

“One and Done”: Test Early, Appear Great, be Done

By Mark Greenstein, Founder and Lead Instructor, Ivy Bound Test Prep, October 2008

www.ivybound.net 877-975-1600

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This is the most important SAT article I have written to date. The College Board decision allowing SAT takers to withhold their scores now gives students a college admissions catapult.

The decision means students and parents need not fear a bad one-day result, and there is no worry about whether taking the SAT a fourth or fifth time might blemish an application.

Score Choice lets colleges see students at their best. And it just may diminish some anxiety so that students can BE at their best.

The strategy students should follow is manifest:

TEST EARLY and TEST OFTEN.

Students who take advantage of this, particularly those in the class of 2010 and 2011 (this will become "routine" for the class of 2012 and younger), will see better scores, more admissions offers, and higher scholarship awards.

Students who are not willing to start early are putting all their "SAT eggs" in a small basket, one that gets upended by a mediocre score that then pushes a student into senior year testing. That jeopardizes Early Decision offers, and causes seniors too much anxiety.

Remember, nothing on the SAT requires high level math. A semester each of Algebra and Geometry is all a student needs to take advantage of SAT math topics. Most students have had that requisite Algebra and Geometry by the middle of sophomore year. The SAT math topics that might fall outside of that early Algebra and early Geometry can be covered well in a good prep course, or even in a few hours of private tutoring.

For most students, there is NO reason to wait until late in the junior year for SAT prep. The most appealing (to colleges) and least pressured students are those who are DONE with SAT I by winter of junior year. (Students can wait on SAT IIs for spring). These students have the luxury of knowing what colleges to visit during their winter and spring breaks; they get more ammunition for rolling and early decision applications; and they are able to RELAX over the summer and fall of senior year.

Four academic reasons gird the "Test Early and Often" strategy:

- 1) A student who is diligently working at the SAT Vocabulary, Reading, Writing, Grammar, and Math skills is likely to have an improved ability in the first place.
- 2) A student can learn from the testing experience. Making the best use of time, knowing what to expect of the proctors, avoiding distractions can all incrementally help on the next test.
- 3) Even a student whose abilities have not improved from one test day to another may still see a better score owing to the vagaries of the test.

AND

- 4) Even a student whose abilities have not improved from one test day to another may still see a better score because of a difference in how that student approaches the test one day versus the next.

My students have always had the chance to take frequent practice tests (Ivy Bound pays for all our students to make maximum use of College Board's released tests). But now, the students who start with us before junior year will be taking a REAL test in the fall. For some this will be as practice; for others it will be with the chance to NAIL one or more of the sections. Once one section is "bagged", it's good for life at most colleges, and thus the student might be able to end study on that section and concentrate on the other two sections.

Remember too that foreign students command high regard by American colleges -- they add "diversity" and they pay full tuition. With the low U.S. dollar, I predict international applicants will go higher for at least the next two years, cutting down the number of places for American students. The way to fight for a place at a competitive college remains being a standout on test scores, grades, or extracurricular excellence. "Legacy" status and just plain well-roundedness will continue to diminish.

This may be a wake-up call to some, but knowledgeable parents have long demanded that their kids test a lot. Savvy parents know what it takes in the modern era for competitive admissions, and their students are getting the coveted admissions and merit scholarship awards.

It is true that for competitive college admissions, the average student will have to test more. Average released test scores will jump precipitously with the Class of 2010, (and thus the current score numbers for various colleges will be obsolete.) My guess is that scores revealed by the Class of 2010 will be 20 – 40 points higher than the current numbers.

To turn a burden into an opportunity, my prescription is: don't prep long, but prep WELL. Ivy Bound encourages only 3 – 9 months for SAT tutoring. When done well, no student has to be saddled with 12 – 24 months.

I don't like students taking the SAT "cold". Unless you can attain a score that will guarantee you admission to your cherished program, testing cold is a wasted opportunity. Do at least SOME prep. Get to a level where you can on a good day show a great score (for the colleges you aspire to attend) on at least ONE section, or at least study so that your use of an early SAT is meaningful practice. Plan to take the SAT 3 – 5 times. Since the SAT is only offered 7 times a year, plan carefully. Almost all my current juniors will take the SAT the first week of November and/or the first week in December. My sophomores have the luxury of testing as sophomores and their final test will likely come early in the junior year. To the colleges that care, these early starters will appear to have only one early test on their record. They will have the appearance of "one-and-done".

At the margins, a "one-and-done" report may be impressive, and marginal advantages are what students need more than ever.