

9 THINGS

EVERY PARENT
NEEDS TO
KNOW ABOUT
THE SAT

A no-nonsense guide to getting your children ready for the most important test they'll ever take

By

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Introduction

As the famous saying goes, “the only thing worse than no information is bad information.” In my many years of tutoring the SAT, it’s remarkable how many contradictory and counterproductive pieces of SAT advice my clients have passed along to me. They’ve received this advice from school counselors, family, friends, books, and their children’s peers. What worries me is this: if two opinions are exactly the opposite of each other, at least one of them must be wrong. An example:

“I heard that the SAT is a test of intelligence, and that there’s nothing you can do to study for it.”

Vs.

“I heard that the SAT has nothing to do with innate abilities, and that everyone has the same chances of succeeding on each section.”

Both of these statements are complete contradictions of each other. Worse, they’re both entirely inaccurate. Another example:

“I heard that when you take the SAT doesn’t matter.”

Vs.

“I heard that you should take the SAT in October, because that’s when the most students take it, and therefore, you’ll have the most favorable grading curve.”

How can people be receiving such contradictory advice? Who are they receiving it from? I get upset when I think about the effects of this widespread misinformation. How many students have received lower scores than they deserved simply because they studied under the wrong framework? How many parents have stressed unnecessarily over an exam which, if approached properly, shouldn’t be stressed over at all?

This guide is meant to set the record straight. I’m in the business of informing my clients. When I walk out the door, my students know more and think differently than they did when I walked in the door. In my years of teaching over 220 students about the SAT, I’ve learned what does and doesn’t work. While each student and each parent is unique, there are some truths that transcend individual differences. The following 9 tips embody those truths. Read the following guide, apply its lessons, and have a much smoother, more successful SAT experience as a result.

Please enjoy this guide – hopefully, it will help you to avoid some common mistakes and to maximize your child’s chance of success!

1. The SAT is just like any other test (and like every other skill).

I cannot tell you how often I hear the following: “My daughter is a great student, but she’s just not a great **tester**.” What does that even mean? It’s complete and utter nonsense. If your daughter can get As in math class, English class, and world history, she can get a perfect SAT score. For whatever reason, people view the SAT as some sort of abomination. Instead of viewing it as a test, just like any other (which it is), they view it as some supernatural entity beyond the scope of human comprehension.

What makes the SAT different from other tests? Nothing, really. It’s a logical reasoning exam that asks very simple material in very tricky ways. Let’s cover both of those points separately:

- A) The SAT covers simple material.** If your child has graduated from 9th grade, he knows everything he needs to in order to get a perfect SAT score. Middle school algebra and geometry, incredibly basic grammatical concepts, and simple comprehension strategy (along with a bit of vocabulary) are the only things any student needs in order to get a perfect score. This isn’t rocket science – it’s administered to almost every high school student in the United States.
- B) The SAT asks simple material in a difficult way.** This is why the test seems so difficult to so many people. Instead of asking what the area of a square is with a side length of 9, the SAT will ask what the area of a square is that has the same side length as the radius of a circle with a circumference of $18(\pi)$. Sure, it’s a bit tricky, but all you need to do is get used to the format and style of the exam and you’ll be able to tear through each question with ease.

So, right now, I beg of you: stop thinking of the SAT as something other than a basic logical reasoning exam. Taking the SAT is like any other skill, and if you practice it effectively, you’ll get better at it. Let me make a quick comparison:

Someone tells you that you need to get good at chess - what do you do? Play chess, practice chess problems, read chess books, and improve your chess-playing ability.

Someone tells you that you need to get good at tennis - what do you do? Play tennis, practice tennis drills, learn proper tennis form, and improve your tennis-playing ability.

So, when someone tells you that you need to get good at taking the SAT, what should you do?

If your child can learn, then he or she can get a fantastic SAT score. Let me say this as explicitly as I possibly can:

Taking the SAT is exactly like any other skill on this Earth – anyone can get good at taking the SAT, and if people ever tell you otherwise, they have absolutely no idea what they’re talking about.

From this point forward, realize that there’s no such thing as a “good tester” and a “bad tester” – there are simply people who take the time to figure out the SAT and do well, and people with defeatist attitudes who don’t study and don’t bother to get good at taking the test.

2. Begin with the end in mind. Set a SMART goal.

In Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, there is an oft-quoted conversation between Alice and the Cheshire Cat:

Alice: Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?

The Cat: That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.

Alice: I don't much care.

The Cat: Then it doesn't much matter which way you go.

Alice:...so long as I get somewhere.

The Cat: Oh, you're sure to do that, if only you walk long enough.

This seemingly ridiculous conversation is of enormous significance. The concept is simple: if you have no idea where you're trying to go, then how are you supposed to know how to get there? How can you be sure that you're doing the right thing if you have no idea of what you're trying to accomplish? In our everyday lives, we follow this principle - after all, no one would ever start driving to a friend's house without any idea of where it was or how to find directions - it would be pointless. So why do students treat their SATs differently? Many students set out to study for the SAT without the faintest idea of what their goals are, what their current score is, or what score they need to attain. They do a bit of studying here and there, not really sure what they're trying to improve or why. Just remember this: unless you know where you are and where you're trying to go, all of your SAT efforts will be almost totally wasted.

