

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 36 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 27 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 22 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 :))

Part 4: Guessing and Time-Management on Test Day

This part of the Black Book will explore the key factors that should impact your decisions about how to invest every second on test day. We'll start with a detailed discussion of the right way to think about guessing on test day (which is very important!), and then we'll build on that and have a broader discussion about using your time in the most effective way possible.

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

- why just marking your best guess for every question isn't a good strategy
- why you should never forget your training, even when a question seems impossible
- why you shouldn't worry about being stumped a few times on test day
- how the SAT is designed to punish most people's guessing instincts
- the right way to think about guessing, so it can help your score instead of getting in the way
- key, section-specific considerations to keep in mind when you get stuck on different kinds of SAT questions
- the two types of guessing on the SAT, and why the one you probably haven't heard of might be better for you
- the important implications of viewing time as an investment on test day
- how quickly a trained test-taker can generally answer a real SAT question
- why and how you should approach each section of the SAT in multiple passes
- different ways to handle questions related to a single passage
- easily overlooked test-taking mistakes that can cost you points and undo your hard work
- how to diagnose any remaining issues with time management
- why skipping questions sooner may be key to raising your score
- why you should never worry about the average amount of time you spend on each question
- and more . . .

How Many Questions/Sections/Tests do You Need to Do?

It may come as a surprise, but there is no magic number of practice questions that will guarantee you hit your target score. Based on my fairly wide experience, I would say that over 99% of people do need to do some kind of actual practice work with the ideas in this Black Book—it's very rare that a person is able to implement the strategies on test day with full effectiveness after merely reading about them. So you'll want to do some number of practice questions or sections. The operative question is "how many?"

And the issue is one of quality, not quantity. Most people will assume (very incorrectly) that if they simply do a certain number of questions they're guaranteed to improve. But that really isn't the case, because of the unique way in which the SAT is designed. It's much more important to try to *understand* a representative sample of questions than it is to crank out a million repetitions simply for its own sake. If you can look at a single real SAT practice test and really, thoroughly understand what the College Board is doing in that test, and why, and how you can use the strategies in this book to beat that test, then you're ready.

Do You Even Need a Schedule?

Finally, I'd like to close by pointing out that a specific test-prep schedule might not even be ideal for you in the first place. In my experience, students are often very bad at predicting how long it will take them to master a particular skill on the SAT, because the SAT is so different from traditional tests. You may pick up the Reading very quickly and take longer to build good SAT Math skills, or the other way around, and there may not be any correlation between those lengths of time and your academic strengths. Or you might rapidly build up good test-taking instincts for all the question types, and then have a difficult time eliminating your "careless mistakes" and spend weeks perfecting that. You may be full of enthusiasm and excitement one week, and then suddenly find yourself with no time at all the next week. And so on. An overly rigid schedule may prevent you from adapting to these kinds of situations, or to others.

My general "scheduling" advice, then, is simple. If I were you, I would try to start prepping as early as you can, even if that just means flipping absent-mindedly through this Black Book in the very beginning. The earlier you start, the more gradual the prep can be, and the more likely it is to stick. At the same time, I'd recommend prepping in ways that you find mentally engaging, and taking breaks when it gets boring and counter-productive. After every practice section or full-length practice test, I would *strongly* recommend a serious post-mortem.

And that's basically it. Modify it and make it your own as you see fit.

Be Careful with Diagnostics, Even from the College Board!

A lot of test-takers try to assess their weaknesses with some kind of diagnostic test, whether from the College Board itself, or from a tutor or test prep company. In fact, even the score report you get from the College Board after taking the SAT or PSAT provides a breakdown of your supposed strengths and weaknesses based on which questions you missed.

In my opinion, you want to be very careful when you consider this kind of feedback, because it overlooks the fact that there are many, many ways to miss any given SAT question, and they might not have anything to do with someone's idea of the question's "type."

For instance, you might miss a Reading question because you don't know some of the words in the question, or you might miss it because you misread the question, or because you were in a hurry and didn't have time to consider it carefully enough. You might miss a Math question for any of the same reasons, or because you made a simple mistake in the arithmetic component of an algebra question, or because you keyed something into the calculator incorrectly. But diagnostic reports on multiple-choice tests can't measure your *reasons* for missing things—they can only try to classify each question into types, and then assume that people who miss a question are bad at answering questions of that type, without considering all the other reasons a question might have been missed.

