

SUPERTUTOR TV: SAT CHEAT SHEET!

Quick Tips & Strategies for the Reading & Writing Sections

PACING TIPS

+Bring a watch. Make sure sound is turned off. I recommend using an analog no sound watch to be safe, and resetting it to noon or 9am at the start of each section. Be sure it has a second hand and marks off each minute. Cheap digital watches can be difficult to silence.

+Have a pacing plan.

Know in advance how much time you have per passage and/or question.

The Reading Section

In the reading section you have five passage sections and 52 question in 65 minutes. This works out to 13 minutes per passage on average. Most passages have 10 questions – two have 11. I recommend trying to pace about 10-12 minutes per passage so you have 5 minutes left at least at the end to review tough questions. Sometimes you'll need 13-15 minutes for the hardest passage or two, and aiming for faster will help on those.

You can also think of it on a per item level, you have:

- +2-3 minutes to read each passage
- +no more than 1 minute per question (on average)

With the reading don't get stuck on a single question. Keep moving and come back.

The Writing Section

For the writing section, you have 35 minutes and 44 questions, typically divided among four 11-question passages. That's 8.75 minutes per passage. As a rule of thumb, try to be finished with an entire passage every 8 minutes. You can check in on your time after finishing each passage/set of questions.

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READING STRATEGIES / APPROACH

- 1) 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, find the one closest to it. VIBE VIBE VIBE – what has the right connotation will win over what seems “logical” or technically correct. You can also replace a key word in the passage with a key word in the answer to see if they vibe out the same.

Don't fall into power of suggestion. Try to divorce your brain from the answer choices to get clarity on what “right” is.

General approach to questions:

- PERFECT ANSWER FIRST! Read questions and try to anticipate answer (don't look down).
- Fast read through all answers and narrow (Yes / No / Maybe)
- Then investigate passage – go back and verify.

- 2) **Isolate 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 tests you take, the more you'll know when to employ which strategy first. Sometimes it's a matter of trial and error. When you isolate answer choices, ask yourself **WHAT DOES THIS MEAN.** Interpret the ideas without thinking about the passage at all. Make that meaning concrete not abstract: if the choice says honor a family member, you might think throw a birthday party for grandma. Get clarity on meaning THEN think back to the passage and what it offers. Find the VIBE.

- 3) **Vibe matters. Zoom out.** The general tone and vibe of the passage and the author are so important on this test. Right answers have the right tone—don't get too caught up on small details or words that are slightly off from what you would have chosen. IF the general gist is right, it may well be right. Zoom out with your mind once you know the perfect answer.

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4) Check every word.

True, vibe matters MOST. But occasionally you'll miss a word that completely changes the meaning of an answer or there is **some odd specific** in an answer that makes it inappropriate. Analyze each word and make sure you understood everything properly. At the same time a noun that's close is probably right if the vibe is right. (A slightly off sound shouldn't deter you from an on-vibe answer). Think about the answer choice deeply, what does it mean? What is your perfect answer? How do they compare? Are they closer than you first realized? Be careful, though, if a specific is contrary to a passage detail, even though the vibe is good, then it is wrong.

A 2nd best answer is often nearly perfect, but ends wrong (ending is most likely part to be wrong.) (Isolate to be sure that the end is off or incomplete or not specific enough).

Also be mindful of words in the question stem: does the question say the author IMPLIES or INDICATES? These words are different. Pay attention! If indicates, you should have clear evidence. Implies will also have specific evidence but it may not be as obvious. Still, infer as little as possible in all cases!

As you check every word, beware of FLAGS, words that the SAT often uses to make answers wrong but tricky.

LIST OF COMMON FLAGS

Beware of these types of words that often make for wrong answers! (FLAGS!)

