

ACT CHEAT SHEET

ALL SECTION STRATEGY:

- 1) Always put an answer. You aren't penalized for guessing.
- 2) Pace yourself. You can't run out of time, and each section is timed. Use a watch! (But not a smart watch... they aren't allowed) And don't let one question get you down.
- 3) Approach additional material correctly:
 - a. Don't read English or science passages first—but read if you need to.
 - b. DO read Reading first unless you don't get it.
 - c. DO read math questions first unless there is a diagram or 3-part question.
- 4) On English, Reading, Science: narrow, then investigate deeper. Think fast then slow. Often going through answers and eliminating the obviously wrong ones first makes investigating possible answers easier. If you go too deep too fast, you'll run out of time.
- 5) Try to find the **PERFECT** answer (in the passage, in the reading, in the chart) before looking at available choices! If your perfect choice isn't there, open your mind, and don't pick what looks closest—if it's missing a comma and you would have put a comma, be suspicious. Don't fall into power of suggestion.
- 6) **Use the answers.** Yes this is the opposite strategy of the last one—but sometimes when you're stuck, the answer lies in trying different tactics or perspectives. Shifting from one strategy to another keeps you nimble, looking at the problem from all angles – able to figure out the solution from whatever perspective it is best seen. The more ACT tests you take, the more you'll know when to employ which strategy first. Sometimes it's a matter of trial and error.

ENGLISH SECTION: 7 BASIC STRATEGIES

1. Don't Read Everything!

This is not the reading section—it's the English section. You don't actually have to read the whole passage to get everything right, and you shouldn't.

The best way to approach the questions in this section depends on the type of question. There are two types of questions on this portion of the exam:

1. Questions without "question stems"
2. Questions with "question stems"

A question stem is basically a question itself. For example #1 below has a question stem, while #2 does not:

1. Which of the following alternatives to the underlined portion would be **LEAST** acceptable?
 - A. still
 - B. even so
 - C. however
 - D. as a result

2. Baron wanted to confront today's challenges in the field of biogenetics.
 - F. NO CHANGE
 - G. today's challenges
 - H. today's challenges
 - J. today's challenge's

To approach questions with stems: start by reading the QUESTION STEM in its entirety and then the COMPLETE sentence that involves whatever portion you are being asked to consider revising.

To approach questions without stems: start by reading the COMPLETE sentence that involves whatever portion you are being asked to consider revising.

Sometimes this is enough for you to clearly find the answer. If it isn't, that doesn't mean you're done yet. When you're still not sure after reading the complete sentence and stem (if applicable), you must investigate further.

2. How to approach questions when the answer isn't obvious:

The first thing I do, even if I'm not sure what the right answer is, is use process of elimination. I first find what I know doesn't work.

At this point, I stop trusting my ears and I start thinking about the rules. On this test, rules are always a better point of reference than your ears.

Let's take this sentence below:

- Baron wanted to confront today's challenges in the field of biogenetics.
- F. NO CHANGE
 - G. today's challenges
 - H. today's challenges
 - J. today's challenge's

Here I can think that “todays” is not supposed to be plural (and thinking of it as plural sounds really lame anyhow). If I put an apostrophe after an “s” it only means possessive if that word is plural already (or is a proper name that happens to end in “s”). That helps me eliminate H. When I look at F I also notice that “todays” has no apostrophe—so it can’t be possessive—it’s just plural. Again that’s kind of weird – not sure about F. Then I can look at “challenges” – does anything belong to the challenges? No, so J is incorrect also. When I get down to G, I see that it correctly makes the challenges belong to “today” – that is going to be the right answer.

As you can see, I take each case, think about it seriously and roll around the idea of whether it’s right or not in my brain, taking into account the rules I know about the grammar area being tested.

Now maybe that question was easy—here are a few more approach tips that might help.

3. Figure out what is being tested.

If you’re not immediately sure of the answer, it’s a good idea to take stock of what any given question is actually trying to ask you. How do you do this? Look for DIFFERENCES between answer choices.

Are there different placements of apostrophes? Then this question is testing apostrophe use or possessive rules. Are there several forms of a verb? Then the question is asking you to consider either subject verb agreement, verb tense, or possibly verb form.

