



PSAT/NMSQT®

PSAT/NMSQT Study Guide

What to expect on test day, how the test is scored, and strategies to help you do your best.



GETTING STARTED

About the PSAT

The PSAT/NMSQT stands for the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test. It has three main functions:

1**SAT Practice**

The PSAT is excellent practice for the SAT. The PSAT contains slightly easier Reading and Writing passages and tests fewer advanced math concepts, but it contains the same types of questions. The PSAT also measures your score against those of your classmates and peers across the country, just as the SAT does.

2**Scholarships**

Taking the PSAT gives you a chance to qualify for scholarship programs, most notably the National Merit Scholarship Program. Aside from the possibility of receiving tuition for college, the National Merit Scholarship program gives you recognition that is an impressive addition to your college applications.

3**Standing Out**

The PSAT can help you stand out to colleges. Many schools purchase lists of high-scoring students and encourage these students to apply. A great score on the PSAT could get you noticed by colleges and earn you small perks like meals during visits and waived application fees.

THE BASICS

PSAT Structure & Scoring

The PSAT is a fully digital test that all students, except for certain students with accommodations, take on a computer. The test is also adaptive, meaning your performance on the first module of each section will determine the difficulty level of the second module you'll take.

TOTAL LENGTH 2 hrs 14 min	READING & WRITING 2 modules 27 questions each · 32 min per module
MATH 2 modules 22 questions each · 35 min per module	SCORING 320–1520 composite · 160–760 per section

How the 2 hrs 14 min Breaks Down

R&W Mod 1	R&W Mod 2	Math Mod 1	Math Mod 2
32 min	32 min	35 min	35 min

Module 1 performance sets the difficulty of Module 2 — the test adapts as you go. Because your Module 1 score determines how hard (and how valuable) Module 2 gets, treat every early question with care: a strong first module unlocks a shot at the section's highest scores.

PSAT Test-Taking Strategies

The strategies below can be used in both the Reading and Writing section and the Math section of the PSAT.

STRATEGY 1

Triage the Test

You do not need to complete PSAT questions in order. You can skip around within each module, but you cannot return to a module once you've submitted your answers.

To triage a section effectively, do the following:

- 1 Work through any easy questions you can do quickly. Skip questions that are hard or time-consuming. Use the digital test's tool to flag any questions you are initially skipping.
- 2 Use the module review screen to return to any questions you skipped. Work through the questions that are doable but time-consuming.
- 3 Work through the hard questions.

STRATEGY 2

Elimination

If you can determine that one or more answer choices are definitely incorrect, you can increase your chances of getting the correct answer by paring the selection down.

To eliminate answer choices, do the following:

- 1 Read each answer choice.
- 2 Use the digital test's elimination tool to cross out any answer choices that you determine are incorrect.
- 3 If only one answer choice is left, select it and move on.
- 4 If more than one answer choice remains, remember that there is no wrong-answer penalty, so take your best guess.

STRATEGY 3

Strategic Guessing

Each multiple-choice question on the PSAT has four answer choices and no wrong-answer penalty. That means if you have no idea how to approach a question, you have a 25 percent chance of randomly choosing the correct answer. The worst that can happen is that you'll earn zero points on a question, which means you should always at least take a guess.

When guessing, do the following:

- 1 Try to strategically eliminate answer choices before guessing.
- 2 If a question is taking too long, skip it and guess. Spend your time on questions you know how to do.
- 3 Leave a few minutes to check the module review screen — make sure every question has an answer.

PRO TIP**Pick a Letter of the Day**

Choose an answer letter (A, B, C, or D) before test day. When you're stuck, select it and move on — no wrong-answer penalty means it's always worth a guess.

SECTION 1

Reading and Writing Section

TIME ALLOTTED

64 minutes

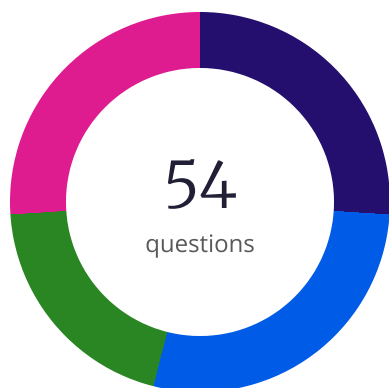
two 32-minute modules

NUMBER OF QUESTIONS

54 total

27 per module · all 4-option multiple-choice

Content Areas



- **Information and Ideas:** ~12–14 questions
- **Craft and Structure:** ~13–15 questions
- **Standard English Conventions:** ~11–15 questions
- **Expression of Ideas:** ~8–12 questions

WHERE TO FOCUS

Craft and Structure carries the most questions in this section — vocabulary-in-context and text-structure questions are worth extra practice. All questions are 4-option multiple-choice.

