

## The Xiggi Method

First off, let me assure you that there are no earth-shattering secrets in what has been -very generously- dubbed as the Xiggi method. I think that it is mostly based on common sense. After all, how hard is it for anyone to figure out that the more one practices, the more one improves. However, there are a few elements that seem to work better than others. Also, I may be able to point to certain elements of a preparation that yield lesser results. For instance, I do not recommend to spend MUCH time reading lists of words.

I'll try to get something posted this afternoon. I'll address one question immediately: taking tests under timed conditions.

The answer is yes but only at the end of the preparation, and eventually at the onset if you did not take an official test. In the past I have compared an SAT preparation to the preparation for a marathon. It is not necessary to run 26 miles each day to prepare for a race. It is better to prepare your body for the grueling race in smaller installments and build resistance and speed by repetition. I do not think that there is ANYTHING wrong in trying to emulate the testing conditions by setting aside a few Saturdays at the kitchen table. It is, however, not necessary, especially in the phase where you build knowledge, confidence, and time management. I would recommend 10 installments of 30 minutes over taking an 5 hours ordeal. One of the keys of a successful preparation is to establish a number of intermediary targets. First, you want to make sure you understand the test and its arcane language. Then, you want to test your current knowledge. After that, you want to make sure you understand what TCB considers correct answers. As I will post this afternoon, I even recommend taking a test WITH the answers in front of you. Obviously that test would not establish a valid yardstick score wise, but it will go a long way to build confidence in your own ability and recognize the few traps that ETS uses.

## Who Needs Prep for the SAT?

Before answering that question, I should address another question. Who LIKES to prepare for the SAT? That one is easier to answer ... nobody in his or her right mind would enjoy to spend hours practicing the lost art of filling little oval bubbles! However, there is so much at stake, that the sacrifice becomes bearable. One compromise might be found in the form of transforming the SAT into a game. In fact, there is a small amount of satisfaction ?if not pleasure- in finding ways to beat the SAT writers at their own game.

Back to the original question ... the answer is that most everyone needs to prepare for the SAT. While we hear occasional reports of a student acing the SAT without any preparation, there is a good chance that the formidable test taker had some experience with standardized tests or with some kind of intellectual competition. The reality is that the SAT is very different from most school exams or tests, and presents a very different set of challenges.

Despite testing English and mathematical concepts, the SAT does not test much of the material a typical student learns in high school. While experts are now battling to decide if the SAT has indeed become an "achievement" test versus the "aptitude" test it was before March 2005, I think that it makes little difference to the students who are facing this animal. In order to tame this "animal", we need to respect it and learn as much as we can about his behavior and idiosyncrasies. For some natural test takers, this would require a simple review of a past test and a general understanding of the arcane presentation and language. But, let's not fool ourselves ... those students are exceptions. Most of us, mere mortals, have to face the simple truth that to do well on this grueling test, we will need to practice.

## Can Brilliant Students Do Poorly on the SAT?

Yes, they can! The first thing to realize is that acing advanced calculus won't do you much good on the SAT Math. The SAT is a different test that requires a different knowledge: the knowledge of the test itself. One usually gains that knowledge by practicing on released tests. This is the best way to start understand the format and recognize the type of questions. In a typical test, 90% of the questions are testing "old" concepts and very few questions (maybe 3 to 5) are a bit newer and unfamiliar.

Getting a good score does not require a deep knowledge of math –nor a very large vocabulary. For example, you can solve most -if not all- of the problems without ever using a calculator. So, what does it take? What is needed is the ability to recognize the questions and patterns without much effort, and especially without wasting time. In other words, the key is to know how to solve the problems FAST. For most problems, it is neither necessary nor advisable to work through all the steps to verify your answers. The SAT, unlike high school teachers, does not reward completeness and does not give partial credit. The only thing that matters is the accuracy of your answers.

## Why is it Hard to Stick with a Program?

Simple answer! Because there is so much “stuff” to read, and most of it is boring and sounds silly. Most of us have been there ... Mom and Dad announced that they had a surprise for us. After a successful trip to Barnes and Noble, they slowly unveil the goods: a collection of fat and colorful books printed on cheap paper. Faking some enthusiasm, we grab the books and retreat to our room, hoping to find some peace. However, it is usually short lived as Mom and Dad announce that they expect us to take test Numero Uno on Saturday at 8AM. But, why? Our strong objections are simply rebutted by a stern, “Because so and so told us at the bookstore that it was important to take the test just like they do at the center. Oh well, let's see what the books contain. Very soon, we are reading about strategies and tricks that ALL sound so simple. After a few pages, battling the desire to fall asleep, we decide to just take one of those simple tests. After all, we are not like Joe Blogg, that bumbling fool who gets tripped so easily. We work our way through the test finding as sole motivation the promise of a great score. Yeah, I'll show Mom and Dad that I know all this stuff.

A few hours later, despite having gone well over the time limits, we announce to our unsuspecting parents that we may very well be done with the SAT. We give them our test and tell them, “Yep, go ahead, score it”. Mom, knowing better, passes the fat book to dear hubby. To your great surprise, you witness the fatidic apparition of more crosses than check marks. No, no, that can't be. I am not Joe Blogg. How could I miss the third question? A level 2 question! The verdict comes in at around 550 for the math and verbal sections. Smartly enough, you did skip that stupid writing component. Dad does not seem too surprised and simply whispers, “Better luck next time,” A short week later, after many unsuccessful attempts to read more than twenty pages, the second test yields a similar result. While you avoided the same mistakes, other problems surfaced. That silly Reading Comprehension section just killed you.

