For the Class of 2028

PSAT to SAT

The Junior Year Playbook



How to read the score you already have, find the mistakes behind it, and choose the SAT you finish on.

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SCORE SAMURAI

The SAT is a discipline. Master it in The Dojo.

Sensei Jay

The SAT Sensei

By Sensei Jay, founder of Score Samurai. I coach the Digital SAT one on one, and this is the first week of that work, written down.

Start here

You have a PSAT score, or a practice SAT score. Most families do one thing with it. They look at the total, feel good or bad about it, and close the tab.

The total is the least useful number on the report. This guide shows you what to read in its place, in about twenty minutes, and what to do with the four weeks after.

Three ideas run through all of it.

1. A score is a location. It says where you are standing today. It says nothing about March.
2. Points go missing to the same few mistakes, again and again. Find the repeats and you have found the plan.
3. The SAT rewards a system. It is a test of patterns, and patterns can be learned.

Parents

Sections 1 to 7 each end with one line for you. If you read nothing else, read those.

1

Read the report you already have

Open the PSAT report, or your Bluebook practice score, and find four things.

The total. The PSAT runs from 320 to 1520. The SAT runs from 400 to 1600. College Board puts the two on a common scale and says they test the same knowledge and skills. So a PSAT total is a fair picture of where you would land on an SAT taken that same week. It is a snapshot of this month.

The two section scores. Reading and Writing, and Math. Two students can both hold a 1150 and need opposite plans. One has 620 in Reading and Writing and 530 in Math. The other has the reverse. The total hides that.

The skill bands under each section. The report shows how you did in each content area. Reading and Writing has four: Information and Ideas, Craft and Structure, Expression of Ideas, and Standard English Conventions. Math has

four: Algebra, Advanced Math, Problem-Solving and Data Analysis, and Geometry and Trigonometry. Write down your two lowest. That is your starting list.

The Selection Index. This is your Reading and Writing score doubled, plus Math, divided by ten. National Merit uses it and nobody else does. No college reads it. If National Merit matters to you, check the number against last year's cutoff for your state, then put it away.

One thing to skip: turning the PSAT into an "expected SAT score". Every conversion table assumes nothing changes between now and test day.

A low band tells you where the points went. It does not tell you why. "Advanced Math" covers several different kinds of question, and a low band rarely means all of them are broken. Finding which ones is the job of section 5.

Parents

Ask about the section split and the two lowest bands. Those are the numbers with a plan in them.

2

Find your belt

At Score Samurai every score band has a belt. Each belt is a set of mistakes the test uses to take points at that score. A mistake is closed when it stops costing you points. Close a belt's set and the next belt is earned.

White	Under 1100	**Setup.** Reading what the question asks, saying what each number stands for, tracking the right line.
Green	1100 to 1250	**Traps.** You know the content. The points go to answers that are built to look right.
Blue	1250 to 1350	**The clock.** You can solve almost everything. The points go to time spent the long way.
Brown	1350 to 1450	**The harder second module,** where one small slip turns a right method into a wrong choice.
Black	1450 and up	**The rare questions.** Each shows up once or twice a test.

Use your PSAT total as a first read of your belt. A belt shows what is closed. It never predicts a score.

No PSAT score, or an old one? The 10-question check at scoresamurai.com/belt has no clock. It gives you a first read in a few minutes.

The next section turns your college list into a target score. The one after it shows six of these mistakes, each with a question to try.

Parents

The belt tells you what kind of work is ahead. A Green belt does not need more content. A Green belt needs to stop falling for the same answers.

3

Set your target from your colleges

A target score is not a feeling. It comes off your college list, and every college publishes the numbers.

Each college files a report called the Common Data Set. Search the college's name with "Common Data Set" and open section C9. It shows the SAT scores of the middle half of last year's first-year class: the 25th percentile and the 75th percentile, for the students who sent scores.

College	25th percentile	75th percentile
Penn State, University Park	1280	1410
Michigan	1370	1530
Stanford	1520	1570

From each college's 2025-26 Common Data Set, section C9.

Three rules for reading those numbers.

1. Aim for the top number. At the bottom number, three of every four students who sent a score did better than you.
2. Take the highest top number on your list. That is your target. The lowest bottom number on your list is your first milestone.
3. "Test optional" does not mean a score is ignored. A score in a college's range, or above it, helps the application. And some colleges ask every applicant for one. Harvard, Stanford, Princeton and Georgetown all require scores from this year's juniors. Policies keep changing, so check each college's admissions page.

Parents

The number that matters is the gap between today's score and the top number at the hardest college on the list. That gap, and the months left, decide how much work this takes.

No list yet? That is normal in the fall of junior year. Pick three colleges for now: one you would love, one that fits and one you feel sure of. The target they give you is good enough to plan with, and it can move when the list does.

