

How to Prepare for the SAT

In the old days, not so many years ago, the SAT was presented as a test of innate ability. In fact, the name of the test (S.A.T.) was actually an abbreviation for "Scholastic Aptitude Test." Did you know that "SAT" doesn't stand for anything anymore? That's probably because it's been well proven that it is not a test of aptitude! All students can raise their scores through smart and steady test preparation.

How much will test prep raise your scores? That answer is extremely variable – and anyone who promises you a magic number is making things up! However, most students who put in a full course of study and analyze their practice tests raise their scores significantly in each section. The Writing and Math sections respond best to specific skills learned, so they are generally easier sections to raise one's score in than the Reading section. Reading improvement usually results from doing a lot of reading in challenging and varied resources on a daily basis, building vocabulary assiduously, starting as early in high school as possible. Your reading skills will naturally mature as you do by the time you take the test for the final time at the end of junior year, or even a couple months later.

So, time to get started! Below are the first key steps to take to get all those scores up.

1. Take the PSAT whenever it's offered at your school.

Whether your school offers the PSAT 8/9, PSAT 10 or just the regular PSAT in the fall of 11th grade, be sure to take it whenever it is offered. The test is free, it won't appear on your official SAT record and it's a terrific study tool to help you prepare for the one that WILL go on record! The PSAT also serves as a wake-up call for many students: SAT time is almost here, and your PSAT score is a good approximation of your starting SAT score.

Make an account for yourself on the College Board website [HERE](#). Use your real, full name, address, school name and birthdate, as this will be your College Board account for the SAT, too. (Do not volunteer any information that is not required such as your hobbies, academic program, parents' names or household income: The [College Board has sold that information in the past](#) and may still or again be doing so. It is a violation of your privacy.) Keep a record of your username and password.

2. Use your PSAT as a learning tool.

Once you are notified by the College Board that your PSAT has been scored (about three weeks after the digital test), go to your account and you can access a few tools to learn from your errors. With the new digital PSAT, the College Board no longer offers a full

review of the actual test you took, but a few general questions that correspond to your error types. Many errors fall into one of two categories: silly error or lack of knowledge/skillset. If you are making a lot of silly errors, especially in the beginning of the test on easy questions, you know you need to slow down and give those easy questions more respect!

With [the digital PSAT](#), students who make too many mistakes in the earlier, easier questions, won't be fed harder questions – which are worth more points – in the second sections of the test. So it behooves you more than ever to make sure you don't leave any easy questions on the table! If the error was due to lack of knowledge or a particular skill (such as a vocabulary word, a math formula), add that to your notes for that section of the test and build from there.

3. Register for the SAT.

The [digital SAT](#) has no more Question and Answer Service test dates, so plan to take the test on any dates that work best for you without that consideration.

Do not take the SAT every time it's offered; give yourself time to build your skills (and have a life). Taking the test repeatedly without extensive SAT study in between is not likely to raise your scores much, if at all.

Plan to take the test 3 times: ideally first in March, then once in late spring (May or June) and once more in August. Test dates will vary depending on your area, so be sure to check the [College Board website offerings](#) to confirm that the dates you are planning on will be options for you.

4. Plan your long-term testing schedule.

Don't discover in May of junior year that it's too late to register for the June SAT – or expect to take it in August and find that there are no seats left for this very popular test date. Register EARLY and get your choice of dates and test center.

If you are requesting testing accommodations, those requests must be made early in the game, especially if they are for accommodations that require extra proctors or special testing conditions. If you are turned down at first, you will need time (in months) to prepare supporting documentation to argue your case to the College Board and get their response.

5. Take a practice test under timed, test-like conditions.

At the start of any SAT course you take, you'll probably be given a full-length practice SAT to be taken in one sitting, just like the real thing. If you are studying on your own or

about to work with a tutor, you should take a full test, as well. By taking practice tests at regular intervals, you'll gain familiarity with the test sections, order, content and pacing. Go over your results: rethinking and redoing those questions you got wrong and analyzing your errors.