Setting goals for yourself and tracking your progress is the most important thing you can do in preparing for the SAT. After years of teaching the SAT, and speaking with SAT experts from all over the country, I have found that this is the biggest difference between students who do well on the SAT and students who do terribly: high performers set goals for themselves - students with low scores don't.

Following is a step-by-step outline of how you can set SMART, realistic goals for your child to make sure that he is where he needs to be on test day.

A) Figure out where you are.

"Know Thyself" - This ancient Greek aphorism applies as much to the SAT as it does to everyday life. Before you can set a goal, you need to know where you're starting from. If you've recently taken an SAT or PSAT, you'll have a pretty good idea of what your current scoring range is, and also of which of the three sections contains your biggest strengths and weaknesses. I recommend, however, that you take a new diagnostic right away to get more information. Knowing that you're "good at math, but not so good at writing" is certainly helpful, but it won't give you quite enough information to begin a good plan of attack. The first thing you need to do is take a realistic, timed diagnostic on your own. In one of my next tips, I'll teach you exactly how your child should take his at-home diagnostic, and to extract as much information from it as possible.

B) Go over your scores and answers and figure out what needs the most work.

Once you've taken your diagnostic, you'll want to go through the exam and figure out which questions you got right and wrong. You want to get as specific as possible here - precisely what types of problems are you good at? Bad at? Confused by? Which problems take you too much time to complete, and which problems do you finish quickly? All of this information is essential in formulating a game-plan for the exam.

There are two important things to remember when looking over the types of questions that you got right and wrong:

- 1. You should be spending almost all of your time working on the types of problems that you consistently get wrong.** If you have a serious weakness, you should focus all of your efforts on it until it is completely patched up. For instance, if you simply cannot do percentage problems, you have no business working on anything else until you can do percentage problems blindfolded. Learning a frequently-tested skill, such as percentage ability, will increase your score by at least 50 points.
- 2. You should be spending no time on things that you're good at.** If you consistently get 800s on the Writing section, you have no business wasting your time on the Writing section. Other areas need more of your time and attention. If you get sentence completion problems right 99% of the time, then you shouldn't be practicing them anymore. Sure, it might feel great to go through a section and absolutely destroy it, but it isn't making your score any better. Have the discipline and the courage to work on your *least* favorite areas, and to keep at them until you're an expert.

As you grade your diagnostic exam, and as you practice in general, you should always remain hyper-aware of your biggest strengths and weaknesses.

C) Be aware of the learning curve.

It is far, far more difficult to raise a score from a 700 to a 750 than it is to raise a score from a 400 to a 550. The worse your scores are to start, the easier they are to improve. This should come as great news to you if you have a particular weakness. If you're scoring >700 in every section, the bad news is that your progress is going to be slow. The good news is that you're already scoring above 2100 on your SAT. If your scores in any particular section are extremely low, it just means that you'll be able to make rapid progress.

By now, you should already have a good idea of what your biggest strengths and weaknesses are. Focus exclusively on your weaknesses. All that matters on the SAT is your score - you want the highest score possible. Very rarely in life will you be given a task with such a simple gauge of success vs. failure - take advantage of this simplicity.

Think of it this way: if you are scoring poorly in a section, it just means that there are certain gaps in your knowledge and in your strategy that need to be filled. The second you fill them, your score is going to skyrocket. When it comes to the SAT, no one is "bad at math" - all the material on the test was taught to you by 8th grade. People who think they "can't do math" have just forgotten how to work with fractions, functions, and circular geometry. If they take the time to work on those three areas alone, their score could easily go up 100 points on the math section. The same goes for every other section. Don't just give up because you scored poorly on a certain section - instead, take it as a good sign. It just means that you have easily identifiable ways to launch your score through the ceiling.

D) Figure out what you need to score.

Don't forget why you're taking the SAT: you want to get into college. Different colleges expect different SAT scores from their students. While the SAT is far from the only metric that colleges use when evaluating your application, it can be a serious asset or a serious liability depending on what you score and where you're applying. If your SAT scores are well above your target schools' average SAT score, you'll be upping your chances of admission considerably. If your scores are lower, you'll be hamstringing yourself. If they're about average compared to the other applicants, then you'll be evaluated on other factors instead. Where your scores fall in comparison to your target school's average scores will indicate whether your SAT is going to be a boost, a liability, or none of the above.

Finding average SAT scores is extremely easy - books, magazines, and newspapers publish this information routinely, and it can be found just as easily online. Simply Google "Average SAT scores for COLLEGE X" and you'll find at least a hundred websites that will give you a relatively consistent listing of average SAT scores. Most scores are presented in a 50% format, which will look like this:

Critical Reading - Random College - 25%: 670 75%: 770.

This information simply gives you a spread of the scores at Random College. What it means is that only 25% of admitted students have scores of 670 or lower, and that only 25% of students scored 770 or higher on their exam. This is a great way to express their average SAT scores, since instead of simply giving you one number, they give you the average range of scores that will get you admitted. Here, we see that 50% of all students who gain admission to Random College have Critical Readings scores between 670 and 770.

Wording differently, it means this:

Students with a Reading Comprehension score below 670 will have a difficult time getting into Random College, since their SAT score will be seen as a weakness.

Students with a Reading Comprehension score from 670-770 have scores that are par for the course at Random College, and the SAT will be seen as a sort of "blank" factor - you're above the cutoff, so you'll be evaluated based on other factors, such as your grades, extracurriculars, and essays.