Kaplan Method for PSAT Reading and Writing

STEP 1
What is the question asking?
Standard English Conventions questions ONLY: look at the answer choices for clues.

STEP 2
What do I need to look for in the passage?

STEP 3
What answer strategy is best?

Predict & Match

Eliminate

PSAT Keywords

There are special types of words you should be on the lookout for in every PSAT Reading and Writing passage. These words will help you understand the structure and viewpoints in every passage.

KEYWORD TYPE	WHAT THE KEYWORDS INDICATE	EXAMPLES
Opinion	the author's viewpoint	<i>fortunately, disappointing, I suggest, it seems likely</i>
Emphasis	what the author finds noteworthy	<i>especially, crucial, important, above all</i>
Continuation	a continuation of the same point	<i>moreover, in addition, also, further</i>
Contrast	a change in direction or a point of difference	<i>but, yet, despite, on the other hand, however</i>
Cause and effect	the use of evidence to support a conclusion	<i>thus, therefore, because, for example, to illustrate</i>

SECTION 2

Math Section

TIME ALLOTTED

70 minutes

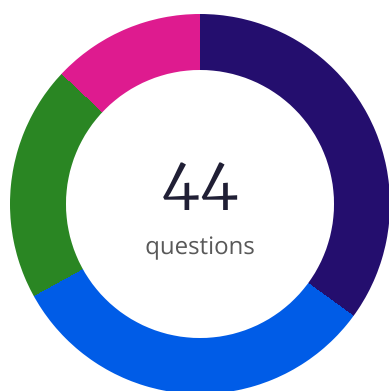
two 35-minute modules

NUMBER OF QUESTIONS

44 total

22 per module · ~33 multiple-choice, ~11 student-produced

Content Areas



- **Algebra:** ~13–15 questions
- **Advanced Math:** ~12–14 questions
- **Problem Solving and Data Analysis:** ~7–9 questions
- **Geometry and Trigonometry:** ~4–6 questions

WHERE TO FOCUS

Algebra and Advanced Math make up roughly two-thirds of the Math section — mastering linear and quadratic equations pays off most. About 3 in 4 questions are multiple-choice; the rest are student-produced, where you grid in your own answer.

The Kaplan Method for PSAT Math Questions

STEP 1
What is the question asking?

STEP 2
What does the question tell me?

STEP 3
What strategy is best for me?

STEP 4
Am I done?

PSAT Mental Math

- ✓ Don't overutilize your calculator by using it to make simple calculations.
- ✗ Save time by reviewing multiplication tables. At a bare minimum, work up through the 10s. If you know them through 12 or 15, that's even better!
- x² You can save a few seconds of number crunching by memorizing perfect squares. Knowing perfect squares of the numbers through 10 is a good start; go for 15 or even 20 if you can.
- % Percent means "out of a hundred." You can write percentages as decimals (e.g., 27% = 0.27).
- ¼ The ability to recognize a few simple fractions masquerading in decimal or percent form will save you time on test day. Memorize the content of the following table:

FRACTION	DECIMAL	PERCENT
$\frac{1}{10}$	0.1	10%
$\frac{1}{5}$	0.2	20%
$\frac{1}{4}$	0.25	25%
$\frac{1}{3}$	0.333...	33.3...%
$\frac{1}{2}$	0.5	50%
$\frac{3}{4}$	0.75	75%

PSAT Calculator Tips

- The Digital PSAT includes a built-in Desmos graphing calculator in the Bluebook™ testing app for both Math modules. Practice using the free web version of Desmos at desmos.com/calculator.
- Some questions, such as those that require you to perform statistical calculations or determine the roots of complicated quadratic equations, are specifically designed with calculator use in mind.
- Solving some questions with a calculator can save you time and energy, but you'll waste both if you go for the calculator on others. You'll have to decide which method is best for:

Long division and other extensive calculations

Graphing quadratics

Simplifying radicals and calculating roots

Geometry

The coordinate plane

- Start practicing with your calculator now, whichever one you choose — you don't want to waste test-day time looking for the exponent button. If you bring your own, a graphing calculator is best given the range of topics you'll see.

KEEP PRACTICING

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