Remember, too, that sometimes there is more than one grammar rule at play, and differences don’t always denote an error. Oftentimes verb tense errors are coupled with other potential errors—your answer must be fully right, not just half right. What’s worse, some questions have two items that are different, but both are technically ok and something else is actually being tested. Let’s look at an example:

These were objects from a culture different from my own.

- A. NO CHANGE
- B. differently from
- C. differently than
- D. different then

Possibly testing:

- **different VS. differently**
- **from VS. than VS. then**

Here “then” is totally wrong (it’s not the comparison one – THAN is) and “differently” is absolutely wrong. “From” is preferred to “than”—but many students likely don’t know that—and “differently,” in any case, is a much worse offense grammatically.

Here's one more:

"She considers herself to be a classical ballerina, adhering to traditional standards of form and technique."

Which of the following alternatives to the underlined portion would NOT be acceptable?

- A. She believes herself to be
- B. She considers herself being
- C. She considers herself
- D. She thinks of herself as

As you can see, all of these choices use different verbs, "believes," "considers" and "thinks." But that is not what the question is asking about – any of those are fine! It wants you instead to identify what is idiomatically awkward. The point is, just because things are "different" doesn't make one or the other necessarily wrong—but it can be a clue to what the question is testing.

4. Stick to the page. It is your best source of more information.

On the English test, it's important to stick to what is on the page—what is the author conveying with surrounding text—do not turn to your own knowledge of a subject to pick what you think belongs—instead focus on the page. Using outside information (when it comes to the content of the passage) generally leads students to a place of listening and less to the page. Your job is to understand what is being asked and what the author is already saying. This is not a creative exercise.

The only outside information you should use is grammar/style norms. You do need to come to the test with these ideas firmly in your mind. Remember, though, when it comes to style (diction, tone, etc.), the rest of the writing on the page is what you're trying to match more than your personal preference.

This idea comes most into play in "rhetorical strategy" questions—questions that ask whether the author is better off including something or not, moving something, etc. These questions require you to dig further into what has been written—do not take these questions out of context—focus more on understanding what is already there.

5. Two equivalent answers are usually both wrong.

The difference between using a semicolon between two clauses and a period with a capital letter is minimal. "Even though" and "Though" are essentially interchangeable if used as subordinating conjunctions at the beginning of a sentence. In cases such as this, when two interchangeably ideas are given, BOTH are usually wrong answers. When you're in doubt, you can use this concept to help you narrow down your choices. This doesn't happen all that often on the test, but can be of help on some questions.

6. Think fast, then think slow.

The secret to crushing the ACT is to balance your fast and slow thinking skills.

Our fast thinking helps us first narrow our answers down, and then our slow thinking helps us consider each possibility with the rules of grammar in mind, searching for clues in the text if necessary. Do not try to analyze every choice deeply without first quickly narrowing answers. Do not try to “guess” if a first, quick read and hearing things by ear doesn’t get you to the answer. You have to try harder than that.

7. DO. NOT. GUESS.

If you feel yourself “guessing” and you’re finishing the test with time to spare, you need to raise your standards.

Many students assume that if their “fast thinking” analysis doesn’t render a certain answer, that the best solution is to just guess among what remains. NO!!!

You must learn to FIGHT FOR THE ANSWER. Until you’re running out of time on the test, you should NOT be guessing.

Fighting for the answer means engaging in the analytical process.

It means looking back to the passage to find clues that will help you.

It means trying many of the methods that I outline here, and even more in depth in the answer explanations.

If you catch yourself “guessing” you need to stop yourself, apply more techniques, gather more evidence, and then make an informed decision.

TEN WAYS TO “RAISE THE BAR” – AKA HOW TO AVOID GUESSING AND KNOW YOU ARE RIGHT.

There are some general strategies that I apply once I have my choices narrowed.

