

An SAT Success Secrets special report...

# How to Choose an SAT or ACT Tutor

Nine questions to ask, and the answers to expect, to help you make the right decision

# How to Choose an SAT or ACT Tutor

**As you navigate your way through the college admissions process, hiring a tutor to help your son or daughter prepare for the SAT or ACT is one of the biggest decisions you'll make. It's a big investment of time and money. You want the best return on your investment that you can possibly get.**

The key to getting a big return is the tutor that you choose.

If you make the wrong choice, you'll face endless battles with your son or daughter over the amount of effort he's putting into his lessons and homework, and the prospect of little or no improvement in his score.

If you pick the right tutor, you'll dramatically increase the chance that you'll end up with a happy, motivated, confident child who's test score goes through the roof.

Choosing wisely can be a daunting prospect. There are a lot of tutors and a lot of tutoring companies. It can feel like you're buying a car. You don't hire a tutor very often, and you're dealing with a professional who's job it is to sell his services or those of his company.

How do you cut through the jargon? How do you evaluate their claims of success? When you speak to a couple of them, you'll realize there are conflicting approaches to helping students improve their scores. How do you know which is right? Will it work for your child? How do you know if the tutor is any good? What questions should you ask? What answers should you expect?

## **Should you hire a tutor at all?**

If you're reading this report, you've probably decided to hire one. If you're on the fence, let's examine a few reasons why hiring the right tutor can make a big difference for your child.

**1. It's hard to get into a good college today.** The number of applicants to the most desired schools has gone up dramatically in recent years. The number of students being admitted has stayed fairly constant. Many of the top private and state schools are reporting record low admissions rates.

Are you considering a top public university? In the spring of 2009, UCLA admitted only 21% of its applicants, the lowest rate of any public university in the country. UC Berkeley wasn't far behind with an admission rate of 23%.

Considering a top private school? Some Ivy League universities had admission rates of less than 10%. The top small private colleges had admission rates in the teens.

**2. You'll pay as much**, if not more, at many mid-ranking private colleges and universities as you will at the most selective schools. In a recent study of the cost and quality of a college education, Malcom Gertz, a professor of economics at Vanderbilt, found that the price of tuition is not directly associated with the quality of education.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the most selective colleges offer the most financial help.

**3. Projected lifetime income** for students at the most selective colleges and universities is significantly higher than it is for students at less selective universities. According to Caroline Hoxley, a Stanford based economist, the average difference in projected income is \$1.2 million.<sup>2</sup>

**4. Higher SAT scores** mean a greater likelihood of a getting a merit based grant or scholarship.

**5. Perhaps most importantly**, a significantly higher SAT or ACT score increases the likelihood that your child will get into the school of his dreams.

Choosing a college is an enormous decision. Better test scores mean more choices. Now more than ever, the stakes are high. Test preparation isn't just another educational expense – it's an investment in your child's future.

### **What to look for in a tutor**

Whether your son or daughter is shooting for a perfect score, happy to beat the average, or somewhere in between, you want a tutor who can help her to break through to the next level and reach her potential.

Since junior and senior year of high school are a busy time, you also want a tutor who can craft an approach that will be easiest for your particular child and most conducive to learning without stress. There's work involved, of course, but the right tutor should increase her confidence, calm her fears, inspire and motivate her, help her to focus, and take an approach to tutoring that's tailored to her particular strengths and weakness and works best for her personally.

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Gertz, "Investing in College: A Guide for the Perplexed" (Harvard University Press, 2007)

<sup>2</sup> Caroline Hoxby, "The Return to Attending a More Selective College: 1960 to the Present" (Harvard, 1998)

Taking a high pressure, high stakes standardized test like the ACT or SAT is similar to activities like sports and theater; there are many factors that affect someone's performance. It's not always what a student knows or how talented he is that makes the difference. If you want your child to perform at his best in a super stressful, make or break test taking situation, you need a tutor who can help him prepare mentally and emotionally, not just academically, for the test.

The right tutor will help your child learn exactly what's going to be on the test and how to approach it. As importantly, the right tutor will help him learn the mentality to have while taking the test and the mentality to have while studying. That's the combination that results in a greatly improved score.

It's relatively easy to find a tutor who understands the material that's tested on the SAT and ACT, and the problem solving methods. It's hard to find a tutor who understands his students.