4 Six questions, six traps

Each question has a wrong answer built to look right. Try the question first. Then read the trap and the fix.

Trusting the first meaning

Trap 1 Reading and Writing

A late frost in April served as a natural check on the beetle population in the orchard, killing most of the larvae before they could mature. As used in the text, what does the word "check" most nearly mean?

A) review B) limit C) payment D) mark

The trap. A) review is the everyday meaning of check. The frost did not inspect anything.

The fix. The frost held the beetles down, so the answer is B) limit. Test the first meaning against the sentence before you trust it.

Matching the verb to the nearest noun

Trap 2 Reading and Writing

The detailed sketches that botanist Lena Ortiz made of a single desert flower _____ now on display at a library in Tucson, where visitors can compare each stage of the bloom. Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

A) is B) are C) was D) has been

The trap. A) is matches "flower," the nearest noun. But the subject is "sketches."

The fix. Cross out what sits between the subject and the verb, then match them. The sketches are on display, so the answer is B) are.

Reading the choices before the clue

Trap 3 Reading and Writing

Most of the town's early maps were drawn quickly and contain many errors. Ana Ruiz's 1852 survey, by contrast, was _____ : every street and landmark on it matches modern satellite images to within a few meters. Which choice completes the text with the most logical and precise word or phrase?

A) ambitious B) meticulous C) hasty
D) celebrated

The trap. A) ambitious fits a big project. The sentence is about precision, not size.

The fix. Before you read the choices, find the words that explain the blank: "within a few meters." Careful in every detail is B) meticulous.

Stopping one step short

Trap 4 Math

A square photo exactly fills the opening of a frame that is 3 inches wide on all four sides. The outside edge of the frame has a perimeter of 56 inches. What is the area of the photo, in square inches?

A) 8 B) 14 C) 64 D) 196

The trap. D) 196 is the area of the whole framed square. The photo stops where the frame starts.

The fix. Each outer side is $56 \div 4 = 14$. The frame takes 3 off each end: $14 - 6 = 8$. Then $8^2 = 64$, choice C. Finish every step.

Desmos. By hand, Desmos adds nothing here: one division, one subtraction and one square.

Solving for the wrong thing

Trap 5 Math

$f(x) = 2x^2 - 12x + 23$. The function f is defined by the given equation. For what value of x does f(x) reach its minimum?

A) -3 B) 3 C) 5 D) 6

The trap. C) 5 is the lowest value of f. The question asks for the x where it happens.

The fix. Write it as $2(x - 3)^2 + 5$. The squared part is 0 at $x = 3$, so the answer is B) 3. Read what the question asks for before you choose.

Desmos. Type $f(x) = 2x^2 - 12x + 23$ and click the gray vertex point. It reads (3, 5). The x is 3.

Turning a percent into a decimal out of habit

Trap 6 Math

One bag of a trail mix provides 4% of the recommended daily amount of fiber for an adult. Which equation gives p, the percent of the recommended daily amount of fiber provided by n bags of the trail mix?

A) $p = 0.04n$ B) $p = 4n$ C) $p = 4^n$ D) $p = n/4$

The trap. A) $p = 0.04n$ comes from the habit of turning every percent into a decimal. Here p is already a percent.

The fix. Say what the letter stands for before you write anything. One bag gives 4 and two bags give 8, so the answer is B) $p = 4n$.

Desmos. By hand, Desmos adds nothing here.

Parents

When a miss gets called "careless", it is usually one of these. A trap with a name is far easier to catch than a vague promise to be more careful.

Look back over the six. None of them asked for knowledge you don't have. Each one was lost in the reading or in the last step. Not every miss is like that. Some come from a topic you were never taught, and section 5 shows how to tell the two apart.

5

Sort your misses by cause

This is the part most students never do, and it is where the plan comes from.

1. Take a full official practice test in Bluebook, College Board's free testing app. Time it, and do it in one sitting.
2. For every miss, write down what you did, in your own words. "Picked the choice with a comma because it looked right." "Expanded the whole expression when the question only asked for one coefficient."
3. Group the misses that share a cause. Three misses with the same cause is a pattern.
4. Fix one pattern, retest that kind of question, and move to the next. College Board's Student Question Bank lets you pull official questions by skill, so the retest uses questions you have not seen.

Sort by what you did. Sorting by topic sends you back to a chapter. Sorting by cause tells you what to change on the next question.

One cause is different from the rest: "I never learned this." That is a gap in the foundations, and no trick covers it. Mark those misses, learn the topic properly, then come back to the traps. Both kinds cost points, and a real plan

fixes both.

For Math misses, ask one more question: could I have graphed this? If a question gives you an equation and asks about its solutions, its intercepts, its vertex or where two things meet, put it in Desmos and read the answer off the graph. If it asks you to rewrite or factor an expression, that is by hand. Desmos adds nothing there.