- Comparisons

- These can be tricky. Remember "good" does not mean "better" and "better" is not necessarily "good" – it could mean less terrible.
- Generally any comparison in an answer must be explicitly stated in the passage. It is extremely rare that you would infer a comparison.
- Also beware of implicit comparisons in words like "growth," "change," etc. Words like "evolve" imply a comparison – things are different now than they used to be before / vs / after can also be a sort of a comparison. These words indicate that something used to be one way and now it is another. If this progression isn't clearly stated in the passage beware!
- Comparisons are RARELY the main idea; only if 50/50 weight is given to each idea in the comparison can the main purpose of a passage be to compare two things.

EXAMPLE:

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The author implies which of the following

- A. Rigid plant cells **are better** at warding off infection than **all** less rigid cells.

Passage says:

Rigid plant cells are **particularly well designed** to ward off infection because of their strong barrier to invaders: the rigid cell wall. Less rigid cells use a different method to dissuade pathogenic virus cells: chemical barriers.

This answer choice at best would be a maybe.

- Time cues, i.e. “long” “for years” “recently”
 - Time cues alone can make answers right/wrong.
- People
 - Make sure you are referring to the right person, species, etc.
- Cause-effect
 - Correlation is not the same as causation. Just because two things occur together or at the same time does not imply one caused the other.
 - Watch out for order—answers sometimes make the effect the cause and the cause the effect.
- Specifics
 - Specifics are dangerous and cannot be inferred. If an answer choice is weirdly specific in a way unsupported by the passage it is wrong. If an answer choice is specific, the passage should clearly indicate the specific.

5) Compare answer choices. Once you’ve narrowed, compare your answers left. In what ways are they the same? Different? Ignore the parts that are the same, or that are clearly correct, and focus only on the differences or on the iffy elements. **ALSO** focus only on parts that are problematic—figure which one is less of a problem. Which one is closer to perfect? Narrow the answers down to just the one or two critical words that will make them right or wrong.

- Line up the corresponding pieces of answer choices—compare verb to verb, consequence to consequence, etc. Weigh each comparison.
- Think more precisely about word choice: dispute / qualify, implies / states, specifics vs. general

6) Be comfortable with vague wording / “not wrong” or mediocre answers.

Occasionally it’s tough to see why the right answer is “right” but easier to see why

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the others are wrong. As long as the answer you choose is vague enough to work, and the specific answers are problematic in some way, you're probably fine. Specifics are often dangerous, and vague but appropriate answers are often correct. Often the best answer is just ok—not perfect.

7) IF you're stuck on one word—really analyze that word and ask if it is kind of close to what you came up with. If it's in the neighborhood of perfect you might be right to choose it. A little bit off but kind of the same vibe is ok (bewildered... confused other option: amazed.) ZOOM OUT, and trust the vibe.

8) With Evidence Pair Questions:

a. ANCHOR YOURSELF to the FIRST QUESTION's QUESTION, Identify the SCOPE of the question and mark KEY WORDS

- i. Biggest mistake: pairing “answers” that don't answer the question**
- ii. Highlight key terms: the quote must mention the key terms OR come after the context of these key terms has been implied.**
- iii. Whatever specifics the question wants to know about should be a point of discussion on behalf of the author in the quotation or the SECTION where you find that quotation – find the right neighborhood given the scope of the question**
- iv. First few sentences of passage are least likely evidence in many cases (they sometimes are right, but then the answer in full must be there, too).**
- v. Just because something is factual doesn't mean it answers the question! True doesn't make it right: just because you found something in the passage doesn't make it an answer to the question. Look for perfect answer first; find closest to perfect.**

b. Know what neighborhood you are “in” and know that evidence must be sufficient to answer the question OR the evidence plus previous information in context (hopefully in the same paragraph) must be sufficient

c. You cannot make very specific conclusions from broad generalizations. You can only get very specific off a generalization if the questions asks for inference or a hypothetical action (WWJD question WW Thoreau do? Those).

d. The answer quotation's ideas and what they support should align with what the author's intended main idea is in the section. / Don't side glean. A side glean is the idea that you get an idea by reading between the lines of a sentence whose purpose is totally different from the purpose that the question is asking about. HUG THE QUESTION!!! Find the section of the

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essay that is directly speaking to that question—it should be about the same concepts.