So I rarely pay any attention to such diagnostic reports, and I don't encourage my students to worry about them in most cases. The only limited exception I would make would be in an extreme case. For example, if you miss every single question on a diagnostic that involves a chart, graph, or other figure, and you don't miss any other questions on the entire test, then there's a good chance that you do need to work on your approach to questions involving figures.

But outside of those kinds of rare situations, I'd recommend that you pay more attention to your own feelings about where your weak areas are, as long as you're trying to diagnose those weaknesses honestly. For instance, it's tempting to look at an SAT Math question you missed that involves circles, and assume that you missed it because you're not good with circles. But, if you pay close attention to how you tried to answer the question, then you may realize that you actually missed it because you ignored two of the answer choices, or you didn't notice a word in the prompt. Either way, the experience of looking back over a question you missed and trying to figure out why the correct answer is correct, and how you might have arrived at that correct answer if you had looked at the question differently, is far more helpful than accepting a diagnostic report at face value.

Guessing on the SAT

If things go wrong, don't go with them.

Roger Babson

It's important for us to talk about the correct approach to guessing on the SAT, because most untrained test-takers go about it in ways that don't help their scores as much as possible.

Let's start with the most basic fact: the SAT has no wrong-answer penalty. In other words, the test doesn't take any points away from you if you answer a question incorrectly, instead of just leaving it blank.¹

With that in mind, you should always mark an answer to every question on a section before time runs out, even if you're just randomly choosing an answer. It can't hurt you, and there's a chance it could help.

Most untrained test-takers realize this on their own . . .

. . . and that's about where they stop thinking about SAT guessing altogether, unfortunately.

As a result, most people develop the habit of just putting down their "best guess" right away on any question they can't answer. For most untrained test-takers, this eventually bleeds into a general approach of marking down their first hunch on any question they see.

Even though this approach is very popular, it can still be a huge mistake, lowering your score for the following reasons:

- It ignores the fact that every official SAT question has a correct answer that's inarguable and totally predictable once you know how the test actually works.
- It ignores the SAT's habit of intentionally misleading people who only understand a small part of a question.

Let's explore those reasons in more detail, because it's very important to understand them if you're going to maximize your score.

Don't Forget that Every Real SAT Question has Exactly One Correct Answer.

Remember that every right answer on the SAT must be bulletproof, and that there's always exactly one correct answer, and that the correct answer is undeniably right, according to the rules of the test—no matter how strange it might seem to an untrained test-taker.

If you forget this fundamental idea, you may end up being tempted to abandon your training when you face a challenging question that you can't quite figure out right away. You might let yourself decide that this one question is the exception, and that two or three of the answers are all equally valid in this one case. Then you might start to doubt or abandon the strategies you've learned as you go through the rest of the test, causing you to end up with a much worse score than you could have achieved if you'd stuck to the rules.

So if you find yourself guessing on something, you have to remember that it's NOT because there's something wrong with the question that makes it impossible to answer with certainty, and it's NOT because the strategies you learn in this Black Book don't work. If you find yourself wanting to guess on a question, it's because there's something about this question that you just aren't seeing. It might be a word you don't really know, or it might be a math concept that you've forgotten, or a complicated sentence you don't quite understand. It might even just be that you're getting flustered and forgetting something important about how the question should work.

That's fine—it happens at least a few times to every single person who takes the SAT. And the way the test is designed, you can be totally stumped a few times and still get a great score, or even a perfect score. There's no need to beat yourself up about being unable to figure out a question. Just make sure you don't lose faith in your training simply because you're unable to execute that training sometimes.

So, for a trained test-taker, guessing should NEVER be the first instinct on a standardized test. You need to maintain a disciplined approach to every real SAT question you encounter, because that's the only way to make sure you attack each question using the principles in this Black Book—which, in turn, is the most effective way to maximize your score.

At this point, I know it might still be difficult to adjust to the fact that every real SAT question must follow certain rules you can learn, because it's so tempting to say that a difficult question "just doesn't follow the rules." But once you do adjust to the right way of thinking about the test, you'll have the comfort of knowing you can't really be surprised on test day—you can only be momentarily confused from looking at something the wrong way. We'll see more proof of this as we proceed with your training, and in the walkthroughs later in this book.

Of course, if you've been trying to figure out a tough SAT question and you've got no idea what to do, then you should eventually guess, rather than leave the question blank. But guessing is a last-ditch option, and it shouldn't change your mindset or mess up your overall game plan for the rest of the test. On top of that, there are specific ideas you should keep in mind if you have to guess on the SAT—and they're not things that most untrained test-takers ever think about.

That leads us into the other big problem with the normal approach to SAT guessing.