Students with a Reading Comprehension score of 770 or above will have a much easier time getting into Random College - these scores are better than 75% of their admitted applicants, meaning that your SAT will likely increase your chances of admission.

Use this information when figuring out what schools you want to apply to, and where you want your SAT scores to be. Start by figuring out what the 50% ranges are for all of the schools that you're considering applying to.

For your "safety schools," you want to make sure that your score is above the 75% mark. If it isn't, then these aren't safety schools.

For your "mid-range" schools, you want to be sure that you're within the 50% range - in other words, you should have SAT scores that are similar to the other admittees at that school.

For your reach schools, you should be sure that your scores are, at a minimum, only a bit lower than the 25% mark. If you're applying to Random College with a Reading Comprehension score of 400, your chances are not very good. However, if you have a 640, it means that, while it is a reach, you still have a shot at getting in.

Test Prep Authority makes this process even easier. If you visit our Free SAT and ACT score generators via the following link:

<http://www.testprepaauthority.com/sat-score-generator>

You can use our software to calculate the average scores you need to get into every college and university in America. Better yet, our software will show you what you need to accomplish, and by when, to get into your dream schools!

This information will be incredibly important when setting your ultimate SAT goal. If you're fixated on getting into a particular college, you'll now have a much better idea of what it will take to gain admission. If you can get your score above the 75% market, you're vastly improving your chances of gaining admission. That should be your goal. Don't settle for SAT mediocrity - make the SAT an asset to your applications and you will reap the benefits. But first, figure out what scores will be an asset, what scores will be a problem, and what scores will simply put you in the middle of the pack.

E) Set your SMART goal.

SMART is a mnemonic that is used by schools, corporations, and high-achieving individuals. It stands for:

S- Specific

M - Measurable

A - Attainable

R - Relevant

T - Time-bound

People and institutions who use the SMART system to set their goals achieve real results. Your SAT goal has to be SMART. If it's missing even one of the five criteria above, you're putting yourself at a disadvantage. Would it take less time to launch into your SAT prep without setting up a SMART goal? Sure. Will your score suffer if you don't? I guarantee it.

SMART goals will improve your SAT score. Here's what all five of the SMART criteria mean, and how you can apply them to your SAT preparation.

- 1. Specific.** You need to create an *exact* goal for yourself. You can't simply say that you "want to do better in math" - that is pointless. Give yourself a real, tangible goal so that you can track how much closer you're getting to achieving it. A specific goal would look like this: "I want to increase my math score by 220 points, my writing score by 100 points, and my Critical Reading score by 80 points. I will do that by improving my geometry and algebra, my ability to recognize misplaced modifiers and pronoun disagreement, and my ability to come up with relevant answers before I look at the ones provided to me." That goal is specific and exact. A goal like that will give you a perfect idea of what you're trying to do and how you're going to do it. A worse goal would be: "I want

to improve my overall score by exactly 400 points." It's somewhat specific, but you don't know where those points are going to come from, or what you're trying to improve. Be responsible enough to set **exact** goals for yourself and to follow through with them. The more specific you are, the better your scores will end up being.

- 2. Measurable.** In the case of the SAT, this is really easy. Your scores are already measurable, since the entire scoring system is numeric to begin with. However, just because your scores are measurable doesn't mean that you will measure them! You need to remember to consistently track your progress! I'll explain how to do so later on in this guide.
- 3. Attainable.** This is another way of saying "realistic." If you are scoring ~1500, don't make your goal "to increase my score by 800 points in three months." Have I seen this sort of drastic score increase before? Yes - but it's rare. There is no exact goal that will be realistic for every student, but a general guideline is that 100-150 points of improvement per month of focused studying is realistic. More if you're starting lower. Less if you're starting higher. As you begin to track your progress, you'll start to get an idea of how attainable your goal is. If you're rapidly advancing towards your goal, then you might be able to set the bar a little higher. If your progress is slow, set your goal a bit lower to make sure that you'll reach it by test day (or at least kick your test-prep up a notch!)
- 4. Relevant.** Much like #2, this is already taken care of. You have to take the SAT, and you know exactly for what purpose you're taking it, so your goal is going to be relevant no matter what you make it.
- 5. Time-bound.** Any good goal will have a deadline. If two men came up and said the following to you, who do you think would be more likely to succeed?

Man 1: "I'm going to write a book someday."

Man 2: "I will finish my novel exactly 18 months from today."

The only difference between these two men is that Man 2 set a time-bound goal. Man 2 sounds like a driven, realistic go-getter. Man 1 sounds like a bit of a daydreaming fool.

Figure out exactly when you want to take your test, and prepare for your exam accordingly. If it is currently January, and you want to take the June SAT, you should be aiming to consistently hit your target diagnostic scores by mid May. Do not ever create a goal without a time-constraint. This is advice just as important for life as it is for the SAT.

Following is an example of a perfect SMART goal:

"My reach school has a 50% SAT range of 2000-2150. My mid-range schools have an average 50% range of 1800-1980. I want my scores to be an asset for my reach school, and therefore I want to be above the 50% range for my reach school.

I am currently scoring a 1900 on my SAT diagnostics. I have 6 months before I plan to take the SAT.