- e. When in doubt, re-anchor to question stem, i.e. the question itself. Make sure you're answering the question, not just saying something that the passage also says.

9) Don't reread on your first read (general rec / can break it every once in a while)

- a) It might be so hard that questions will be easy and you won't really need to understand it you just need to know kind of where to look
- b) You might waste time understanding something with no questions
- c) You are going to go back later—so wait. Hard to understand is harder to remember.

10) DUAL PASSAGE TIPS

- Always find the “Main Argument” of the author / what's his or her take?
- Double check the order of the passages – make sure you don't mix up which passage is which (one answer always will!!)
- Also be careful not to confuse the author's point of view with the opinions of others that an author might cite, but are not the author's actual perspective.
- For dual passage, the most common question that stumps students is “What would the author do or say?” To answer questions that predict how an author would respond to the other author, you usually want to understand the big picture, main idea argument of that person, not that person's “exception to the rule” argument or concessions that person makes.

11) The Literal Answer is usually wrong.

Sometimes if you take one sentence out of context and don't understand the complexity, the irony, the metaphor, the simile, or the nuance in the passage, you will stumble on an answer that seems to match a little detail you looked back to but interprets it too literally. This choice is wrong!!

12) Function question tips

These are questions that ask about purpose i.e. “The author (does something) in order to....” The answers to these most often align with the passage or portion of the passage's main idea.

Also be sure you answer the question. You're being asked, “what is the point the AUTHOR is trying to make?” not “what can you assume by reading this information?”

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You want to look at **what the purpose of the author was in stating a particular line** NOT what you **can infer from reading that line absent of the context of the passage.**

Ex. In line 45 the passenger checks her watch to indicate:

- A. She's running late.
- B. She feels a kinship with her grandmother.

If the passage somewhere says, "The watch was an heirloom from her grandmother and she can't help but think on grandma constantly, she inherited so many of her treasures," don't assume she's running late! Even if the context is elsewhere, you must always find what is indicated by the passage. Never assume!

13) Main Idea / Central Claim question tips:

- Check out the title of the passage and pre-information in the description—these can help.
- Last sentence > First sentence: Look to the last paragraph for main ideas.
- Title
- First sentence can be deceiving: hook or contrast openings often aren't exactly the main idea. However, sometimes openings do allude to main concepts.
- After contrast signals (but / however etc.)
- Thesis position (end of 1st paragraph or in 2nd paragraph)
- Look for question marks / questions, particularly in 1st column of writing (tend to be the central question). Questions often express the central objective of a passage or experiment.

14) Words in Context: Tips / Process / Approach

The Approach

Step 1:

1. Scribble the word out and come up with a perfect answer – read the whole sentence to understand what you would need to say, and more sentences if necessary.
2. Look for that answer you came up with among the answer choices, and eliminate anything way off base.
3. If more than one seems to work...

Step 2:

1. Isolate your answer choices
2. Imagine what each word means—don't think at all about the passage-- but focus on the meaning of each word.
3. Can you eliminate choices because what they naturally spring to mind is off base or the core of the answer includes connotations that are off?

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Step 3: Think Context

1. Replace (i.e. plug in) the word in context with the answer choice and read the sentence. It should not sound AWKWARD. But sometimes everything sounds awkward... if it changes the meaning of the sentence it won't be right. But if the meaning is pretty close that is right.
2. If necessary read UP and DOWN from the sentence at hand—can you glean more understanding from the surrounding sentences of what the author means or the vibe or connotation the author intends. Can, with a really tough word, you find a repetitive statement of the same idea that the underlined word is in? Can you find a dead ringer context clue? Can you find a parallel construction that is either comparison or contrast—so that you can define the word in comparison or contrast to another word.
3. An arrow in the right direction, but a little weaker/stronger, is often CORRECT—try to understand the overall intention and listen to how it sounds. Does it sound idiomatic or random and awkward?