¹ At the time of this writing, the SAT Subject Tests *do* penalize you for missing a question instead of leaving it blank, so make sure you keep that in mind when you take your Subject Tests!

Don't Forget that the SAT is Designed to Lead You to Wrong Answers if You Don't Understand a Question.

As we'll see in more detail later on in this Black Book, the SAT is intentionally designed so that wrong answer choices often seem like the right answer to people who don't know how to approach a particular question. In other words, the very thing that keeps you from understanding a question in the first place is also the thing that's likely to attract you to a wrong answer if you decide to guess.

When untrained test-takers come to a question they're not sure about, they usually just put down the first choice that looks appealing to them, and move on to the next question—and this often means that they fall for a trap somewhere in the question, as we'll see in my walkthroughs of official SAT questions later on.

Instead of immediately guessing when a question can't be answered right away, a trained test-taker knows that she has to keep the design of the test in mind, and try to work around the issue that prevented her from immediately identifying the correct answer in the first place. This gives her a much better chance of correctly understanding how the question follows the rules and patterns of the SAT, which gives her a much better chance of answering the question correctly than she would have if she made a guess based on a poor understanding of the question.

Here are some guidelines of the kinds of things that tend to get overlooked when you can't figure out which choice is correct. I've broken them up by section. (Of course, we'll go into much more detail with instructions and examples of these ideas later in this book.)

Reading

- Are you reading the wrong part of the passage?
- Have you misunderstood, misread, or overlooked a word or phrase in the prompt, answer choice, or passage?
- Have you made an everyday assumption that isn't actually supported by the text?

Writing and Language

- Did you misread or overlook part of the underlined portion of the text?
- Did you misread or overlook part of an answer choice?
- Is it possible that the question involves a grammar or punctuation rule you haven't considered?
- Is it possible that a sentence before or after the underlined part of the passage might contain a parallel phrase that indicates which answer choice is correct?

Math

- Did you misread the prompt, answer choices, or diagram?
- Did you make any calculation mistakes? (Remember that it's still possible to make a mistake when you use a calculator—you might mis-key, for example.)
- Could the question involve a math concept you haven't considered? (Remember that the question might involve concepts that are directly related to the concepts in the question and the answer choices—but the question can't require you to know calculus, for example.)

Very often, a trained test-taker will remember to refer to elements of her training like the ones I've sketched out above, and then actually be able to identify the mistake she made when she first saw the question. From there, it's often possible to identify the correct answer to the question, rather than try to make a misguided guess.

Of course, it can sometimes happen that a trained test-taker will be unable to figure out the correct answer to a question with total certainty, no matter how hard she tries. In those circumstances, she should still mark an answer before time runs out, for obvious reasons . . . but the best way to pick which choice you'll commit to may not be what you'd expect. This is a good time to talk about the different ways to guess on the SAT.

The Recommended Approach to Guessing on the SAT

These are the two main approaches to SAT guessing:

- Hunch guessing
- Constant guessing

Let's explore them in more detail.

Hunch Guessing: The Most Common Approach

Hunch guessing is exactly what it sounds like: choosing an answer based entirely on your subjective assessment of which choice feels right to you, based on what you think you understand about the question. This approach tends to result in wrong answers for a lot of untrained test-takers, largely because it keeps them from working to understand how a difficult question follows the rules and patterns of the SAT, and because the College Board likes to include wrong answer choices that seem tempting to test-takers who don't fully understand the question.

But hunch guessing can be a useful strategy for some trained test-takers! There are two general types of test-takers who can benefit from hunch guessing:

- Test-takers who lack the confidence to know for sure that they're right, even though they're well trained.
- Very high-performing trained test-takers who have developed reliable instincts about how the SAT works. These test-takers usually only feel the need to guess once or twice per section, and can often intuitively identify the correct answer to a tough question even if they feel like they've overlooked a key piece of the question that would make them certain.

In a moment, we'll talk about how you can find out whether you should employ hunch guessing or not.

Constant Guessing: The More Reliable Approach?

One way to avoid being influenced by the question and answer choices—and possibly picking the wrong answer as a result—is the technique of “constant” guessing. In this kind of guessing, once we've gone through our passes and answered every question we can handle with confidence, we then go back before time runs out and mark the same answer choice to every single skipped question. For example, we might mark all (A)s, or all (C)s. It doesn't matter which choice we pick; the goal is just to remove any kind of conscious interference from the process of guessing, and hope that random chance will cause us to get about 1/4 of our guesses right (since multiple choice questions on the SAT have four answer choices).

