

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Coaching for Standardized Tests \*

For those who plan to go to college, standardized admission tests like the **SAT** (Scholastic Aptitude Test) or **ACT** (American College Test) are almost a certainty. With the anxiety related to taking those tests, many people are tempted to seek businesses that offer coaching for these tests. Will this coaching give them higher scores? If so, does it give those people who can afford such courses an unfair advantage over those who cannot?

First, for those who lack **test sophistication** – being familiar and experienced with test-taking procedures – these courses can help by increasing the person's confidence. For standardized tests, sophistication includes at least the following:

- Being familiar with separate answer sheets.
- Considering *all* the answers in a multiple-choice item rather than picking the first one that seems right.
- Knowing not to spend too much time on puzzling questions.
- Spotting flaws in questions that give additional clues to the answer.
- Knowing when to guess. (For example, if there is no extra penalty for incorrect answers, it makes sense to guess if you do not know. However, on the SAT, a wrong answer on a four-alternative multiple-choice question is marked  $-1/4$ , while a correct answer is marked 1 and no response is rated as 0. In this case, it would pay to guess only if the answer has been narrowed down to a couple of alternatives.)

Most courses for coaching include these test-taking strategies and practice with sample questions. Self-coaching can be achieved by using commercially published booklets available for the major admissions tests. Familiarity with the test format, knowledge of test-taking strategies and practice on sample test items result in higher test scores – but the gain is substantial only for naive test takers (e.g., recent immigrants or students from schools that require little testing). The typical American high school student would probably not benefit from spending more than a day on practice test items.

What about getting instruction in specific subject areas? Those who construct admissions tests try to *avoid* questions on which performance can be raised by short-term drill or instruction in specific topics. However, the verbal section of the SAT and other tests rely heavily on **vocabulary**. Likewise, many of the math sections presume knowledge of high school **algebra** and **geometry**. For those students lacking in those areas, a review would be helpful.

Several studies have shown that coaching in math raises scores in that section of the SAT for those who were not currently studying math. In contrast, the same coaching was of little benefit for those enrolled in math courses. Vocabulary flashcards and reading with the aid of a dictionary are helpful in preparing for the verbal section.

Over the last 30 years, many studies have been done to determine the effects of coaching on SAT scores. They covered many coaching methods – including commercial programs and programs offered to students in public and private high schools. Results varied greatly, depending on the length and type of program and the presence or absence of a *control group*. (It is hard to evaluate test-score gains without relating them to scores of a comparable group of students who have not received coaching.)

In 1981, an analysis of research studies on SAT coaching, which included control groups, was published. The analysis revealed that 30 hours of instruction in verbal skills can result in average score gains of about 14 points on the verbal section of the SAT. An additional 30 hours of math instruction provide an average gain of 26 points on the math section. In total, 60 hours of instruction averaged a 40-point gain on the combined SAT scale. However, you may not realize that SAT scores may range from a minimum of 400 to a maximum of 1600. Within this range of 1200 points, a 40-point change is not likely to affect any decisions about college admissions. In 1983, another psychological study came to similar conclusions.

Without control groups, several studies report larger gains of 50-80 points in both sections of the SAT. However, students in these studies were enrolled in intensive, long-term coaching programs of up to 6 months. The issue here is the difference between **education** and **coaching**. The SAT is designed to measure *developed* abilities. If one year of high-school courses in English and algebra increases SAT scores, it is not surprising that a 6-month coaching course produces a similar effect.

Now here is the big question – should you get coaching for college admission tests?

- To equalize levels of test sophistication – especially for those who lack experience with objective tests – it would help to take a brief course in test strategies and practice with test items under exam conditions.
- If your background in specific abilities is deficient, you will benefit by reviews in English, algebra or geometry, whichever are needed.
- In contrast, if you have a normal high school education, it is probably not worthwhile for you to spend a great deal of time or money on coaching courses.

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\* Adapted from Atkinson, Atkinson, Smith and Bem's *Introduction to Psychology*, Harcourt brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1990, pages 456-457.