1. **Look at the context.** Ask yourself which of the two choices seems to fit the rest of the passage – which one matches in terms of tense? Tone? Style? Diction? Is there something in the sentence before or after that makes a detail necessary in this sentence?
2. **Plug in each answer; re-read the WHOLE sentence start to finish**—make sure you’re not leaving any words out, assess the complete situation. If you don’t plug in you might miss a subtle mismatch. Conceptually what you want may not work grammatically. Grammatically correct words may not work logically or stylistically.
3. **Find the “bare bones” sentence.** If you’re still confused, pare down the original sentence you’re dealing with. Cross off any modifying phrases or words (adjectives,

adverbs, etc.) that might be getting in the way of you seeing what is actually going on. Cross out any non-essential phrases or clauses.

4. **If the question has a stem, go back and look for evidence.** If you're being asked about whether something fits or is a good title, etc. you need to know what's going on in the actual passage. Go look for it!
5. **Scour the sentence with grammar rules in mind—**
 - Do the verbs agree with subjects?
 - Is the verb tense correct?
 - Are there any stray phrases?
 - Have you identified what is being tested? If so, what rules apply and how are those working?
6. **Scour the answer choices—**is one missing a word you thought it had? Did you misread something the first time?
7. **If available, re-read the question stem—**did you miss anything in the question?
8. **Figure out what makes the two answers left different—**if they are mostly the same, with only a single difference, this is the source of your issue.
9. If you're still stuck, **reconsider answers you've crossed off—**did you miss something?
10. **Beware of the "Careless Error" traps of the ACT** (We'll get to those soon).

PACING STRATEGIES: The English Section

Most students can finish the English section in time.

If you can't finish on time:

You need to **work on your grammar rules** (i.e. don't trust your ears), be sure you're not reading the whole passage, and be sure you don't let a few questions suck up all your time (**Watch your time**).

If you're in this camp, make your goal to FINISH above all—the English section is not in order of increasing difficulty (like the math)—later questions are often no harder than earlier ones.

Getting through more questions will most likely up your score. If you find yourself guessing but don't always finish, get in the habit of marking the questions you guess on, and coming back to them if you have time later.

If you finish with time left:

If you are finishing the English section EARLY, then you also have some work to do.

Read more context.

Most students who finish this section quickly but still miss many questions aren't paying enough attention to the context.

Many questions on the test CANNOT be answered from a single sentence alone (although some can). Being able to tell the difference between these two types of questions is critical.

In general, questions for which you need to read beyond a single sentence are testing:

- Verb tense (tense must match within a sentence and fit the context of surrounding sentences)
- Pronoun use (pronouns must have an antecedent—that antecedent should be in the sentence before if not in the sentence at play—if you see an ambiguous “it,” “he,” “she” or even “this,” “that,” “those,” or such—you may need to check the sentence before)
- Transitions Words (“however,” “though,” “because,” etc.) or words that change the meaning of a sentence in some way (to understand which meaning fits, you must know context)
- Diction (your word choice needs to match the style of the passage)
- Anything with a question stem (often the stem refers to ideas in the passage, what fits best in context, etc.)

On those questions, if I’m not immediately sure of the answer—or even if I think I am—I may double check the surrounding areas to ensure I’m on track.

The other tip for those who finish early—you need to learn to “**raise the bar**” and fight for your answer choices. Use the troubleshooting tips in my “10 Ways to Raise the Bar” video to fight harder and get more answers right!

Pace yourself in any case!!

When you’re really torn, and you’ve exhausted a few “raising the bar” techniques, mark the question, guess and move on. Do not let one question keep you from finishing. Doing questions out of order on this section isn’t terrible—you may be able to clean things up at the end.

TOP 4 CARELESS ERROR TRAPS

THE ACT’s SNEAKY TRICKS

How the test makers set traps for you in the English section. Avoid careless errors with these tips!

The way the ACT test is formatted can create multiple tricky situations on the exam. If you’re not keen to the test’s format you can easily make careless errors. Be in the know and stop these mistakes before they happen.

1. DANGEROUS PAGE TURNS

Page turns on the ACT can be dangerous. How? Because you’re often reading and evaluating one sentence at a time, and the question numbering comes mid-sentence, if a page turn starts with a capital letter, you may falsely assume you’re at the beginning of a sentence. If a proper name or a capitalized word is at the top of the page, you still need to flip back to the previous page to see if you’ve missed anything. If you don’t, you could easily pick the wrong answer because you can’t see the full sentence structure.

