

Hello to all my students taking the ACT this Saturday! To relieve some of the stress of test day, I've decided to put together a list of tips and reminders for you.

Before I begin, here is what the ACT recommends (taken from <http://www.actstudent.org/testprep/tips/testday.html>):

- Carefully read the instructions on the cover of the test booklet.
- Read the directions for each test carefully.
- Read each question carefully.
- Pace yourself—don't spend too much time on a single passage or question.
- Pay attention to the announcement of five minutes remaining on each test.
- Use a soft lead No. 2 pencil with a good eraser. Do not use a mechanical pencil or ink pen; if you do, your answer document cannot be scored accurately.
- Answer the easy questions first, then go back and answer the more difficult ones if you have time remaining on that test.
- On difficult questions, eliminate as many incorrect answers as you can, then make an educated guess among those remaining.
- **Answer every question.** Your scores on the multiple-choice tests are based on the number of questions you answer correctly. **There is no penalty for guessing.**
- If you complete a test before time is called, recheck your work on that test.
- Mark your answers properly. Erase any mark completely and cleanly without smudging.
- Do not mark or alter any ovals on a test or continue writing the essay after time has been called. If you do, you will be dismissed and your answer document will **not** be scored.
- If you are taking the ACT Plus Writing, see these [Writing Test tips](#).

I would add some other tips to this list:

- 1) Bring one dull pencil in addition to your regular #2 pencils. This dull pencil will make it easier to fill in the multiple-choice "bubbles" and save you a few extra seconds per question. You might want to bring a manual pencil sharpener as well.
- 2) Bring some water, but not too much - you don't want to be running to the bathroom during the test! Bring snacks you're used to eating.

- 3) Bring replacement batteries for your calculator, just in case. (I recommend the TI-83 and above for its graphing capabilities.) You might even want to bring a smaller calculator as a backup. Don't be too reliant on your calculator, but at the same time, you shouldn't waste time doing complicated arithmetic when you could be using your calculator instead. You are much more likely to make a careless error on the math section if you don't write things down and use your calculator to double-check. Go to this link to make sure your calculator is allowed: <http://www.actstudent.org/faq/calculator.html>.
- 4) Bring a digital watch and practice using the stopwatch function. For the essay section (30 minutes), try to split it into 5-minute increments. For example, for a 5-paragraph essay you should spend about 5 minutes on the outline and 5 minutes on each paragraph. Keeping close track of the time will prevent you from having to rush or wonder how much time you have remaining in the section. Don't count on the proctor to tell you this, and don't count on having a clock in the room. (As a matter of fact, when I took the ACT, I couldn't see the clock from where I was seated.) Students tend to rush their answers on test day, so using a stopwatch is the best way to pace yourself and prevent careless errors.
- 5) You should arrive at the test center by 7:45, as the ACT suggests, but don't believe their claims that the test is really going to start at 8:00! The test usually starts closer to 8:30 or even 9:00 because of all the forms you have to fill out, the reading of the instructions, seating of students, etc. So try not to be nervous when you arrive, because there will be plenty of time to be nervous when the test starts.
- 6) **Breaks:** you can expect a brief "bathroom break" after the Math Section, as well as a short break between the Science and Writing (Essay) sections. Don't overdo the water!
- 7) **Nerves:** Remember, being a little bit nervous is a good thing, because it means that you care. Just trust your instincts and remember the lessons that we worked on, and you should be fine. If you're confused, you might want to think to yourself, "What would Brian say about this problem?" Remember to "look at the big picture" and to pay close attention to the wording of each question.
- 8) **Essay:** most students don't write the (optional) ACT essay anymore, now that the SAT has dropped the essay portion. If for some reason you are still taking the ACT with essay, remember that it is always the last section of the test. You may

want to think of a few "fallback" examples that you could use on your essay, just in case you draw a blank after reading the question. Remember, you should be as specific as possible, so try to think of an area where you are particularly knowledgeable. You could refer to an article that you recently read in the newspaper, or a biographical paper that you recently wrote. Make sure you discuss the counterarguments to your argument. Don't forget to take the first 3-5 minutes to outline, to CLASSIFY YOUR EXAMPLE in the topic sentence of each body paragraph, and to explain THE REASONS WHY YOUR THESIS MAKES SENSE. Details are important, but you must answer the question directly in order to receive a good score. Periodically refer back to the question, and ask yourself, "How am I answering the question right now?" Try not to ramble, to repeat yourself, or to go off on any tangents.