**Here are are some questions to ask, and some answers to look for, to help you make this very important decision.**

**1) If you're thinking of hiring a tutor from a company such as Kaplan, Princeton Review, Revolution, or any other company of that nature, ask them if you can speak to the tutor they plan to assign to your son or daughter.**

It's not enough to know the company's philosophy or the company's track record. If they won't allow you to speak with the tutor directly before you make a final decision, walk away.

Of course they train their tutors, and would never send a tutor who didn't understand the algebra or know the grammar rules. It's not enough that the tutor knows the material. You have to ask the specific tutor himself the questions that follow, and receive satisfactory answers, or you run a high risk of getting a tutor who can't help your child.

**2) Do you have testimonials or references?**

Every tutor will have them. The important thing here is that if you're considering a tutor from a test prep company, you have to get testimonials or references for that tutor himself. You can't rely on those for the company in general.

**3) How much experience do you have?**

Experience doesn't equal effectiveness. Someone with 7 years of experience won't necessarily be better than someone with only three. However, a tutor with only a year or two of experience hasn't worked with enough students.

Every student is different. They have different issues, different learning styles, different personalities, and different roadblocks that get in the way of doing their best. You can't count on a tutor with only a couple of years of experience to handle the particular challenges that your son or daughter will face on her way to getting the score she deserves.

#### **4) What's the most important factor in getting the best score possible?**

There are 2 acceptable answers.

The first one is "focus." Focus is the most important factor in getting the best score possible. When taking these tests, if a student isn't paying full attention at every moment, he'll get questions wrong when he knows how to get them right.

Answers that seem right but are actually wrong are built into every section of the test. A skilled tutor knows this and is always helping his students sharpen their focus. It's the absolute, number one key at all score levels.

The second acceptable answer is motivation or perseverance. As President Obama said in his back to school speech,

"People succeed because they understand that you can't let your failures define you – you have to let them teach you. You have to let them show you what to do differently next time... If you get a bad grade, that doesn't mean you're stupid, it just means you need to spend more time studying. No one's born being good at things, you become good at things through hard work... You've got to practice. It's the same with your schoolwork. You might have to do a math problem a few times before you get it right, or read something a few times before you understand it, or do a few drafts of a paper before it's good enough to hand in."<sup>3</sup>

Studying for a high pressure standardized test can be frustrating. It can make a student feel stupid sometimes. The key is to keep working at it.

It sounds obvious, but sometimes that's what eludes us. If a tutor doesn't know that motivation and perseverance are the key to massive improvement, he either hasn't worked with enough students, or he doesn't know how to help his students address these challenges.

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<sup>3</sup> Barack Obama, Prepared Remarks, Back to School Event, 2009

## **5) What is the key to keeping a student motivated?**

There are 3 keys to staying motivated.

The first is knowing why you want to get your results. When a student is motivated by a strong desire to get into a particular school, she'll stay motivated to push ahead with studying for the SAT even when it gets tough.

The second key is expecting a positive outcome. If a student gets discouraged and feels like she won't reach her goal, her motivation to keep studying will weaken. When a student expects to be successful, her motivation will stay strong.

The third key to staying motivated is enjoying the process. It really helps when the tutoring sessions are fun and engaging.

A skilled tutor will impact all of these areas. If a tutor says that motivation is purely the student's responsibility, find a different tutor.

## **6) How do you eliminate careless mistakes in the Math section?**

You can think of a careless mistake as one where you knew the right answer, but made some sort of mistake along the way. The issue isn't carelessness, though, it's a loss of focus.

When doing a math problem, a student has to do 3 things correctly.

He has to read the problem correctly, meaning he has to know what information the problem is giving him, and what specifically it's asking him to solve for. Then he has to figure out how to solve it. Finally he has to do a calculation correctly. If he makes a mistake anywhere along the way, he gets the problem wrong.

An unskilled tutor will simply say that careless errors come from rushing and the solution is to slow down. Or he'll say that nothing can be done about them.

A skilled tutor knows that the way to eliminate careless errors is for the student to take a few seconds after reading the problem and ask himself, "Did I read this correctly?" Then after finishing the problem and before moving on to the next one, take a few seconds and ask, "Did I calculate this correctly?"

When mastered, that's a silver bullet.

