## Just leave every question on the SAT blank!

October 22nd, 2009

Juniors and sophomores across the nation recently took part in an annual tradition known as the PSAT.  The  PSAT, of course, is simply a warm-up to the SAT which these students will be taking in preparation for applying to the college(s) of their choice.

One concern I have is that so many students talk about leaving large numbers of questions blank if they didn’t know the correct answers.  It appears that some test preparation books/services are issuing the edict, “don’t guess if you don’t know the answer.”

Problem:  too many students made the comment, “If you leave a question blank, you aren’t penalized.”  The perception seems to be, leaving questions blank is a good thing.

Let me ask the question: **If you aren’t “penalized” for leaving questions blank, why not leave EVERY answer blank?** **Seems to me, you’d make a perfect score.**

**It is my contention that students ARE penalized for leaving questions blank.**

Let me explain.  The mathematics portion of the SAT has 44 multiple-choice questions.  You receive one point for each question that you answer correctly. If you answer every question correctly (which is possible, by the way), you would receive 44 points onto your raw score.  (The raw score is later converted into the score between 200-800.)  **For each question that you do not answer you receive no points (which sounds an awful lot like having a one point penalty per blank answer.  Because it is.)** For each question that you attempt, but are incorrect, you have 1/4 of a point deducted from your raw score.

You could look at the SAT multiple-choice math section this way.  You start with 44 raw points.  For each question that you leave blank, you have one point subtracted.  For each incorrectly attempted answer, you have 1.25 points deducted from 44.

Bottom line:  leaving answers blank is not ideal.  You should try your best to finish, and you should try your best to answer every question.

**Anticipated Followup Questions**

* **Why is an additional 1/4 of a point deducted for a question that is completed incorrectly?**

Answer:  To adjust for the fact that you have a 1/5 probability of answering the question correctly if you simply guess.  Example:  Suppose you have a 40-question multiple-choice test, and each question has five possible solutions.  Suppose you filled in the bubbles at random without even reading the questions.   You could expect to answer 8 (that’s 1/5 of 40) of the questions correctly!  However, you would have answered 32 of the questions incorrectly.  1/4 of 32 is also 8, so that number would be subtracted from your total answered correctly, leaving you with zero.  Thus, you would rightfully receive the same number of points as someone who left every answer blank.

* **What if I don’t know the answer to a question, should I guess?**

If you absolutely don’t know the answer to a question, then no.  You’ll waste time coloring in the little bubble. **However, before totally giving up on a question, look at the answers and try to eliminate at least one of the solutions.** You may not know the answer to the question, but can you identify one of the answers as being obviously incorrect?  If so, you should guess at the remaining choices.  You just switched the odds ever so slightly in your favor.

* **What if I’m having trouble finishing the test?**

Don’t feel too badly about this.  There are some careers where slow methodical thinkers are preferred.  If I’m having brain surgery, for example, I do not want a surgeon who’s racing to finish before the guy operating next door.  However, if you are a slow test taker, there are some things you can do:

1. **Take TIMED practice tests.** Several practice tests are available online and at bookstores.  Practice one or two of these while someone else times you.  I know that online/computer tests are popular, but studies show that students who use pencil/paper practice tests score higher.  (The idea is, you’re practicing using the methods that you’ll use on the actual test.)
2. **Complete the easier problems first.** If you’re struggling with a question, skip it until you’ve answered other easier questions.  In general, the easier questions appear at the beginning of each section.
3. **Be aware of the time.** I realize that no one wears watches anymore, but you might consider wearing a watch on test day, preferably one with a stopwatch.  At the very least, find out where the clock is before the test begins.
4. **Don’t waste time coloring.** Seriously.  Some students spend too much time filling in the little bubbles.  In fact, some test preparation services have clients practice filling in sheets of bubbles.  Be aware of the time that you’re coloring.  Saving three seconds a question gives you over two minutes just on the mathematics MC questions.   One thing that helps is using pencils that are a little dull.  Also, the bubbles don’t have to be colored perfectly.  (I know this bothers some of you who are a little OCD, but it’s true.)

* **What is the best strategy for success on the PSAT/SAT?**

Answer:  Take challenging classes. Study hard.  Read a lot. Practice, practice, practice.  Sorry, but there really is no substitute for hard work.

* **Mr. Mealor, why the diatribe?**

First of all, “diatribe” is an excellent vocabulary word that might appear on the SAT Verbal.  Secondly, your goal should be to make a perfect score!  (Why not?)  Ok, maybe that’s not realistic for every student, but hopefully you have a goal of a relatively high score.    If you’re leaving a lot of answers blank, it ain’t gonna happen.  (“Ain’t” and “gonna” will most likely NOT appear on the SAT verbal.)

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