Here is a sample ACT essay outline:

OPENING PARAGRAPH (make sure to keep this short because you have a lot of other things to do):

- Interesting Intro (optional)
- Quickly summarize popular positions on the topic, and start to move toward your position. (optional)
- Thesis in last sentence (answer the question directly)

BODY PARAGRAPHS (four total - one for each perspective, and then one to summarize your own perspective / its relationship to the other perspectives)

- First few sentences: summarize and evaluate the perspective in general terms
- Next 3-5 sentences: address the language of the perspective by analyzing it logically, then using examples to back up your observations. Use human nature, psychology, ethics and more logic to help you address the perspective more completely. Be as specific as you can: every claim should be supported with an example when possible.

CONCLUSION

- Quickly summarize your point
- Generalize/ Allude to the perspectives and your examples
- Look toward future and consider the implications of your argument.

(Obviously this outline is a bit generic, but you get the idea. Make sure that your handwriting is

legible, that you fill as much space as possible, and that you indent your paragraphs clearly.)

And here's what the ACT has to say about the essay (taken from <http://www.actstudent.org/testprep/tips/writing.html>):

- Carefully read the instructions on the cover of the test booklet.
- Do some planning before writing the essay; you will be instructed to do your prewriting in your Writing Test booklet. You can refer to these notes as you write the essay on the lined pages in your answer folder.
- Do not skip lines and do not write in the margins. Write your essay legibly, in English, with a No. 2 pencil. Do not use ink, a mechanical pencil, or correction fluid.
 - **Carefully consider the prompt** and make sure you understand the issue—reread it if you aren't sure.
 - **Decide what perspective you want** to take on the issue.
 - **Then jot down your ideas:** this might simply be a list of reasons and examples that you will use to explain your point of view on the issue.
 - **Write down what you think** others might say in opposition to your point of view and think about how you would refute their arguments.
 - **Think of how best to organize** your essay.
- At the beginning of your essay, make sure readers will see that you understand the issue. Explain your point of view in a clear and logical way.
- Stay focused on the topic.
- Discuss the issue in a broader context or evaluate the implications or complications of the issue.
- Address what others might say to refute your point of view and present a counterargument.
- Use specific examples.
- Vary the structure of your sentences, and use varied and precise word choices.
- Make logical relationships clear by using transitional words and phrases.
- End with a strong conclusion that summarizes or reinforces your position.
- If possible, before time is called, recheck your work:
 - Correct any mistakes in grammar, usage, punctuation, and spelling.
 - If you find any words that are hard to read, recopy them so your readers can read them easily.
 - Make any corrections and revisions neatly, between the lines (but not in the margins).

-On the math section, ALWAYS CONSIDER PLUGGING IN AS AN OPTION.

[Full ACT Math Formula and Concept List](#) / [Helpful ACT Math Calculator Programs](#)

Remember, if the answer choices contain variables, plug in for those variables. If the problem does not include any specific values, plug in your own numbers. When the answers are constants, plug in the answers. If the question has a “missing piece,” and the missing piece is the answer, then try plugging in the answers rather than using algebra.

-If a math problem doesn't specifically say that it's *not* drawn to scale, you can assume that it *is* drawn to scale. So always double-check your answers to make sure they make sense according to the illustration. For example, if you answered 30 degrees but it looks more like 120, then you know you must have made a mistake. In fact, you should always use common sense to quickly double-check your answers, even on problems that don't involve geometry.

-Math: skip or do?: The very first step for any math question is deciding whether to skip or do the question. Make this decision right after reading the question. If you're unsure about it or if you don't know how to do it, skip it and come back later if you have time. Remember to also check in after about 30-45 seconds and ask yourself: Should I continue? If you're stuck, confused, or not confident - guess, skip, and move on.

-Math: get the ball rolling: When coming back to a question you didn't know how to do, start anywhere. Doing something - anything - often gets the ball rolling enough for you to solve the question. Don't worry about "setting it up" correctly - just solve for something, draw a picture, estimate, etc. Take a baby step. Get your pencil moving!