My goal is to raise my score by 320 points. I will increase my math score, which is my worst section, by 180 points. I will do so by focusing on functions, percentages, and algebra almost exclusively. I will continue to work on those

areas of my math until I can consistently get 10 problems right in a row having to do with any of those fields. I will improve my Writing and Reading Comprehension scores by 70 points each. For writing, I am going to focus on error-identification problems, which are my biggest weakness, and I will specifically focus on improving my idiomatic knowledge and ability to recognize tense disagreement. For Critical Reading, I will start to improve my vocabulary immediately, focus my long-passage reading skills, and work on avoiding Lightning-Rod answers.

By 3 months into my preparation, I want to have a math increase of at least 100 points, and a Reading Comprehension and Writing increase of at least 40-50 points. I will consistently score in the 2220 range on my diagnostics for 3 weeks leading up to my exam, starting May 14th.

I will take one diagnostic exam every 3 weeks to track my progress and to coordinate my goals accordingly."

That is a real goal. It's SMART, in every sense of the acronym and the word.

Test Prep Authority provides parents and students with free tools to help them set their SMART Goals. Visit:

<http://www.testprepaauthority.com/take-the-SAT-study-plan-testing>

To download all our free forms, which will walk you step-by-step through the process of planning for your SAT and ACT, and which will give you easy-to-use visual reminders of what you need to do and when, simply visit the link above and download what you need!:

This is the most important piece of advice that I can give to parents and to students before they take the SAT. Before you do any other preparation for the exam, figure out where you stand and what your goals are. You'll outperform almost everyone who does not take the time to do so.

3. Your child should take the SAT when she is ready to take it.

When I first start working with clients, they usually have an exact idea of when they're planning on taking the exam. Unfortunately, this planned date is usually meaningless. Here's a version of the average conversation that I have with new clients on this topic:

"We're taking the SAT in March."

"Why?"

"Because we decided to take the SAT in March."

I'm not trying to poke fun at anyone or trivialize people's plans. I'm just pointing out a very common, and extremely awful, practice that seems to have become widespread: picking SAT dates out of a hat.

I will go over the steps of this process in much more detail in tip 4, but here is the basic sequence that you need to follow in order to properly pick your SAT date:

- A) Figure out what SAT score you need.
- B) Figure out what your SAT score currently is.
- C) Figure out how long it will (probably) take to reach your target score.
- D) Pick a test date *after* that point and register for it.
- E) Test frequently during the preparation process to gauge and measure progress.
- F) Figure out the last possible date that you can take the SAT in case progress moves more slowly than anticipated.

A lot of people take the SAT to "see what score they're going to get." I have absolutely no idea why. You can see what score you're going to get by giving yourself a timed, proper diagnostic exam on your own time (also covered later in this guide). If you want to stress your kid out beyond belief, spend \$60+ for no reason, get a disappointing official score on record, ruin a Saturday morning, and make yourself miserable, then I couldn't recommend taking a premature SAT more highly. Otherwise, your child should take the SAT when she is actually prepared and ready to do so.

I have some clients who make their children take the SAT so that they can get used to the testing environment. I guess there's some merit in this – after all, I'm a broken record when it comes to practicing the test under realistic conditions, so I suppose that this 3.5 hours could be helpful **if a student realizes that the ONLY reason he or she is taking this official exam is for practice purposes**. But in my experience, high school students aren't emotionally equipped to deal with this sort of practice. It will completely freak them out, and when they inevitably get a score below their potential, they'll view this score as a defeat.

Have your child take the SAT when she is scoring within 100 points of her desired SAT score on multiple consecutive practice exams. Do NOT register your child for the closest SAT because that's what the school says to do, or because that's what your friends are doing.

4. The SAT is more important to college admissions than any single classroom assignment - prepare accordingly!

Let me start by saying one thing: the SAT might be the most irrelevant exam in the entire world. Being very good at the SAT makes you very good at almost nothing else. It's a unique exam with strange logical strategies and very little real material. I'm a specialist when it comes to the SAT – I can teach the SAT in my sleep. However, this does not make me smarter or more capable than anyone else at almost anything else – I'm hopeless when it comes to science, history, and advanced mathematics. With the exception an improved vocabulary, which is always useful throughout life, the lasting intellectual benefits of studying for the SAT are very limited.

Now, with that out of the way, I can say this:

No grade that you get on a specific classroom assignment will ever be more important to your college application than your SAT score will be.

That's not hyperbole – that's a mathematical fact. Think of it like this:

-The average college uses the SAT as 20% of its admissions criteria (a slight approximation - also, keep in mind that some colleges don't even use SAT scores in their evaluation, but if you were applying to those schools, you probably wouldn't be reading this guide...)

-The average college uses grades as about 60% of its admissions criteria (also a slight approximation)

-The average high school student will take at least 30 graded classes that affect his or her overall GPA.

Therefore, the average class that a high school student takes will account for roughly 1-2% of his total admissions criteria (dividing the percentage of admissions criteria based on GPA by the number of classes that a student takes).

Mathematical Conclusion #1: the SAT is at least 20X more important, numerically speaking, than any class your child will take in high school. WARNING: this does NOT mean that you should slack off on your academics. Any good college consultant worth his or her salt will tell you that academics are, overall, vastly more important than SAT scores.

