

The SAT Prep Black Book

“The Most Effective SAT Strategies Ever Published”

Second Edition

By Mike Barrett and Patrick Barrett



Part 1: The Secrets of SAT Success

In this part of the Black Book, we'll cover the most important concepts that underlie effective SAT preparation. Unfortunately, these are things that most untrained test-takers never realize, which causes them to spend more time than necessary on their SAT preparation . . . and come away with very little to show for all that effort.

The rest of this Black Book will build on these critical concepts; you'll see them at work in all of my training and walkthroughs.

In this part of the Black Book, you'll learn the following:

- why the SAT isn't designed like a regular high school test
- how the College Board manages to create difficult questions based on relatively simple concepts
- why some people do better in school than they do on the SAT, or vice-versa
- why there can only be one valid answer for each SAT question
- some fundamental errors that keep most untrained test-takers from ever approaching the SAT correctly
- how everyday experiences in high school can set you up with the wrong expectations on test day
- how to react when it seems like a question has more than one good answer
- important differences between classroom discussions and the analysis you'll need to use on the SAT
- why it's so important to see each SAT question as a system of ideas
- why any detail can potentially reveal the best way to answer a question, no matter how insignificant it seems
- and more . . .

The “Big Secrets” of the SAT: Simplicity, Repetition, Weirdness, and Details

There are no secrets that time does not reveal.

Jean Racine

Before we get into all the strategies and advice for specific areas of the test, I want to start out by sharing something very important with you: the “secret” of the SAT.

Here it is: the SAT frustrates so many test-takers because it asks about basic things in very strange (but repetitive) ways.

The simple reason so many people struggle with the test is that they’re looking at it in completely the wrong way. Let’s examine why this is.

Imagine you’re the College Board. Colleges use your test scores to help figure out which applicants to admit, and they only trust your test because it consistently provides them with reliable measurements. So how do you go about making a test that can be given to millions of students a year and still compare them all in a meaningful way, despite the wide variations in their backgrounds and abilities?

You can’t just make a super-difficult test, because that won’t really provide useful information to the colleges who rely on you. For example, you can’t just focus the math test on advanced ideas from calculus and statistics, because many of the test-takers have never taken those subjects—and, even if they had, the results from your test wouldn’t really tell the colleges anything that wasn’t already reflected in students’ transcripts. And you can’t make a test that relies on arbitrary interpretation of literature, because then the test results won’t correlate to anything meaningful on a large scale, and colleges won’t be able to rely on the data from your test.

So, if you’re the College Board, you need to design the SAT so it avoids advanced concepts and arbitrary interpretation. Otherwise, your test will be useless for colleges, because colleges want to use a test that measures something meaningful about every applicant in the same way every time.

In other words, you have to test *basic* ideas in an *objective* way, rather than testing *advanced* ideas in a *subjective* way.

But then you have another problem: if you give a traditional objective test of basic ideas to millions of college-bound, motivated students, a lot of them are going to do really well on it—and then your results will be useless for a different reason, because there will be so many high scores that colleges won’t be able to use the results in their admissions decisions.

So how do you solve this problem?

The College Board solves this problem by combining basic ideas in weird (but repetitive and predictable) ways. The result is that doing well on the SAT involves the ability to look at a new test question and then figure out how it follows the rules that all SAT questions of that type must follow. And that’s what this book will teach you to do.

This is why there are so many people who do so well in advanced classes in high school but have a relatively hard time with the SAT: the SAT tests simpler stuff in a stranger way. It basically requires a totally different skill-set from high school or college. (You may be wondering why some students do well on both the SAT and school. These people are just good at both skill-sets. It’s a bit like being good at both football and wrestling: there’s enough of an overlap that some people are naturally good at both, but enough of a difference that many people struggle with one or the other. Or both.)

Now that you know the SAT's big secret, the rest of this Black Book—and the SAT itself—will probably make a lot more sense to you. This book is basically a road map to all the weird things the SAT does. It will teach you how to navigate the SAT's bizarre design, and how to exploit the many weaknesses inherent in that design.

Certainty and the SAT

I've spent more hours than I can count helping my students raise their SAT scores, and all of that time has made me realize that there's a serious problem blocking most SAT-takers from realizing their full potential.

