

## Seven Basic Rules for Taking the ACT

These seven rules apply to every section of the ACT. They really are just commonsense guidelines, but it's amazing how the pressure and time constraints of the ACT can warp and mangle common sense.

### 1. Know the Instructions for Each Subject Test

Since you'll need all the time you can get, don't waste time reading the Subject Test instructions during the actual test. Learn the instructions beforehand by taking practice tests and reading our chapters on the Subject Tests.

### 2. Use Your Test Booklet as Scratch Paper

Some students seem to think their test booklet has to look "pretty" at the end of the test. Don't be one of those students. In the Math Test, the ACT writers even give you "figuring" space for drawing diagrams and writing out solutions. You should write down all your work for math problems, in case you want to return to them later to complete the question or check your answer. The Math Test isn't the only place where you can benefit from marginal scribbling, though. Making margin notes alongside the Reading and Science Reasoning passages can help you stay on track when answering the subsequent questions. In addition, if you want to skip a question and come back to it later, you should make a distinctive mark next to it, so you won't miss it on your second pass through the questions.

### 3. Answer Easy Questions before Hard Questions

**This is a crucial strategy for the ACT.** Answer the easy and moderate questions first. That way you'll make sure that you get to see all the questions on the test that you have a good shot of getting right, while saving the leftover time for the difficult questions.

### 4. Don't Get Bugged Down by a Hard Question

This rule may seem obvious, but many people have a hard time letting go of a question. If you've spent a significant amount of time on a problem (in ACT world, a minute and a half is a lot of time) and haven't gotten close to answering it, just let it go. Leaving a question unfinished may seem like giving up or wasting time you've already spent, but you can come back to the problem after you've answered the easy ones. The time you spent on the problem earlier won't be wasted. When you come back to the problem, you'll already have done part of the work needed to solve it.

This strategy goes hand in hand with Rule 3. After all, the tough question that's chewing up your time isn't worth more to the computer grading your answer sheet than the easy questions nearby.

### 5. Avoid Carelessness

There are two kinds of carelessness that threaten you as an ACT test taker. The first kind is obvious: making mistakes because you are moving too quickly through the questions. Speeding through the test can result in misinterpreting a question or missing a crucial piece of information. Take a deep breath, look at the question, and make a sober decision

about whether or not you can answer it. If you can't, skip the question and go on to the next one.

The second kind of carelessness arises from frustration or lack of confidence. Don't allow yourself to assume a defeatist attitude toward questions that appear to be complex. While some of these questions may actually be complex, some of them will be fairly simple questions disguised in complex-sounding terms. You should at least skim every question to see whether you have a feasible chance of answering it. Assuming you can't answer a question is like returning a present you've never even opened.

## 6. Be Careful Bubbling In Your Answers

Imagine this: you get all the right answers to the ACT questions, but you fill in all the wrong bubbles. The scoring computer doesn't care that you did the right work; all it cares about are the blackened bubbles on the answer sheet, and the wrong answers that they indicate.

Protect yourself against this terrifying possibility with careful bubbling. An easy way to prevent slips on the ACT answer sheet is to pay attention to the letters being bubbled. You may also want to try bubbling in groups (five at a time or a page at a time) rather than answering one by one. Circle the answers in the test booklet as you go through the page, and then transfer the answers over to the answer sheet as a group. This method should increase your speed and accuracy in filling out the answer sheet.

## 7. Always Guess When You Don't Know the Answer

**The basic rule is: *always guess!* You're much better off guessing than leaving an answer blank because there is no penalty for wrong answers. The ACT score is based on the number of questions answered correctly, so it is to your advantage to guess on answers, rather than leave the question blank.**

"Always guess" really means "always eliminate as many answer choices as possible and then guess." Let's say you're taking the ACT and come upon a question you can't quite figure out. Yet while you aren't sure of the definite answer, you are sure that two of the answer choices *can't* be right. In other words, you can eliminate two of the four answer choices, leaving you with a one in two chance of guessing correctly between the remaining two answer choices. Now let's say someone else is taking the same test and gets to the same question. But this person is completely flummoxed. He can't eliminate *any* answer choices. When this person guesses, he has only a one in four chance of guessing correctly. Your extra knowledge, which allowed you to eliminate some answer choices, gives you better odds of getting this question right, exactly as extra knowledge should.

