

# HOW TO TAKE STANDARDIZED TESTS

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CHARLES OLIVER

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**ELS Publications**  
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## TO THE TEACHER

It is a fact of life that students in American colleges and universities will be required to take tests—most frequently of the timed, standardized, machine-scored variety. Such tests naturally present certain difficulties for all who encounter them, but foreign students are at a particular disadvantage—and not only because of language problems.

Perhaps the greatest disadvantage foreign students must overcome is their lack of experience in the test-taking arena. This gives rise to two great misconceptions, one built on the other: first, that subject-matter knowledge alone is enough to guarantee success; second, that the various standardized tests are so different that preparation must begin completely anew for each one to be taken.

Subject-matter knowledge is, of course, necessary, but in and of itself it is not enough: other factors—understanding directions, filling in answer sheets correctly, dealing with a variety of unfamiliar question and answer types, using time to advantage, and more—are just as important. And as to the tests themselves, certainly there are differences; however, there are many more similarities.

It is not in any sense the goal of this work to treat specific subject areas; countless other texts exist for that purpose. Instead, *How to Take Standardized Tests* concentrates on the tasks common to all timed, standardized, machine-scored exams: the focus is on the development of test-taking “attack strategies.” By employing such strategies, students should be able to approach tests with a renewed measure of confidence and employ the subject-matter knowledge they already possess to maximum advantage.

When working with the materials contained herein, it is important to observe these key considerations:

- Be sure students have read *all* pertinent background sections before attempting any practice test.
- Be sure students understand all question and answer types described—that is, be sure they understand the test-taking tasks involved—before tackling them on any practice test.
- Be sure students understand exactly what they are required to do by any set of directions on a practice test.
- Be sure that work with practice tests does not stop with determining correct answers: have students puzzle out why incorrect answers are wrong.
- Concentrate on use of time, understanding tasks, and applying “attack strategies.” Do not digress by teaching vocabulary and grammar rules.
- Help students focus on developing critical thinking, not on remembering right answers.
- Help students keep in mind that they are not preparing for one particular test, but for standardized tests in general.
- Help students identify their areas of test-taking weakness and then to develop appropriate strategies to combat them.

*How to Take Standardized Tests* consists of the following materials:

- background information on the most common standardized tests;
- specific information on content areas encountered in standardized tests;
- practical suggestions on test-taking preparation;
- test-taking "attack strategies for the areas of English Grammar and Usage, Vocabulary, Listening Comprehension, and Reading Comprehension;
- 20 Practice Tests (6 English Grammar and Usage, 4 Vocabulary, 6 Listening Comprehension, 4 Reading Comprehension);
- a timed (2 hour) Composite Test which allows students to practice using the test-taking strategies presented in the text;
- a 205-item Word List, complete with synonyms and example sentences;
- 2 C-30 cassettes\* containing the Listening Comprehension passages and questions for the Composite Test and Practice Tests;
- Answer Keys for all Practice Tests and the Composite Test.

\*NOTE: These cassettes *must* be used for the Listening Comprehension Practice Tests and for the Listening portion of the Composite Test, since no scripts have been included with these materials. This has been done intentionally for two reasons: first, to simulate actual test conditions; second, so that students would be forced to listen, not read when taking Listening Comprehension tests.

It is suggested that *How to Take Standardized Tests* be used in the following manner:

1. Administer the Composite Test before study of the text proper is begun. This will give students an idea of the kinds of test-taking tasks they will be required to attack. (Two separate Answer Sheets are provided for this purpose.)
2. Do not bother with lengthy explanations of the Composite Test. Students will understand it better and better as they progress through the textbook.
3. Assign the word list at the beginning of the course, but make it *the students'* responsibility to work with it at home on a regularly scheduled basis. Do not turn the test-taking class into a vocabulary clinic.
4. Have students read background material as preparation for classwork. Discuss the salient points of the background material, including examples. Be sure the students understand the thinking involved.
5. Complete all Practice Tests in class so that time may be controlled; follow the suggested time limits. After the allotted time has elapsed, spend the remainder of the class period in discussing what was expected and why the answers were right or wrong. Do not neglect this essential aspect of working with the materials.

