

SAT Strategy for 2010s now that The SAT is “Score Choice”

By Mark Greenstein, Founder and Lead Instructor, Ivy Bound Test Prep, August 2008

The June 2008 College Board decision to allow SAT takers to withhold their scores from colleges has evoked relief, concern, and anger. The relief is widespread among students, and parents: this lets students show their best scores and not fear that their application is being denigrated by the presence of inferior scores. Some parents and counselors dislike the decision, fearing it means average students will have to test on more occasions in order to impress. And at least some parents have become angry: “the prior policy meant my child could have taken the SAT II last spring and not had it count against her!” said the mother of a 2010 graduate.

The negative comments stem from lack of knowledge. Almost every college was giving the benefit of the best SAT score all along, and the majority of competitive colleges have chosen to “cherry-pick”, the best scores from different dates. Though College Board allowed all colleges to see SAT scores, colleges have routinely been choosing the better scores in assessing applicants.

Now, students and parents need not fear a bad one-day result. Now there is no dilemma for a student deciding whether to “cancel” a score following a test.

And finally, there is no worry about whether taking the SAT a third time could blemish an application.

I think Score Choice is good because it lets colleges see students at their best. This change may diminish some anxiety so that students can BE at their best.

The strategy students should follow is manifest:

TEST OFTEN.

I say this for three reasons:

- 1) Even a student whose abilities have not improved from one test day to another may still see a better score owing to the vagaries of the test, and the difference in how that student might approach it one day versus the next.
- 2) A student who is diligently working at the SAT Vocabulary, Reading, Writing, Grammar, and Math skills is likely to have an improved ability in the first place.
- 3) A student can learn from the testing experience. Making the best use of time, knowing what to expect of the proctors, avoiding distractions can all incrementally help on the next test.

My students have always had the chance to take frequent practice tests (Ivy Bound pays for all our students to make maximum use of College Board’s released tests). But now, for \$43, most of our 2010s will be taking a REAL test. For some this will be as practice; for others it will be

with the chance to NAIL one or more of the sections. Once one section is “bagged”, it’s good for life at most colleges, and thus the student can stop the study on that section and concentrate on the other two sections to nail them too.

The big lament – “now my student has to test more”. That is true; average evaluated test scores will jump precipitously with the Class of 2010, and thus the current score numbers or various colleges will be obsolete (my guess is that the 2010 numbers will be 30 – 40 points higher than the current numbers). This may be a wake-up call. Focused families have been testing a lot for the last decade. They know what it takes in the modern era for competitive admissions, and their students are getting ahead.

To ease the burden that lies ominously ahead, my prescription is: don’t prep long, but prep WELL. Ivy Bound encourages only 3 – 9 months for SAT tutoring. When done well, no student has to be saddled with 12 – 24 months.

The other complaint we’ve heard is “this means students have to pay more for multiple SATs”. This is misguided; the College Board is very good at giving fee waivers for indigent students. For students with better resources but who may still be pinched, a great SAT score opens the doors to merit-based scholarships. An extra \$200 to cover 4 additional SATs pales in comparison to the \$20,000 award that can come from a 100+ point improvement. Finally, a great SAT score means there is less work for a private college counselor to do, and that saves time and money.

A few colleges would still prefer to see all scores, and at least one (a USC admissions officer) would like to require students to submit all scores. But it will be impossible for colleges to force students to show all their scores. The first colleges to insist on this will see such a diminution in applications that the economics and the flack will make them rescind.

SAT Subject Tests (aka SAT IIs)

Unlike the SAT I (which attempts to measure logical thinking, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and basic math) SAT IIs measure knowledge of classroom subjects. Fewer test-taking strategies apply to the SAT IIs. Aside from time management, the SAT IIs do not require new skills, just thorough knowledge of what should have been presented in the classroom and the text.