It's not a problem that has to do with strategy, memorization, timing, focus, or anything like that. This problem is at the root of the very nature of the SAT itself. And if you don't come to terms with it, your score can only be mediocre at best.

The problem is that the SAT only gives you one correct answer choice for each question, and this correct answer choice is totally, definitively, incontrovertibly the correct answer—there are no arguments to be made against it (once we know the test's rules).

But a lot of untrained test-takers never realize this. In this book, I talk a lot about all the specific ways that the SAT is different from tests you take in high school. But I really want to pound this one difference into your head, because it will affect every single thing you do as you prepare for the test.

So I'm saying it again—read closely:

Multiple-choice SAT questions always have ONE, and only ONE, correct answer. Furthermore, the issue of which answer choice is the correct one is absolutely beyond disagreement. As surely as 2 and 2 make 4, and not 5 or 3, every single multiple-choice SAT question has exactly one correct answer choice. And you can find it with total certainty once you know how to identify it, which is what you'll learn to do in this Black Book.

A Real-Life Example

Why is this such a big deal, you ask?

Imagine this common high school situation, which you've probably been through yourself. Your history teacher is going over the answers to a multiple-choice test with your class. It's a test he wrote himself, and he wrote it just for your class. And as he's going through the test, he tells you that the answer to number 9 is choice (D). Half the class groans—they all marked (B). One of the students who marked (B) raises her hand and makes a convincing argument that she should get credit for marking (B). She explains that if you read the question a certain way, (B) and (D) are equally good answers. The teacher, who wants to be open-minded and fair, reconsiders the question, and decides that it's poorly written. In light of the student's argument, he can understand why (B) might have looked like the right answer. And, because he's fair, he announces that he'll give equal credit for both (B) and (D).

That sort of thing happens every day in high schools all across the country. It's the natural result of a system in which teachers have to write their own classes' exams, and don't have enough time to proof-read them or even test them out on sample classes in advance. Inevitably, some poorly written questions get past the teacher. The teacher corrects the problem later by giving credit as necessary, or throwing questions out, or whatever.

What message does this send to students? Unfortunately, students come to believe that the answers to *all* tests are open to discussion and debate, that *all* questions are written by stressed-out teachers who work with specific students in mind, that *all* questions are potentially flawed and open to interpretation.

Then, when these students take the SAT, things get crazy. They can never settle on anything, because they've been taught that the proper approach to a multiple-choice test is to look for any way at all to bend every answer until it's correct. They mark wrong answers left and right—usually they manage to eliminate one or two choices, and then the rest all seem equally correct, so they take a stab at each question and move on to the next, never really being certain of anything.

Most of these untrained test-takers are wrong way more often than they think.

And the worst part is that they never even realize what's holding them back.

Two Key Realizations

If you're going to do well on the SAT, you have to realize two things.

First, you have to know that the SAT is a totally objective test, and that every single question has only one right answer, as we've discussed. The SAT is written by teams of people; before a question appears on the SAT, it's been reviewed and tested by experts. No matter how much it might seem otherwise, every multiple-choice question on the SAT has only one right answer that follows the rules of the test.

Once you come to accept that, the second thing you have to realize is that you—specifically YOU, the person reading this—can find the answer to every SAT question if you learn what to look for. You can. And with the right training and practice, you will.

So let's wrap this whole thing up nice and simple:

1. The only way to do really well on the SAT is to mark the correct answer to most or all of the questions on the test.
2. The only reliable way to mark the correct answer consistently is to be able to identify it consistently.
3. Before you can identify the correct answer consistently, you have to know and believe that there will always be one correct answer for every question—if you're open to the possibility that more than one answer could be acceptable, you won't be strict about eliminating answers by using the rules and patterns of the test.
4. Most untrained test-takers never realize this, and as a result they never maximize their performance. Instead, they treat the SAT like a regular high school test, which is a huge mistake for the reasons we just discussed.

Now that we've established this important concept, we have to talk about something that comes up often in testing situations . . .

What to Do When it Looks Like There Might be Two Right Answers to a Question

Even though you know there can only be one valid answer to a real SAT question, there will be times when you think more than one choice might be correct. It happens to everybody. It happens to me, and it will happen to you. When it does happen, you must immediately recognize that you've done something wrong—you misread a key word, you left off a minus sign, something like that.