6. After all Practice Tests have been administered and are understood, administer the Composite Test again. Unless the text material has been completely misrepresented or misunderstood, there will be a significant improvement due to increased familiarity with test-taking tasks and increased ability to apply test-taking strategies.
7. Encourage students to apply the knowledge they have gained to whatever standardized tests they may be required to take.

**ONE FINAL NOTE:** This material was not designed as preparatory material for any one, specific examination. Various standardized tests—the ACT, SAT, GMAT, GRE, MAT, and TOEFL in particular, since these are the exams foreign students are most frequently required to take—were considered in drawing up the textual and practice material, but focus on any particular exam was not intended.

## TO THE STUDENT

The materials in this book can most effectively be used with the help of a teacher. If you are working alone, follow this step-by-step study program to work with the text most profitably:

1. Read through each chapter of the text carefully and thoughtfully. Pay special attention to the information on test-taking strategies and to the descriptions of the various common question and answer types.
2. Analyze all examples.
3. Work through all Practice Tests. Keep within the suggested time limits as much as possible.
4. Use the Answer Keys (p. 213) to check your performance on the Practice Tests. When you find you have answered incorrectly, use the Answer Keys to help you analyze your errors.
5. Work regularly with the Word List (p. 85) to increase your knowledge of English vocabulary. Concentrate on how words are used as well as on what they mean.
6. After you have studied each chapter of the text and taken all the Practice Tests, take the Composite Test (p. 185). Keep within the suggested time limit. When you encounter areas of special difficulty, return to the appropriate section of the text for review.

Here are some things you should *not* do:

1. Do *not* try to memorize any of the contents of this book. Instead, concentrate on developing the kind of thinking that standardized tests make necessary.
2. Do *not* try to work through this book too quickly. Take whatever time is necessary to be sure you understand what this book is trying to tell you.
3. Do *not* neglect the material on test-taking preparation, common question and answer types, and test-taking strategies. These are the most important parts of this book.

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# GENERAL INFORMATION

## INTRODUCTION

Most college and university students are required to take many standardized, machine-scored tests. Some of these tests are given to determine whether a student will be accepted for college or university study. Others are given to assess a student's progress while he is in school. In either case, doing well on such tests may be quite important for success in an educational career.

Most people would agree that it is essential to be *prepared* for a standardized test. Unfortunately, however, just what being prepared *involves* is often not very clear.

It is, of course, important to know as much about what is to be tested as possible, but other things are important, too. One must have a clear idea of what the test will be like; one must also be physically and psychologically ready to take it. All of these—knowledge of subject matter, understanding what the test will be like, and being physically and psychologically ready—require careful planning and wise use of time if the best results are to be achieved. Earning a high score on a standardized test is rarely the result of luck or last-minute “cramming.”

This text was designed to help you prepare for taking standardized tests in an organized, step-by-step way. You will be given important background information on standardized tests you might be required to take. You will also learn to follow the directions contained in a standardized test, to mark answer sheets correctly, and to know the kinds of tasks you will have to understand and be able to complete when you take a standardized test. In addition, you will get a great deal of practice in test taking, and you will be given many suggestions for test-taking preparation.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF STANDARDIZED TESTS

One characteristic of standardized tests is that they are intended to be given to a large number of people at the same time—to everyone applying for admission to a given school, to all those in a particular class or department, to students working toward a certain degree, to all foreign students, to all undergraduate students, and so on. Some standardized tests are given only at one location. Others are given on a statewide, national, or international basis.

Another characteristic of standardized tests is that most are designed to be scored by machine, not by hand.<sup>1</sup> Those taking the test must choose the best of several possible answers. Tests that are machine-scored are looked at impartially. The personal situation and background of the test-taker and how he or she felt on the day of the test are not given consideration.

