

Introduction: The Truth About the SAT and ACT

“...yeah, we definitely don’t see this stuff in school.”

– Emily K. (my student during our grammar lesson last week)

The SAT and ACT Do Not Reflect What You’re Learning in School

College Board is not telling you the whole truth about the SAT. Here’s the truth: what you’re learning in high school has very little to do with what you’ll see on the SAT.

In their literature, College Board claims that the questions on the SAT reflect the same topics that students see in their high school classes.

This is simply not true.

The ACT is guilty of this as well. In their literature, the ACT folks say that their test measures what you “should have learned by the time you’ve completed high school”.

“Should have” is an interesting choice of words.

Alas, there is no perfect marriage between what students learn in high school and what is considered fair game on the SAT and the ACT.

Just to illustrate with a grammar example, both exams include questions on misplaced modifiers. That’s all well and good, but my students from High School A have never seen that topic before. On the math end, both tests include questions on the exponential growth formula. Again, that’s fine, but my students from High School B have never learned that formula. (Don’t worry, we’ll be hitting both of those topics in later chapters!)

I’m going to say it again.

There is no perfect marriage between what students learn in high school and what is considered fair game on the SAT and the ACT.

I don’t mean that these exams expect students to know things they have once learned and have since forgotten. ***I mean that these exams expect students to know things they have never learned in the first place.***

My students’ parents are often incredulous when I tell them this, but it’s true.

High School Alone Will Not Prepare Students for the SAT or ACT.

Here is a text I got from a student when she was accepted to college. This was in 2015, when the SAT was about to change from the 2400-scale to the 1600-scale. During that transition, College Board was touting how the material on the updated test would be more aligned with what students saw in their classwork.

She texted me the following:

“Thank you so much for all you have done for me. I truly hope that the upcoming format changes will be better for the next generation... or that they will at least reflect what we actually learn in high school.”

Sadly, that did not happen. Here is a message I got from another student several years later, regarding that updated version of the test:

“I don’t know how anyone knows this material without a tutor!”

And then there’s the quote I used at the top of this introduction. In the middle of a recent grammar lesson, a student of mine remarked:

“...yeah, we definitely don’t see this stuff in school.”

My students echo these sorts of sentiments every day. Their high school classes have not prepared them for what we see during our SAT and ACT prep.

Now just to be fair, I don’t think that College Board or the ACT companies are evil. In this book, I’ll give them credit when it’s due. And yes, these exams do include *some* topics that my students have seen before.

But when the test makers say that these exams are aligned with what students learn in school, it is simply not true.

Plus, the SAT is about to change from a paper test format to a digital test format.

Are you confused? Nervous? Downright scared?

Then this book is for you! I’m going to give you an exact step-by-step plan for how to prepare for the digital SAT, along with some great strategies for the ACT.

Bridging the Gap

Hello! My name is Daniel, and I have been a professional SAT and ACT tutor for over 20 years. Throughout this book, you'll find testimonials from many of my previous students and their parents. When you're feeling overwhelmed by your test prep, jump around to read some of these success stories. They'll help to keep you motivated.

I'll just include one of these stories here.

Back in 2019, I worked with a student... let's call her Jackie. At first, Jackie was struggling with our lessons. Not academically, but emotionally. More specifically, she was embarrassed to admit when she needed help.

At one of our early lessons, she was stumped on a math question. I asked her, "So what do we do next?" But she was embarrassed to say she didn't know. So we sat in silence for about 25 seconds.

Which was a very long time.

It was like an academic game of chicken. But neither of us budged. Her face got red. I saw tears forming in her eyes. She looked away so she could wipe them.

I put my pencil down and took a deep breath. I told her, "Jackie, it's ok that you don't know what to do. Truly. *But telling me that is one of the best things you can say during our lessons.* It's not just that it will save us time. It will help me understand which step you're confused about. That way, I can help you!" She dried her tears and agreed.

At subsequent lessons, she started to embrace the power of saying, "I don't know." This was a quantum leap forward! And much better than sitting in silence.

All told, her score improved from the 1000's up to 1210, and then up to 1320! When her scores came out, she texted me the following:

*"Thanks for everything over the past year. I think you're an amazing teacher.
Definitely the best I ever had."*

(I'm not crying, you're crying!)

The reason I tell this story – many of my students are hesitant to ask for help. Don't be embarrassed! Admitting that you need help is a crucial first step.

And that's where this book comes in. It is designed to help you bridge the gap between what is not taught in school and what is fair game on these tests.

What You Will Find in This Book

- A complete step-by-step guide for how to prepare for the digital SAT...
- ...along with steps for the ACT!
- Guidance on how to decide which test to focus on.
- A full overview of what you can expect to see on the digital SAT.
- A full analysis of every type of question you'll see on the digital SAT...
- ...along with some killer strategies for each!
- The best test-taking “tricks”, tips, and strategies on how to navigate the ACT.

What You Won't Find in This Book

- A coddling approach. I err on the side of tough love. I promise, everything I say stems from a genuine desire to help you achieve your best score. That said, some of what I say might surprise you. (See the next chapter for my speech that shocks all of my students' parents.)
- A false promise of what you can expect for your score increases. See Chapter 9 for a deep dive into what you can expect in terms of reasonable score increases.
- Complicated language or jargon. Yes, the SAT and ACT contain some advanced topics. Still, this book is very user-friendly! Even when addressing some of the most difficult topics, I'll be sure to use clear language that is easy to follow.
- A magical “do-nothing” plan to help your scores to go up. Test prep is about more than simple “tricks”. There is work involved! Or as a tutoring colleague of mine likes to say:

“It's a number 2 pencil, not a magic wand.”

(That joke is a tad dated now that you don't need a pencil for the digital test. But you get my point.)

My most successful students are those who take ownership over their testing journey. To quote another recent client:

“Daniel was a great tutor for my daughter. We achieved great results with his help. You get what you put in, and his book will get you started in the right direction!”

I agree! **You get what you put in.** I'll give you great strategies, a detailed road map, and specific step-by-step instructions. But I can't do the work for you. Your success is up to you.

Why Listen to Me?

Just a bit of background:

- For many years, I worked for Kaplan as an SAT and ACT teacher and tutor.
- After a few years, I started training their tutors.
- I then wrote curriculum for the Kaplan product development team.
- I was the writer and host of the cable program Mastering the SAT.
- I created the YouTube test prep channel *Plan Your Work – Work Your Plan*. (More on that in a bit.)

But what I'm most proud of is my tutoring company that I've been running for more than a decade. During that time, I've worked with over 1,000 students, helping them achieve their best scores on the SAT and the ACT exams.

And now I'm going to share that secret sauce with you! This book includes the same strategies that I teach my students, along with the same step-by-step plan that I have them follow.

So all of this to say, you're in good hands. Strap in, pour a cup of coffee (is that bad advice for a teenager?), and let's get to work.