A lot of test-takers dislike constant guessing at first because it often involves marking down answers that seem like they must be wrong. But that's part of the process, and actually part of the rationale: when we use this approach, we're deliberately acknowledging that we don't understand the questions we're guessing on, and we're deliberately opening ourselves up to the possibility that answers might be correct even if we don't understand why.

Guessing Wrap-Up

With hunch guessing, the hope is that a test-taker will somehow figure out the answer without understanding a question, and the result is often that the test-taker misses all the questions he guesses on; with constant guessing, the hope is that random chance will allow us to mark correct answers for a predictable fraction of the questions we can't figure out.

As we've discussed, different guessing approaches will work better for different test-takers. The following key factors will influence the best approach for you on test day:

- Your level of training and awareness of how the SAT works as a test.
- Your level of confidence in the choices that you mark as correct answers.
- Whether your general intuitions about a particular question tend to be reliable.

Most untrained test-takers use the hunch-guessing approach on nearly every question, never even realizing that it's possible to know for sure which choice will be correct if we understand the rules and patterns of the SAT. This heavy reliance on hunch-guessing will nearly always result in a low-to-average score on any standardized test.

For most (but not all) trained test-takers, constant-guessing will result in at least as many correct answers as hunch-guessing will.

The only real way to know which approach is most likely to boost your score on test day is to experiment with each approach during your training, and see which one works best for you—that is, which one causes you to choose the correct answer more often when you guess.

A Critically Important Note on SAT Guessing

As we've discussed in other parts of this book, third-party questions from well-known test prep companies often break the actual rules and patterns of the real SAT, which can sometimes make it easier to hunch-guess your way to a correct answer on those fake questions. This is why it's **EXTREMELY IMPORTANT** that you test out your guessing with real SAT questions written by the College Board, and **NOT** with third-party questions written by other companies!

Time Management on Test Day

I recommend you read this section carefully, even if you feel like you don't need help with time management right now. My experience with students has shown me that everyone can improve their time management to some degree—no matter how good they think they already are when it comes to that aspect of testing performance—and improving your time management on test day is one of the fastest and easiest ways to raise your score.

We'll start by discussing the key underlying concept to keep in mind as you make decisions on test day. Then we'll go over the general process I recommend on test day in order to decide which question you should be answering at any given time. Finally, we'll discuss some other aspects of time management that might still be an issue after you've tried to implement everything else.

Remember that Time is an Investment.

We always want to spend our time in the ways that are most likely to increase our score in the most efficient way. For example, we don't want to spend 90 seconds on a question that seems difficult to us if we could have spent those 90 seconds correctly answering 2 or 3 questions that seem easier to us. If we have time to go back and try the harder question later, instead of just guessing on it, that's great—but we should take care of the ones we can answer more quickly first.

All of this leads to the following conclusions:

- We want to invest time in questions that we'll be able to answer correctly.
- We want to avoid working on questions that we'll end up having to guess on anyway.
- If we're not sure about an answer, we should use the guessing strategy that works best for us (for more on the issue of guessing on the SAT, see "Guessing on the SAT" on page 33 of this Black Book).

Now that we've discussed some key ideas underlying time management, let's talk about some ways we can apply them practically.

Answer Questions in the Order You Choose, not in the Order They're Presented.

Most untrained test-takers answer questions in the order that the College Board chooses to present them, instead of prioritizing the questions they find easier. This is almost always a bad idea—sticking to the College Board's order can't possibly *help* your score, and the only way it could fail to *hurt* your score is if you're so good at the SAT that you know you'll finish every question quickly and correctly . . . in which case you wouldn't need to be reading this Black Book in the first place.

So instead of just accepting the order that the College Board chooses for its questions, we should decide on our own whether to answer each question as we first encounter it, or skip it for the moment. To help us make that decision, we should keep in mind the fundamentals of time management:

- Every question within a section has the same potential impact on your score.
- Working on a question and then having to guess on it is usually a waste of time.
- Getting a question wrong is also a waste of time.

When we first come to a question, we shouldn't assume that we have to try to answer it right away. We're the ones who decide what we'll work on next, not the College Board. Instead of just diving right in and trying to find a solution, we should read the question and decide quickly if we think we'll be able to find the correct answer with total confidence in a fairly short time. My general rule of thumb is that I give myself 10 seconds to see if I can figure out how to arrive at an answer in 30 seconds or less. In other words, I spend 10 seconds reading through the question and trying to figure out how I could solve it in under 30 seconds. If 10 seconds have gone by and I still have no idea how to attack the question, then I skip it for the moment. I can always come back to it later if I want to, and I'll definitely mark some kind of guess for the question if I can't figure out the answer before time expires, but it's silly to invest more time in the question now, when I could be working on other questions that would be quicker and easier for me. I always keep in mind that every question in the section has the same impact on my score, so I should ideally be working on the easiest unanswered question at any given moment.