A third characteristic of standardized tests is that most feature multiple-choice answers—usually four or five choices for each question. Multiple-choice answers are often particularly difficult

1. Most standardized tests are scored “mechanically” even when done by hand: those taking the tests use answer sheets and those marking the tests use answer keys. Only the correct answers, therefore, are seen.

because most or all of the choices have been written to seem equally possible. Errors you are likely to make are often incorporated into the choices for questions.

Another way that most standardized tests are alike lies in the great amount of reading they require. This is true whether or not reading itself is being tested, since—no matter what the subject matter is—most standardized tests deal with various tasks involving the printed page.

Standardized tests are also alike in that vocabulary figures importantly in all of them. This may be direct—parts of a given test have vocabulary as their subject matter—or indirect—a solid knowledge of vocabulary is necessary in order to understand directions, examples, questions, and answers.

One more characteristic of standardized tests is that they are timed. This means that a definite amount of time is allotted to each part of the test and that when that time has elapsed, one must go on to the next part whether or not all questions have been answered.

The final characteristic to be mentioned here concerns types of questions. As mentioned earlier, most standardized tests have multiple-choice questions; to answer such questions, the test-taker must choose the best of several possible responses. These responses will involve more than facts, however. Many kinds of tasks are likely to be encountered: making judgments, drawing conclusions, identifying what has been implied, summarizing and making generalizations, determining meanings through context, identifying what was *not* stated or implied, and so on.

## MAJOR STANDARDIZED TESTS: THE “WHAT” AND “HOW”

You will probably be required to take various standardized tests during your years in school. The main differences between these tests are the kinds of students who take them, the institutions that require them, the purposes for which tests are given, and the specific subjects and skill areas emphasized. The main similarities are the general areas tested and the kinds of questions that commonly appear in the tests. For the most part, most standardized tests are more alike than different.

### GENERAL SUBJECT AREAS

The general subject areas found in almost all standardized tests are English Grammar and Usage, Vocabulary, Reading Comprehension, and General Mathematics. Following is a short description of each of these:

#### English Grammar and Usage

Most standardized tests contain a section on English grammar and usage. This section may be labeled differently from test to test—“verbal aptitude,” “writing ability,” or “structure and written expression”—but the subject matter will be the same: how the English language is correctly and appropriately used.

In grammar and usage sections, you will not be asked about grammar rules, nor will you probably be required to write a composition or make an oral presentation. What *will* be necessary is to be able to recognize English which is grammatically correct and also *appropriate* in various language situations.

The best way to be prepared for English grammar and usage sections is to have a solid understanding of English grammar patterns, but this alone is insufficient. Knowledge of idioms and common expressions will also be helpful, as will knowledge of punctuation, capitalization, and spelling patterns in English. In all these areas it will not be of much help to memorize rules. Concentrate instead on learning how and when basic idioms, expressions, structures, and punctuation and capitalization patterns are used. To do this, you must read as much as possible and notice appropriate English usage in what you read. You should also study and review English grammar on a regular basis over an extended period of time. Memorizing, however, will not be of much help.

For more detail on English grammar and usage, see Chapter 4.

## Vocabulary

A solid vocabulary is also a necessary ingredient for success on any type of standardized test. Vocabulary is tested both directly and indirectly. It is tested directly in sections dealing with synonyms, antonyms, analogies, and determining meanings through context. It is tested indirectly in that all sections of tests require a strong basic vocabulary if one is to understand directions, examples, questions, and answers.

It is actually necessary to know two kinds of vocabulary to do well on standardized tests. The first type appears primarily in vocabulary sections and tends to be technical, academic, and found in books, not conversations. Because of this, vocabulary sections are difficult for both native and non-native speakers of English. The second type, basic English, appears in other sections of tests. If you understand what you are reading now and what you will read in other parts of this book, vocabulary tested indirectly should not be much of a problem.

For more detail, see Chapter 5.

## Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension sections are found in nearly all standardized tests. As a general rule, you will be required to answer questions designed to see how well you have understood the content of reading passages; however, more than factual comprehension is involved. The subject matter, number, and length of reading passages vary from test to test, as do the number and type of questions. In all reading comprehension sections, you will have to read quickly, efficiently, and with understanding.

The best way to prepare for the reading comprehension sections of standardized tests is to learn strategies good readers employ to read quickly, purposefully, and critically. The kinds of questions you will find described in Chapter 6 of this book will help you understand many of these reading strategies.

## General Mathematics

Most standardized tests include sections testing general mathematics ability. The most notable exceptions are those tests which concentrate on verbal skills—for example, the MAT, the TOEFL, and other foreign language tests.

The mathematics section of standardized tests generally require knowledge of basic arithmetic, algebra, and plane geometry. The emphasis in math sections is on problem-solving and data interpretation. The problem-solving items may be expected to include questions requiring

- basic addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division of whole numbers and numerical and decimal fractions;
- percentages, averages, ratios, and proportions;
- equations and diagrams of geometrical figures;
- questions on area, circumference, and volume; and
- “story problems.”

The data interpretation questions involve understanding information summarized in tables, charts, and graphs.

## SPECIFIC SUBJECT AREAS

Although the general subject areas noted above are common to most standardized tests, there are also specific subjects which are emphasized on particular tests. Among these specific subject areas tested are the following:

## Social Studies and Natural Science

Some standardized tests contain sections dealing with social studies and natural science. These sections are most frequently found in tests given to American students—for example, high school students who must take certain examinations as part of their application procedure for college or university work. The ACT is the most common test in this category.

Both social studies and natural science sections of standardized tests require a basic knowledge of facts and terminology. Social studies questions are generally taken from the areas of world and U.S. history, and basic political science, economics, geography, and sociology. Natural science questions usually come from the areas of basic physics, chemistry, biology, and geology.

If you are required to take a social studies or natural science test, prepare for it by working with study guides or course outlines in these areas. You can either borrow these materials from a library or purchase them from a university bookstore.

## Logic and Analytical Thinking

Only a few of the major standardized tests—the GMAT, GRE, and, indirectly, the MAT—contain sections specifically designed to test your ability to think logically and analytically. These tests are commonly required of students applying for admission to graduate school.

In the GMAT, logic and analytical thinking are tested in three subject areas: *business judgment*, *data sufficiency*, and *logical reasoning*. In the GRE, the corresponding section is called *analytical ability*. In all of these, you might be required to do any or all of the following:

- analyze and classify information contained in a passage describing a particular situation;
- analyze and classify actions or decisions that were made because of a particular situation;
- determine the main points or weaknesses in an argument and/or draw conclusions based on the argument;
- given a conclusion, determine which of various statements would make the conclusion true or false, or strengthen or weaken the conclusion;
- determine which of various pieces of information are sufficient data to solve a problem;
- analyze various facts and then decide whether they are related or unrelated to one another;
- analyze and classify information using logical diagrams.

In the MAT, logic and analytical thinking are tested indirectly through verbal analogy questions. Questions of this type involve looking at groups of words, determining the relationships existing between the words in the group, and then selecting other words that have the same relationship. For verbal analogy questions, it is important to be able to think clearly and to have a strong vocabulary. It is also necessary to know what each word in the original group means and to be able to analyze the way each word is related to the other words. (For more information on analogies, see Chapter 5.)

Memorizing facts and definitions will not be of much help in preparing for logic and analytical thinking sections of standardized tests. Of considerably more value will be your awareness of the kinds of problem-solving you will be required to do. Only knowledge of a test and the kinds of questions it contains will tell you this.

## Listening Comprehension

Standardized foreign language tests—among them the TOEFL—usually include a listening comprehension section. In listening comprehension sections, you will generally hear recorded passages of

spoken language and then be required to answer questions testing how well you have understood what you heard. You will probably hear both short and long listening passages.

