

Chapter 1: Why Is Your Test Score So Low – And What You Can Do About It!

“The dream begins with a teacher who believes in you, who tugs and pushes, and leads you on to the next plateau, sometimes poking you with a sharp stick called truth.”

— Dan Rather

Let me know if this sounds familiar.

- You just got your PSAT score back... and you can't believe how low it is.
- You just took your first practice ACT... and you're shocked by the low numbers.
- You've been taking a test prep class... but your scores have hit a plateau.

Your immediate reaction is some variation of:

“But my average in school is (insert number here)!”

“But I'm in the A.P. math class!”

“But I take I.B. English!”

My students are often surprised when their SAT and ACT scores don't reflect their grades from high school.

Brace yourself. This might hurt a bit. Your GPA is irrelevant when it comes to the SAT and the ACT.

I'm going to say that again. **Your GPA is irrelevant when it comes to the SAT and the ACT.**

Now, I promise that this book is not all doom and gloom. Rather, my goal is to address the problem so we can find the solution! There is a light at the end of this tunnel.

Let's start by identifying the seven reasons for the discrepancy between your high school grades and your scores on standardized tests.

- Reason 1: Material You've Never Learned Before
- Reason 2: Material You've Learned... But Forgot
- Reason 3: Reading Comprehension Struggles
- Reason 4: Grade Inflation
- Reason 5: Not Thinking Like a Test Taker
- Reason 6: Test-Taking Muscle
- Reason 7: Equity and Access

Let's take a closer look at each.

Reason 1: Material You've Never Learned Before

To reiterate what I said in the Introduction: ***there is no perfect marriage between what you see in high school and what is fair game on the SAT and the ACT.***

In the Introduction, I mentioned how many of my students from a certain school have never learned about misplaced modifiers. My students from another high school have never seen the formula for exponential growth. In Chapter 4, I'll make the same point with margin of error. ***These are all topics that are fair game on the tests, but many of my students have never seen them before.***

Every state and school district in the country covers different topics of math and English. ***No high school class perfectly covers all of the topics you will encounter on the SAT and the ACT.***

This past spring, I was chatting with the mother of one of my sophomore students. She asked me if her daughter should take (fancy name) math class A or (fancy name) math class B in her upcoming junior year. More specifically, she asked me, "Which one would serve her better for the SAT?"

My answer was neither.

Don't pick a math class because you think it will teach you what you need for the SAT! Most of the material from your high school math class will not appear on the SAT. And only a tad more of it will appear on the ACT.

Don't believe me?

Leaf through your junior year math textbook. See how many of those topics overlap with what you'll see on an SAT question.

You'll be hard pressed to find more than a few. Five might be a stretch.

I was recently chatting with one of my students about her upcoming high school math test. I asked her, "Hannah, ballpark, what percent of material from your math class would you say comes up on the SAT?" She said about 15%.

She's not far off.

Now, please don't misinterpret me.

1. I'm not saying that the situation is hopeless! Again, let's diagnose the problem so that we can then move on to the solution.
2. I'm not trying to vilify high schools or teachers. I know many wonderful teachers who are excellent at their job. My mother is one of them. (Hi mom!)

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In fact, I don't blame high schools at all. It should not be the responsibility of a high school class to cover the material that is tested on the SAT or the ACT. *It should be the other way! These tests should mirror the material that students see in their everyday classwork.*

But unfortunately, they don't.

Even though both test companies say they do.

For example, this is what the College Board book says when explaining the answer to one of their sample grammar questions. I'm paraphrasing for copyright purposes, but the gist is as follows: "You're probably already familiar with the (such and such) grammar rule."

No, as a matter of fact, many of my students are not familiar with the such and such grammar rule!

A fun anecdote: a student once told me that her English teacher would circle punctuation mistakes in her essays and papers. For example, if she had confused the word *its* and *it's* or *your* and *you're*, the teacher would write things like "This is wrong", or "You need to proofread more". But here's the thing – this student didn't know the difference between those words! So she knew that she had made a mistake, but she didn't know how to correct it. (Shame on that teacher for not explaining those concepts to her, but I digress.)

So when College Board book says something like, "you probably already understand the concept of subject-verb agreement", the book is wrong! Many of my students have never seen that concept before. And if you're in that same camp of students who have never heard of that topic, that's ok! Keep reading to the end of this chapter.

