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# SAT/ACT Strategy Guide

A Clear. Low-Stress Plan for Smarter  
Test Prep (Not Last-Minute Panic)



Preparing for the SAT or ACT does not need to be overwhelming, intense, or all-consuming. The most successful students are not the ones who cram—they are the ones who **prepare early, practice strategically, and understand the test itself.**

This guide explains what the SAT and ACT actually measure, how to choose the right test, and how early planning leads to better results with less stress—for students *and* parents.

By Dr. Nathan Hurwitz

University Professor ✧ Author ✧ Mentor ✧ Admissions Consultant



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### **Why This Guide Exists**

Many families delay thinking about testing until junior year—often because the process feels intimidating or unclear. Unfortunately, waiting creates unnecessary pressure, rushed prep, and anxiety.

Early, informed planning changes the experience completely:

- Students feel more confident and capable
- Parents feel calmer and better informed
- Prep becomes manageable instead of overwhelming
- Scores improve more naturally over time

**Test prep works best when it is paced, purposeful, and pressure-free**



### *A Note to Parents*

*from*

### *Nathan Hurwitz*

The college admissions process has changed considerably, often causing stress or overwhelming families. This guide is designed to help you understand the steps, support your student, and know what to expect as we work together. My primary goal is to reduce anxiety, clarify the process, and empower your student to confidently express their identity. I look forward to discussing your student and collaborating with you to support your family through this exciting transition.

*Nathan Hurwitz*

**If you are looking for “hands-on” support, contact me to schedule a consultation and take the next steps with confidence.**



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### **Part 1: SAT vs. ACT – What’s the Difference?**

Both the SAT and ACT are widely accepted by colleges, and neither is inherently better—it's all about finding the right fit.

**The SAT** focuses on:

- careful reading
- close analysis
- grammar
- writing conventions, algebra
- and problem-solving

with a slightly slower pace, allowing more time per question. Students who prefer to think through problems methodically tend to feel more comfortable with the SAT.

**The ACT**, on the other hand, emphasizes:

- speed and efficiency, with
- frequent topic switching,
- straightforward math and reading questions, and
- a science section centered on data interpretation

Students who work quickly and trust their instincts often favor the ACT.

**Important to remember:**

Choosing the right test is not about intelligence. It’s about how well a student processes information under timed conditions.



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### Part 2: Why a Diagnostic Test Comes First

Before any prep begins, students should take a **full diagnostic SAT and/or ACT**.

#### **A Diagnostic Test Helps:**

- Identify natural strengths and weaknesses
- Reveal timing patterns (rushing vs. running out of time)
- Clarify which test is a better fit
- Set realistic, individualized goals

**Parents need to remember:** A diagnostic is *not* a prediction.

**Students need to remember:** The diagnostic test just establishes a baseline. It's just information—no pressure, no judgment.



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### Part 3: When Should Prep Begin?

#### The Ideal Timeline

Most students benefit from beginning prep **in late 10th grade or early 11th grade.**

This timing allows:

- Skill-building without cramming
- Low weekly workload
- Confidence before official testing
- Time for retesting if needed

#### Starting Earlier Is Especially Helpful When:

- A student feels anxious about testing
- Foundational reading, grammar, or math skills need reinforcement
- A student is aiming for selective schools or scholarships

Waiting until junior spring risks turning prep into a sprint. Starting earlier makes it a walk.



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### Part 4: What Effective Test Prep Actually Involves

Strong test prep is **not** about tricks, shortcuts, or memorizing answers. Real improvement comes from understanding how the test works and building the skills it repeatedly measures.

#### Effective prep focuses on:

• **Understanding recurring question types** – The SAT and ACT reuse the same *types* of questions over and over. For example:

- SAT Reading often asks students to find evidence for a previous answer
- ACT English frequently tests comma usage and sentence clarity
- Math sections repeat certain algebra and word-problem patterns

When students recognize these patterns, questions feel familiar instead of intimidating.

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• **Strengthening core skills (reading, grammar, math)** - Higher scores come from stronger fundamentals, not clever guessing.

- Reading improves by learning how to track an author's argument
- Grammar improves by mastering a small set of key rules
- Math improves by understanding *why* formulas work, not just when to use them

This kind of prep helps students both on the test **and** in school.

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• **Learning how the test is structured** - Students perform better when they know what to expect.

- How many sections there are
- Which questions are worth the same number of points
- When to slow down—and when to move on



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Understanding structure reduces anxiety and prevents wasted time.

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• **Practicing pacing and endurance** – Many students know the material but struggle with timing.

- Some rush and make careless mistakes
- Others work carefully but run out of time

Practice teaches students how to:

- Allocate time wisely
  - Stay focused through longer sections
  - Maintain energy across the full test
- 

• **Reviewing mistakes to avoid repeating them** – Improvement happens *after* practice—not during it.

- Why was an answer wrong?
- Was it a misunderstanding, a timing issue, or a careless error?
- What strategy would prevent it next time?

Students who review mistakes thoughtfully improve far faster than those who simply do more problems.

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**The goal is not perfection—it's progress and confidence.**

When students understand the test and trust their preparation, scores rise naturally—and stress drops dramatically.