Two types of short listening passages—brief dialogs and restatements—are usually included in listening comprehension sections. You will listen to the dialog and choose the appropriate answers to spoken questions. The questions will relate to the speakers, the setting, or the situation. For restatement questions, you will hear a sentence and then be required to select another statement which has the same meaning as the one you have heard.

Long listening passages consist of several spoken paragraphs followed by factual questions on the content of the passage. You may need to take notes for the long listening passages, although this will probably not be necessary for the short passages. The short and long listening passages and questions on them are spoken, not printed; you will usually see only the answers.

For more detail on listening comprehension, see Chapter 7.

### Advanced Subject Area Tests

Certain major standardized tests—most notably the GRE—have two parts: a general test and an advanced test in a specific subject area.

Advanced subject area tests are most commonly required of students applying for graduate study. They require knowledge of facts, terminology, and the kind of analytical thinking and problem-solving ability related to a student's particular discipline—history, literature, mathematics, etc.

## STANDARDIZED TESTS: AN OVERVIEW

In order to understand this book and profit from it, you should have an idea of what “standardized test” means. You should also know something about the various kinds of standardized tests you might be required to take—what subject matter they contain, what types of questions frequently appear on them, when and how often and by whom they are given, and how they are scored. You will find this information noted on the following chart.

Area	English Usage	Math. Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability (test only)	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability
Area	English Usage	Math. Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability (test only)	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability
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Area	English Usage	Math. Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability (test only)	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability
Area	English Usage	Math. Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability (test only)	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability
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Area	English Usage	Math. Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability (test only)	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability
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Area	English Usage	Math. Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability (test only)	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability
Area	English Usage	Math. Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability (test only)	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability
Area	English Usage	Math. Ability	Verbal Ability	Verbal Ability (test					

## MAJOR STANDARDIZED TESTS

Test Name	(ACT) ACT Assessment Program	(GMAT) Graduate Management Admissions Test	(GRE) Graduate Record Examination	(MAT) Miller Analogies Test	(SAT) Scholastic Aptitude Test also known as "College Boards"	(TOEFL) Test of English as a Foreign Language
When and How Often Given	In the U.S.: Saturday mornings in October, November, February, April, June  ABROAD: 3x/yr.	January, March, July, November	January, February, April, June, October, December	Throughout the year by appointment	Saturday mornings 6 times annually	Contact High School Guidance Counselor, Dean of Admissions for your college or write to Test of English as a Foreign Language, Box 899, Princetown, NJ 08540
Generally Required By	Many colleges and universities (approx. 2000 in U.S. and Canada)  (BA, BS level)	Graduate Business Schools (approx. 350 in U.S.)	Most Graduate Schools for many subject areas (MA, MS). If your field is Business, check to see if GMAT, GRE both required.	Many Graduate Schools for many subject areas	Most American colleges and universities (BA, BS)	Most American colleges and universities (all levels) if student's native language is not English
Areas Tested	English Usage Math Usage Social Studies Natural Sciences	Reading Recall Math Aptitude Verbal Aptitude Data Sufficiency Business Judgment Reading Comprehension Writing Ability	Verbal Aptitude Math Aptitude Analytical Ability Includes subject areas tests separate from the general test	Verbal analogies only	Verbal Ability Math Ability Standard Written English	Listening Comprehension Structure and Written Expression Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary
Total Time	2 hrs. 40 min.	approx. 3 hrs.	3 hrs.	50 min.	3 hrs.	2 hrs.
Penalty for Guessing	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Scores Received in Approx.	4 weeks	4 weeks	3-4 weeks	4 weeks	4 weeks	4 weeks

# TEST-TAKING PREPARATION

## USING TIME WISELY AND PREPARING EFFECTIVELY

In preparing for a standardized test, it is very important to plan carefully and use your time wisely. Here are some suggestions on how to do so.