Similarly, don't be so lazy that you don't read the full sentence!! If you're not reading the full sentence for each question (unless you have timing issues), unless you've eliminated something that is always or universally wrong (For example "its' " is never right – it doesn't exist in English) regardless of full sentence structure, you are likely missing out on points.

2. SENTENCE NUMBERING

Often you'll need to put a sentence in a new position in the paragraph—you'll be asked where a sentence is best placed (or even a paragraph is best placed). Remember, QUESTIONS HAVE NUMBERS but SENTENCE NUMBERS look different from question numbers. Whenever I have these questions involving numbered sentences or paragraphs, I make sure I'm looking at the right sentence.

Questions such as these put the question number in a SQUARE BOX. The sentences you will be moving or considering in the question, however, can be the "preceding sentence" (AKA the sentence before the square box) OR a numbered sentence that is not even next to the box (for example "Sentence 2" should be placed...). Sentence numbers are typically in BRACKETS. Be sure to use extra caution with these problems—you are often asked whether something is before or after "Sentence 2" for example—sometimes students get confused and think that "After sentence 2" means "at the [2]" -- numbers come in front of sentences they refer to, not after.

3. WHITE GAPS

Because of the way the ACT is formatted, there are often big white gaps on the page—even in the middle of sentences. These gaps help the test to keep the sentences at left in line with the questions at right. It would certainly be a pain to have to flip pages back and forth constantly on the test—and the white gaps prevent this. However, these gaps can also create confusion. You must know that a gap does not necessarily delineate a paragraph break on the ACT – so on any questions asking about paragraphs (main idea of the paragraph, where should this sentence go in the paragraph, etc.), you must look for **INDENTS** not **WHITE GAPS** to figure out where a paragraph starts or stops.

I know, this sounds stupid. You're probably thinking this is the lamest tip ever. But you would be surprised at how many students make the error of confusing a white gap for the end or beginning of a paragraph.

4. UNDERLINES

Often students get careless when it comes to seeing where the "underlined" portion begins and ends. Paying attention to this technical detail can save you!

BE EXTRA CAUTIOUS—if you are deleting something try reading the whole sentence with that element deleted. If you are replacing something, try replacing the element, just the underlined portion, and reading the whole sentence. Sometimes **the comma** isn't underlined even though you wish it were, or the **"and"** is underlined. BE CAREFUL.

Example: I have went to the store.

(A) gone

(B) went

(C) had went

(D) have been gone

Answer is WENT not GONE – notice both words are underlined! Your ear wants to say “have gone” – but that is not an option!

ACT CONTENT RUNDOWN

5 Question Types that Students MOST COMMONLY Miss:

1. Questions with Stems (Replacement) / Author Choice / Achieve Goal
2. Main Idea Questions
3. Transitions
4. Placement Questions (where should this sentence go?)
5. Verb Tense

1. QUESTIONS WITH STEMS -- REPLACEMENT

First what in the world do I mean by “questions with stems”

Here’s what I mean.

Some tutors call these “Rhetorical Strategy Questions” – regardless, any time you have a question and not just answers, you have to shift mental gears. You cannot continue on with the same set of rules as you did before. This is not a matter of “pick the one that sounds best.” You aren’t looking for the answer with the best style or grammar, even. You’re looking for the answer choice that answers the question in the question stem. Period.

Whenever you have a stem based question **focus on the stem** – it is MOST important.

This goes particularly for questions that are “replacement” focused, i.e. you’re choosing words to insert in the passage. Because the task is similar to what you’re otherwise doing, it can be easy to forget to read the stem.

Here are some example questions:

For plankton tows, we would stand on the bridge while Mom lowered a cone-shaped net that is often used by marine biologists. Then we would patiently wait. After a while, she would pull up the net, and we would go home. Later, we would see her sitting at the kitchen table, peering at a drop of water through the lenses of her microscope from the bottle—watching the thousands of tiny swimming organisms.

Given that all of the choices are true, which one provides information that is relevant and that **makes the rest of this paragraph understandable?**

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) had a specimen bottle attached to its smaller end.
- C) was woven from cotton and nylon material.
- D) was shaped like a geometric figure.

Having tried and failed, my father was unable to make a gardener of me.

Which of the choices best emphasizes how much the father wanted his son to share his avid interest in gardening?