Let's give the ACT a little love as well. The ACT is notorious for including many math topics that my students have never seen before. For example, the ACT often includes questions on how to multiply two matrices. (Because, you know, that's relevant in life.) However, many of my students have never seen that topic in their math class. Still, the explanation in the ACT book says something like this. Again, I'm paraphrasing for copyright purposes: "...and you might have a math textbook to help explain this example."

Well that's wonderful. But what if you're like my students who have never seen a matrix before? You're screwed. Now what?

Sorry, I'm being flippant. But this sort of language from the test makers infuriates me.

Just to lighten the mood for a moment, you know that scene in the finale of *Breaking Bad*...

(What's that? High school students don't watch Breaking Bad? Au contraire! It was actually one of my students who suggested that I should start watching it. And he was right. Good call, Joe! Anyhoo...)

...where Skylar looks at Walt and says, “If I have to hear you say one more time that you did this for your family!” She’s heard him sing that refrain over and over, and she can’t bear hearing it one more time.

That’s how I feel whenever the SAT and ACT claim that their tests reflect what students see in school. In the words of Dwight Schrute: **false**.

*(Yes, I switched to another TV show reference. Both shows are excellent!
Back to the point...)*

Last summer, a student’s father came to realize how false these sorts of statements were. After one of our lessons, he commented, “So in this environment of everyone-gets-a-trophy, I guess it’s a shock when the kid realizes how much material they don’t know.”

Bingo!



Now, some of you might now be thinking, “But surely, Daniel, you’re not talking about me.” Or for the parents reading this, “... that can’t be true for my Sally. She attends the such and such high school for gifted children.”

Brace yourself. Yes, I’m talking about you.

Or yes, I’m talking about Sally.

Tough love. I know. Stay with me.

Sally – I’m sure that you’re a wonderful human being. This doesn’t mean that you’re not smart. It doesn’t mean that you don’t have the potential to do well on these tests. This is in no way a personal attack on your character. That said, after 20 years of working with students, I’m confident of this: *your GPA has nothing to do with your SAT and ACT scores. The majority of material that you learn in high school will not appear on either of these tests.*

One more time for the folks in the back: **there is no perfect marriage between what students learn in high school and what is considered fair game on the SAT and the ACT.**

And that’s ok; you’re in the right place! This book is designed to help you bridge that gap.

Reason 2: Material You’ve Learned... But Forgot

To be fair, the SAT and ACT will include some material that you’ve seen before. However, it is usually material that you haven’t seen in years.

Often, when my students get stuck on an SAT or ACT math question, it’s not because they don’t understand the advanced 11th grade math topic that’s in play. Rather, it’s because

they've forgotten a much more fundamental concept. For example, a student recently told me that she knew how to simplify a derivative in her math class, but she still missed a practice SAT question because she'd forgotten how to divide fractions.

I see this sort of thing with my students constantly; they know the schmancy 11th grade topic, but they've forgotten the simpler (9th... 7th... 5th) grade topic that the question is testing.

And these simpler topics are the bread-and-butter of the test!

Reason 3: Reading Comprehension Struggles

About 10 years ago, I worked with a student who struggled mightily on the verbal sections. Still, she had a high GPA. I asked her, "Chloe..." (her name was not Chloe), "Chloe... when you read a book for school, give me a ballpark number... what percentage of it do feel like you understand? 80%? 50%?"

She told me – without sarcasm – that she had never read a book.

Yep. Just another honor roll student.

After my pulse started again, I asked her how she maintained her grades in her English class. She told me that she listened to the classroom discussions, took notes on what the teacher said, and found online summaries for whatever they were reading. That was enough to get by.

And now here she was, being asked to read complex college-level SAT reading passages.

And she didn't understand a word.

Chloe is not an anomaly. Your grades in English class are not a leading indicator of how you might score on your SAT and ACT verbal sections.

How do we combat that? We'll get there in future chapters!

Reason 4: Grade Inflation

Then there is grade inflation. Back in my day (wow, did I just say that??), it was not common for students to hold a GPA above a 90, and even less common for students to hold a GPA above a 95. These days, everyone has a high GPA.

