

What Does the SAT Look Like?

Sections of the SAT	Type of Questions	No. of Questions	Time Allotted
Critical Reading	Sentence completion	19	
	Passage-based reading	48	
	<i>Total critical reading questions</i>	67	70 minutes (two 25-minute test sections and one 20-minute test section)
Writing	Identifying sentence errors	18	
	Improving sentences	25	
	Improving paragraphs	6	
	Essay writing	1 essay	25 minutes
	<i>Total writing questions</i>	49 + Essay	60 minutes (two 25-minute test sections and one 10-minute test section)
Mathematics	Multiple choice	44	
	Student-produced response (grid-ins)	10	
	<i>Total math questions</i>	54	70 minutes (two 25-minute test sections and one 20-minute test section)

The SAT also includes a variable section on critical reading, writing, or mathematics for which 25 minutes is allotted.

What Is the PSAT/NMSQT?

Practice may not make perfect, but it definitely helps. That is why taking the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT) is a student's best chance for realistic SAT practice. It includes questions like those on the SAT—covering critical reading, writing, and mathematics—but at a level appropriate for juniors in high school. At 2 hours and 10 minutes, the PSAT/NMSQT is shorter than the SAT. The SAT lasts 3 hours and 45 minutes.

Share the table with your students. It gives the number and type of questions with the time allotted for each section of the PSAT/NMSQT.

What Does the PSAT/NMSQT Look Like?

Section	No. of Questions	Time Allotted
Critical Reading (multiple-choice questions)		
Sentence completion	13	
Passage-based reading	35	
<i>Total critical reading questions</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>50 minutes (two 25-minute test sections)</i>
Writing (multiple-choice questions)		
Identifying sentence errors	14	
Improving sentences	20	
Improving paragraphs	5	
<i>Total writing questions</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>30 minutes (one test section)</i>
Mathematics		
Multiple choice	28	
Student-produced response (grid-ins)	10	
<i>Total math questions</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>50 minutes (two 25-minute test sections)</i>

Approaches to Taking the SAT

Before the Test

- Learn the directions for all eight types of questions.
- Know what to expect from the test: the types of questions, the number of questions, and their order on the test.
- Learn approaches to each of the eight types of test questions.

During the Test

- Read and think carefully.
- Use your test booklet as scratch paper, and mark questions to go back to.
- Check your answer sheet regularly to make sure you are in the right place.
- Work at an even, steady pace, but keep moving.
- Keep in mind that most questions within a section range from easy to hard, except for Passage-based Reading questions and Improving Paragraphs.
- Keep track of time during the test.
- Know which questions are best for you.
- Skip questions if you can't answer them without spending a lot of time.
- Answer the easy ones first.
- Make an educated guess when you can eliminate at least one choice.
- Eliminate all the choices that you know are wrong, and make an educated guess from the remaining ones.
- Answer the question asked.
- Read all the answers to a critical reading or writing question before choosing your answer.
- Check that your answer makes sense.
- Check your work in the mathematics section if you have time.
- Mark each question that you *don't* answer so that you can easily find it again.
- In math, make drawings to help you figure out word problems.

Making Educated Guesses

Making educated guesses on the SAT is a good idea if you have an effective approach: eliminate all the answer choices that you know are incorrect and then make an educated guess from the remaining choices.

Each correct answer on the SAT is worth one point. To correct for random guessing, $\frac{1}{4}$ of a point is subtracted for each incorrect answer to a multiple-choice question. Because of this correction for guessing, random guessing probably won't improve your score. However, if you can eliminate one or more choices as incorrect, you improve your chances of making an educated guess that may be the right answer from the remaining choices. The more incorrect choices you can eliminate, the better your chance of making an educated guess that will prove to be the right answer. Because the mathematics grid-in questions (also called "student-produced response questions") are not multiple-choice, there is no deduction for a wrong answer. So you should make educated guesses on these if you think your answer may be correct.

Make an educated guess only after you've tried your best to answer the question. Eliminate choices you know are incorrect. Cross them out in your test booklet so that you can clearly see which choices remain. If you cannot eliminate one or more choices, you're not really making an educated guess, so this approach is probably not to your advantage.

Pacing and Timing

Pacing is important because each question on the test takes a certain amount of time to read and answer. The SAT is a timed test, so you need to pace yourself.

Good test-takers develop a sense of timing to help them complete the test. The goal is to spend time on the questions that you are most likely to answer correctly and leave some time for review at the end of the testing period.

Recommendations for Pacing

Following are some basic pacing recommendations that will help ensure that you don't lose time on the SAT and that you'll have time to consider all the questions you have the ability to answer:

Keep moving. Don't spend so much time puzzling out hard questions that you lose the time to find and answer the easier ones. Work on less time-consuming questions before moving on to more time-consuming ones. Remember to mark the questions as you work on them, especially the ones you want to go back to. Also, cross out choices you can eliminate as you move through the test. This will save time when you return to those questions.