Individual Question

- A) NO CHANGE
- B) Because of my indifference to his hobby,
- C) Contrary to this thinking,
- D) Despite his repeated attempts,

Another way students get tripped up is not realizing they are to select what DOESN'T work rather than what does:

EXAMPLE

However, to many, the most spectacular part of Paris is the Eiffel Tower.

Which of the following alternatives to the underlined portion would NOT be acceptable?

- A) Yet,
- B) Therefore,
- C) Still,
- D) Nonetheless,

2. MAIN IDEA QUESTIONS

A more specific type of question with a stem that many students struggle with is the main idea question. These often come at the end of the passage. I know many of you don't read the whole passage the whole way through when you approach the English section (and I don't recommend doing so!) but when you get to this question you must back up and do some research.

EXAMPLE

Suppose the writer's goal had been to write an essay that outlines the evolution of video games during the 1970's. Would this essay accomplish this goal?

- A) Yes, because it discusses how the Channel F was an innovative milestone in the gaming industry.
- B) Yes, because it describes the contributions of many who revolutionized the video game field.
- C) No, because it focuses on one particular pioneer's accomplishments in the field.
- D) No, because it explains the history of video games from the advent of computing to the present.

There are THREE PLACES I look to find main idea most quickly:

- 1) The title of the passage
- 2) The first paragraph of the passage
- 3) The last paragraph of the passage.

Depending on how much time you have, you can select one or all of these as references. Here's a passage we can look at:

Jerry Lawson: Video Game Pioneer

The first prominent African-American in the gaming industry was Jerry Lawson, a pioneer who created the world's first video game console with interchangeable cartridges called the Fairchild Channel F. Prior to his invention, video games were built directly into the hardware of a console; individual cartridges allowed for more gaming options, because multiple consoles were no longer necessary to get different games. The Channel F was a huge step forward for the gaming industry.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Lawson moved to California to pursue a career at Fairchild Semiconductor, a manufacturing company that made transistors and microchips for electronics. Lawson climbed the corporate ladder, quickly becoming the Chief Hardware Engineer and director of engineering and marketing for the company's video game division. He was one of two black members of the Homebrew Computer Club, a meeting group for computer enthusiasts. Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, the founders of Apple, were also in the club.

Lawson developed the Channel F throughout the early 70s and Fairchild released it in 1976 for \$169.95 – equal to \$700 dollars today! 250,000 units were manufactured and sold. The system has very simple graphics with a basic color scheme consisting of red, green, and blue. The Channel F comes with two built-in games, Tennis and Hockey. The rest of the 27 games developed by the company are on cartridges, which the company called videocarts. The

genre of the games varies: there are sports, action, trivia, puzzle, and gambling games. One of the more popular games, Alien Invasion, is like a simpler version of Galaga.

The Channel F was not particularly successful because Atari released a similar console called the 2600 under a year later. Atari's brand was better known than Fairchild Semiconductor, so Atari is credited with popularizing the use of ROM cartridges. Despite that fact, without Jerry Lawson's ingenious invention, video games would not be the same today. A month before his death, he received an industry pioneer award from the International Game Developers Association, commemorating the advancements he made with the Fairchild Channel F.

REMEMBER!!

TITLES are your friends. They help distinguish **main ideas** – pay attention to them when you have question stems asking for broad main idea type information.

3. TRANSITIONS

Transitions are always best chosen by reading context—read entire paragraph above and below—figure out which answer has a piece that transitions BOTH out of the first and INTO the 2nd if at all possible. Remember you are looking for TWO ideas in a transition, not just one. ALSO—for one-word transition questions, try creating a blank and filling in that blank with the most appropriate transition word you can think of.

4. PLACEMENT OF SENTENCES OR PARAGRAPHS

Look for CLUES that create a logical sequence. These can be pronouns such as HE or SHE or THEY, referring words such as THOSE or THAT, and sequential events (in the morning, years later, first). These references can occur BOTH in the piece you're moving around OR in the pieces you're looking to move next to OR between two pieces you shouldn't split up. We want all ideas to make sense in position—not just one or a couple.

