

Seven Basic Rules for Taking the ACT

These seven rules apply to every section of the ACT. They really are just commonsense guidelines, but it's amazing how the pressure and time constraints of the ACT can warp and mangle common sense. We list them here because you should always have these rules of test taking resting gently in your mind as you take the test. You don't need to focus on them obsessively, but you should be sure not to forget them. They will help you save time and cut down on careless errors.

1. Know the Instructions for Each Subject Test

Since you'll need all the time you can get, don't waste time reading the Subject Test instructions during the actual test. Learn the instructions beforehand by taking practice tests and reading our chapters on the Subject Tests.

2. Use Your Test Booklet as Scratch Paper

Some students seem to think their test booklet has to look "pretty" at the end of the test. Don't be one of those students. A pristine test booklet is a sad test booklet. In the Math Test, the ACT writers even give you "figuring" space for drawing diagrams and writing out solutions. You should write down all your work for math problems, in case you want to return to them later to complete the question or check your answer. The Math Test isn't the only place where you can benefit from marginal scribbling, though. Making margin notes alongside the Reading and Science Reasoning passages can help you stay on track when answering the subsequent questions. In addition, if you want to skip a question and come back to it later, you should make a distinctive mark next to it, so you won't miss it on your second pass through the questions.

3. Answer Easy Questions before Hard Questions

This is a crucial strategy for the ACT. Since all questions within a Subject Test are worth the same number of points, there's no point slaving away over a difficult question if doing so requires several minutes. In the same amount of time, you probably could have racked up points by answering a bunch of easy, less time-consuming questions.

In summary, answer the easy and moderate questions first. That way you'll make sure that you get to see all the questions on the test that you have a good shot of getting right, while saving the leftover time for the difficult questions.

4. Don't Get Bugged Down by a Hard Question

This rule may seem obvious, but many people have a hard time letting go of a question. If you've spent a significant amount of time on a problem (in ACT world, a minute and a half is a lot of time) and haven't gotten close to answering it, just let it go. Leaving a question unfinished may seem like giving up or wasting time you've already spent, but you can come back to the problem after you've answered the easy ones. The time you spent on the problem earlier won't be wasted. When you come back to the problem, you'll already have done part of the work needed to solve it.

This strategy goes hand in hand with Rule 3. After all, the tough question that's chewing up your time isn't worth more to the computer grading your answer sheet than the easy questions nearby.

5. Avoid Carelessness

There are two kinds of carelessness that threaten you as an ACT test taker. The first kind is obvious: making mistakes because you are moving too quickly through the questions. Speeding through the test can result in misinterpreting a question or missing a crucial piece of information. You should always be aware of this kind of error because the ACT writers have written the test with speedy test

takers in mind: they often include tempting “partial answers” among the answer choices. A partial answer is the result of some, but not all, of the steps needed to solve a problem. If you rush through a question, you may mistake a partial answer for the real answer. Students often fall into the speeding trap when they become confused, since confusion brings nervousness and fear of falling behind. But those moments of confusion are precisely the moments when you should take a second to slow down. Take a deep breath, look at the question, and make a sober decision about whether or not you can answer it. If you can, dive back in. If you can’t, skip the question and go on to the next one. The second kind of carelessness arises from frustration or lack of confidence. Don’t allow yourself to assume a defeatist attitude toward questions that appear to be complex. While some of these questions may actually be complex, some of them will be fairly simple questions disguised in complex-sounding terms. You should at least skim every question to see whether you have a feasible chance of answering it. Assuming you can’t answer a question is like returning a present you’ve never even opened.

6. Be Careful Bubbling In Your Answers

Imagine this: you get all the right answers to the ACT questions, but you fill in all the wrong bubbles. The scoring computer doesn’t care that you did the right work; all it cares about are the blackened bubbles on the answer sheet, and the wrong answers that they indicate. Protect yourself against this terrifying possibility with careful bubbling. An easy way to prevent slips on the ACT answer sheet is to pay attention to the letters being bubbled. Odd-numbered answers are lettered A, B, C, D (except on the Math Test, where they are A, B, C, D, E), and even-numbered answers are lettered F, G, H, J (except on the Math Test, where they are F, G, H, J, K). You may also want to try bubbling in groups (five at a time or a page at a time) rather than answering one by one. Circle the answers in the test booklet as you go through the page, and then transfer the answers over to the answer sheet as a group. This method should increase your speed and accuracy in filling out the answer sheet. To further increase your accuracy, say the question number and the answer in your head as you fill out the grid: “Number 24, F. Number 25, C. Number 26, J.”

7. Always Guess When You Don’t Know the Answer

We will discuss guessing below in “The Meaning of Multiple Choice,” but the basic rule is: always guess! You’re much better off guessing than leaving an answer blank because there is no penalty for wrong answers.

The Meaning of Multiple Choice

As we’ve suggested throughout this chapter, the multiple-choice format of the ACT should affect the way you approach the questions. In this section, we’ll discuss exactly how.