A skilled tutor knows that “careless” errors happen when a student loses focus. He might not describe the steps to correct them exactly as I have here, but should know they’re correctable and have a plan to do it.

## **7) What’s the key for a student who wants to improve his score in Reading?**

Reading more, and if taking the SAT studying vocabulary, are two important steps a student can take to get a better score, but if a tutor gives you this answer, you have to follow up, because it passes all the responsibility to the student.

There are two other keys to improvement that a tutor should know.

A skilled tutor knows that the most important thing to focus on in the reading passages is the main idea of the passage. When a student who’s a pretty good reader has trouble with this section, it’s often because he got stuck on the details and missed the main point.

A skilled tutor also knows that students who do really well on this section use the process of elimination to eliminate the answers that are clearly wrong, then pick the best remaining answer. Unlike in math, where the right answer is clearly right, in the Reading section a student has to look for the best possible answer among the choices given.

Give the tutor extra credit if he tells you that if a student is still unsure of the answer after eliminating those that are clearly wrong, he should pick the one that most closely reflects the main idea of the passage.

The Reading section is the hardest one to improve on. If a tutor doesn’t give you one of these answers, he won’t be able to help your child on this section

## **8) How do you accurately gauge a student’s strengths and weaknesses? How do you gauge her potential score?**

A skilled tutor will interactively go through official practice tests with a student and carefully watch how she works. When she struggles, he’ll ask her what she’s thinking and listen carefully to her response. He’ll offer suggestions and see how she responds. He’ll encourage her to ask questions of her own. He’ll be patient and watch how she responds to instruction.

A skilled tutor eliminates the pressure of time and creates a relaxed atmosphere. He knows that going slow is the key to building a student’s confidence. It shows both the tutor and his student what the student really knows and what she doesn’t, what her real level is.

It's often the case that someone who thinks she's bad at math, for example, rushes the questions because she's nervous or insecure. She'll get more questions wrong this way, of course, and reinforce her belief that she's bad at it. The same is true for someone who thinks she's bad at reading.

In order to know a student's true potential, the tutor has to create the conditions for it to come out.

A skilled tutor knows that every student is different. When a tutor works with a student this way, it takes no more than a few hours to see what her real issues are, identify her strengths and weaknesses, and formulate a plan to help her improve based who she is as an individual.

A tutor who works this way can not only assess his student's potential score, he can also give her a taste of reaching it, and show her what she needs to get there.

If a tutor tells you the way to do it is simply by giving a student a diagnostic test to take on her own, walk away. If the he tells you that he plans to give a diagnostic test that's produced by a test prep company rather using official test material, run.

The results of a diagnostic test can only show *what* questions a student got wrong, not *why*, and it can't show a student her potential, only her limitations.

A tutor who's focused on limitations can't get the most out of his students.

### **9) What material should you practice with, official material produced by the testing organization (the College Board for the SAT and the ACT Organization for the ACT), or proprietary material designed by a test prep company?**

A skilled tutor will only use official material. A student has to know exactly what's going to be on the test. Pattern recognition is extremely important. The only way to do that is to use official material.

It's fine to use material produced by a third party to remediate a lack of knowledge. If a student is weak in algebra or geometry, is sorely lacking in grammar, or needs additional practice in reading comprehension, a skilled tutor might use additional material to teach and practice the concepts.

However, if a tutor doesn't use the testing organization's official material for the bulk of his work with your son or daughter, look for a different tutor.



## Final thoughts

Here's what happens when a student takes his SAT or ACT score to the next level. He learns that he can do things he didn't know he could do before. He sees the improvement in his homework and on his practice tests. He believes that his efforts are paying off and expects to do well. His confidence and self image as a student and a test taker grows, which motivates him to practice even harder. The process builds on itself.

A skilled tutor knows how it works. He knows it's all about helping his students have an inner shift, the right frame of mind, and a positive attitude. Then the material covered on the test, the problem solving skills, and even the level of focus he needs to do really well become pretty easy to learn.

Use these questions as a guide. They'll help you find the right tutor for you. When it comes to getting the highest SAT or ACT score possible, that makes all the difference.

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Jeff Bergman has been tutoring students for the SAT, the ACT, and the SAT Subject Tests since January, 2000. You can learn more about his tutoring services, follow his blog, and get free test prep resources at [www.SATSuccessSecrets.com](http://www.SATSuccessSecrets.com).