A caution about "free" tests:

Many high schools have relationships with big test prep companies. The schools and their students benefit from the convenience of having test prep offered at school, often at a discount. The test prep companies benefit by having a monopoly on you, the student! You can – and should – take advantage of any free diagnostic SATs offered by these companies at your school or elsewhere. Make sure, however, that you will be getting your practice test back within a couple weeks and that you will be able to take the test booklet and your results home with you. There is very little benefit in taking a practice test and getting nothing but a score – or being forced to register for the course to see your results in full. These companies may nevertheless try to rope you into one of their paid courses, but understand that you are under no obligation to register with them just because you took the free practice test!

Also, find out in advance whether they will be using one of the only 4 official digital SAT practice tests offered by the College Board. If it's one you've already taken, it's not useless, but good to know in advance. (Having already taken that practice test, you may find you are offered harder questions since you already learned from the previous time taking it. This is also a great learning experience for the real thing!) And given that the digital test is much different from the old paper exam, make sure that the practice test you will take is digital, as the real thing is.

6. Choosing your study plan 1: What kind of student are you?

Your answers to the following four questions will help you decide on the prep method best suited to you.

1. What is your family's budget for test prep?

While there is no direct correlation between cost and quality, in general, better and more personalized teaching will be more expensive. In-person courses will cost more than online and video courses, and one-to-one tutoring will cost more than all the rest. Among personal tutoring options, experienced tutors will charge more than young grads.

2. How self-guided and motivated are you?

Do you think you can study well on your own, taking an online course or working through a textbook and/or online resources by yourself? Do you have the self-discipline and the time to do so? If you believe the answer is "yes," give it a try before you get into high season for SAT prep, say, early summer after sophomore year. If it's going well and you think we can keep it up, great! You can always supplement self-paced study with a session or two with a tutor or take a course later. If you find yourself bored, frustrated or

falling behind your goals, switch to a program with a real live teacher.

3. Do you do better with a teacher guiding you? (Most people do.)

Some students – particularly the most advanced ones – do great studying on their own. They love independent projects, find research a breeze and take satisfaction in accomplishing tasks at their own (generally high) speed. Most people, however, do better at test prep and other challenges with the help of a class or tutor to guide, encourage and coach them.

4. How much time can you afford to commit per week to your SAT course without compromising your schoolwork?

If considering a class you would have to travel to, include that time commitment in your calculations, too. Do you have time for the class hours PLUS homework? However you choose to study for the SAT, recognize that you MUST do homework. Listening to lectures and skimming through book pages or video lessons is not sufficient for real score improvement.

How long do you need to prep for the SAT – or, how high is the moon?

Really, you could study for the SAT continuously from sophomore year through the fall of senior year, but you probably have some other things to do – such as go to high school! A good rule of thumb for an SAT foundation course is 8-10 weeks of lessons that entail 2-3 hours of lesson time generating 2-4 hours of homework per week, plus 4 practice tests (and analysis of your results after each one). This is ideally accomplished during the summer between sophomore and junior year, when you have more time. Then, either continue at a lighter pace through your SATs of junior year, or regroup for a refresher in the 5-6 weeks before your test.

Note that the College Board has so far only released 1 official practice digital PSAT and 4 SATs, so don't use them all up in the summer before junior year! Use textbook resources and other online practice tests from SAT prep companies to supplement the real thing while saving at least 1 official practice test to take before each time you take the real one.

A word about "boot camp" SAT courses:

Boot camp, or intensive, SAT courses typically last a week or less, with up to 6 hours of lessons every day and a couple of hours of homework every night. They are seen by some students and parents as the only way to shove an SAT course into the student's already fully-scheduled life. If this is the only way you can schedule your SAT study, it will have to do, but it has some big drawbacks. First, it's impossible to learn all you need for the SAT in one week: with the massively condensed learning period, you don't have the time to absorb, learn and practice new skills and knowledge and you can't learn it all in one week, anyway – no matter how intensive the program. Second, by the time you take the SAT, you will need a refresher course, as crammed knowledge is poorly retained in the long term.

If you choose to study boot camp-style, be sure you get guidance from your teacher on how you can keep your skills sharp and continue learning gradually from the time your course ends until you actually take the SAT. If, on the other hand, you've done some prep already, you might consider an intensive SAT course to finish your program, and take the SAT shortly after completing the course.

7. Choosing your study plan 2: Weigh the PROS and CONS of each.

- **Online course or self-guided study**

PROS: generally cheapest option, good for self-motivated and advanced students. Convenient; no travel required. Less time wasted on material or lessons that you already know than in an in-person class if the online course enables you to skip easy stuff – or drill deeper into material you particularly need to build your skills in.