The other clue to be aware of with sentence placement is often the idea of transitional words and contrast—we say “however” to contrast with an idea before it—the order of the sentences needs to reflect that concept, too. Any word that indicates continuation (furthermore, likewise, additionally, etc.) or contrast (but, however, even so, while, etc.) can be used to infer where certain ideas should go.

5. VERB TENSE

These types of questions can be tricky! Remember to look out for not just what you think sounds right, but anything that COULD be right. Then compare the two answer choices. Tiny details can trip you up on these—sometimes UNRELATED to verb tense—sometimes because of what is underlined (i.e. is the helping verb underlined?). In the text, be sure to check sentences above and below (for tense consistency) and **think about ideas such as parallelism and logic**. Sometimes a verb tense is wrong because it actually makes the sentence awkward or illogical.

Check 2 things:

1. Time cues (words like “already, then, before, earlier, now, etc.” dates, chronological cues)
2. Other verbs in the sentence / paragraph

EXAMPLE

American military officials have been using cumbersome machines to encode and relay information during battles.

F. NO CHANGE

G. had

H. would have

J. will have

Here we don't have enough information to answer the question from the sentence alone. HAVE/HAS cannot be used as helping verbs when you are in the deep past (anyone who isn't alive can't take these helping verbs). They also don't work if you have a specific date in the past mentioned.

COMMAS – a few quick comma rules:

- 1) Commas are more flexible than most types of punctuation—focus more on what isn't allowed than what is.
- 2) Think—is this non-essential or essential? Occasionally clauses or phrases that are non-essential will be treated as if they are essential and that is the only reason one answer is better than the other – WRONG (based on ideas, not on syntax): The dogs you see are pack animals. (This would mean that ONLY VISIBLE dogs are pack animals, implying that invisible dogs may not be...) RIGHT: The dogs, you see, are pack animals.
- 3) No commas should ever separate a subject and verb UNLESS they form a non-essential phrase or clause-- a “comma sandwich” (that is removable).

- 4) In pairs, commas separate out removable elements in most cases (exceptions include lists)—to test if they are correctly placed, remove the entire section and read—does it work?
- 5) Commas should never be paired with a “—” if they are intended to delineate non-essential elements. In those cases, dashes go with dashes, commas go with commas. The exception would be if the comma is motivated for a different reason than the dash—for example, in this sentence, the comma after “for example” is setting off “for example” from the rest of the text that follows, but isn’t a separator from the first part of the sentence. This is not a “sandwich” of dashes or commas. As such, this above combination IS acceptable.
- 6) Though conjunctions mid sentence should generally be accompanied by a comma if we have CLAUSE+CLAUSE, if that comma is missing it is NOT the worst thing in the world. It’s preferable but not required. This goes for conjunctions such as “because” or “while” as well as FANBOYS.
- 7) Avoid commas after prepositions when doing so would separate the preposition from its object (WRONG: She has many talents like, her sister. WRONG: She has many talents such as, singing, dancing, and baton twirling.
- 8) Lists of **2 items** connected by AND or BUT generally do NOT have commas between them. The only time you need a comma with AND or BUT is when you have CLAUSE+ Comma+Conjunction (FANBOYS) + CLAUSE. Compound subjects, verbs, and items in **pairs** do NOT need a comma near the “**and**”! In very short sentences, CLAUSE / FANBOYS / CLAUSE *may* be acceptable, though it is not preferred.

EXAMPLES

Correct: My dog, an honest cocker spaniel with a kind heart, walks in the grass tepidly **and** drinks from the broken sprinkler that dribbles a puddle on the sidewalk.

Incorrect: My dog, an honest cocker spaniel with a kind heart, walks in the grass tepidly, **and** drinks from the broken sprinkler that dribbles a puddle on the sidewalk.

OK, not ideal (less concise): *My dog, an honest cocker spaniel with a kind heart, walks in the grass tepidly, and he drinks from the broken sprinkler that dribble a puddle on the sidewalk.*

OK, not ideal: I walk and I run. (No commas – ok because the sentence is so short).

- 9) Semicolons are NOT commas and should only be used as comma substitutes in situations of potential confusion and frequent comma use (Paris, Texas; Provo, Utah; etc.)