In a recent press release, College Board said the following:

"While high school grades are an important reflection of students' work, the share of students graduating from high school with an A average has grown from 39% in 1998 to 55% in 2021."

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They even use this data point to market their test! In October of 2022, I saw a College Board ad pop up on my computer that said this:

“Most college freshmen were ‘A’ students in high school. Don’t miss the chance to stand out! (And then an advertisement to take the upcoming December SAT.)”

And they’re right! They know that the majority of students are applying to colleges with high GPAs. A high GPA does not help you stand out the way it once did.

A student recently told me how her GPA was calculated. Students in the I.B. or A.P. classes have their grades multiplied by a certain factor. So, students scoring in the high 70’s have their numbers bumped to the low 90’s. Students scoring in the low 80’s have their numbers bumped to the high 90’s, and so on.

As a result, some of my students, and their parents, have an inaccurate sense of their strengths and weaknesses. Their grades do not indicate how much they might be struggling with a certain topic.

Plus, there’s the partial credit factor. If students do just one thing wrong on a math test question in school, their teacher might still give them 9 out of 10 points. Alas, no luck with that on the SAT or the ACT! These tests will either reward you the full point for or they won’t. There is no partial credit for doing five out of six things correctly within a question.

And one parent even told me how her daughter had her grade bumped a bit for attendance, behavior, and “just being nice”. That’s all well and good, but no such luck with that on the SAT or the ACT.

A Brief Aside: There is No “Should”

Here’s an exchange I once had with a student after her second attempt at the SAT. She had seen some solid math jumps, but her verbal numbers had hit a plateau.

Me – How was the reading section for you?

Her – I feel like I should be scoring higher there.

Me – Good to know. Why do you say that? Do you feel that you understand the passages, and you’re then getting tripped up on the questions?

Her – ...no.

Me – Ok. Are you understanding the passages, but then struggling with the timing factor?

Her – ...no.

Me – Ok. So... why do you say that you should be scoring higher there?

Her – ... *I just feel like I should be!*

Says who?

And I promise, I liked this student! I'm lovingly picking on her here. Still, she thought her stellar high school grades meant she "should be" scoring higher on the SAT.

Nope.

Now, I'm not saying a high GPA means you *can't* score well on the SAT or the ACT. After all, that's why we're here! But don't think that having a certain GPA means you *should* have a certain standardized test score.

And the flip side of that is also true! *Just as a high GPA does not mean you should do well on the SAT or the ACT, a low GPA does not mean you shouldn't do well on the SAT or ACT!* There is little correlation between the two.

The strategies and methods outlined in this book can help students from any GPA improve their SAT and ACT scores. As I said in the Introduction, it's all up to you!

But your GPA is not a leading indicator of your potential to do well on these tests, nor is it a leading indicator of your potential to do poorly.

Reason 5: Not Thinking Like a Test Taker

Many of my students are not used to thinking the way that the SAT and ACT want them to think. Here's an example of the type of thinking that stumps many of my students.

Q. The number of bacteria on a lake will double every day. The bacteria will reach their final amount on the 30th day. On what day will the bacteria reach half of that final amount?

Take a minute to think about an answer before you keep reading.

*(I'll pause to let you work on it. Writing this chapter is making me hungry.
Should I make a panini or an omelet on my lunch break?)*

9 out of 10 times, my students will say that the answer is 15. Or more accurately, 5 out of 10 will say 15, and 4 out of 10 will say "I don't know."

Let's consider 15. That's logical, right? Half the time must mean half the number. So if we're hitting the final number on the 30th day, then the 15th day must be half of that amount. Right? RIGHT?!?

But that's linear thinking. If you're doubling something forever, that's not linear growth; that's exponential growth.

Let's use actual numbers to make this idea more concrete. Let's say that we're starting with 2 bacteria, because why not. (And don't worry, we won't do this 30 times. But let's pretend we're going to.)

On day 1, we have 2 bacteria. Doubling that...

On day 2, we have 4 bacteria. So far so good. Doubling that...

On day 3, we have 8 bacteria. Continuing to double...

Day 4 would be 16...

Day 5 would be 32...

And so on... and so on... and so on...

