

Test Anxiety Guide for the ACT and SAT

Test anxiety for the ACT and SAT is a very real experience for a great number of students. Unfortunately, you are given very few tools to handle it – you are just expected to take the test, and *somehow* relax, even though you’ve never taken a test with stakes this high. Since this is such a widespread phenomenon, I am going to share with you some tried-and-true ways of addressing test anxiety that I have used with students over the past few years with a great deal of success. If you have truly severe anxiety, please seek professional help. I am not a psychologist, and none of what follows should be construed as psychological advice – simply some strategic tips.

Know that you are not alone – test anxiety is not a topic that people want to openly discuss. As a test preparation instructor, I have known students to have panic attacks during the test, cry for the duration of a 1.5 hour tutoring session because they are so stressed out, feel tremendous pressure from their parents and themselves, and even becomes so freaked out about the test that they run out of the test a few minutes after it begins. It is neither stupid nor silly to have some fear about a test that does have a significant impact on your chances for admission to college. What does NOT make sense is to pretend you are not going to have any worries when you take the test, and do nothing to prepare for it ahead of time—that is a recipe for disaster.

To help you get your head out of the sand and realistically prepare for what you face on test day, read my four-part guide to test anxiety:

(1) Roots of Test Anxiety

(2) How Test Anxiety Affects your Test Taking

(3) Things to Think about to Combat Test Anxiety

(4) More Things to Think about to Combat Test Anxiety

Part 1: Roots of Test Anxiety

- 1. Being great at school tests, but not so good at standardized tests.** Understand that the SAT and ACT are VERY different from the types of tests you take for school. Instead of testing your memory of facts and figures, the ACT and SAT test your ability to critically reason and think through new and different problems. The wording on ACT/SAT questions is far more intricate, and demands a much more careful reading than do school test questions. If you are beating yourself up for having a 4.0 in school but a mediocre SAT/ACT score, know that if you are taking

the test in a way that is more oriented towards a memorization/recall test, your issue is not one of intelligence, but strategy.

2. **Feeling that you won't be able to get into college unless you do well on these tests.** Students attach an abnormal weight to their SAT/ACT scores because it is the easiest thing to measure. It is like asking someone, "how is the weather?," and having them tell you only about the temperature. Sure – the temperature is the easiest thing to measure. However, it only gives us part of the story. We need to know about the humidity, precipitation, wind speed and a host of other factors. Similarly, colleges will ultimately need to know far more about you than your SAT/ACT test scores. They need to know about your grades, the courses you have taken, how you have done on AP and IB tests, your essays, your interview, your extracurricular involvement, and your unique personal attributes. If you have parents from another country, know that they might be pressuring you because in their country, the test WAS indeed the primary or sole factor for college admission. It is simply not the case in the United States – it is only about 25-35% of what is considered.
3. **Being a perfectionist.** I've tutored more perfectionists than I can count. I myself am a perfectionist. As perfectionists, we ask ourselves, "why not try to get EVERY SINGLE QUESTION RIGHT?" This is a great approach to areas where time is not an issue, and where it is not that challenging a task to get all the questions right. With the ACT and SAT, you can STILL get a perfect score and miss questions! This is because they are scored on curves – they have to score them on curves in order to make the scoring consistent from one test date to another. What you must do is pick the score that is sufficient to reach your goals and shoot for that and nothing more. If you don't do this, you will tend to (1) get stuck on questions or (2) go way too fast so that you make careless mistakes. *Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good!*

Part 2: How does Test Anxiety Affect your Test-taking?

Students tend to fall into one of two categories with respect to how their test anxiety manifests in how they approach the SAT and ACT:

- (1) Speed demons
- (2) Perfectionist snails

Let's discuss (A) what these students do, (B) why they do it and (C) how to deal with it differently.

Speed Demons

- (A) Speed demons rush through the test and manage to finish with no problem. They think they got most of the questions correct. However, when they get their scores back, they realize they must have made a ton of careless mistakes.
- (B) Their principal concern is **finishing the test**. They prioritize this objective above all else. Speed demons are not used to doing tests where time is a factor, because nothing they have done in school prepares them for the time pressures of the SAT and especially the ACT. They also love to have time to go back and check answers.
- (C) Speed demons should make the following happen:
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- a. Figuring out a way to divide the test up in a way that helps them finish within the time constraints, and stick to not going faster than their divisions permit.
- b. Realizing that they shouldn't try to have time to go back and recheck answers. The far bigger concern is the unknown careless mistake they make as they do the questions the first time through.
- c. Practice with timing so that they have a really good feel for the pace they should go. They shouldn't practice without any time constraints at all because this will give them a false sense of security.
- d. Schedule times that they will check the time. Perhaps it is every passage, or every page. Speed demons know they will check the time, so they shouldn't pretend they won't. If they plan on *when* they will check the time, they will take control of the process rather than letting the test control them.
- e. Be aware of the competitive nature they may have – if they see other test-takers around them going quickly, they will often let that bother them. Speed demons must be aware of this tendency and mentally rehearse so they can stay on their own pace and tune out what others are doing.

