

# Conquering the ACT in 3 pages\*

## Top Ten Tips for ACT Success

1. Remember that YOU are in control; you are the MASTER of this test. There is no need for any fear or panic.
2. Mark in your test booklet—you paid for it! Underline key words, phrases, and ideas, and draw diagrams if that helps you visualize the problem you are supposed to solve.
3. Ignore irrelevant issues by working problems with urgency, not squandering time to obsess over one answer.
4. Check back with the text in Reading and Science—ALL the answers are THERE!
5. Read carefully so that you are sure to answer the right question.
6. Guess intelligently. No penalty for guessing unless you do so haphazardly.
7. Answer carefully—consider gridding in answers in groups, OR use letters of your answer choices to keep you on track with the answer sheet.
8. NEVER read the directions for each of the tests. It wastes time, and they haven't changed.
9. Keep your eye on the time! I suggest you bring a watch or clock that you can put flat on the desktop so that you don't have to look around for the time. Also, Kaplan suggests re-setting your timepiece at the start of each test at 12:00, so you know how much time you have without having to think too much about it.
10. Do "Question Triage." Take a quick look at each question, and consider if it seems something you can answer fairly quickly (do those right then), or if the question appears to be a "time eater" that you should skip and go back to after you have answered all the quick questions.

## Test-Specific Information

### I. The English Test a.k.a. "The FUN Test"

Rundown: 45 minutes, 75 multiple choice questions with 4 choices each, 5 passages with about 15 questions each.

#### Main Advice:

1. Read through the entire passage, marking corrections to errors you see and "hear" as you go through it. This will help you figure out the main idea of the passage, the author's purpose in writing the passage, and if you know those two things you will answer the rhetorical skills questions more successfully and quickly.
2. Trust your ears. On this test, if it "sounds right," it probably is.
3. When in doubt, select the shortest answer.
4. When in doubt, leave commas out!
5. If "OMIT the underlined portion" is a choice, there is an 80-90% chance that is the correct answer.

#### Other Tips:

1. Make sure every sentence contains at least one complete thought.
2. Make sure that modifiers are as close as possible to what they modify.
3. Make sure it's perfectly clear to what or to whom all pronouns refer.
4. Make sure structural clues make sense.
5. Make sure all verbs match their subjects and tense of the surrounding context.
6. Keep the tone of the passage consistent.
7. Make sure that your answer is in keeping with the logical "flow" of the passage.
8. Make sure your answers match the level of formality of the passage.
9. Know the 12 classic grammar errors:
  - a. It and They
  - b. Commas or Dashes or Parentheses
  - c. Run-ons and Comma Splices
  - d. Fragments
  - e. Misunderstood Punctuation Marks ( . ? ! , ; : — )
  - f. -ly endings
  - g. Its and It's
  - h. There or Their or They're AND Are or Our
  - i. Irregular verb conjugations
  - j. -er or -est AND more versus most
  - k. Between versus Among
  - l. Less versus Fewer

## II. The Math Test a.k.a. "The LONG Test"

Rundown: 60 minutes for 60 questions, each with five choices, and graphing calculators are allowed.  
THE BREAKDOWN OF QUESTIONS BY TYPE CHANGED IN THE FALL OF 2014! THEY ARE NOW AS FOLLOWS:

12-15 pre-algebra  
9-12 elementary algebra questions  
9-12 intermediate algebra questions  
9-12 coordinate geometry questions  
12-15 plane geometry questions  
3-6 trigonometry questions

### Main Advice:

1. On this test, like all the others, the ACT question makers reward acts of clever thinking. Do not automatically go through the motions of solving every problem in the traditional sense. Look at the problem first and quickly consider if there is a simpler way to get to the correct choice. Look for shortcuts!
2. Use the 3-Step Method (Kaplan's): Understand, Analyze, and Select—Understand the problem and what is being asked, Analyze how best to solve, and Select (if your answer is there it is probably right; if it isn't a choice, narrow down the choices as best you can by process of elimination or smart guessing).
3. Plan two "Passes" through the Math subtest: The First Pass is to look at each problem in order, do each one you understand, without allowing yourself to get bogged down. Never spend more than a minute on any question. The Second Pass is to go back to any question that may have stumped you the first time through. Sometimes going back to a question gives you a chance to see how to answer it in a way you couldn't see the first time. If there hasn't been any breakthrough, use process of elimination, or intelligent guessing.
4. On complex questions, think of how you would handle an easy problem that tests the same principle. A complex problem is often just an easier problem in disguise.