Only the Answer Matters

A machine, not a person, will score your test. This scoring machine does not care how you came to your answers; it cares only whether your answers are correct and readable in little oval form. The test booklet in which you worked out your answers gets thrown in the garbage, or, if your proctor is conscientious, into a recycling bin.

On the ACT, no one looks at your work. If you get a question right, it doesn’t matter whether you did impeccable work. In fact, it doesn’t even matter whether you knew the answer or guessed. The multiple-choice structure of the test is a message to you from the ACT: “We only care about your answers.” Remember, the ACT is your tool to get into college, so treat it as a tool. It wants right answers? Give it right answers, as many as possible, using whatever strategies you can.

Multiple Choice: You've Already Got the Answers

When you look at any ACT multiple-choice question, the answer is already right there in front of you. Of course, the ACT writers don't just *give* you the correct answer; they hide it among a bunch of incorrect answer choices. Your job on each question is to find the right answer. Because the answer is right there, begging to be found, you have two methods you can use to try to get the correct answer:

1. Look through the answer choices and pick out the one that is correct.
2. Look at the answer choices and eliminate wrong answers until there's only one answer left.

Both methods have their advantages: you are better off using one in some situations and the other in others. In a perfect scenario in which you are sure how to answer a question, finding the right answer immediately is clearly better than chipping away at the wrong answers. Coming to a conclusion about a problem and then picking the single correct choice is a much simpler and quicker process than going through every answer choice and discarding the four that are wrong.

However, when you are unsure how to solve the problem, eliminating wrong answers becomes more attractive and appropriate. By focusing on the answers to problems that are giving you trouble, you might be able to use the answer choices to lead you in the right direction, or to solve the problem through trial and error. You also might be able to eliminate answer choices through a variety of strategies (these strategies vary by question type; we'll cover them in the chapters dedicated to each type of question). In some cases, you might be able to eliminate all the wrong answers. In others, you might only be able to eliminate one, which will still improve your odds when you attempt to guess. Part of your preparation for the ACT should be to get some sense of when to use each strategy. Using the right strategy can increase your speed without affecting your accuracy, giving you more time to work on and answer as many questions as possible.

Guessing and the ACT

We've said it once, but it's important enough to bear repetition: whenever you can't answer a question on the ACT, you must guess. You are not penalized for getting a question wrong, so guessing can only help your score.

Random Guessing and Educated Guessing

There are actually two kinds of guesses: random and educated. Random guesser Charlie Franklin will always guess C or F because he really, really likes those letters. Using this method, Charlie has a pretty good chance of getting about 25 percent of the questions right, yielding a Composite Score of about 11. That's not too shabby, considering Charlie expended practically no intellectual energy beyond identifying C and F as the first letters of his first and last names.

But what about educated guesser Celia? Instead of immediately guessing on each question, she works to eliminate answers, always getting rid of two choices for each question. She then guesses between the remaining choices and has a 50 percent chance of getting the correct answer. Celia will therefore get about half of the questions on the test correct. Her Composite Score will be about a 19, which is an average score on the ACT.

The example of these two guessers should show you that while blind guessing can help you, educated guessing can *really* help you. For example, let's say you know the correct answer for half of the questions and you guess randomly on the remaining half. Your score will probably be a 22—three points higher than the score you'd get leaving half of the answers blank. Now let's say you know the correct answer for half of the questions and you make educated guesses on the remaining half, narrowing the choices to two. You can probably score a 26 with this method, landing you in the 90th

percentile of test takers. This is a good score, and to get it you only need to be certain of half the answers.

“Always guess” really means “always eliminate as many answer choices as possible and then guess.”

A Note to the Timid Guesser

Some students feel that guessing is like cheating. They believe that by guessing, they are getting points they don't really deserve. Such a belief might be noble, but it is also mistaken, for two reasons. First, educated guessing is actually a form of partial credit on the ACT. Let's say you're taking the ACT and come upon a question you can't quite figure out. Yet while you aren't sure of the definite answer, you are sure that two of the answer choices *can't* be right. In other words, you can eliminate two of the four answer choices, leaving you with a one in two chance of guessing correctly between the remaining two answer choices. Now let's say someone else is taking the same test and gets to the same question. But this person is completely flummoxed. He can't eliminate *any* answer choices. When this person guesses, he has only a one in four chance of guessing correctly. Your extra knowledge, which allowed you to eliminate some answer choices, gives you better odds of getting this question right, exactly as extra knowledge should.

Second, the people who made the ACT thought very hard about how the scoring of the test should work. When they decided that they wouldn't include a penalty for wrong answers, they knew that the lack of a penalty would allow people to guess. In other words, they built the test with the specific understanding that people would guess on every question they couldn't answer. The test *wants* you to guess. So go ahead and do it.