Now, think of something else: the average class has at least four graded assignments and tests that contribute to the final grade (at least). So, take that a step further and you come to another conclusion:

Mathematical Conclusion #2: The SAT is at least 80X more important than any particular assignment or test that your child will ever work on or study for. CONCLUSION: Academics are more important than SAT scores are, but Johnny's history paper is not - it's an issue of specifics.

Have you ever stayed up with your child to help him with an assignment that he was stressing over? Because that assignment was less than 1% as important as his SAT score. Why is this so important?

You NEED to make sure that small assignments don't derail your test preparation the week or two before the exam. Make sure that classes are dealt with IN ADVANCE so that they don't violate Tip #5.

The key lessons to be learned from this point are threefold:

Key Point 1: Academics are more important than SAT scores, but specific academic assignments are not.

The SAT is less important than academics, but it is more important than any specific class grade. I'm not suggesting that your child drop out of school while he studies for the SAT, but I am saying that the World History 101 quiz on Friday does *not* get priority over SAT preparation.

Key Point 2: You have to prepare for classwork in advance of the SAT to make sure that it doesn't affect SAT performance. This is very simple to do. Follow these steps:

- A) Have your child ask every teacher in every class what assignments and tests are due the 2 weeks before the SAT.
- B) Let your teachers know that you're taking the SAT on a particular Saturday, and that it's important that you get plenty of rest and preparation the week before the exam.
- C) Ask that you be able to take exams and turn in assignments well in advance, or after, the SAT. There is nothing that will kill your SAT scores faster than pulling an all-nighter the week before the exam. If you can get all of your serious work out of the way beforehand, you're going to avoid any potential catastrophes.
- D) Work with your teachers to eliminate all serious schoolwork immediately preceding the SAT. Teachers will be flexible - just let them know how important the date switch is.
- E) Do the work! Your teacher is doing you a favor by moving assignments around. Don't take advantage.

Key Point 3: The SAT should be viewed with a weighted perspective in the two weeks preceding it.

If you're a believer in the Pareto Principle (that 80% of your outcomes come from 20% of your labor and vice versa) then you should realize that proper SAT preparation will do more for your chances of college admissions than any other single activity. If, in the week before the exam, your child spends 20 minutes on SAT prep and 15 hours on an essay, think about the math above and realize how wildly inappropriate this time allocation is.

The SAT is the most important test that most people will ever take in their lives. It is a huge determining factor in arguably the biggest lifestyle determinant (college) in someone's life. So when you are helping to manage your child's time, please keep this in mind.

5. Sleep and diet affect test scores as much as knowledge and strategy.

I could write an entire book on this topic, but here I'll summarize the key ideas so that you can put your child on a better eating and sleeping program as soon as possible. First, a quick story:

Melissa was a very promising student. She started with a 1650, but by the end of our sessions, she was repeatedly scoring 2250-2300 on her diagnostic exams. She was confident, prepared, and ready to go. Then she got her SAT scores back: 1580. How could this have happened? I talked to her and her mother, and found out the following:

1. She had two big papers due the week before the SAT, and she was averaging 4 hours of sleep a night for 3 nights before the test (blatantly violating the principles set forth in Tip 4).
2. She didn't eat breakfast the morning of the test, and ate almost nothing the Friday beforehand.
3. Against my specific instructions, she decided to "cram" some vocabulary the night before the test, and barely slept as a result. Her mind was racing and the few hours of sleep she got were restless and unhelpful.

Her scores, therefore, were no surprise. The SAT is a 4-hour-long mental marathon. How many marathon runners do you know that go into a race on a totally empty stomach, having gotten no sleep for the week before their race? How do you think they'd perform if they did act this way?

Melissa registered for the next available SAT, but this time she slept for 9 hours a night for the entire week leading up to the exam, ate huge, healthy meals the entire week and the morning of the exam, and took the Friday before the exam completely off from any sort of mental strain. She took the SAT again and got a 2340. All's well that ends well, but it would have been a lot easier for her if she had just treated her mind and body right in the first place.

Your child NEEDS to be well-rested and well-fed if she is going to do well on this exam. If you think your brain can operate on 0 calories for 4 hours straight, you haven't been talking to the right nutritionist. If you think that arguably ***the most challenging mental exercise that your child will ever be put through*** can be mastered on a 20-hour sleep deficit, you're in for a terrible surprise.

You can get in touch if you want a much more complete and nutritional program for your child, but the basics of a good program are as follows:

- A) **8-9 hours of sleep a night, EVERY night, for a week leading up to the SAT.** No ifs, ands, or buts. These hours also need to be on the same schedule – aim for 10pm-7am every night. Consistency is just as important as quantity.
- B) **Healthy, calorie-dense meals all week leading up to the test, and especially on the morning of the test.** Lean proteins, whole grains, plenty of fruits and vegetables, and adequate hydration are all essential. No TV dinners, no doughnuts, and no fasting. Your brain burns 20% of your body's calories, and more so when you're going through intense bouts of mental activity. Feed it!