- 10) Commas go inside quotes: “Yes,” she said. But they go outside on the front end; she said, “yes!” BUT they go after parenthesis unless they’re part of the parenthetical idea. He was late (as, you know, is to be expected), but I didn’t care.
- 11) DO NOT use a comma to offset a term in “quotes” – only to offset direct speech. They called these new animals “ligers.” He said, “I can’t believe it!” If it’s NOT dialogue and in quotations—be careful—**commas are likely wrong**. He explained that these were “pods” of students.
- 12) Beware of “Bad” figurative language and clichés. If it sounds dopey and as if a 3rd grader said it, be on guard. Clear, concise, easy to understand, and similar in tone to the rest of the passage is best. Same with fancy language—too fancy can be wrong.
- 13) Use other wrong answer choices to determine what’s being tested by each question— i.e. if you know choice (A) is redundant and choice (D) is just plain wrong—ask if the two remaining are redundant—one of them likely is. If a choice is hard to understand, ask which of the two remaining is **most clear**. *Which one is easiest to understand and adds the most meaning to the sentence?*

CONTEXT!! If you don’t get something – remember CONTEXT is the best path to figuring it out. That means read more!

MAIN IDEA QUESTIONS AT THE END: Go back – LOOK AT THE TITLE – sometimes that is enough to help you get it right. Otherwise, skim and come up with your perfect answer first—then read EVERY choice just in case. These can be tricky.

WHEN STUCK: Compare two answers—how are they different? Similar? What makes each unique? Break down EACH piece—are more things being tested than just one idea? Is this a verb tense and a punctuation question?

TAKE THINGS LITERALLY AND BE EXTRA CAUTIOUS—if you are deleting something try reading the sentence with that element deleted. If you are replacing something, try replacing the element and reading the whole sentence. If you don’t pay attention you may choose something that you have made assumptions about that aren’t true. Conceptually what you want may not work grammatically. Grammatically correct words may not work logically or stylistically. Sometimes **the comma** isn’t underlined even though you wish it were, or the **“and”** is underlined. BE CAREFUL.

EXAMPLE

I have went to the store.

(A) gone

(B) went

(C) had went

(D) have been gone

Answer is WENT not GONE – notice both words are underlined!

READING

Skim if needed! STOP READING if you get bored or lost and go to questions!

If it helps you—circle / highlight CLAIMS and important content: BUT / ALTHOUGH / CONTRAST signals usually inform you of main or important ideas. Concrete details are impossible to memorize, don't try.

CLAIMS (abstract point of view) come up most often in **EXCEPT / NOT** questions—to do these faster, underline or circle **important claims** as you read. ACT also loves PLACES and TIMES – if you see places / dates these may be tested.

Find evidence! Don't guess—be as sure as you can while moving quickly.

If you can't find the evidence – MOVE ON and do at the end of section or (gulp) end of test if it's bad. Guess. When you guess, pick what sounds most reasonable.

Off vibe / emotionally weird answers are wrong – facts with bad connotations are wrong.

SKIM SMART: First look for numbers or words that are proper names or include capital letters, italics or quotations. When identifying figurative language, remember simile is easiest (like or as).

Once you find a concept in an EXCEPT question, most of the related concepts will be nearby. Read around that section.

Even wrong answers are usually in the text SOMEWHERE – just because you saw it doesn't make it right—BUT one way to help on a tough question is to eliminate wrong answers by seeing that those concepts are referred to in a totally different manner.

ALSO sometimes ideas are clustered—so even if you know something is wrong, if it's available and you know where it is, use that section as a starting place to skim from. Otherwise look for unique words.

Read the question first (on specific line read questions) then go to passage. WORK FORWARDS -- don't look at answers until you go back unless you have a hunch – then narrow.

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING is code for look at the answers.

USE FAST THINKING (on general questions, skim and narrow the field before checking answers).

WORK BACKWARDS (isolate answer choices to gain clarity on their meaning; check EVERY word, imagine what each means independently)

MAIN IDEA wins. If something is more on point with the main idea of the entire piece, it is going to be right. Sometimes VIBE on the 1-3 hardest questions is your best defense.

MATH

General Tips:

DIAGRAMS are almost always accurate if **MARKED**. You almost always are solving for whatever is marked with a “?”. Use info from diagrams before paragraphs b/c it’s faster—then pick up what you need from paragraph.

