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## **PSAT BASIC STRATEGIES**

The PSAT is different from the tests you are used to taking in school. The good news is you can use the PSAT's particular structure to your scoring advantage.

Here's an example. On a school test, you probably go through the problems in order. You spend more time on the hard questions than on the easy ones because harder questions are usually worth more points. You probably often show your work because the teacher tells you that how you approach a problem is as important as getting the answer right.

None of this works on the PSAT. If you use the same approach on the PSAT, your score will suffer. On the PSAT, you benefit from moving around within a section

if you come across hard questions because the hard questions are worth the same as the easy ones. It doesn't matter how you answer the questions — only that you get them right.

The PSAT is *special*. To succeed on the PSAT, you need to know its quirks and how to use them to your advantage. Once you fully understand the PSAT's personality, you may even find yourself wishing tests at school were more like it.

## **Basic Strategy 1**

### **Know the Enemy**

The key to success on the PSAT is knowing what to expect. The PSAT format — that is, the directions, the types of questions, and the traps that the test makers put in the questions — is almost identical from test to test. The only thing the test makers change are the questions themselves.

That means one of the easiest things you can do to improve your performance on the PSAT is to know its

format *before* you take the test. For example, if you learn the PSAT directions as you read this book, you can spend all of your time during the test answering the questions and getting your highest score possible instead of reading the directions, which you already know, because they never change. Get it? Great.

## **Basic Strategy 2**

### **Use Order of Difficulty to Your Advantage**

Many of the PSAT sections arrange their questions so they get more difficult as you work through a question set. In a question set that goes from 1 to 9, question 2 would be fairly easy, question 5 would be moderately more difficult, and question 9 would be really hard.

This is true of both Math question types (regular math and Grid-ins) and the Sentence Completion questions in the Critical Reading sections. The Reading Comprehension portion of the Critical Reading sections and the Writing Skills section questions are **NOT** arranged in any particular order of difficulty.

You can use this knowledge to your scoring advantage. As you work, always be aware of where you are in the set. When working on the easy problems, you can generally trust your first impulse — the obvious answer is likely to be right. As you get to the end of the set, you need to become more suspicious. The answers probably *shouldn't* come easily. If they do, look at the problem again because the obvious answer is likely to be wrong. Watch out for the answer that just *looks right*. It might be a distractor, or a trap — a wrong answer choice meant to entice you.

### **Basic Strategy 3**

#### **Don't Get Stuck. Move On**

You're not allowed to work on other sections during the test, but you are allowed to skip around within each section of the PSAT. High scorers know this. They move through the test efficiently. They don't dwell on any one question, even a hard one, until they've tried every question at least once.

The key is to be systematic. When you run into questions that look tough, circle them in your test booklet and skip them. Go back and try again after you have answered the easier ones. Remember, you don't get more points for answering hard questions. If you get two easy ones right in the time it would have taken you to get one hard one right, you just gained points.

There's another benefit for coming back to hard ones later. On their second look, troublesome questions can turn out to be simple. By answering some easier questions first, you can come back to a harder question with fresh eyes, a fresh perspective, and more confidence.

## **Basic Strategy 4**

### **Know When to Guess**

There is no penalty for guessing on the PSAT. There is only a penalty for getting a *wrong answer*. If you can determine that one or more answers are definitely wrong, then you should probably guess from the

remaining choices. Even if you aren't sure which one of them is absolutely correct, you've at least increased your chances of success by paring the selection down.

Here's why. If you get an answer wrong on any multiple-choice question on the PSAT, you lose 1/4 point. These fractional points you lose are supposed to offset the points you might earn accidentally by guessing the correct answer. You can eliminate wrong answer choices on almost all PSAT questions, even if you have no idea what the actual right answer is. By eliminating wrong answer choices, you are creating a *guessing advantage*.

The PSAT has one question type that is not affected by this strategy. Remember, if you get an answer wrong on a Grid-in math question, for which you write in your own answers, you lose nothing. **So you should write in an answer for every Grid-in.** The worst that can happen is that you get zero points for the questions you guessed on.

## **Basic Strategy 5**

## **Respect Your Answer Sheet**

It sounds simple, but it's extremely important: Don't make mistakes filling out your answer grid. When time is short, it's easy to get confused going back and forth between your test book and your grid. If you know the answer, but misgrid, you won't get the points. To avoid mistakes on the answer grid, you could try some of the methods below.

## **Circle the Questions You Skip**

Perhaps the most common PSAT disaster is filling in all of the questions with the right answers in the wrong spots. Every time you skip a question, put a big circle in your test booklet around questions you skip to help you locate these questions when you are ready to go back to them. Also, if you accidentally skip a box on the grid, you can always check your grid against your book to see where you went wrong.

## **Circle the Answers You Choose**

Circling your answers in the test book makes it easier to check your grid against your book. It also makes the next grid strategy possible.

## **Grid Five or More Answers at Once**

Time is of the essence on this exam. To save time and make sure you are marking your answers in the correct bubbles, transfer your answers after every five questions or at the end of each reading passage, rather than after every question. That way, you won't keep breaking your concentration to mark the grid. You'll end up with more time and fewer chances to make a mistake on your answer sheet.

## **Basic Strategy 6**

### **Think About the Question Before You Check the Answer Choices**

The people who make the test love to put distractors among the answer choices. Distractors are answer choices that look right but aren't, and they are easy to choose if you haven't read the question carefully. If you

jump right into the answer choices without thinking first about exactly what you're looking for, you're much more likely to fall for these traps.

## **Basic Strategy 7**

### **Use Shortcuts if You Have To**

There are usually a number of ways to get to the right answer on a PSAT question. Most of the questions on the PSAT are multiple choice. That means the answer is right in front of you — you just have to find it. This makes PSAT questions open to several different ways of finding the answer.

If you can't figure out the answer the straightforward way, try other techniques.

## **Basic Strategy 8**

### **Pay Attention to Where You Are in a Question Set**

As we noted earlier, many of the question sets (except for Reading Comprehension and the Writing Skills section) start out easy and gradually get harder. So if an

early question seems hard, make sure to take a second look; you're bound to be missing something obvious. If a hard question seems easy, watch out! You may be falling into a trap.

Finally, don't be upset if you have to skip a couple of the hard questions altogether; by spending your time elsewhere, you'll probably do better on the questions you did answer. You don't have to answer every single question, even if you're aiming for a National Merit Scholarship.

## **Basic Strategy 9**

### **Look for Quick Points When You're Running Out of Time**

Some questions can be done quickly. For instance, some Critical Reading questions will ask you to identify the meaning of a particular word in the passage. These can be done at the last minute, even if you haven't read the passage. When you start to run out of time, try to locate and answer the questions that can earn you

quick points. When you take the PSAT, you should have one clear objective in mind — to score as many points as you can. It's that simple.