not conflict with either the SAT or the Subject Test dates.

If you find yourself faced with retaking the SAT and the ACT in the fall of your senior year, I strongly urge you schedule every SAT and ACT sitting, even if you plan to take it just one more time. Here's why. What if you took the SAT in October but didn't get the score you wanted, you woke up with the flu and couldn't make it to the test center, or just had a bad day? You simply retake the test in November! The same holds true for the November sitting; you have December as a backup. Naturally, the ACT dates work the same way. Believe me, this scheduling regimen is the cheapest insurance policy you will ever buy, and you would be surprised at the number of times backup dates have gotten students their highest scores. Also, just knowing that you have reserved backup dates (not all your eggs are in one basket) will allow you to take the tests with minimal pressure.

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