There are two ways to fix this situation. One way is to cut your losses and go on to the next question, planning to return to the difficult question later on, when your head has cleared. This is what I usually do, and we cover it in more detail in "Time Management on Test Day," which starts on page 46 of this Black Book.

The second way is to keep working on the difficult question. Try and figure out what might be causing the confusion while the question is still fresh in your mind, and resolve the issue right then and there. I'm not such a big fan of this approach because I tend to find that things are clearer to me when I return to a question after skipping it. But some people find that moving on without answering a question just means they have to familiarize themselves with it all over again when they come back, and they prefer to stay focused on a particular question until they either find the right answer or decide to guess on it.

To see which type of person you are, just do what comes naturally, and experiment a little bit with both approaches in your practice sessions—then check your results and see which approach yields more total correct answers per section.

The Importance of Details: Avoiding “Careless Errors”

You will make all kinds of mistakes; but as long as you are generous and true, and also fierce, you cannot hurt the world or even seriously distress her.

Winston Churchill

As you go through the test-taking strategies in this Black Book, one thing will become very clear to you: at every turn, the SAT is obsessed with details in a way that high school and college courses typically are not.

The right answer to an SAT Reading question might rely on the subtle difference between the words “unique” and “rare.” A 5-word answer choice in a Writing and Language question might be wrong because of a single comma. A Math question involving algebra and fractions might have the reciprocal and the opposite of the right answer as two of the wrong answers. And so on.

This means that doing extremely well on the SAT isn’t just a matter of knowing the proper strategies (though that’s a big part of it, of course!). It’s also a matter of being almost fanatically obsessed with the tiniest details. In fact, I would say that in most cases the biggest difference between someone who scores a 600 on a section of the SAT and someone who scores an 800 is not that the 800-scorer is any smarter or any more knowledgeable, but that she’s much more diligent about paying attention to details.

This strong orientation to detail is exactly the opposite of what most teachers in most high schools reward in their classes. Generally speaking, teachers are more interested in things like participation, an ability to defend your position, and a willingness to think of the big picture, especially in humanities classes. On the SAT, those things rarely come in handy. What matters on the SAT is your ability to execute relatively simple strategies over and over again on a variety of questions without missing small details that would normally go overlooked in a classroom discussion.

For this reason, the attitude that most test-takers typically have towards so-called “careless errors”—which is that they don’t really matter as long as you basically understand what the question is about—is very destructive when you take the SAT.

In fact, I’d even say that most test-takers could improve their scores by at least 50 to 100 points per section—usually more—if they would just eliminate these kinds of errors completely. But most people don’t take these small mistakes seriously, and they don’t know a reliable way to separate right answers from wrong answers anyway. So they usually end up making the same kinds of small errors, often without realizing it, no matter how much they practice.

Why are Careless Errors so Easy to Make on the SAT?

As always, when we try to figure out why the SAT is the way it is, we have to remember why the test exists in the first place: colleges and universities find the data from the test to be useful when they’re evaluating applicants. This is only possible because the test questions are written according to specific rules and patterns that don’t change, and because the test uses the multiple-choice format, which limits student responses and allows the grading to be objective, in the sense that a test-taker either marks the correct answer to a question, or she doesn’t.

Here’s the kicker: the multiple-choice format itself, and the SAT’s rules and patterns specifically, would be useless for the purpose of making fine, meaningful distinctions among millions of test-takers unless the questions were written in a very detail-oriented way.

In other words, the College Board has to be obsessed with details because otherwise its data would be useless.

So the questions on the SAT are extremely nit-picky.

How Can We Pay Attention to Details and Avoid Careless Mistakes?

When we get into the walkthroughs of real SAT questions later in this book, you'll notice that I always talk about each question as a system of ideas. Instead of just explaining how the right answer satisfies the prompt, I also talk about the patterns we can see in the wrong answers, and about how the wrong answers relate to the right answer. I do this for a variety of reasons, but one of the biggest reasons is that being aware of the interplay of the parts of a question is one of the best ways to verify that an answer choice is right. If the choice you like makes sense within the larger context of the test's design, then you can have more confidence in your decisions and a greater degree of certainty that you haven't made a mistake.