Pacing

The ACT presents you with a ton of questions and, despite its three-hour length, not that much time to answer them. As you take the test, you will probably feel some pressure to answer quickly. As we've already discussed, getting bogged down on a single question is not a good thing. But rushing isn't any good either. In the end, there's no real difference between answering very few questions and answering lots of questions incorrectly: both will lead to low scores. What you have to do is find a happy medium, a groove, a speed at which you can be both accurate and efficient, and get the score you want. Finding this pace is a tricky task, but it will come through practice and strategy.

Setting a Target Score

The ACT is your tool to get into college. Therefore, a perfect score on the ACT is not a 36, it's the score that gets you into the colleges of your choice. Once you set a target score, your efforts should be directed toward achieving *that* score and not necessarily a 36.

In setting a target score, the first rule is to be honest and realistic. Base your target score on the schools you want to attend, and use the results from your practice tests to decide what's realistic. If you score a 20 on your first practice test, your target score probably should not be a 30. Instead, aim for a 23 or 24. Your scores will likely increase on your second test simply because you'll be more experienced than you were the first time, and then you can work on getting several extra problems right on each Subject Test.

Your Target Score Determines Your Strategy and Pace

Your target score should affect your overall approach to the test. Cathy, whose target score is 31, is going to use a different strategy and pace from Elvie, whose target score is 20. Cathy must work quickly without becoming careless to get 90 percent of her questions right. Elvie, on the other hand, can afford to work more slowly; to get a 20, she needs to answer approximately half of the questions correctly. Elvie can focus her energy on carefully answering about 60 percent of the questions,

allowing for some wrong answers; then she can guess on the remaining questions. Cathy needs to focus on every question to get her 90 percent. Also allowing for some wrong answers, she should aim to answer all the questions correctly.

Of course, this is all a bit like the chicken and the egg conundrum. Cathy's target score is probably higher than Elvie's because she is a faster and better test taker than Elvie. Elvie needs the extra time to spend on each problem because she is a slower worker than Cathy. It's not as though Elvie generates a lot of extra time in which she can doodle or draw elaborate diagrams by concentrating on a smaller number of questions. All of that extra time per question is being put to use by Elvie because she needs it in order to get the right answer.

The point of this anecdote: Adjust your pacing to the score you want, but also be honest with yourself about what pace you can maintain. The following charts will give you an idea of the number of questions you need to get right in order to receive certain scaled scores on the ACT. Use these charts to determine the number of correct answers you need in order to achieve your target score.

English		Math	
Target Score	# Right	Target Score	# Right
36	75	36	60
30	69–70	30	53–54
26	60–62	26	44–45
23	52–54	23	38–39
20	44–46	20	32–33
17	36–38	17	23–25
11	19–21	11	7–8
Reading		Science Reasoning	
Target Score	# Right	Target Score	# Right
36	40	36	40
30	35	30	37
26	30–31	26	32–33
23	26–27	23	27–28

20	22	20	22–23
17	18	17	16–17
11	9–10	11	7

The first target score you set doesn't have to be your last. If you reach your initial target score, set a new, higher score and try increasing the pace at which you work. In setting preparatory target scores, focus on improving a couple points at a time. In the end, incremental change will work better than a giant leap.

The White Rabbit Syndrome: Watching the Clock

Because the ACT is a timed test, you should always be aware of the time. The proctor at the test center will strictly enforce the time limits for each Subject Test. Even if you have only one question left to answer, you won't be allowed to fill in that bubble.

As you take the test, watch the clock. You shouldn't be checking it every two minutes, since you will only waste time and give yourself a headache. But you should check occasionally to make sure you are on pace to achieve your target score. If you're Cathy, aiming to answer 90 percent of the questions correctly, you'll be in trouble if you've answered only 40 of the 75 English questions in 30 minutes (the English Test is 45 minutes long). If you're Elvie, aiming for 60 percent of the questions, answering 40 English questions in 30 minutes is a pretty good pace.

Preparing for the ACT

Preparation is the key to success on the ACT. When the ACT is lurking sometime far in the future, it can be difficult to motivate yourself to study. Establishing an organized study routine can help keep you on track as you approach the test date.

Setting Up a Study Schedule

Rather than simply telling yourself to study each week, you might want to write down an actual schedule, just as you have a schedule of classes at school. Keep this schedule where you'll see it every day, and consider showing it to a parent who will nag you incessantly when you don't follow it. (You might as well use your parents' nagging capabilities to your own advantage for once.) You should reward yourself for keeping to your schedule.

You should allot at least a few hours a week to studying, depending on how much time you have before the test date. If you start preparing five weeks in advance, you might consider studying one subject per week, with the last week left over for light review. Our chapters on the individual tests will give you a solid review of the material you need to know.

To complement your studying, take at least part of a practice test each week. We've given you two practice tests at the back of this book. You don't necessarily have to take a full practice test each week, but, if you're preparing for English one week, take a practice English Test to help focus your studying. We explain how practice tests can function as powerful study tools in the chapter called "Practice Tests Are Your Best Friends."