- C) Take the day before the test off.** If possible, have your child skip school. No homework, studying, or intense physical activity is allowed. This day should be reserved for leisure and relaxation. Suggested activities: long walks, light pleasure reading, video games, long baths, naps, cooking, listening to music, meditating, eating. You will not learn anything on the day before the SAT that will affect your score – just have your child take it easy and relax and put her brain in an optimal, rested condition.
- D) Wake up early the day of the exam.** This is extremely important. You want your child to wake up **at least two hours before the exam**. Estimates vary, but most scientists agree that it takes at least 75 minutes after you wake up before your brain is running at its optimal levels and is completely free from the effects of sleep. Have your child wake up early, take a shower, eat a big breakfast, and go on a relaxing walk. No studying allowed. Also – try to feed your child breakfast as soon as possible upon waking. That way she will be able to digest her food fully by the time the exam starts, fueling her brain optimally while simultaneously reducing any chance of drowsiness.

Diet and sleep can affect your score by over 600 points! I've see it happen. Make sure your child is eating and sleeping before the test or you'll be dealing with a score that isn't even close to her maximum potential.

6. Tactics First – Strategies Later (Start Early)

Some things take a while to learn, while other things can be learned rather quickly. I'm a chess player, and I like to view the SAT much like a game of chess in that it can be divided into two distinct categories: strategies and tactics.

Strategies are overall concepts that guide the appropriateness of specific actions. You cannot "do" a strategy, but instead let strategy guide what you do. In chess, a strategy would be to "control the center of the board." On the SAT, strategies involve such key concepts as "coming up with your own answer rather than choosing the ones provided to you by the exam" and "do arithmetic with your calculator, but do math (there's a difference) with your mind."

Tactics are specific actions which are meant to bring about the realization of your strategic objectives. A tactic in chess might be to "move your bishop to square E4." On the SAT, tactics involve algebra shortcuts, grammatical knowledge, comprehension tricks, and other action-based knowledge.

On the SAT, much like in chess, tactics take much longer to learn than do strategies. I can sit with a student for ten minutes and teach him 10 great SAT strategies. However, without the tactics necessary to enact those strategies, a student will not be able to carry out his or her plans (even if he or she has the right plans!).

On the SAT, "tactics" are composed of vocabulary knowledge, mathematical functions and properties, grammatical principles, and comprehensive action-plans. If you do not have your tactics down, you'll never be able to use the strategies that are so essential for a great score on the SAT.

As I said earlier, tactics take much longer to learn than strategies do. When I get hired for last minute jobs (1-2 weeks until the SAT) I teach only strategies to my students, since I know that they don't have enough time to learn tactics, and that strategies will do more to raise their scores in the limited time that they have to prepare.

If you have the luxury of starting your preparation early, then use that luxury! Spend time tightening up your fundamentals before you move on to more SAT-specific material.

Many of my students come to me with relatively weak vocabularies. If a student with a bad vocabulary has two weeks before the test, I don't spend 5 seconds on the topic because **you cannot improve your vocabulary by any significant margin in 2 weeks.** However, you can improve it by hundreds, or even thousands, of words if given enough time.

Going back to the chess analogy: imagine a player who read chess books all day, but had never actually played a game (i.e. knew all the strategies but had never used the tactics). He might be better than your average Joe, but he's not going to be spectacular. On the other hand, imagine someone who had never read a book, but who had played 3,500 games. He'll be absolutely incredible, simply because he knows what to do in a situation-by-situation basis. The same goes for the SAT – if you can get your child to sit down and learn vocabulary words, key grammar facts, mathematical procedures, and reading comprehension tricks, he or she will be far, far more able to learn proper SAT strategy when the time comes.

This whole tip boils down to two key points:

- 1. Start preparing for the SAT as soon as imaginably possible.** The longer you have to prepare for the exam, the better you'll do. There are a thousand reasons why starting earlier is better than starting later, but the number one reason is this: you can't learn the necessary SAT tactics unless you give yourself the time to do so.
- 2. When you start your program, focus on tactics first, and move to strategies only when you're comfortable with your tactics.** It doesn't matter how good you are at navigating the Math portion of the SAT if you have no idea how to solve a percentage problem or read a graph. These skills must come first – then, once they're solid, they can have strategy applied on top of them.

This is where the opening chapters of those massive SAT books come in handy – the endless math formulas, grammatical rules, and vocab lists might be tedious, but they're also extremely important. Put your child on a program and make sure that he or she learns these skills as early as possible, and you'll be giving him/her a massive leg up on the competition.

7. Administering frequent practice tests is essential.

Practice makes perfect. The SAT is far from an exception to this rule. If you want your child to get a better score, you should have him or her taking as many full-length, timed exams as possible.

Why are SAT practice tests so important?

- 1. Mental endurance.** If your child has never practiced for more than an hour at a time, how do you expect him/her to perform on the actual SAT? Your brain is an adaptive mechanism - it gets good at what you ask it to do frequently. So if you practice for an hour at a time, your brain will get really good at taking the SAT for an hour at a time. What happens when that hour is up? You're going to start fading. You **NEED** to teach your child's brain to stand up to the full test.
- 2. Familiarity.** Your level of confidence and familiarity with the SAT are two of the most important influencing factors on your score. I would argue that they might be **the** most important factors (no math trick or SAT grammar strategy is going to make more of a difference). If your child has taken the test ten times and his/her peers have only taken it once, who do you think is going to be less stressed and more comfortable?
- 3. Timing.** A lot of students practice without timing themselves. This is an enormous problem. If you get every SAT problem right, but it takes you 4 minutes a question, you're going to bomb. Taking full-length practice exams gives you a better idea of pacing and allows you to practice effectively, taking into account both the quality and the speed of your work.
- 4. Tracking.** You can't make a good plan for yourself unless you know how you're performing. Stick with a solid program and track your progress frequently, and you'll know where you need to improve. When you know where you need to improve, you'll also know where you need to focus your attention. Getting exact scores and tracking where you need to focus most is absolutely essential.
- 5. Skill Acquisition.** All of the above benefits leave out the fact that you're going to be doing 3.5 hours of pure, unadulterated SAT practice. Getting this much practice will make you better at all three sections of the test. However, this ***doesn't happen automatically.***