Step 4:

1. Ask yourself what the scribbled out word means
2. Try to match it up with the closest word to its meaning
3. The harder the word, the more likely this step will work

Here's from my blog—many points already made:

1. Read with a purpose

You have to read actively — know what you're looking for. It's easier to answer questions correctly when you have a general idea of the essay. You don't have to read slowly or too carefully; rather, you need to get a handle on some big elements of the essay. These are some things you need to look for on your first read:

1. **Plot** – Figure out what's going on in the passage. What is it about?
2. **Tone** – Look at the word choice that the author uses. How does it sound? Does it sound exciting, interesting, or happy? Critical, skeptical? Use your senses to try and figure out what your passage is getting at. Get the vibe of the passage and let that guide you.
3. **Map of the passage** – Know where stuff is so you can come back to it later. **Do not try to memorize every detail.** It's more important to know what is where— memorizing details usually leads to time loss or errors.

These things help you get through the passage effectively— before tackling the questions. I highly recommend reading the passage first then moving on to the questions. The exception would be if you don't understand the thing at all— then read a question or two to help you read with more purpose!

2. Don't Cherry Pick

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Cherry picking is this idea where you only look at some of an answer choice or you look at the individual concepts of the answer choice but not the whole idea of what it means. You have to take the entire answer for what it means on its own— don't focus on a few words here or there— focus on its holistic meaning. Then, focus on the question stem and be sure the scale of your answer matches that of the question. A tiny detail may be true— but not the main idea. A fact may be true, but not encompass the intention of the author's purpose. Make sure the answer answers the question.

3. Half Right is Not Right

A lot of time the test presents answer choices with two distinct elements— I'll call these 50/50 answers— it could include two adjectives to describe a mood (sympathetic but self-absorbed), two attitudes of a character (annoyed at her ramblings, but polite in her manners), two general ideas, etc. Even if half of the answer choice is 100% right **do not pick it unless you can find evidence for the other half**. You're better off picking an answer choice that you can find evidence to support both halves — even if each half feels only 60-70% right. Same with “which of the following provides the best evidence” questions. For these if the answer BEFORE this question has two halves, the best choice will address BOTH halves of the previous answer, not just one, in most cases. It may not be worded perfectly or as easy to spot and grasp on to, but it's the right choice.

Only if no answers are 100% answers can you pick a 50% answer.

4. Which Questions

Don't always attempt “Which of the following is the best evidence for the previous question” questions out of order (aka FIRST). Often the first question in these pairs is the easier question. Students often get the earlier question right and the evidence question wrong. Oftentimes the test will also plant “trick” answers that dovetail with each other (i.e. two answers that go together for this pair of questions)— and out of context you may convince yourself of a wrong answer because a piece of evidence could be misconstrued to match that answer. Sometimes the answer choices aren't even the best evidence for the question above it, so it's easier to first figure out that initial question (i.e. there's a stronger piece of evidence elsewhere), and then analyze which piece of evidence is strongest from what is available.

At the same time, on several tests I have seen question pairings so challenging that looking at both questions together, or using the line references in the “which of the following” question to be of some help. If you have no clue to the first question without looking to the passage, then it's fine to consider the next question to help you. Just remember the evidence that is “best” in the 2nd question is often the best of what's available, not the best overall. Always keep in mind the author's main point of that evidence when you consider it.

5. Zoom out

Sometimes we get so wrapped up in the details— doing so can cause you to eliminate imperfect answers that are actually right. On this test in general, a lot of times the right answer is not perfect. Let's compare this to a dart board, with the red center being the perfect answer. On the SAT the right answer is often one ring outside of that red center. Your goal is to find the closest to the center. One of the easiest ways to do that is to zoom out and look at the whole picture. Ask yourself, “What's closest to the heart of this?” Don't expect to find the perfect answer. Expect to find the one closest to the perfect answer.

