



EducationUSA Advisor

Jenika Heim

ottawa@educationusa.info

canada.usembassy.gov/

educationusacanada



20 Tips on Studying for the SAT and ACT

These are some tips that will guide you from choosing your test all the way until test day.

- 1. Take full-length practice tests.** Use the exact timing of the SAT and ACT, with timed breaks. Try to take each test with a group, if possible, to make the exam more test-like. Taking the actual tests will give you a baseline score and a great idea on which test you liked better, and which one you performed better on.
- 2. Review your practice tests.** Use percentiles to determine your success on each test section and how you did on the test overall. Then, review the questions thoroughly. When you see the questions you got wrong, patterns will emerge that will help you focus your studying. For example, in the Math section, you might find that every question you got wrong had multiple figures involved. Additionally, review the questions you got right. Do this to build your confidence and find the patterns of question types you get right over and over again.
- 3. Decision Time: Either or both?** Use your practice test results and your personal sense of which test feels right to decide whether to take the SAT or the ACT. If you really can't decide, that is okay, you can take both! Many students study for and take both exams, and you can aim to do this as well.
- 4. Registration:** the most important step! Once you have decided which test(s) you are going to take, get online and register right away! The locations and test dates in Canada are limited, especially for the ACT. Register for the SAT at collegeboard.org and the ACT at actstudent.org.
- 5. Make a Study Plan.** Once you know your test date, then you can solidify your study plan. You should begin about three months before your test day, that way you can study a little bit every day without feeling overwhelmed with the additional workload. Plan to study 15 minutes every day up until your test, with longer timed sessions planned 1-2 times per week.
- 6. Ask yourself and your parents these 3 questions to determine your Method of Study.** How self-motivated am I? What is my score goal? How much money can we invest in taking these tests?

Register for your test

SAT: collegeboard.org

ACT: actstudent.org

Study Tools

College Search: collegeboard.org

Free SAT study: khanacademy.org/sat

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7. **A little help with “What is my score goal?”** To determine your score goal, go online and look up the ideal test score range needed to get into your university of choice. Collegeboard.org has a very helpful college search engine which holds all the score information. You can also go to each university’s admissions page. Your goal score should be in the range of your goal university.

8. Methods of study

a. **Self-Study:** If you are highly motivated, and will stick to your Study Plan, then there are many self-study tools that you can use (and many of them are free!). [Khanacademy.org/sat](https://www.khanacademy.org/sat) offers free SAT practice and both the Collegeboard and ACT websites have free practice tests, study tools, and tips of the day. Use test prep books from your library or book store. If you are willing to pay for a plan, many test prep companies offer online only, self-study courses, which are usually less expensive than teacher-led classes. Self-study is the least expensive option.

b. **Classes:** If you are more motivated by others, a class is a great option. If you live in a larger city, you will most likely be able to find a course in your area. Ask your Guidance Counselor for suggestions. Larger test prep companies offer online courses with a teacher. This can be a good option for a student who is self-motivated, but responds well to classroom structure and teacher support. This is the moderately priced option.

c. **Tutor:** A tutor is the most expensive option, but you will typically see the biggest score improvement because of the one-on-one interaction. If you are a large ways off your score goal, but you are motivated to make it happen, a tutor may be a good option to help get you into your dream school. Word of mouth is the best way to find a great tutor. Ask your Guidance Counselor and other students who you know are planning to study in the U.S. to find a great tutor in your area.

9. **Study materials.** When practicing at home, use the same materials you will on test day, so that you get comfortable with them. Use a #2 pencil and an approved calculator. Go to the test-maker’s websites to make sure your calculator is on the list. Basically, your graphing calculator is good, and anything that resembles a phone or tablet is bad. You also can’t use anything that takes “paper tape,” but I digress...

10. **Get a study buddy.** You know how you are more likely to go to the gym when your friend is already there waiting to meet you? It is the same with studying! Pair up with a friend who will keep you motivated to stay on track with your Study Plan. During your study time together, you will also benefit from talking out and teaching each other difficult problems.

11. **Studying vs. timed practice.** I mentioned this earlier when talking about making your study plan. Studying is learning new methods and practicing it on the material. You can do this slowly and through repetition to gain confidence. Once you are feeling good about a particular problem type or subject, take a full timed section (for example, 25 minutes for the SAT). This will help you practice the timing of your new technique. Make sure to review your right and wrong answers!

12. **Essay Practice.** Both the SAT and ACT have an essay section, which you should also practice. If you are doing self-study, make sure you identify an adult who understands the demands of these exams to review your essay for you. The most important thing to remember for any persuasive essay is to write a thesis statement that answers the question in the prompt. You should have an intro paragraph with a thesis, 3 body paragraphs with specific supporting examples, and a conclusion.

13. **Don't spend time memorizing vocabulary.** The ACT doesn't test vocabulary, so this can be a good option if this is something you struggle with. The SAT does test vocabulary in the Reading Comprehension section, but don't spend hours memorizing thousands of words. Rather, take time to learn word roots so that you can pull apart tough vocabulary. This skill will not only help you on the SAT and ACT, but also in general reading comprehension.
14. **Make Reading Comprehension into a puzzle.** Reading sections on tests are never very interesting, so you need to work hard to stay engaged. Use your pencil to mark the passage as you read to identify key themes and the author's tone. Physically engaging with the passage will help keep your brain on task, and you will have a better sense of the answers when you get to the questions.
15. **Practice Math word problems and problem-solving.** Both the SAT and ACT love math problems with multiple steps to solve. Usually the math in the problems isn't that difficult, rather it is the number of steps to get to the result which usually causes problems. Take the time to understand what the problem is asking you before proceeding. Time spent on global understanding and approaching the problem will help you gain more points on the test!
16. **For Writing multiple choice, practice makes perfect.** The SAT and ACT only test a handful of grammar rules, most of which you should already be familiar with. Practicing things like subject-verb agreement and correcting run-on sentences will gain you a lot of test day points!
17. **Do you like graphs and charts?** Then ACT Science is for you. The ACT Science section tends to be the most confusing for students. This is because it tests reading comprehension in a science context and not science knowledge. Don't let the word Science scare you, if it is typically not your subject. If you are great at data interpretation, you will do very well on this section. If you prefer to avoid data analysis, then the SAT is a better test option for you.
18. **A couple test day tips.** If you followed your Study Plan, go in to the test confidently knowing that you will do your best on each section. If you get tired or stressed during the exam, allow yourself to take a 15 second break to close your eyes, take deep breaths, and re-center.
19. **Trust yourself.** Don't second guess yourself. If you are down to two answer choices, your first instinct is usually right.
20. **You can take the test more than once.** One thing that should help you relax is to know you can take these tests more than once, if you need to. Universities will look at a "Super Score," or the best that you did on each section. For example, let's say you did really well on Reading and Science the first time you took the ACT, but you bombed the Math. So, the second time your Math score increases a bunch, your Reading and Science drop slightly, and writing English/Writing scores stay the same. Schools will consider your best Math, Reading, and Science scores from the two tests you took.