The key to gaining the most from each SAT practice exam is in evaluating your exams question-by-question after you take them. Have your child get the official, free SAT diagnostic exam from the College Board by visiting the following link:

<http://sat.collegeboard.org/practice/sat-practice-test>

Have him take the entire test under the proper conditions and grade the test using the rubric and directions provided by The College Board. But don't stop there. Also have him circle every question that he got wrong, star every question that he thought was weird, and mark every question that he found confusing with a question mark (make sure these markings happen during the test when the questions are still fresh on his mind).

Then, once your child has marked his test, have him go through his results question-by-question to figure out what he got wrong and why. This is the key to proper learning. If he experiences a problem, gets it wrong, examines it, looks at the right answer, and views an explanation, he will learn WAY more than he would by simply trying the problem and getting it wrong.

If your child doesn't evaluate his wrong answers and explain them to himself, he is missing a HUGE opportunity for improvement.

Hopefully I've made the importance of practice tests clear. The second step is to understand **how to take practice tests** so that your child can get the most out of each one that he takes.

Know Your Options

I cannot overemphasize the importance of practicing the test under real conditions. If your child is used to taking the exam while he has the TV on in the background, is sending texts, and is listening to MP3s, he's not going to get an actual idea of what the real testing experience is like. While there are lots of different way that students can take the test under real conditions, the best way is always to simply create those conditions in the comfort and convenience of your own home. Here's how:

- A) No Electronic Distractions.** Students aren't allowed to use their cellular phones, ipods, etc. on the real test. When it comes to taking practice exams, students should be in tomb-like silence, and should have all of their electronics turned off completely.
- B) It MUST be timed.** When I work with my students, the second half of each program is done on a timed basis. Proper SAT performance is a combination of **accuracy and speed**. If you get every question you attempt right, but you only solve ½ the questions before the clock runs out, you're still going to do terribly. Make sure your child is using an accurate and easily readable time piece during each section so that he has an idea of precisely how quickly he needs to move and how he is performing.
- C) Paper is best.** While there are lots of electronic testing options for the SAT, when it comes to getting diagnostic results, paper-based exams are the most realistic and accurate. The SAT is on paper, so when trying to get a realistic score assessment, you need to do so on paper as well. Most SAT books have scoring guidelines and answer grids. The best book for administering diagnostic exams is, without a doubt, the College Board SAT Guide, since it's made by the makers of the exam and will therefore be based on the most realistic grading standards.
- D) It must not be broken up.** Students get two 5-minute breaks during the SAT. Other than that, they need to take the entire exam straight through. It's hours and hours of grueling mental gymnastics. You aren't going to get a realistic score if you take 1 hour here and 1 hour there. The whole test needs to be taken at once to get a realistic idea of how you're scoring.
- E) No distractions of any kind.** I need to repeat this point because it is so important. When your child is taking a practice diagnostic, the door should be locked, the phones should be off, you should limit noise in the household, etc. Please don't allow outside distractions to affect your child's performance.

Administered Exams: Many test-prep companies offer proctored exams at their own facilities. I recommend taking advantage of these activities if they're free, but remember one thing: these companies purposely make their tests harder to encourage you to sign up for their test-prep programs (lower scores equal scared parents). Buyer beware. But proctored exams are fantastic practice.

8. All Practice is Not Created Equal.

As Vince Lombardi, legendary NFL football coach, once said: “Practice doesn’t make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect.” While this might sound funny, it’s actually a profound, and completely accurate, analysis.

My favorite analogy regarding the importance of perfect practice is this: imagine that you pick up a guitar, and someone shows you how to play the solo to “Born Free.” Every single day, you play that solo for 5 hours straight, repeating it over and over again. Finally, ten years later, someone evaluates your guitar skills. How good will you be? You’ll be really good **at playing the Born Free solo, and have no idea how to do anything else.**

While this is an extreme example, it’s really not too far off-base. Practicing isn’t enough – you need to practice the right things if you’re going to make any major headway. Simply sitting down with an SAT book and getting to work isn’t that constructive. Following are the three general rules to follow to make sure that your child is getting the most out of her time and effort:

- A) Feedback is essential for learning.** Imagine that you were trying to learn archery, but that you could never see where your arrows hit. Would you ever get better? Probably not. You need to get feedback for your efforts in order to analyze their efficacy. Make sure that your child reviews all of her work after she finishes problems, seeing what she got right and wrong, what confused her, what she’s getting better at, and why. If she practices problems without evaluating her actual performance, much of the potential value of her practice is going to be lost.
- B) Always focus on weaknesses.** I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: students of the SAT should be spending their time **exclusively** on the areas that they’re weakest in. If your child has a 750 in Math and a 750 in Writing but a 500 in Critical Reading, every single minute of her studies should be spent on Critical Reading – no exceptions. Improvement requires challenging work. While practicing things that you’re good at might feel good, it won’t help you to get any better (much like the guitarist who, instead of practicing scales, keeps going back to the Born Free solo again and again). This is why diagnostic exams are so important. If they aren’t administered frequently, your child won’t have an accurate idea of where her biggest weaknesses currently are.
- C) Have a goal in mind for each practice session.** You know by now that I’m obsessively goal-oriented. In my personal life, I strive to create and live up to SMART goals no matter what I do, both professionally and personally. SMART goals aren’t only essential for designing an SAT program – they’re also essential for each study session that your child partakes in. Setting something as simple as: “I will have a better understanding of percentages and fractions, and will get 8 problems right in a row before I stop practicing” will lead to faster and more focused progress, and will also do wonders for your child’s self esteem.

Ask your child to combine these three elements into each practice session and watch what happens to her progress!

9. Reading Skills and Vocabulary are Universal – Implant Good Habits Early.

The Critical Reading section of the SAT is notoriously difficult. There's an easy explanation for this: it tests an ability that most high school students have never learned, practiced, or seen as particularly valuable: comprehensive reading.

Most high schools test **content**, not **meaning**. I'm always shocked, and a bit depressed, when I look at my students' English and history assignments and see the types of questions that they're asked:

What date did this happen on?

How many times did character X do this in book Y?

What was the name of this event that happened in some other period?

I hate rote learning, and in the new age of computer databases and easily-accessible knowledge, it's appalling to think that so many educators are focusing on fact-memorization rather than critical thinking. I'd much rather see students learn **how to think about information** than to spend their time implanting 1/1,000,000,000th of the world's available knowledge into their brains. But that's a topic for another article. . .

Here's the thing: the SAT does not test content. It tests meaning. The SAT will never ask questions such as, "how many hats was the character on line 14 wearing?" or "on what line did the author mention the tuba competition?" These are facts, and anyone can find them. The SAT wants to test a student's ability to think critically. The questions asked on the SAT look more like this:

"Why might the author have mentioned the migratory patterns of birds before discussing Al Capone's criminal history?"

"What was the main purpose of lines 3-5 in the context of the rest of the passage?"

You can't memorize or Google search these answers – you need to come up with them in your own head. Thinking critically is an essential skill for the SAT, and there's something you can do right away to make sure that your child gets a better score on the Critical Reading section: make him practice **SAT Critical Reading!** At the end of the day, the SAT Critical Reading section is its own beast. Students are perplexed by this exam because they've never seen anything quite like it before.

A lot of people think that reading The New York Times every day will help to improve SAT Reading scores. If a child has been routinely challenging material her entire life, I can guarantee that she'll get a higher score on the Critical Reading section than will someone who hasn't been reading. But if you have a limited amount of time to study for your exam, reading non-relevant material won't be much help.

SAT Critical Reading questions test your SAT Critical Reading skills. If you want to get good at SAT Critical Reading, do a lot of SAT Critical Reading! Try to get your child working on at least 4 sections of Critical Reading a week, and keep this pace up until the exam. When she finishes a section, have her look at the answers, then figure out why she got her wrong answers wrong and ponder the strategies she needs to improve for the next time around. If she practices,

gets feedback, practices, gets feedback, etc. in a loop, she'll improve her score in no time flat. But the process does take time, so get her started EARLY! The more practice she gets, the better she'll do.

What About Vocabulary?

SAT Vocabulary words need to be studied constantly and consistently up until test day. The vocabulary problems on the SAT, which are embedded in "sentence completion" problems, are 1,000X easier when your child has the right vocabulary up his sleeve.

There are three points you need to understand about SAT vocabulary:

- 1. Consistency is better than quantity.** Words are learned through consistent repetition, study, and use. Have your child spend 10-15 minutes a day, EVERY day, studying vocabulary. If words aren't studied every day, they'll never be remembered.
- 2. Start early.** Students can easily learn 10 words a day if they use the right methods. If you give yourself 2 weeks, you'll learn 140 words...which won't make much of a dent. If you can learn 1,000-2,000 words, you'll be much better off.

You can find a full, free list of the 1,000 most common SAT Vocabulary words by going to this link:

<http://www.testpreppauthority.com/sat-words-and-vocabulary>

- 3. Study the right way.** Flashcards are almost completely useless when it comes to memorizing words. If you want your child to pick up words and memorize them permanently, you need to use multi-sensory methods that create as many associations as possible in his brain.

We've developed a product specifically for this purpose:

<http://www.VividVocab.com>

Vivid Vocab is a SAT Vocabulary mnemonic software which uses images, audio, and mnemonic stories and associations to create lasting, permanent associations of the most common SAT vocabulary words. The software costs only \$19.95/month, and you can sign up for a free trial by visiting the link above.

GOOD LUCK WITH YOUR STUDIES!

All of us at Test Prep Authority wish you the best as you prepare for the SAT. If you ever need anything whatsoever, don't hesitate to visit our website at www.TestPrepAuthority.com and get in touch. We're always happy to speak with our visitors, offer our advice, and build on new features at our users' request!

Have a great day, and we'll be rooting for you!

-Anthony-James Green and the Test Prep Authority Team

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