

# Strategies for the ACT and SAT



The SAT and ACT are the most often used exams for college admissions in the US, and given that they are standardized, they must be taken under strict time constraints. Students can struggle with the limited amount of time per question, leaving points on the table when they're unable to finish certain sections. Simple pacing strategies, however, can help students improve their test performance and overall scores.

The SAT and ACT, rather than strictly measuring aptitude or knowledge, are essentially set up to also gauge how well students perform under pressure and implement test-taking strategies. Each section on both exams has its own strict time limits that are enforced by the proctoring team during the exam. The time limits ensure that the testing experience is universal and that

no student receives an unfair advantage (although some students may qualify for extended time

## **Understanding Test Format and Timing**

If we step back for a minute, there are three essential parts of college entrance exam test prep: content knowledge, test strategy, and time management. Although it may seem the most challenging, time management actually is the single easiest piece of the test prep puzzle to prepare for because you just need to keep pace with the required amount of time to complete each section of the test (ideally with a few minutes to spare to review the questions you didn't know as well or double check the answers that were bubbled.)

But first, it is beneficial to firmly know the format and procedure of the exams you are planning to take even before worrying about the pacing. The number of questions per section never changes, so it's helpful to know when pacing that you will always encounter a set number of questions.

**The SAT is broken down as follows:**

- ❖ Evidence-Based Reading (52 multiple-choice questions, 65 minutes to complete)
- ❖ Writing and Language (44 multiple-choice questions, 25 minutes to complete)
- ❖ Math – No Calculator (15 multiple-choice questions and five grid-in questions, 25 minutes to complete)
- ❖ Math – With Calculator (30 multiple-choice questions and 8 grid-in questions, 55 minutes to complete)
- ❖ Optional SAT essay (last section, 50 minutes to complete)

The ACT format is a bit more straightforward:

- ❖ English (75 questions in 45 minutes)
- ❖ Math (60 questions in 60 minutes)
- ❖ Reading (40 questions in 35 minutes)
- ❖ Science (40 questions in 35 minutes)
- ❖ Optional Writing (1 Essay in 40 minutes)

### **Pacing for Reading Passages**

Despite seeming intimidating at first, the more you practice and prepare for it, the easier it will become to take the exam in a set amount of time. For example, there are 5 passages on the reading section of the

SAT that are each between 500-750 words and 52 questions, all to be read and answered in 65 minutes. This implies that you will have 10-12 questions associated with each passage and should allow approximately 12 minutes for each passage. Ideally, however, you should spend eight minutes on each passage, leaving yourself three minutes to review at the end. After two passages, check the time. You should have just about 20 minutes remaining if you're staying on track.

[For SAT Writing on the other hand, a slightly different strategy may be better](#), whereby you answer questions while you're reading. Passages and questions are arranged alongside so it's easy to complete each question as you arrive to it in the text. Reading the passage first and then returning to answer questions is a waste of time in this case.

The reading and English section on the ACT will require similar strategies as the SAT, but it will be extremely crucial to pay attention to the timing on the ACT considering that the pacing is even more rigorous due to greater number of questions (but maybe slightly less difficult) and less time.

## **Pacing for Math**

Pacing is slightly different on the math sections of the SAT due to their organization. In general, questions on both calculator and non-calculator sections are ordered by difficulty with the most difficult questions coming at the end of the section. Grid-in questions also come at the end of the section and are also generally ordered by difficulty. Keep in mind that your individual strengths will ultimately decide which questions are most difficult for you. You might be pleasantly surprised to find that the questions at the end of the test are not as challenging as you'd feared. Nonetheless, it's a good idea to assume that the questions toward the end of the test will take you longer to complete than the questions at the beginning.

Similarly, the ACT Math section is also structured in order of difficulty (no grid-ins) with more rigorous pacing. The science section on the ACT is unique and may require its own pacing methodology depending on a student's analytical skills.

## **When to Check the Clock**

A good rule of thumb is to check the time, but not so frequently as to take time away from the exam and in

turn cause anxiety The more time remaining implies there's more time to review, but you should also adjust if you feel you are pacing too fast or too slow. Practice your skim-reading skills and mark the text as you go to stay engaged and to highlight important areas like a thesis or supporting evidence.

It's important when sitting for the ACT or SAT to take breaks seriously and use the restroom, drink some water, and eat a quick, nutritious snack. If you find yourself getting anxious over time, try closing your eyes and taking a few deep breaths. Don't worry about how you look — everyone around you is too busy focusing on their own tests to notice what you're doing. Calm yourself and prepare to shift your thinking by clearing your head. Try rolling your shoulders or arching and releasing your back to relieve tension. All this will help you maintain your endurance through the exam and get back on pace if you find yourself slowing down or going too fast.

### Some other general pacing rules to remember:

- ❖ Try to conserve time at the beginning since the questions at the end of the sections will likely take

longer (due to increasing difficulty in the case of math and also fatigue.)

- ❖ Use the two-passes strategy to make sure you answer every question that you find easy. This means skipping problems that seem very difficult and returning to them after you've completed all of the questions you find easier.
- ❖ Neither the SAT or ACT penalizes you for guessing, so it's in your best interest to answer all of the questions even if you have to guess on some.
- ❖ Don't obsess over time. Keeping an eye on the clock can help keep you on track with your pacing, but constantly figuring out how many minutes you have left per problem also eats away at that valuable time.

Again, test prep is a combination of knowledge, strategy, and time management. By implementing these pacing strategies, students can improve their performance on the SAT or ACT – putting them in a good position to obtain their goal score and ultimately admission to their top-choice universities.

Still struggling with your SAT or ACT strategy? The LF Educational Consulting can work with you to help you determine which test is the best fit for your abilities, areas of strengths and weaknesses, and develop a test prep plan that will help you reach your goal score. For more information on LF Educational Consulting