CONS: requires the most self-discipline and organization, offers the least amount of personal attention. This matters because even if you study hard and complete all the assignments, if your technique is faulty, you won't have anyone to point that out to you or teach you a better approach.

Here's an example: A student of mine solved all the quadratics she encountered on her first practice SAT by using the quadratic formula. Looking over the answers, she even found that the College Board explanations used the quadratic formula. But a good teacher would have told her right at the start that it's rare to have to use the quadratic formula on the SAT. If you use it more than once on the test, it's a sure thing you are doing something wrong. Why? Because it's a massive time-sucker that prevents you from having enough time to solve other, harder questions. When you see a question that seems at first glance to require a long solution, your immediate thought should be how to get around that step by using savvier math skills.

In short, without personal feedback, you won't necessarily know that you are doing things the wrong or less effective way, and as a result, you may inadvertently reinforce bad techniques or misunderstandings.

- **Class**

PROS: cheaper than private tutoring, more social than other options

CONS: little or no personal attention and class level may be too high/low for you individually. Class difficulty levels, if organized at all, tend to be based on the math results of an initial practice test, so if your math and verbal (reading, writing and grammar) skills are uneven, you will likely be unhappy in one section or the other. Classes also require time and energy to go there and back. A certain amount of your time in class is wasted, too, in organization, waiting for other students to get settled, waiting

through the teacher's explanations of material that you already have mastered, etc.

- **Tutor**

PROS: most convenient, most flexible and adaptable to your own study needs and style. Generally, one-to-one tutoring is the most effective use of your time and energy. With an excellent tutor, you'll learn the best techniques, personalized for YOU. And it should be the easiest to quit if you are dissatisfied.

CONS: generally, the most expensive option

TIP: If private tutoring is out of your budget, see if you have one or two friends with whom you are fairly evenly matched academically and who might want to join you in a semi-private (2 students) or small group (3-4 students) course. Most tutors and test prep companies would be happy to accommodate you and your group. You'll save money over one-to-one private tutoring, enjoy studying with your friend/s and possibly be able to arrange the lessons in the convenience of your home or theirs.

Ask these questions before you sign up for any study program:

- Read the fine print: Find out whether you can take a complimentary trial lesson or pay for a single lesson before committing to a course.
- If you've paid for a packet of lessons or a full course, will you be issued a full refund for lessons or classes remaining if you decide to quit?
- If taking a classroom course, will you be tested to determine which class is the better fit for you? (Most classes, if they divide students up by level at all, do it by their math scores: High math scorers go to the advanced class for both Math and Reading/Writing.)
- Will you get any personal attention in the class or online course? If you have questions on homework or a practice test that aren't answered in class or online explanations, will the teacher be available to help you with them? Does the course limit you to a specific number of extra help minutes or hours (either by contract or in practice)?
- How many students will be in the class? If that is not known in advance, find out whether the class size is limited.
- Does the program offer digital practice tests? And are they their own material or do they use the official College Board tests? (If you have intend to use those 4 tests from the College Board on your own, you'll want a course that offers additional tests that they've created – hopefully good facsimiles of the College Board test style and content.)
- How soon after you take each test will you get it back to review? (Some classroom courses don't return practice tests to students for a week or even longer, by which time students may have forgotten their thinking on the questions, making the tests a lot less useful as study tools.)
- Will the teacher/tutor/class go over the practice tests in full?

Once you've started on your SAT prep, you'll find the process in some ways less stressful than you may have imagined. You'll encounter specific areas in reading, grammar and usage, and math that you find you need to work on. You'll have your resources lined up – a textbook, online tools, a teacher, a class, or some combination of these – to address your areas of weakness and build your skills and knowledge overall. Taking regular practice tests will help dispel test anxiety and as you learn more, you'll start to take ownership of your achievements.



About the author, Karen Berlin Ishii:

Karen Berlin Ishii, a Brown University graduate with over twenty years' experience as an academic and test prep teacher, tutors students via video chat all over the world. She specializes in reading, writing, grammar, math, and preparation for the SAT, ACT, SSAT, ISEE and other standardized tests.

Learn more about Karen and find test prep tips and goodies at www.karenberlinishii.com.