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### Part 5: How Much Prep is “Enough?”

There is **no single number of hours** that guarantees a specific score. Every student starts from a different place, learns at a different pace, and has different goals.

What matters most is **how** prep is structured—and **when** it begins.

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#### Typical Prep Ranges (With Real Context)

- **Skill Reinforcement: ~10–15 weeks**

This range works well for students who:

- Are already near their target score
- Need to clean up specific weaknesses (for example, grammar rules or algebra basics)
- Want to improve consistency and confidence

*Example:*

A student scoring in the low 1200s on the SAT who understands most material but makes careless mistakes may only need focused practice and strategy over a few months.

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- **Meaningful Score Growth: ~12–20 weeks**

This is the most common prep window.

It's ideal for students who:

- Want to raise scores significantly
- Need time to strengthen reading speed, math foundations, or pacing
- Benefit from steady, weekly practice rather than cramming

*Example:*

A student starting with a 1050 SAT score often sees strong improvement over a semester by working consistently on core skills and test strategy.





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### • **Highly Competitive Goals: Longer, Lighter Prep Over Time**

Students aiming for selective colleges or merit scholarships often benefit from:

- Starting earlier
- Doing shorter, less intense sessions over a longer period
- Allowing time for multiple test attempts

#### *Example:*

A student targeting top-tier schools may begin light prep in late 10th grade, test in spring of 11th, and retest in the fall—without ever feeling overwhelmed.

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### Why Starting Earlier Makes Such a Difference

When prep starts early:

- Weekly workload stays light
- Stress stays low
- Skills improve gradually and naturally
- Confidence builds before test day

When prep starts late:

- Sessions become longer and more intense
- Anxiety increases
- Progress feels rushed

**Starting earlier usually means less stress per week—and better results overall.**

Early prep isn't about pressure. It's about giving students time to grow into their best performance.



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### Part 6: Test-Optional – What It Really Means

Many colleges are now test-optional, but that does **not** mean test scores are irrelevant. It means students are given a **choice**—and choices should be made strategically.

#### Test Scores Still Matter When:

- **Applying to selective colleges**, where strong scores can help distinguish applicants
- **Competing for merit scholarships**, which often still rely heavily on test data
- **Strengthening an otherwise strong application**, especially when grades or course rigor need additional context

#### *Example:*

A student with strong grades from a rigorous high school may still benefit from submitting a solid test score to reinforce academic readiness. Another student may choose not to submit if their score does not reflect their true ability.

**The key point:** Submitting scores should be a **deliberate, informed decision**, not something avoided out of fear or uncertainty.



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### Part 7: The Student's Role

Students succeed when they approach test prep as a **skill-building process**, not a judgment of intelligence.

Students do best when they:

- **Practice consistently, not obsessively** (short, regular sessions work better than cramming)
- **Review mistakes carefully**, asking *why* an answer was wrong
- **Ask questions early** when a concept or strategy isn't clear
- **Focus on personal improvement**, rather than comparing scores with friends

*Example:*

A student who reviews errors weekly and adjusts strategies often improves faster than one who completes large numbers of practice questions without reflection.

This process is about **learning how the test works and how you work best**—not proving worth or ability.



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### Part 8: The Parents' Role

Parents play a powerful role in shaping how stressful—or manageable—test prep feels.

Parents help most by:

- Encouraging **steady, realistic progress**
- Supporting structure and routine without constant pressure
- Avoiding comparisons to siblings, classmates, or online anecdotes
- Keeping the focus on long-term confidence and growth

*Example:*

A parent who helps set a weekly schedule and checks in calmly creates a very different experience than one who focuses only on scores.

**Calm, consistent support is far more effective than urgency or fear.**



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### Part 9: Why Guided Prep Makes a Difference

Many students struggle with test prep not because they lack ability—but because they lack direction.

Students often stall when they:

- Practice material that doesn't target their real weaknesses
- Don't understand *why* an answer is wrong
- Plateau at the same score despite continued effort
- Feel unsure how to improve efficiently

Working with an experienced instructor provides:

- **Personalized diagnostics** to identify specific needs
- **Targeted practice** that focuses time where it matters most
- **Clear explanations** that build understanding, not frustration
- **Accountability** to maintain consistency
- **Confidence and momentum** as improvement becomes visible

*Example:*

A student who has been stuck at the same score often improves when practice shifts from “doing more problems” to understanding patterns and strategies.

**Early guidance prevents wasted effort, burnout, and last-minute panic.**



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## FINAL REASSURANCE FOR FAMILIES

SAT/ACT prep does not need to be stressful, overwhelming, or last-minute.

When students start early and prepare strategically:

- Confidence rises
- Anxiety drops
- Scores improve steadily
- The process feels manageable and controlled

A clear plan—started at the right time—allows students to perform closer to their true ability.

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## NEXT STEPS

If you'd like help with:

- Choosing the right test (SAT vs. ACT)
- Interpreting diagnostic results
- Building a realistic, low-stress prep timeline
- Reducing anxiety while improving performance

Early conversations almost always lead to better outcomes—for both students and parents.

[Contact now to set up your initial consultation](#)  
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