On the other hand, most of the time when people do make a mistake on the test, it's because they haven't considered the question in its entirety. Instead, they catch a couple of phrases or concepts, make an unwarranted assumption or a faulty calculation, see an answer choice that reflects their mistake, and then move on to the next question without reconsidering their decisions.

So please do us both a favor and take a lesson from the way I think carefully about parts of each question that most people might consider irrelevant. I do that for a reason.

Part 2: When to Use College Board Materials . . . And When Not To

In this part of the Black Book, I'll explain why it's so important to work with real SAT questions from the College Board . . . but also important to ignore the College Board's own "explanations" of those real SAT questions (you'll see why I put the word "explanations" in quotation marks like that, too). Finally, if you've already run out of official questions from the College Board, I'll give you some ideas of other sources you can use in a pinch.

Among other things, you'll learn the following:

- why it's so important to practice with questions that follow the same rules as the questions you'll see on test day
- what really holds most people back from scoring as high as they should (it isn't subject-matter knowledge!)
- where we can find real test questions from the College Board
- some common differences between questions from the College Board and questions from other companies
- where to find real College Board questions, including free resources
- why it makes no sense to practice with "harder" questions than you'll see on test day
- why the College Board's "explanations" are often unhelpful for most test-takers who need them
- the elements of a good explanation for an official SAT question
- the most important part of using real SAT questions in your training
- why your analysis of an SAT question should always be directed at diagnosing similar situations on test day
- how the College Board's "explanations" of math often ignore the techniques that high-scorers actually use
- how the College Board's "explanations" of Verbal questions use circular reasoning to avoid revealing too much
- how to use the walkthroughs in this Black Book
- why you should read the entire walkthrough when you use this Black Book to help you with an SAT question
- why my walkthroughs are more thorough than you'll need to be on test day, and what to do on test day instead
- why you probably won't run out of practice material if you use the College Board's materials wisely
- which other practice materials to use—and which to avoid—if you do feel like you need more practice questions
- and more . . .

Only Work with Questions from the College Board!

One must learn by doing the thing.

Sophocles

Three of the most important themes in this book, which are reflected on almost every level of my SAT advice, are the following:

- SAT questions are written according to specific rules and patterns, and . . .
- . . . beating the SAT is a matter of learning to exploit the inherent weaknesses of those rules and patterns systematically, because . . .
- . . . most of the problems that most people have on the SAT are the result of poor test-taking skills, not of deficiencies in subject-matter knowledge.

I'll expand on these ideas in the rest of this Black Book, but for right now I want to impress something upon you that is extremely, extremely important: it's absolutely critical that you practice with real SAT questions written by the actual College Board itself, and not with any other kind of practice test or practice questions.

Only the real questions written by the actual College Board are guaranteed to behave like the questions you'll see on test day. Questions written by other companies (Kaplan, Barron's, or anybody else) are simply not guaranteed to behave like the real thing. In some cases, the differences are obvious, and, frankly, shocking. Some companies write fake practice SAT Writing and Language questions in which the passive voice is the difference between a right answer and a wrong answer. Some fake SAT Math questions rely on math formulas the real SAT doesn't test; many fake SAT Reading questions require literary analysis. And so on.

Fake practice questions that break the rules of the real test will encourage you to develop bad test-taking habits, and will keep you from being able to develop good habits. For our purposes, then, fake SAT questions written by any company except the College Board are basically useless. If you want to learn how to beat the SAT, you should work with real SAT questions. (You can find them in the College Board's "Blue Book," *The Official SAT Study Guide* (any edition from 2016 or later). You can also get all the SAT Practice Tests from that book for free on the College Board's website.)

At the time of this writing, there are 8 official SAT Practice Tests available from the College Board, but you could really prepare effectively even if you only had access to 2 or 3 tests, so 8 is plenty. See "How to Train for the SAT—Mastering the Ideas in this Black Book" on page 32 for ideas on the best ways to use the official tests along with this Black Book. (And see "But What if I Run Out of Practice Materials?!" on page 25 if you're nervous about using up all the official tests.)

What About "Harder" Questions?