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- Isolate the answer choice. Divorce your brain from the passage and just focus on the answer choice: what does it mean? Ask yourself what is the vibe? Does the meaning of the answer change if you isolate it? If so be suspicious.
- Half right is not right – if a few words are off—really off—it’s wrong.
- Probabilistically a right SAT answer is most often
 - Not extreme (avoid words like ALWAYS, NEVER, ALL, EVERY)
 - In line with the main idea vs. a tangential one.
- Sometimes the right answer will be extreme. Sometimes you’ll need to infer something a bit specific. Sometimes you’ll pick a specific answer over a vague one. If you do, though, there should be clear evidence in the passage warranting a break in the trend.

WRITING & LANGUAGE STRATEGIES

1. You must comprehend the passages and know the general **structure** of the passage and main idea of each paragraph. That means typically reading 70-80% of the page.
 - a. Read as you go through grammar part – kill two birds with one stone.
2. On transitions. Think BIGGER. The SAT will fool you by tricking people who only look a little before (i.e. 1 sentence). Always look several sentences earlier OR when a transition is at a paragraph break find the TOPIC SENTENCE of the previous paragraph, not last sentence.

Be very aware of topic sentences – they create a framework for the paragraph. ALSO if you have the option to add one in, always do!! SAT loves topic / organizational sentences. Better a slightly imperfect topic / transitional sentence than none.

3. Right answers are not REDUNDANT, they are EXPANSIVE
 - a. Repeats lots of words from paragraph – these say nothing / fluff / redundant
 - b. Synthesizes and adds ideas / might draw together earlier ideas in the passage, expand the conversation and teach you something. It works but it also makes the passage more interesting.
 - c. If the sentence adds cause/effect, explanation, nuance, detail, etc. and it’s not off topic, awkward, out of place, and it works. It’s likely to be right.
4. On questions with a stem (i.e. a question vs simply answer choices), always start with the stem. Focus on what it desires FIRST. 50% of the time this will lead you to the right answer. The rest of the time, you need to think outside the question a bit. Do other choices not refer to something that must be mentioned because of a pronoun in next

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sentence? Are there clues in context that require certain info be mentioned. Think placement cues in addition to question purpose.

5. Above all, keep in mind major themes and the story arc of the piece as a whole.
6. Know your grammar & style rules that govern each question type on the test
 - a. Pronouns
 - b. Verb Tense
 - c. Subject Verb Agreement
 - d. Sentence Structure– run ons and relative pronouns / clauses
 - e. Punctuation
 - f. Modifiers
 - g. Comparisons
 - h. Parallel Structure
 - i. Concision/Clarity/Wordiness
 - j. Transitions
 - k. Placement
 - l. Idiomatic Usage
 - m. Diction/Word Choice

Placement / Rhetorical Strategy

Remember these can help you identify where sentences should be placed:

- Pronouns/Determiners (**this / that / these / those / such**)
- Unclear nouns (be mindful of articles also: the / a / each / every)
- Definitions come first before further discussion
- Time cues / chronology cues / logical progression
- Verb tense
- What happens to the rest of the paragraph (context read more!!!)
- Organization / patterns / topic sentences / claim then evidence
- Like ideas go together / look for transitional sentences (weirdly redundant in context = topic sentence)
- Damage can be peripheral / watch for splitting ideas that need to be together

WHEN YOUR BRAIN GETS MUSHY:

Sometimes the writing section questions just do not click. You might feel like you just have no clue at times, and the lack of a “question” itself can seem disorienting. But you must keep moving.

→ TIP: IF you ever feel brain mush **STAR EVERY QUESTION** during your brain mush.

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