Be aware that questions are ordered by difficulty level. The questions on the SAT (and the PSAT/NMSQT) are organized from easy to hard (except for passage-based reading questions and improving paragraphs). This means that within a group of questions, for example, the easier ones come first and the questions get more difficult as you move along. If you find that the questions of one type are getting too difficult, quickly read through the rest of the questions in that group to see if there are others you can answer. Then go on to the next group of questions in that section. (Again, this does not apply to passage-based reading questions and improving paragraphs; a difficult critical reading question might be followed by an easier one.)

Spend time on the questions that you have the best chance of getting right. Some question types take longer to answer than others. For example, passage-based reading questions take longer than sentence completion questions.

Keep track of time during the test. The SAT includes 10 sections (including a variable section) to be completed in 3 hours and 45 minutes. You should develop the habit of occasionally checking your progress through the test, so that you know when you are one-quarter of the way through the time allotted for a section, halfway through, and when you have five minutes left. If you finish a section before time is called, use the remaining time to check your answers and erase any stray marks on your answer sheet.

Know which questions are best for you. If you practice the different types of questions on the SAT beforehand, you will probably know which type is your best. You might want to begin with that type of question rather than at the beginning of

the section. If you do this, however, be sure to mark what you skipped and go back and do the questions you passed over.

Remember that all questions are worth the same. The score value for a correct answer is the same regardless of the type of question or the difficulty of the question. So go through an entire section, answering questions that you know or can answer quickly and skipping questions for which you know you will need more time. Be careful to mark the skipped questions in your test booklet and leave the circles on the answer sheet blank to avoid marking answers to the wrong questions.

Set up a schedule for progress through each test section. Know when you should be one-quarter of the way through and halfway through the section. Every now and then, check your progress against your schedule.

Note: Some questions take less time than others. So if you have 25 minutes to answer 25 questions, that does *not* necessarily work out to one minute per question. For example, if you take 10 minutes to answer 10 Sentence Completion questions, you are working too slowly. If, however, you take 10 minutes to read a passage and answer 10 questions on it, you are working at, or faster than, the speed you should be.

Begin to work as soon as the testing time begins. Keep your attention focused on the test. Don't daydream.

Don't ponder over alternatives on the first pass through a section. Answer questions you are sure of first; mark those questions you are unsure of in the test booklet so that you can easily locate them later. When you skip a question, be sure to mark your answers to later questions in the appropriate ovals on the answer sheet.

Go back and try the questions you skipped. Use a guessing strategy when appropriate.

In the last few minutes, check your answers. This will help you to avoid careless mistakes.

Check your answer sheet. Make sure that there are no stray marks and that all eraser marks are clean.

Answering Test Questions: What Would You Do?

Read each statement and circle T for true or F for false.

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|---|---|--|
| T | F | 1. Test questions should be answered in order, no matter how long it takes. |
| T | F | 2. You don't have to read the directions on the test. |
| T | F | 3. If there is time left after you finish, review your test answers. |
| T | F | 4. Even though there is a time limit on the test, it's okay to spend as much time as necessary on each question. |
| T | F | 5. When you're not sure of an answer, try to eliminate choices and then guess from the remaining choices. |
| T | F | 6. Read all the choices before answering multiple-choice questions. |
| T | F | 7. After answering each question, double-check that you have marked the answer you meant to mark on your answer sheet. |
| T | F | 8. You are in the testing room. The test supervisor has just explained about taking the test and asks, "Are there any questions?" You should not ask questions if no one else does. |
| T | F | 9. You realize that you marked the answer to question 25 opposite number 24 on your answer sheet. This means that you probably skipped an answer and you should go back to find where. |
| T | F | 10. It is a good idea to bring a calculator to the test, preferably one with which you are familiar. |
| T | F | 11. You should probably use a calculator on every math question. |

Answers to What Would You Do?

1. False You should answer test questions in the order they appear until you reach a question that you can't answer or aren't sure of. Leave that question blank and go on to questions that you can answer. If you have time, go back to the question you skipped. Spend your time on the questions that you are most likely to get right.
2. False It's important to be very sure that you understand all the directions on the test. Become familiar with the directions before the test.
3. True Use every available minute to review the test and to work on the questions you have the best chance of answering correctly.
4. False Pace yourself so you spend time on the questions that you have the best chance of getting right. Within each question type, the easier questions come first, except for passage-based reading questions. Some question types take longer to answer than others.
5. True If you can eliminate at least one choice, this is a good way to increase the chances of selecting the correct answer, even when you don't know the answer.
6. True Often, directions for multiple-choice questions tell you to pick the best answer. You have to read all the choices to be sure that you have picked the *best* answer.
7. True If you are not careful to mark the answer in the right place, the scoring machine will count your answer wrong even though you knew the right answer. Check often to be sure that you are answering the question that corresponds to the number you are marking on the answer sheet.
8. False Ask questions until you are sure you understand what you have to do on the test. The supervisor is responsible for explaining anything about the oral directions or the testing situation that is not clear to you.
9. True Otherwise, the answers that are in the wrong place will probably be scored as wrong. If you don't realize that this has happened until the end of the test, you should tell the test supervisor.
10. True It is a good idea to take a calculator that you are familiar with.
11. False All questions can be answered without a calculator.