Perfectionist Snails

- (A) Perfectionist snails cannot let a question go. They obsess over a question until they are 100% certain it is correct. If they have a question that they cannot figure out, they let that question bug and haunt them throughout the rest of the test. As a result of this, they leave quite a few questions unanswered or untried.
- (B) Their principal concern is **not making a mistake**. They are used to tests in school where they can take all the time they need, and teachers will let them stay after class if they do not have time to finish during the period. They have very high standards for themselves, and think, “why shouldn't I try to get every single question right?!”
- (C) Perfectionist snails should consider doing the following:
- a. Deciding ahead of time on a reasonable number of questions they plan on missing. If they don't do this, they will try to do absolutely everything perfectly.
 - b. Consider what the bigger danger is to their performance – spending forever on a tough question or neglecting to do several easier questions. The answer is clearly the latter, since every question is worth the same amount.
 - c. Make their practice as realistic as possible. Often, students with perfectionist tendencies will practice in an untimed, relaxed way so they can convince themselves that “everything is ok – I will get them all right!” This may make them feel better temporarily, but it will only serve to sabotage their performance on the actual test. It is essential that perfectionist, slow test-takers practice under timed conditions so they can establish an internal sense of when to let go of a question.
 - d. Create time frames for where they need to be at what point in the test, and write them down on the test booklet. Putting this down on paper will serve to force them to let things go.

- e. Realize that they can come back to questions later. The mind is a very complex thing – just because something is not being thought about consciously does not mean it will not be considered subconsciously. If you are a perfectionist snail, after giving a question a good try, let it go and delegate it to your subconscious to consider. You will be amazed that when you revisit the question, if you have time, that you will likely see how to do it almost immediately.

Tips to help you relax on the SAT and ACT

Beyond the obvious tips – know the directions, practice, prepare – here are some suggestions that my students have found helpful, and that may work for you too!

- 1. You have MANY opportunities to take them.** Each year, the ACT is offered 6 times and the SAT is offered 7 times. While it would be extremely impressive if you could take the test one time and get a perfect, that is an unrealistic goal for most everybody. Plan on taking them a few times.
- 2. A state school is the worst-case scenario.** Colleges that have state funding in the state where you live (e.g. Ohio State or Ohio University in Ohio) generally have branch campuses in which you can enroll so long as you have a high school diploma. If you are able to do well in your first year of college at a branch campus, you will have no trouble transferring to the main campus. So, the realistic worst case scenario for you is that you may have to spend freshman year attending a branch campus, while transferring to the main campus for the last three years of school. In the grand scheme of things, this is not anything to be too concerned about. You will still have a great degree, you can still graduate with honors, and you can potentially save a good bit of money on tuition and room/board by living at home.
- 3. The test score is just one part of the process.** As mentioned above, the test score is the easiest thing to quantify, but it does not provide colleges with a complete picture. A complete picture is only found with a full application—check out commonapp.org for a sample. Another place you can check out, particularly if you have done quite well in school but are concerned about your SAT & ACT performance, is cappex.com. They have fantastic graphs that illustrate who has gotten into a school, taking into account both grades and test scores. There is nothing like accurate information to help you calm down!
- 4. Where you attend school doesn't have as big an impact on salary as you might think.** Try this exercise – think of the best school you can imagine attending, and think of a school you are fairly confident will admit you. Now, think of how much money people who have graduated from each of these schools will make – consider how much they make immediately after graduation, and how much they make in the middle of their careers. I imagine that the numbers you have come up are quite a bit off from reality. To see the reality of this, please look at this excellent chart from payscale.com.
- 5. If you have to take out loans in moderation, it's not that bad.** Everyone knows that college has become quite expensive. As a result, it generally does not make sense for undergraduates to take out student loans to pay for the entirety of their education. Most students are aware of this and have no

intention of taking out \$100,000 or more in loans. Many students, however, are worried about taking out ANY loans at all. If you are concerned that college will become too financially burdensome if you don't get that \$10,000 or \$20,000 scholarship because your SAT or ACT score was not high enough, a reality check is in order. Look at this [student loan calculator](#), see what you would actually have to pay back, and I bet it's much more manageable than you feared.

6. Believe it or not, many colleges do NOT require either the ACT or SAT! There are quite a few colleges that will consider your academics, portfolios, essays and much more as opposed to focusing on your test results. You can find a list of these schools [here](#).