- Apply for the test and begin your preparation for it as early as possible. Allow yourself *plenty* of preparation time.
- Figure out exactly how much time you have before the test. Set aside as much of this time as you can for preparation, but be sensible. Always get a good night's sleep and eat properly. Do not neglect other responsibilities. Do allow yourself some time for relaxation.
- Make a study schedule. Plan to study regularly for a definite period of time. Be realistic, however. Set aside a period of time that is long enough to accomplish something, but not so long that you are exhausted the next day.
- Plan to study at the same time each day and do not let other activities interfere with your schedule.
- Choose an appropriate place for your preparation. It should be quiet, well-lighted, and comfortable. Choose a place where you are not likely to be interrupted or distracted, and where you can stretch and move around from time to time.

Now you are ready to decide what to do during your preparation period. Following are some ideas.

## USING STUDY GUIDES

Before you begin to work, find out as much about the test as you can. It's a good idea to talk to friends who have taken the test, but do not depend on them for all your information. For more details, study the descriptive material available and/or get a copy of one of the *study guides* which exist for many standardized tests. To understand what study guides are and to use them productively, consider the following:

- What are study guides?** Study guides are books of material designed to help you prepare for specific tests. Each study guide contains general information about a given standardized test and provides practice tests with questions like those you will have to answer. Most study guides include answer keys for practice tests; some contain word lists and suggestions on how to improve your score. Nearly all study guides focus on a single standardized test. Few, if any, contain general test-taking information or strategies.

b. *If I have a study guide for a test, how should I use it?* To use a study guide effectively, study the general information given about the test—length, kinds of questions, place to apply, procedures for getting more detailed information, etc. Then take the practice tests. Take the time to study why certain answers are right or wrong. Look carefully at your wrong answers and analyze why you were not correct. Determine what your strengths and weaknesses are, and work to improve your shortcomings.

c. *What should I NOT do when using a study guide?* Do not try to memorize anything from the study guide—questions, answers, synonyms, etc. Instead, make generalizations about the kind of thinking required in questions and answers.

Do not try to absorb everything in the study guide in a short period of time. Take enough time to go over each part of it carefully and thoroughly.

Do not concentrate on answers instead of questions. Look at both of them together and try to get an idea of the kinds of questions that might be asked and the kinds of answers that are acceptable.

Do not feel that if you know everything in the study guide, you will know everything on the test.

d. *Which study guides are best? Which one(s) should I buy?* Although many study guides are commercially available, none is perfect. Determine the following before you purchase any kind of study guide:

- Is it thorough?
- Does it contain general explanatory material or only practice tests?
- Does it include practice tests in the areas you are weakest in?
- Does it include information on test-taking strategies?
- Is it really necessary to buy it? Can you get a copy from a friend or study one in the library?

Whether you use study guides or not, be sure you can answer these key questions:

a. *What should I know about the test?* Consider the following items: What areas or subjects are covered on the test? How many parts does the test have? What are you required to do in each part? Are all parts equally important, or are some emphasized more than others?

Then find out about the kinds of questions the test contains. What will you be required to do in order to answer the questions? Will you need to know facts only? To make inferences or draw conclusions? To solve problems? To interpret tables or graphs? To choose synonyms or antonyms? To find errors? To construct or complete analogies?

b. *How should I decide what to study?* To decide what to study, first make notes about the major areas contained in the test, the importance of each area, and the kinds of questions that appear on the test. Then list what you do and do not understand.

When you have done these things, relax a little and think about yourself. What aspects of the test worry you the least? What aspects worry you the most? In what areas do you need to study longest and hardest? Write these things down.

For the time being, take a closer look at the areas you feel weakest in—those that worry you the most and that you feel you'll need to spend the most time studying. Try to determine what your problems are in these areas:

- Do you need to review material you've studied before, but don't remember very well?
- Do you need to study and learn new or unfamiliar material?
- Are there certain test-taking skills—such as making inferences or constructing analogies—that are unfamiliar to you?