One of the most common objections to the idea of using real SAT questions is that some companies (most notably Barron's) are known for writing practice questions that are "harder" than real test questions—the argument is that working with more difficult questions will make the real test seem like a breeze in comparison.

Unfortunately, this approach is too clever for its own good! It overlooks the nature of difficulty on the SAT. If the "harder" practice questions from a third-party company were hard *in the same way that "hard" SAT questions are hard*, then using them might be a good idea. But those fake questions are harder in a way that makes them totally unlike real questions, so they're a waste of time.

When a third-party company writes fake questions to be hard, it does so by incorporating skills that a high-school student would need to use in advanced classes: complicated math concepts, subtle literary analysis, and so on. But these skills have no place on the SAT, because the SAT limits itself to very basic ideas, and tries to fool you by asking you about basic things in weird ways.

So if you want to raise your SAT score, the skill you need to develop is the ability to look at real SAT questions, figure out whatever basic thing they actually want you to do, and then do it. That's what this Black Book teaches you. In fact, the more familiar you become with the SAT, the more you'll see that "hard" official SAT questions aren't really any different from "easy" ones when you get right down to it. This is why it's pointless to use fake questions, even if they're supposed to be more challenging.

Whenever students ask if they should use "harder" questions to get ready for the SAT, I always answer with this analogy: it's true that performing on the flying trapeze is harder than making an omelet, but getting better at the trapeze won't make your omelets any better, because the two things have nothing in common. Just because something is harder doesn't mean it's helpful.

I really can't stress this enough: If you're serious about raising your score, then you need to practice with real SAT questions written by the College Board, because real test questions are what you'll see on test day. (I sometimes have students who ignore this part of my SAT advice, and the results are never good. Seriously. Trust me on this. Use questions from the College Board :))

Why it's so Important for Me to "Re-Explain" Questions from the College Board

Whatever is worth doing at all is worth doing well.

Philip Stanhope

You may have realized by now that the College Board already provides "explanations" for every official practice question in their released practice tests, and that this Black Book also contains explanations for the same official practice questions. You may also be asking yourself why I'd bother writing out a ton of in-depth explanations for questions that already have "explanations" by the College Board.

On top of that, you may have noticed that I just put the word "explanations" in quotation marks every time I referred to "explanations" written by the College Board. And you may be wondering what's up with all of that.

Actually, it relates to a very important question that underlies our entire method of preparation: what's the purpose of practicing with official test questions from the College Board, and how do the official practice questions you work on relate to the questions that you'll see on test day?

The questions that you see on test day won't be word-for-word repetitions of the questions in the official SAT Practice Tests from the College Board, but the questions on test-day will follow the same design principles as the official practice questions. They'll observe the same rules and patterns, and they'll try to trick you in the same ways, even if that's not immediately obvious to an untrained test-taker.

That means you'll miss out on the true value of practicing with real SAT questions from the College Board *unless you analyze them effectively afterwards*. You'll never see a specific practice question on a real SAT again, but you *will* see lots of other questions that follow the same underlying principles as the questions you practice with. So your analysis of your practice sessions needs to get into those underlying principles, or your preparation won't be nearly as effective as it could be.

For these reasons, a good explanation of an official SAT practice question should point out 5 things:

1. Specifically why the right answer is right—what attributes does it have that you can expect to find in other right answers that you'll see on test day?
2. Specifically why the wrong answers are wrong, and which of their attributes you'll see again in the wrong answers on test day.
3. The fastest and easiest way that you could have arrived at the right answer to the question.
4. The attributes of the question that will appear in other questions on test day, so you can exploit them when you see them in the future.
5. The tricks that the College Board tried to play on untrained test-takers when it constructed the question, and how we can avoid similar tricks on test day.

In general, the College Board's own "explanations" don't address these issues. Instead, they typically provide some kind of limited or circular statement about Reading or Writing and Language questions, and a relatively formulaic approach for Math questions. The College Board occasionally provides more detailed explanations for some questions, but, for the most part, the College Board's explanations do almost nothing to help you learn the deeper lessons from a practice question and then apply them to future questions (which makes sense, really, because if the College Board fully explained how SAT questions actually work, it would be working against its own interests . . .).

This is why it's necessary for me to provide separate explanations for the College Board's practice questions. My explanations address the elements above so that you can learn what you should actually do on test day.