Notice – every day is *half* of the day that follows it. Day 1 was half of day 2. Day 2 was half of day 3. This will continue forever. Day 11 will be half of day 12... day 23 will be half of day 24... and so on...

...until day 29 is half of day 30. The answer is 29! If the bacteria doubles on day 29, you'll arrive at the final number for day 30. This means that day 29 is half the amount of day 30.

Aha! Now that you got it, let's do it again. Let's say you have the same situation: bacteria are doubling every day. But now, they're going to reach their final number on the 72nd day, because why not. On what day will the number of bacteria reach half of that amount?

(I'll pause to let you think about it... and I think we're going with an omelet.)

Just like before, it's doubling every day. This means that the 71st day will have half of the number of the 72nd day. The answer is 71. (And just like 15 being the trap answer on the first question, 36 would be the trap answer here. Half the time does not mean half the amount!)

Now, some of my students understand that first question instantly. They can immediately tell me that the answer is 29. But other students, most of my students in fact, absolutely need the explanation above.

And if you needed the explanation too, that's ok! But that illustrates the point: *there is a difference between high school-based computation and test-based critical thinking.*

Many of my students are not used to this.

(And now I'm back after eating. It was delicious.)

The Reason You Really Want Me to Include: "Just a Bad Test Taker"

At this point, most of you are (hopefully) with me. For the students, you're thinking, "You're right! They don't ask us questions like this in school." Or for the parents, you're thinking, "We're so glad we found this book for Charlie!" Hi Charlie. Glad to have you here.

But for some of you, I can still hear your gears grinding. You want to say something like, "Daniel, you're still not talking about Sally. She's a good student! *She's just a bad test taker.*"

Are there students with genuine learning struggles? Of course. I have had many students with learning disabilities, I.E.P.s and 504 plans. This chapter is not intended to diminish how those struggles can indeed impact a student's test-taking experience. (See Chapter 15 on testing with accommodations.)

Still, all too often, I hear the parents of my students say, "... she's very smart, she's just a bad test taker."

Sometimes. *But sometimes, she just doesn't know the material.*

And it is critical to be able to make that distinction.

Reason 6: Test-Taking Muscle

And there are many other factors in play as well, such as timing struggles (especially on the ACT), energy, stamina, focus, nerves, and test-taking anxiety.

These factors, along with countless others, help to explain why a student with a GPA of (insert high number x) might have a standardized test score of (insert low number y). It is not the exception to the rule; it happens for many students.

Reason 7: Equity and Access

And finally, there are issues of equity and access. Not every student has the same access to quality education. And certainly, even fewer students have access to elite test prep. Tutors and prep classes can be prohibitively expensive. Not every family can "afford a Daniel".

That's why I created this book! I wanted to remove that barrier. This book covers the same "secret sauce" that I teach my students.

And it's also why I created my YouTube channel, which is completely free and available to everyone!

My channel is called *Plan Your Work – Work Your Plan*. It is an invaluable resource for your test prep! (Side note – invaluable means extremely valuable. My students hate that one.)

The videos on my channel cover the same lessons that I teach my students. Here's how to incorporate those videos with this book.

How to Incorporate My YouTube Channel with this Book

My YouTube channel, and this book, are designed to bridge the gap between what is not taught in school and what these tests want you to know.

Whenever I mention a specific topic, I'll include a link to my YouTube video that covers that lesson. So if I mention a topic that you're not familiar with, go watch that video!

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For example, earlier in this chapter, I mentioned subject-verb agreement. If you don't know what that is, check it out here! This video contains my full lesson on that topic.



<https://tinyurl.com/DanFisch1>

Or for those on the ACT path, I mentioned earlier how the ACT might ask you to multiply two matrices. If you have no idea how to do that, go to this video! I cover that topic in full detail.



<https://tinyurl.com/DanFisch2>

This book will cover some essential test-taking strategies. From there, I'll cover *some* material. But when needed, I'll include the link to the video that covers that topic in more detail.

My YouTube channel is an outstanding supplement to this book. **More so – it is designed to bridge the gap between what is not taught in high school and what is fair game on the test.**

And that is how to overcome the discrepancy between your GPA and your standardized test scores.

Now, before we get to actual material, let's start with an overview of what you'll see on each test. Once you're more familiar with the format, we can get to a step-by-step plan.