Remember that SAT Questions are Designed so Trained Test-Takers can Answer them Quickly—Usually in Under 30 Seconds.

As we've discussed in general, and as you'll see in more detail when we get into the section-specific training and walkthroughs, the SAT is actually a relatively simple and repetitive test once you understand its design. The SAT isn't interested in making us work out complicated solutions to advanced questions, because those kinds of skills are already measured in classroom settings or even on AP tests; instead, it's interested in seeing how quickly we can diagnose a question, identify the key information on the page, and apply the most efficient solution to arrive at the right answer. Questions are generally designed so that test-takers who know the unwritten rules of the test can answer them quickly. So if we know how the test works and we're still having a hard time answering a question, then we've probably misread or misunderstood some key element of the prompt, answer choices, or other information on the page; in these situations, continuing to spend a lot of time on the troublesome question is unlikely to yield results in the way that, say, spending more time on a complicated physics question in school is often the only way to arrive at the correct answer.

In general, I find that trained test-takers can expect to work through a question in less than 30 seconds if all goes well—in fact, people often find they can work through certain types of question, such as relatively easy Math questions or Writing and Language questions, in 10 seconds or less. Of course, this doesn't mean that you're guaranteed to get a question wrong if you need more time, or that you should feel bad if you routinely take longer than 30 seconds to answer certain questions. I'm just mentioning this idea to help you understand how the test is designed and what the rhythm of working through the questions efficiently can feel like.

All of this leads to the next idea, which is VERY important, and which most test-takers don't seem to realize:

Approach Each Section in Multiple Passes—Probably More than Two.

I've mentioned the idea of skipping questions if we don't think we'd be able to answer them with certainty, but there's a bit more to this idea than we've discussed so far.

A trained test-taker should approach a section of the SAT with the expectation of doing at least three or four passes through the section. This allows us to be fairly certain that we're not wasting time on questions that are more challenging for us when we could be scoring points on easier questions that we haven't seen yet.

Here's the basic idea—of course, you should feel free to modify this as you see fit, but this is roughly how I divide up the passes when I take a standardized test:

First Pass: Low-Hanging Fruit and Information-Gathering

I have two primary goals in mind the first time I go through a section of the SAT:

- I want to mark down correct answers for all the questions I feel I can work through pretty quickly and easily.
- I want to get an idea of what the harder questions look like.

I start the first pass by reading the first question on the section. If I can figure out a quick, easy way to attack the question and find the answer, then I do that—making **EXTREMELY** sure, as always, that I don't take the question for granted and fall for some kind of trick that causes me to mark the wrong answer. If I've looked at the first question for 10 seconds or so and I still don't feel like I have an idea of how to find the answer, then I skip it. I can always come back to it in a later pass if I want, or eventually guess on it.

After I handle the first question, either by finding the answer quickly and easily or by deciding to skip it for the moment, I go on to the second question, and repeat the process: if I look at the question for 10 seconds, and I think I can answer with total certainty by working on the question for another 30 seconds or less, then I do; if not, I skip it and save it for later.

I repeat this process until I've gone through every question on the section.

After the first pass, I've marked correct answers to all the questions that seemed pretty easy to me . . . and I've also put my eyes on *every single question on the section*, even if it was only to glance at the question and decide quickly that it was something that probably required more time than I wanted to spend on my first pass.

I'm going to use my knowledge of the various questions on the section when I do my next pass.

Second Pass: Questions that Require a Little More Thought

Keeping in mind what I saw during my first pass, I go back to the beginning of the section and find the first question that I skipped during my first pass. I read it a bit more carefully and think about it a bit more deliberately than I might have done on my first pass, when I was just trying to answer the questions that seemed obvious to me.

Just like on the first pass, I skip or answer each question, and I don't let myself get too bogged down on any one question; it's just that, now, I'm more willing to invest a few extra seconds trying to figure out how to approach a question than I was before. (Again, I'm **NOT** willing to spend several minutes on a single question, because I know that the College Board never sets up a question in a way that would require a trained test-taker to work on the question for several minutes. I'm willing to spend more time analyzing the wording of a question, the relationships among the choices, and the other things we consider as trained test-takers, but I still know that when I figure out how to execute a solution, that solution will usually take less than 30 seconds per question.)

