

Demystifying the ACT/SAT



By Dr. Joe Krupnick
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After 15 years of working with students in all six continents (except Antarctica), we've concluded that traditional ACT/SAT prep is based on a myth. This myth is responsible for hundreds of wasted hours, thousands of wasted dollars, and millions of dispirited students and parents. The myth is that these tests are reflections of what students learn in high school. The perception is that their component sections (Math, English, and so forth) should map one-to-one to what students actually learn in school. Except for certain parts of the Math sections, They don't. And for two big reasons:

1) In school, you excavate and explore, you read closely, you think creatively, you think critically. The ACT/SAT, in some ways, depends on *learning how not to think*. On the ACT/SAT, the second you start

excavating the subtext in the Reading passage about Bob Dylan's Greenwich phase or the Science passage on the Cretaceous Extinction, you descend into a rabbit hole. This is because the ACT/SAT is much more about attention to detail than it is about actual knowledge or critical reasoning. It's also because these are ultimately speed tests, and you simply don't have time to drink a cappuccino and leisurely think about these Bob Dylan questions. The ACT reading is a 70- minute test that they give you 35 minutes to complete. The ACT Science is an 80-minute that test they give you 35 minutes to complete. When you walk into these tests, you have to turn yourself into a machine—and let your training do your thinking for you.

2) The second part of the myth is that In school, you have teachers who like you, are invested in you, want you to do well, and be successful. This is what makes them good teachers. The test writers of the ACT and SAT—and we know these people and have worked with them—are like evil geniuses sitting around at a round table trying to think of ways to trap you, psyche you out, coax you into the wrong answers, and make you feel bad about yourself. Don't take it personally; that's their job. We have a student who's at Northwestern and whose father is a physics professor at Northwestern. He decided to take the ACT Science—and he got a 22. Here's a guy who knows more science than all of the ACT writers put together, and he got psyched out by the traps and unusual pacing demands of the test. Your job is to stay in the pocket, separate the wheat from the chaff, and use your training to turn these traps to your advantage. If all else fails, remember Michael Jordan: prepare for "winning time." Always save something for the finish. Yes, even on the ACT/SAT, Be Like Mike.

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So I was teaching this material to students a number of years ago out of my home office as I was getting my Ph.D. from Harvard. At some point, we realized something: these tests are identical from one year to the next. Each SAT is a replica of each previous SAT; each ACT is a replica of each previous ACT. The same evil

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geniuses write these tests year after year, and they base all of their questions on a set of algorithms. Yes, algorithms. So we decided to do something it seems nobody else has thought to do: we actually looked at the questions. After careful analysis of 26,000 official questions official ACT and SATs, we've cracked the code, and the result is the program you're about to embark on. So, yes, you will learn content, yes, you will come out of this program with some extremely valuable intellectual skills. You'll learn how to properly use dashes and semicolons, you'll learn how to read purposefully and distill what you read quickly (which will be important in college, believe me), and you'll learn a series of extremely important logical rules like the "rule of inclusivity," which will help in math and philosophy and every other standardized test you will ever take. But you will also learn a set of formulas and algorithms that will make the ACT/SAT more like a sporting event or like a chess game than a traditional academic subject. And that is what it is: checkmate.



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