-Pacing: Usually, when students run out of time on a test, or have to rush at the end, this happens because they took too long to complete the first half of the test. Make sure that you set a "halfway" goal for yourself based on the number of questions in the section. For instance, in a 75-question English section for which you have 45 minutes, set a goal of being done with question 37 after about 22 minutes. In Science, it's question 20 after about 17 minutes. **Don't forget your watch!** Depending on your score goal, though, you might not work on every question in a given section.

- **Two minute warning:** with two minutes left in a math or reading section, it's probably a good idea to stop trying to solve problems and just focus on eliminating logically and guessing.

- **Working carefully:** Putting your finger on the page when reading is a good way to

make sure you read carefully. Go slowly at the beginning of the question so you don't misread it, and go slowly at the end of the question so you don't make a careless mistake just because you want to finish it. Remember the quote: "slow is smooth and smooth is fast". It feels scarier to work methodically than to work quickly, but it's worth it.

- Rough spots: Accept that the test isn't going to go perfectly. Don't put too much pressure on yourself to excel when you hit a tough spot. Just get through it. That way at least you won't burn too much energy and time on it.

- Tough spots: The worst thing to do with hard questions is to invest energy and time on them. Your brain may want to struggle through the question. DON'T. Stop staring at it. Come back to it later, unless there are no easier questions left.

Remember to leave a minute at the end of the section to allow yourself enough time to bubble in any questions you haven't answered; unanswered questions are marked as incorrect. REMEMBER: depending on your score goal, you may or may not work on every question in a section. If you're behind on time, sacrifice and guess on the next hard or time-consuming question and repeat until you're back on track.

- As far as "snacks" go, I would recommend something high-calorie like a Powerbar; all that thinking is going to make you hungry. But don't eat anything you're not used to - now is not the time to surprise your stomach.

- If you are prone to allergies in the morning, or have any other medical conditions, don't forget to bring your medicine in case you need it! If you have a cold, take the proper medicine and bring some tissues...but DON'T take any medicines that make you drowsy.

- If you find yourself starting to zone out or panic, sit back, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. This is a very long test, so you will have to relax and pace yourself. There are 5 sections and 215 questions on the ACT, so remember that no one problem is going to make or break your score!

- Finally, don't be afraid to raise your hand and request a different seat if you are uncomfortable. In my many years of tutoring students for this test, I have heard almost every test-day horror story imaginable, from a broken desk to a testing room where the college band is practicing at full volume on the floor below! If you are uncomfortable for **any** reason, then raise your hand and request a different seat right away. Don't wait until the test has already started, because then you will have no power to change the

situation.

AFTER THE TEST

-Please feel free to leave me a quick phone message, or send me a text to let me know how it went.

-You should be able to see your scores online in approximately 3 weeks.

-Remember that most students take the ACT more than once, so if you don't receive your ideal score, don't panic. Those "average" ACT scores that you see in the college guides are usually not the students' scores from one test date; rather, they are the students' "best scores" from multiple administrations of the test. If you need to take the test again, then you can always sign up for future ACTs. Remember that the ACT's new "Score Choice" policy allows you to take the ACT as many times as you like, and to send only your best score to colleges (except for certain colleges such as Yale and Georgetown, who require you to send all of your scores).

Also, with the addition of the 5th, unscored experimental section, which is about 20 minutes long, don't expect your test day to end until about 1 pm or later (the exam usually starts between 8:30-9 am):

Table 7. Times for ACT Subject Tests

	ACT (no writing) (minutes)	ACT with writing (minutes)
Test 1	45	45
Test 2	60	60
Break	15	15
Test 3	35	35
Test 4	35	35
Break	—	5
Writing test	—	40

Writing Room

Approx. 7:30 a.m. Arrival of testing staff

Approx. 7:45 a.m. Briefing session

8:00 a.m. Arrival, identification, and seating of examinees begins

- Approx. 8:15 a.m.
1. Begin reading the verbal instructions
 2. Distribute test materials to examinees
 3. Administer the five tests as directed in the verbal instructions—time each test exactly
 4. Collect and verify all test materials

Approx. 1:10 p.m. Dismiss examinees

Source: <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/ACTAdminManualStateDistrictStandardTestingPaper.pdf>

OK, that's all. GOOD LUCK!

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