Unlike my first pass, though, I have some idea of what the other questions on the test look like when I go through my second pass, and I use that information to help me decide which questions I should skip again for a later pass, and which of the remaining questions seem easier to me. I let that knowledge guide me.

I always keep in mind that my goal at any given moment is to invest my time in the activities that are most likely to result in getting me the most points in the least time, which generally means answering the remaining questions that seem quickest and easiest to me, and making sure I don't make any careless errors.

When I've reached the end of my second pass, the only questions left unanswered are the ones that seem the most challenging, because I've now looked through the whole section twice and still decided not to attack them yet. Now it's time for the third pass.

Third Pass: Remain Upbeat and Remember Your Training

Most untrained test-takers would be very discouraged at the thought of focusing on the questions that seemed hardest initially, but we know two things that untrained test-takers don't know:

- The College Board generally makes questions seem challenging by using test-design principles that make the test seem harder than it is, not by writing questions that actually require advanced knowledge.

- On most days we can miss or leave blank a handful of questions and still get an elite score if everything else is answered correctly. This means we never need to get flustered about a few questions that seem extra hard to us, as long as we're careful to answer all the other questions correctly.

So on the third pass through the test, we need to keep in mind that our goal is basically to identify the unanswered questions that we're most likely to be able to answer correctly with a little extra attention and reflection in the time we have left. In general, these will be the questions that contain words and concepts we feel like we're familiar with, as opposed to questions that include phrases we may not recognize—but it's important to keep in mind that you'll sometimes find you can work out the meaning of an unknown phrase if you stay calm and analyze the parts of the question that make sense to you. (For an example of how this can work, consider question 23 from Section 4 of SAT Practice Test #4, which involves the phrase "standard deviation." Even if a test-taker is uncomfortable with that term, he might be able to work out roughly what it means and then answer the question correctly if he notices that the values in one set of numbers vary significantly more from their average than the values in the other set do. See my walkthrough of that question on page 417, including my note on a way to attack the question if you don't know the term "standard deviation.")

By the time you start this third pass, you're likely to have used up half of your allotted time on the section, or maybe even three-quarters of it, or more. You may only have enough time to expect to answer 5 or fewer additional questions, so it's especially important to tackle the remaining questions in the order that you want. If you feel like the last question on the test is likely to be the easiest remaining question to figure out, then start there. Start this pass on the question that seems like the one that's most likely to result in a correct answer in the shortest possible time, and then go on to the question that seems the next most likely to result in a right answer in the shortest possible time, and so on.

At some point, you may be ready for a fourth pass, either because you've answered all the questions on the section, or you've decided that there are some questions on the section you just won't be able to answer with certainty before time runs out. This is when we might consider shifting our focus a little bit.

Review and Clean-Up Pass

I usually recommend you start your review pass through the section when you've answered all the questions that you think you can answer with certainty, or when there are about 10 minutes left, whichever comes first.

On this last pass, the goal is to go back through all the questions you've answered and make sure that you haven't made any mistakes in the answers that you've marked. Be especially careful to check for all the little kinds of mistakes that the College Board likes to trick us into—stuff like looking at the wrong part of a Reading passage, overlooking the subject of a verb on the Writing and Language section, solving for the wrong variable on a Math question, and so on.

I often like to check my work by seeing if I can figure out the kinds of mistakes the College Board was trying to anticipate with the wrong answers that it set out. If I can do that for a particular question, I can usually be pretty sure I've answered it correctly.

Of course, you should also have been very careful to avoid mistakes during the other passes, when you previously answered the questions, so this last pass usually shouldn't turn up too many mistakes. But we should always be on the lookout for them, because we always need to remember that one of the College Board's main goals is to trick untrained test-takers into answering questions incorrectly even when they think they understand a question. Never forget that rigorous attention to detail is the main thing that separates top-scoring test-takers from everybody else—not advanced knowledge!

After we've reviewed the questions we felt certain about, we may still have some questions on the section that are unanswered. In our last pass before time expires, we'll consider how to guess on those remaining questions.

Guessing Pass

If you find yourself still working on a section with only a few minutes left before time expires, then you'll want to make sure that you mark down an answer for every question on the section, even if you have to guess blindly on some of them, because you'll at least be giving yourself the chance to get lucky on the questions you guess at. (Of course, if you've implemented the ideas in this Black Book and been diligent in your training, you probably won't find yourself guessing blindly at the end of a section—my point is just that you should always make sure to manage your time so that you've marked an answer for every question before time runs out, since there's no penalty for marking an incorrect answer on the SAT.)