A chatbot can answer any SAT question you paste into it. It cannot tell you why you keep picking the wrong one. That takes your misses laid side by side, which is what this sort gives you.

Parents

Ask to see the sorted list. If it says "careless" five times, the sorting is not finished.

> **Want this done for you?** The free Diagnostic at scoresamurai.com/diagnostic takes your score and a few answers about where you are. I write back within 24 hours with what to fix first.

6

Pick your Done Date

Your Done Date is the sitting you want to be your last. Plan your second SAT as the Done Date. Keep a third sitting open as the backup, so one bad morning does not end the plan.

Test date	Register by	Late deadline	Scores out
Sat, Mar 6, 2027	Fri, Feb 19	Tue, Feb 23	Fri, Mar 19
Sat, May 1, 2027	Fri, Apr 16	Tue, Apr 20	Fri, May 14
Sat, Jun 5, 2027	Fri, May 21	Tue, May 25	Mon, Jun 21

Deadlines end at 11:59 p.m. Eastern. Late registration costs an extra fee. Register at satsuite.collegeboard.org.

For most juniors that means March first, May as the Done Date and June as the backup. A March score arrives with time to act on it, and a second sitting goes better with a real test behind you.

Three mistakes juniors make

Parents

Put the March register-by date in your own calendar today. "We'll decide later" is how a deadline passes.

1. Missing the regular deadline. The late fee is avoidable, and nearby test centers can fill up.
2. Taking the first SAT cold. Take a full practice test in Bluebook first, so the first real sitting is not the practice run.
3. Studying only the section that feels hardest. Points leak from Math and from Reading and Writing, so check both.

7

The next four weeks

Week	What to do
1	Read the report: the section split and your two lowest bands. Register for your first SAT. Take a full practice test in Bluebook if you have not taken one.
2	Sort every miss by cause. Pick the two causes that show up most.
3	Work on those two and nothing else. For each, write the fix as one sentence you can say before you answer. "Reread the last line before I choose."
4	Retest those two kinds of question with official questions you have not seen. Check whether those two causes still show up. The ones that are gone come off the list, and the next two go on.

Parents

Once a week, ask which two mistakes are being worked on right now. A clear answer means the plan is running.

Then run it again. Bluebook has a limited number of full practice tests, so spend them on purpose: one at the start, one at the midpoint and the last one 10 to 12 days before test day. Never take one in the week of the test.

8

When a tutor is worth it, and when it isn't

You do not need a tutor if you have sorted your misses, the causes are clear, and the list gets shorter from one practice test to the next. Keep going.

A tutor earns the fee when one of these is true.

- Some misses come from topics you were never taught, or have forgotten.
- The same mistakes keep coming back after you have named them.
- The score has sat at the same number across two or three practice tests.
- Nobody is checking that the work between tests gets done.

Having Bluebook, free practice tests and a chatbot is like walking into a well-equipped gym alone. Everything you need is in the room. What is missing is the trainer who builds the program around your weak spots, runs the sessions and notices when you skip one.

That is what I do. Score Samurai is one-on-one Digital SAT coaching with me, over Zoom. I teach what is missing, foundations included, and then the traps that sit on top. It starts with a free written Diagnostic. You fill in one short form, and a written read comes back within 24 hours: where the score stands, the score your colleges call for and what to fix first. Every family I work with gets a Roadmap built from that Diagnostic and a written progress update every week.

Start with the free Diagnostic

One short form, a written answer within 24 hours, and nothing to buy.

scoresamurai.com/diagnostic

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Test dates, deadlines and score dates were read on College Board's SAT dates and deadlines page and score release page on November 16, 2026. Dates can change, and College Board is the final word. The PSAT and SAT score ranges and the Selection Index formula are College Board's. The college score ranges come from each college's 2025-26 Common Data Set, read on November 16, 2026.

Print this page

Your playbook, on one page

Fill it in as you go. When every line has an answer, you have a plan.

1 My score today

Total _____ Reading and Writing _____ Math _____

My two lowest bands _____

2 My belt

☐ White ☐ Green ☐ Blue ☐ Brown ☐ Black

3 My target

College	25th percentile	75th percentile

Target: the highest top number _____

First milestone: the lowest bottom number _____

4 What I'm fixing

Topics I never learned, to learn first _____

Cause 1 _____

The fix, in one sentence _____

Cause 2 _____

The fix, in one sentence _____

5 My dates

First SAT _____ Register by _____

Done Date _____ Backup _____

6 Four weeks, four check-ins

☐ Week 1 ☐ Week 2 ☐ Week 3 ☐ Week 4

Parents: tick a box each week once you have seen the work on line 4.

Stuck on a line? The free Diagnostic gives you your belt, your target and what to fix first.
scoresamurai.com/diagnostic