### Other Tips:

1. Eyeball a geometry problem if you don't have the time or knowledge to solve it.
2. Know your calculator, and how to make it work for you in solving and back-solving (plugging each answer in to see which is correct) the Math problems. When back-solving, begin with the middle choice (C or H).
3. Make abstract problems concrete by substituting numbers for variables.
4. Know your terms! "Integers" include zero and negative whole numbers; "evens and odds" include zero and negative whole numbers, "prime numbers" do not include the number one, "remainders" are integers, the  $\sqrt{\quad}$  symbol represents the positive square root only, and "rectangles" include squares.
5. Basic Algebra you must know going in
  - a. Evaluate an expression (if  $x=2$ , then  $x^2 + 5x - 6 = ?$ )
  - b. Multiply binomials  $(x+3)(x+4) = ?$
  - c. Factor a polynomial (what is the complete factorization of  $x^2-5x+6$  ?)
  - d. Solve a quadratic equation (for  $x^2+12=7x$ , what is the solution set?)
  - e. Simplify an algebraic fraction (For all  $x \neq \pm 3$ ,  $\frac{x^2 - x - 12}{x^2 - 9} = ?$ )
  - f. Solve a linear equation (If  $5x - 12 = -2x + 9$ , then  $x = ?$ )
  - g. Solve a system of equations (If  $4x + 3y = 8$  &  $x + y = 3$ ,  $x = ?$ )
  - h. Solve an inequality (What are all the values of  $x$  for which  $-5x + 7 < 3$  ?)
  - i. Find the distance between two points in the  $(x, y)$  coordinate plane (What is the distance between  $(-2, 2)$  &  $(1, -2)$  ?)
  - j. Find the slope of a line from its equation (Find slope of  $2x + 3y = 4$ ).
6. Basic Geometry you must know going in
  - a. Calculating the area of rectangles, circles, trapezoids & triangles.
  - b. Working with isosceles, equilateral, and right triangles.
  - c. Using the Pythagorean theorem.
  - d. Working with similar triangles.
  - e. Working with parallel lines and transversals.
  - f. Figuring the length of an arc.

### III. The Reading Test a.k.a. "The EASY Test"

Rundown: 35 minutes, 40 questions with 4 choices each, 4 passages with 10 questions each.

Types of Passages (one each): Prose Fiction, Social Studies, Humanities, and Natural Science. Questions cover comprehension, making inferences, recognizing structure, theme, and characterization.

Advice:

1. SKIM each passage, then start answering questions over it. Skimming will keep you from bogging yourself down in this subtest.
2. Many students think their job with this test is to "Comprehend and Remember," when really, this test is about "**Find and Paraphrase.**"
3. Follow Kaplan's 3-step method for Reading: Preread quickly (skim), Consider the question, and then Look back at the passage (**before** viewing choices).
4. Write on the text! Underline ideas, circle important words, etc.
5. When making inferences, don't be too extreme.

### IV. The Science Test a.k.a. "The BORING Test"

Rundown: 35 minutes for 40 questions, each with 4 choices, 7 passages with 5-7 questions each. Topics range from biology, chemistry, physics, geology, and astronomy, to meteorology.

Advice:

1. This is the last test (unless you are doing the Writing subtest), and the reading material is often quite dull and confusing. This is where the ACT question makers separate students who will work with tenacity and purpose from those who will give up due to exhaustion and boredom. The confusion comes in with the multitude of various charts, tables, and graphs they have to select from when composing questions. Remember: nearly all the answers are in the reading passages, so force yourself to fight against the desire to give up or not care. Turn it into a game! On average, only 5 of 40 questions require basic physical science (9<sup>th</sup> grade) knowledge.
2. Same as in the Reading subtest, Pre-read, Consider the question, and Refer back to the passage, charts, tables, and graphs. Knowing how to read visual presentations of data and interpret them is helpful. Look at the units and values! Try to visualize descriptions of experiments and apparatuses! Make small sketches of descriptions if it helps you!
3. If you are almost out of time, go right to the questions in this test without reading the passage and answer as many data interpretation questions as you can, since they do not require reading of the passage. Typically, the first two questions of every passage are simple data interpretation (reading graphs, charts, and tables).

### V. The Writing Test a.k.a. "The Why-Do-I-Have-to-Do-This-Part Test"

Rundown: As of September 2015, students now have 40 minutes to write one essay in response to a prompt. Take this IF a school you are interested in requires it. Your essay is holistically scored by two readers on a 6-point scale. The readers, by the way, are stingy when it comes to giving sixes.

What are they looking for?

1. Stating a clear perspective on an issue—answering the question in the prompt.
2. Providing supporting evidence and logical reasoning—building an argument.
3. Maintaining focus and organizing ideas logically.
4. Writing that is focused and clear. (Neatness helps!)
5. The difference between a 4-5 essay and a 6 involves greater depth of discussion of the topic plus varied syntax, vocabulary, and transitional wording.

*Experience with the essay scoring shows that students should NOT take this part of the exam unless they are applying to a school that requires it.*