Our preferred way to study for the SAT IIs is to go over your materials the same way you would prepare for a year-end final. Then **take a full-hour practice test**. One of each test is available in the book The Official Guide to SAT Subject Tests, published by the College Board. ISBN 0-87447-756-5

Analyze that test and make sure you know the difference between a careless mistake and a topic you don't know. For all topics you don't know, if you don't have a tutor, make an appointment with a teacher at your school. Make sure s/he fills you in on how to solve that problem. Many courses do not cover the exact same material tested on the SAT II, so don't go with an attitude

that "you failed to teach us this!". Instead, say "I've learned well what you presented us, and in preparing for the SAT II I noticed five questions that are totally unsolvable. Allow me to give you these questions and next week please instruct me on how to attack them".

Unless there is an absolute requirement by the college you are dying to get into, only take SAT II tests in subjects in which you know you can do well. Our best definition for "well" is "get a better score than your best SAT I score". (Most students' SAT II scores are 60 – 90 points above their SAT I scores). Another definition is "get a better score than the college's posted 75 percentile SAT I score". (This is available in the US News survey.) If on a good day you don't think you can attain either of those thresholds, **do not take the test in that subject**. Doing so will hurt you, unless you replace that score with a better score on a later test.

Scheduling the SAT IIs.

SAT IIs occur six times a year, on the same dates as SAT Is are given. (March is the one time when SAT I and not SAT II is offered). You cannot take SAT II and SAT I on the same dates (you probably would not want to anyhow!). Students should plan carefully when they expect to take SAT Is and SAT IIs. For most students in most subjects, the best time to take the SAT II is June of Sophomore year and June or May of Junior year, so as to coincide with studying for finals in that subject. You can only take three SAT IIs on a single date, and we recommend doing only two, so here are good subjects to peel off for dates other than May / June of Junior year:

If you are completing a science class that you've done well in but **won't** be continuing after sophomore year, take that SAT II in June of Sophomore year.

If you spent the summer learning a language **abroad**, consider the November test date for the SAT II with Listening. If you're simply in academic language study in the U.S., wait as long as you can before taking a language SAT II - you'll be more proficient during Senior year.

If you took US History as a sophomore and do a lot of summer reading, plan to take the US History test in October of Junior year. The US History test does NOT ask you to regurgitate dates, people and places, but instead demands knowledge of causes and trends.

Now, if you're saying "there's no SAT II on which I can score "well" right now, then wait and prepare for the SAT II Math Level One and the US History. The Math Ic only goes over topics through Algebra I; though a tutor may be needed, any diligent "B" student can individually master 80% of the questions. The US History, is not easy, but is very straightforward – no tricks, and many answers that are easy to eliminate if you paid average attention in your US History class.

If you think the Math Level One and US History will not yield good results, even with tutoring, be sure to study for the SAT Writing: it's a **very coachable** test. (Ivy Bound students from whom we have had feedback average over 650). Indeed, a really strong SAT Writing score can make up for a mediocre SAT Critical Reading score and mediocre SAT IIs.

Things to be wary of:

- 1) Taking three tests in a day. Though students are capable of powering up for three separate one-hour tests, most don't. We have heard that scores in the final hour are typically the worst. If you are taking three tests, make sure you **approach every one with vigor**. Say "this subject test is my one and only thing on the agenda, and I'm going to NAIL it!"
- 2) The Literature Test. It is very difficult to coach, and appears to have some answers that are subjective in each test. Students whose ambitions are very high (need a 750 or better) can't afford to get more than 8 wrong. These students should take at least TWO practice tests, and consider not taking this test at all.
- 3) Language Reading and Listening Tests. The "listening" version is offered once a year, in November. Unlike most high school language class speakers, the test speakers speak with nearly the rapidity of a native. This catches many students by surprise and many just bail out of the test. Thus we recommend this version of the test only to native speakers and to students who have spent at least a few months living abroad. If you are in neither category, take the Language test without the listening component, on some other date.
- 4) Math Level I and Math Level II. The Level II is higher level math, but it is not necessarily harder. Students who have done well in trigonometry should plan on the Level II. The Level II has a more forgiving "curve" – you can get more wrong and still get a 700 than on Level I.
- 5) Winging it. Though the College Board now allows "Score Choice" on the SAT II, taking one with no prep is a wasted opportunity. If you got 730 with no prep, you might have had 790+ and been "done". If you're serious about doing well on a test, you might as well prep for it.