7. Know where the name of a college matters, and where it doesn't. It is undeniable that there are some areas where the name of a college will open doors. Based on my discussions with college counselors over the years, here is where having an elite degree will make a difference:

- *Getting that first job.* If you are hoping to land a job at one of the premier companies on the planet, there is no doubt that a degree from Stanford or M.I.T. will open some doors to Silicon Valley, Princeton or Harvard will open doors on Wall Street, and Georgetown and Yale will open doors in Washington D.C. Once those doors are opened, what you do ON the job will make the ultimate difference. In my own personal situation, I found that having a degree from Princeton made clients receptive to me when I first started my tutoring business. Several years after starting it, however, I put an emphasis on the results I have had with clients and rarely mention my educational background with clients. No one would want me to be his or her instructor if the only thing I could talk about is where I went to college many years ago. If you talk to other professionals, I bet you will encounter similar stories.
- *If you want a career in politics.* If you look at the resumes of people working in Washington, D.C. in high level positions, you tend to find people with Ivy League pedigrees. By no means is an Ivy-League degree a prerequisite to a political position, but the networking opportunities it might afford could be extremely helpful. If, like most of us, you are not interested in working in politics, no need to be concerned!
- *If you are committed to being a top-level scientific researcher.* Since you will have access to top-level Nobel Laureate scientific researchers, going to a highly ranked university will help you in your budding scientific career. Even with this, keep in mind that if you hope to do elite scientific research, your terminal degree, i.e. your Ph.D., will matter far more than your undergraduate degree.

8. Take a look at a career posting sites, and see what companies actually want! My favorite job posting site is [indeed.com](#). What will undoubtedly strike you as you search for your choice of jobs is the emphasis that there is on *experience*. Employers want people to have relevant real-world experience as opposed to just having a degree from a particular school. This makes plenty of sense when you think about it – if you were hiring a computer programmer, for example, wouldn't you want to see a portfolio of his or her programming creations as opposed to merely a transcript?

9. Take a look at the resumes and C.V.'s of accomplished professionals. This can easily be accomplished with a google search – check out people who have achieved what you hope to one day achieve in a given field: psychologists, doctors, engineers, consultants, business owners, etc. Some will have gone to an elite school as undergrads; far more will have a solid terminal degree; even more will emphasize their post-graduation accomplishments such as publications, work experience, and leadership positions.

10. Isn't graduate school your final destination? Most students with whom I work plan on earning a graduate level degree in their chosen field – an M.B.A., M.D., Ph.D., J.D., etc. The time spent earning your terminal degree is when you will do your most productive networking with employers and colleagues. After all – do we really worry much about the name or prestige of our high school? I think not.

11. Imagine if you were in a different country! Many educators decry the emphasis that American universities place on standardized tests. What we do in the United States pales in comparison to the emphasis that other countries – India, China, Japan, European nations – place on their college admission tests. It is frequently the case that in other countries, the test is the SOLE factor in determining what college, if any, you will attend. There is a plus to this: the government generally picks up the tab for your education. There are some big minuses though: students who don't test well do not have the opportunity for higher education, and there are few to no opportunities later in life to redeem yourself if you mess up the first go-round. Be grateful that you have the test count for the relatively little amount that it does!

12. Don't have caffeine. You may think that having caffeine will help jolt you awake, but the adrenaline you will have pumping through your veins will be enough to get you going. The caffeine will generally make you more jittery. Having plenty of sleep leading up to the test will help you. (If you have a more unique situation, such as ADHD, please consult with your doctor or psychiatrist as to what he or she would recommend.)

13. Do NOTHING the night before except relax. If you were preparing for a memorization-based test, then it could make sense to cram in some information the night before. The ACT and SAT are critical thinking tests, and as such, it is imperative that you do all you can to think well! Be well rested, relax, watch some T.V. In fact, I would suggest watching a comedy. Anecdotally, I have found that students of mine who have watched comedies seem to be much more relaxed when taking the test.

14. Make sure your parents are helping you, not hurting you. Parents: when your children are worrying about test performance, the worst thing you can do is tell your kids, "well that's silly and stupid!" All that does is make them feel more anxious about the testing process because not only do they feel anxious, they now feel like they're being crazy for being worried about something that others consider to be insignificant. The pressures on young people are really great nowadays. For the most part, there aren't good jobs without higher education. International competition is sky-high. Costs are sky-high, risk of debt is enormous. They don't want to let you down and burden you by being "stay-at-home" children. Acknowledge that their concerns are valid and real, and then help them become more

relaxed by sharing with them what has worked *for you* in keeping things in perspective during stressful situations.

15. Go check out the test environment for yourself! It is no wonder that so many high schools seek to host tests at their schools – they know that their students will relax and perform better if they are in a familiar environment. If you are unable to take the test in your home school, make an effort to at least drive by the school where you will be taking the test. Better yet, try to go to the school when it is open for a sporting event, play or something else. Walking around the school and becoming acquainted with the environment—where the clocks and restrooms are, for example—will help you sleep well the night before the test.

I hope that you have found this guide helpful. –Brian W. Stewart