There are two main ways to approach guessing on the SAT, and I cover them in "Guessing on the SAT" on page 33 of this Black Book. For now, the important thing to keep in mind is that, as trained test-takers, we need to make sure that we distinguish between questions whose answers we're certain about, and questions when we know we're guessing, so that we don't develop the mindset that the right answer to every question is subjective and up for discussion. That way we can optimize our results from any guessing we need to do.

Make it your Own and Remember What Counts.

As I mentioned earlier, you should feel free to modify this idea of approaching the test in passes, and make it your own. The key thing to keep in mind is that you should always be investing your time in the activities that are most likely to improve your score in the least time, instead of mindlessly tackling whatever the College Board decides to throw at you next.

What about Passages on the Reading Section and the Writing and Language Section?

Both the Reading Test and the Writing and Language Test feature questions grouped around separate passages, which can complicate the idea of approaching the test in passes for some test-takers: they wonder whether they should decide to skip individual questions, or to skip all the questions for an entire passage if they find the passage difficult in general.

As it turns out, some test-takers will do better when they skip an entire passage altogether, and some will do better when they skip individual questions. The only real way to know for sure what works for you is to experiment with how you structure your passes during your practice sessions.

Personally, I generally prefer to save individual questions for later passes, because my approach to the Reading and Writing and Language sections involves treating each question as its own issue, rather than lumping them together with other questions about the same passage. As you'll see when we get into the training for those kinds of questions, I generally approach each one by reading the prompt, finding the relevant part of the passage, and then using my knowledge of the SAT's design to identify the correct answer based on the relevant text. Because I understand how the test works, I know that we never need to keep an entire passage in mind when we answer an individual question about that passage. Once you learn the proper way to approach the test, you'll understand why this is so, and you'll probably prefer to decide whether to skip a question without considering which passage it refers to. Still, some test-takers just prefer to work on all the questions for a passage anyway, even when they understand that it isn't technically necessary. If that's what works best for you, then that's what you should do.

You may also wonder whether to do multiple "mini-passes" within the questions for a given passage, or to just go through all the questions for all the passages before coming back to the beginning of the whole section. The answer is basically the same—either approach can work fine. Just try each one out in practice and go with whichever works better for you.

A Few More Things to Keep in Mind

Below, I'd like to address a few other important considerations when you approach the test in this way.

Don't Mis-bubble the Answer Sheet!

As you're skipping questions and working in passes like this, it's important to make sure that the answers you do fill in are marked in the proper place on your answer sheet. For example, if you skip question 17 to work on question 18, make sure that you mark the answer for 18 next to the 18 on your answer sheet—not next to the 17. This idea of working in passes will save you a lot of time and frustration if you do it right, but if you end up having to erase a bunch of answers and re-enter them, you'll undo a lot of the benefits. So pay attention, and make sure you're always marking each answer next to the right number.

Don't Lose Track of Time.

As we've discussed, the idea of approaching the test in passes is an essential part of optimal test-taking, because it allows us to make sure we invest our time in ways that are mostly likely to get us more points. But we still have to make sure we move through each pass with an appropriate sense of urgency. Sometimes, finishing a pass can make us feel like we're done with the section overall, because we find ourselves considering how to answer the last few questions of the section much earlier than untrained test-takers will see them. But it's important to remember that we're not expecting to answer every question when we complete a pass! We're just looking for the easiest remaining questions on each pass, even though it might feel like we're completing the section multiple times. So we can't take breaks, even though it might be tempting to pause sometimes. When I finish one pass, I go right back to the questions that are still unanswered and start the next pass, and I repeat this process until time is called—even after I've finished answering the questions, I keep re-checking my work, because I know how important it is to make sure I avoid mistakes.

Mistakes will Undo Your Hard Work. Don't Make Them.

You've probably noticed by now that I constantly remind you of the importance of avoiding small mistakes. This is because every wrong answer costs you in two ways:

- You lose the time you invested in the question, which you could have invested in a question you would have answered correctly.
- You lose the opportunity to mark a correct answer for the question you got wrong.

So when you're going through your passes, you want to make sure to remain thorough and diligent on the questions that you answer, because it doesn't help you to work on a question and get it wrong.

Similarly, you should take your final review and guessing passes seriously, because correcting a question that you'd previously marked wrong is just as valuable as marking a correct answer on a blank question.