Three-part problems are all about TMI! **GO TO THE QUESTIONS** and then find what you need. Don’t read everything first!

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING is code for look at the answers. You must consider them—don’t work too long without looking down.

USE YOUR CALCULATOR to give your brain a break. Anything with more than 2 digits (2 digits plus/minus/times 2 digits) I recommend using a calculator.

On anything Trig, remember in a pinch your calculator knows every trig value in the world.

Don’t forget your calculator graphs! You can use graphing to solve for zeros, to look at the shape of a potential graph (trig, conic otherwise) – it’s time consuming but if you’re at the end with time-- do it! (Let it load while you move on).

Multiple Choice Strategies:

- **MAKE UP NUMBERS** to double check on challenging word problems OR when you have variables in the answer choices. Don’t rely on this trick too often, though. It can be slower than solving algebraically.
- Use the answers/Backsolve
- Estimate

Avoiding careless errors:

- Build safety nets: Reread all questions before putting answer on word problems
- **Double check math on problems I know I make careless errors on.** For me, that’s angle problems. Those are ones I might do twice or grab the calculator For you, it may be Exponent distribution, negative signs, long algebra problems etc.

- Know when to shortcut – star things to come back to
- Use calculator programs to double check work or do quadratic equation, midpoint formula, distance formula, etc.
- Use my pencil to underline surprising details, UNITS (feet / minutes / hours)
- Think through concept of word problems before I set up with “more than” “less than” etc. Not afraid to draw pictures
- Better to move fast and be safe—do things the 5th grade way but do them quickly
- Don’t be afraid to list numbers on counting problems, you can speed up later
- Be ready for curve balls #52-60 – if it feels REALLY easy you missed something.
- With squaring both sides of an equation and absolute values **ALWAYS PLUG IN AT THE END** to double check. Both situations can give extraneous solutions.

Timing Tips:

- On word problems, skip to the question
- First 30 in 20
- Questions get harder as you go
- Several strategies for getting your best score
- Avoid “Time Vortex” problems / skip come back

How to learn the content you need (Self-study tips for targeted practice):

Reading / English: **DON’T use outside information.** First look at what is on the page! What you know might not be there. If you can’t find anything, only then turn to common sense.

BREAK IT DOWN: Take things one piece at a time. **CHECK** every detail.

TAKE NOTES: Make a paragraph into easy to reference symbols.

Use the answer choices to help you—they restrict what information you are looking for. Especially on two part problems (YES, blah blah blah, NO blah blah blah) – where the 1st and 2nd halves of the problem are identical in two or more answers.

When asked about **WHY** students did something in an experiment, know you will need a little common sense – the answer may not be obvious. **Go to the experiment set up.**

In **experiments 1, 2, and 3**, the student.....

REMEMBER outside information is sometimes necessary, **BUT** look back first. Sometimes answers are counter-intuitive and supported by details.

If you have a word or term you don’t know – read the paragraph part. If there’s a letter you don’t understand—skim for in paragraph. If you’re told to look at a graph and you don’t get it—read the paragraph part.

UNITS are your friends! If answers have different units, use these to help you understand which is right. AND if you are trying to figure out what is what, use the units as a clue. Units in rate form can actually be a huge tip off on what.

RATES are equations in disguise – PER means divide.

IN EACH SECTION, the questions get harder as you go. Early questions should not require much synthesis—later questions should – or at least should be tricky. If it feels too easy and it's a late question, you may have done something wrong.

GENERAL TIPS

- Use your calculator or paper as a straight edge if you need it on the math / science.
- Eat a good breakfast.
- Sleep the night before.
- Don't bring your cell phone into the room.
- Packing list:
- Bring a dull pencil or three for multiple choice—dull and rounded fill in circles faster.
- Sharp pencil for the essay!
- Have a good eraser handy.
- Charge your calculator or bring extra batteries. (NO TI89 or TI92 or CAS Inspires allowed!!)
- Bring a snack and water.
- Bring a bag to put the snack / water in.
- Bring a watch in case the clock is hard to see (clocks / stop watches that make noise are no no's). ASK before using stopwatch.