Other Time-Management Issues

Up until now, we've been discussing general time-management strategies that apply to all trained test-takers. But you may still feel that you have other concerns when it comes to timing, and we'll address some of those now.

This approach might make sense if most of the questions on a given section were very similar to one another in terms of subject matter, difficulty, and complexity . . . but they aren't. Some questions will naturally take you 10 or 15 seconds to figure out with total certainty (especially as you get better at implementing the strategies in this Black Book, which you'll see in the question walkthroughs later on). In these situations, it would be silly to spend extra time staring at a question once you've checked your solution and made sure you're right. On the other hand, sometimes you'll misunderstand a question, or keep making a small mistake that causes you not to arrive at any of the answer choices, or you'll have some other issue on a question that might cause you to skip it twice and then finally be forced to guess on it, and you'll end up spending a total of two minutes or more on one question. For these kinds of questions, it makes no sense to try to cram all of that thinking into an arbitrary time limit.

So the smart way to approach the SAT is to realize that some questions take much less time than average, and some questions might take you more than a minute or two. You should try to handle every question as quickly as you can without sacrificing accuracy—whether that means solving it on your current pass, saving it for later, or deciding to skip it altogether. If you keep this attitude, you'll find that the questions you answer quickly will help you have enough time to devote extra energy to the occasional question that stumps you in the later passes.

Analyze and Adjust Your Performance.

If you're still having timing issues, you may need to do some analysis on the specific questions that are slowing you down. When you practice with real test questions, make a mark next to questions that take you a lot of time. Go back to them after your practice session is over, and try to identify the elements they have in common that made them take so long. Every test-taker has different triggers that might cause him to spend more time than necessary on some questions, and your goal is to figure out what causes it to happen to you. You might think about issues like the following, just as examples:

- Do you have trouble reading the prompt carefully if it involves more than two or three lines of text?
- Do you re-check work three or four times on each question, even after you're sure you haven't made a mistake?
- Do you panic when passages involve figures?

Try to pinpoint the kinds of things that generally slow you down. Then do some untimed review of relevant practice questions from the College Board, along with the walkthroughs from this Black Book, and really analyze and break down the aspect of solving that question that takes you the most time. Then, keep in mind what you've learned when you do your next timed practice, and try to modify the behavior that was costing you extra time before.

Breaking down your performance like this, and thinking about how you react to different elements of official practice questions from the College Board, can give you some insights into where you should focus as you try to increase your speed. For example, if you find that certain calculations take a lot of time for you to do by hand, consider using your calculator a little more; if you find that you're frequently re-reading long blocks of text, focus on trying to absorb all the necessary information in one or two tries. You'll find that identifying the causes of your issues as precisely as you possibly can will make it a lot easier to figure out the likely solutions to your problems.

On the Reading and Writing Sections, Remember that We Never Need to Memorize Every Detail in a Passage.

Some test-takers have a difficult time accepting the fact that the rules and patterns of the SAT prevent the College Board from writing questions that would require test-takers to remember and understand an entire passage at once. This causes them to spend much more time and energy than necessary on trying to keep an entire passage in their head, instead of identifying the small portions of any individual passage that are actually relevant to a particular question. As we'll see later on in the training for questions on both the Reading section and the Writing and Language section, and as I'll demonstrate in the walkthroughs for those question types, we never need to understand an entire passage at once to answer a question—in fact, we generally don't need to read any passage all the way through if we don't want to.

On Math Sections, Remember that the College Board Rewards Us for Finding Informal Solutions.

Sometimes, a test-taker will waste time unnecessarily writing out extra steps to a solution as though she were going to submit the work to a teacher, forgetting that the College Board will only grade her on the bubbles she fills in on the answer sheet. In fact, as we'll see in the walkthroughs in this Black Book, the fastest solutions to many questions don't involve formulas, or even written solutions at all.

If you find yourself writing out a lot of steps for most questions, then give yourself permission to be more efficient, and focus on finding answers without doing so much writing. As we'll discuss in more detail later on, these solutions might involve analyzing the answer choices as part of the question, using a calculator, noticing a shortcut that's possible because of a diagram, and so on.

Consider Petitioning the College Board for Accommodations.

If you've been working on implementing the ideas in this Black Book, and particularly in this section, but you're still feeling totally overwhelmed by the time limits on the SAT, then you may want to consider contacting the College Board for special timing accommodations. The requirements of the conditions for getting these accommodations can change at any time (as can the nature of the accommodations themselves), so I won't discuss them here. If you're interested in more information on these accommodations, you can look them up on the College Board's website, or ask a teacher or guidance counselor for advice.