Dad, as usual, does not say much, but Mom has a great idea. “Tomorrow, I'll call those nice people at Prince Something Review or Kal Plan.” You accept this outcome with a degree of relief and are now doomed to sit through thirty to forty hours of organized torture. At least, if you fail, you could blame Mom and Dad.

## Is there an Alternative?

Yes, there is! As one would expect, I'll start with the importance of viewing the SAT as a game to be defeated. For all sports, dedicated practices are extremely important. Preparing for the SAT is no different from practicing for tennis or soccer: it's a game of strategy and repetition. As I noted earlier, the material that will be tested on the SAT is not that difficult, but the presentation and language is confusing for anyone who has not done much testing or competitions.

In my opinion, there are two important phases in preparing successfully for the test. The first phase includes building small blocks of confidence and the second one involves time management. That is why I recommend breaking the tests in smaller and manageable sections.

The general idea is to devote about thirty minutes to completing a test section and about the same amount of time to review the answers proposed by The College Board. While most students focus on the scores and check their wrong answers, much can be gained from checking the correct answers. It is important to TRULY understand EVERY answer and to try to understand how the SAT questions are developed. To do this, one has to be comfortable with the material tested.

It is for this reason that I recommend to **start** working with open books and without time limits. Open books include the precise answers to the test. During this phase, student ought to review the books that form their SAT library. On this subject, I have a simple recommendation: buy as many SAT books as you can afford. There are no clear leaders and most books share very similar strategies and tips. For math, Gruber's is the most complete and should provide answers to most problems appearing on the SAT, with the potential absence of problems specific to the post March 2005 test. The other usual suspects are Princeton Review, Barron's, Kaplan, and McGraw Hill. The strategies and tips for math will be very similar among the books listed. The strategies for the verbal components offer a few variances, which students should evaluate on an individual basis. With the advent of the new SAT, a number of new books have appeared. Those new books such as the RocketReview of Adam Robinson, the Maximum SAT of Peter Edwards, and the solution book by TestMaster(s) have raised the bar, and are in many ways better than the books published by the former "gorillas". However, the choice of the source books is not that critical, and I did not try to prepare an exhaustive list of books. There are a number of other books that contain advice and strategies. My recommendation stays the same: buy as many as you can and check the strategies to find a few that apply to your individual taste. As you will say later, the best strategies will be self-developed.

This is the time to introduce a caveat. Under no circumstances should a student use tests that are not published by The College Board. You may have noticed that I did not list the Official Guide among the source books. It is, however, the must-have book since it contains all the tests you'll need to prepare for the SAT. I will comment on the online tools of The College Board in a later paragraph.

Are you now ready to get your X-acto knife out and rip that Official Guide in small sections? Better stock up on manila folders ... you'll need them.

## Tricks and Strategies

After spending time building the blocks of knowledge and confidence, students should start developing techniques to save time. The SAT is mostly a test of mental quickness. People who like to solve puzzles

tend to do well. One good facet of the SAT is that the “puzzles” thrown at students are rather simple and very often repeated.

Again, there are no great secrets. Dedicated students should be able to learn the techniques, leave the calculator in its case, and know what NOT to do. Developing time saving techniques will help students find not only the correct answer, but the best answer in the shortest amount of time. It is worth remembering that the four incorrect answers do NOT matter: nobody needs to show the steps and confirm the answer. Well, that is fine and dandy, but does one acquire the techniques? This is where your source books come in play. As we know, the books contain a number of tips and strategies. While most of the advice is helpful, it is important to tailor it to the individual student. In other words, by reading the various “industry” offerings, a student can acquire a set of tools that will start the process. However, the advice is really aimed at helping average students improve their scores. I am not saying this is a pejorative way! Most books –and organized classes- are most helpful for students who will score between 500 and 650. Despite being incomplete, the advice is still valid and will help anyone in the earlier phases. Concepts such as the process of elimination (POE) and plugging key numbers represent key components of any student’s arsenal. However, to really push your talent to the limit, you’ll have to **graduate** from the generic concepts. This is accomplished by practicing and looking for hidden patterns. Slowly but surely, your brain will recognize the questions and the answers will “flash” right in front of you. Oh, I know that someone said that the SAT was super easy because ALL the answers are always in front of you –except for the Student Produced Responses or grid-in questions. That is, however, not what I meant!

So, let’s depart from the sterile theory part and look at a few examples of the difference between following the generic advice and moving up to the next step.

For instance In the very beginning of a book published by Princeton Review, we find this strategy:

To follow the example, you need to visualize a square ABCD, and inscribed inside the square a half circle CFD. The half circle diameter is also CD. In this case, the value of the side is 8. This is a very common SAT problem and PR asks the student to identify the area represented by the square MINUS the half circle.

The 5 proposed answers are:

- A.  $16 - 8\pi$  ( $\pi$  for [greek] $\pi$ [/greek])
- B.  $16 - 16\pi$
- C.  $64 - 8\pi$
- D.  $64 - 16\pi$
- E. 64

This is what PR proposes: We know that the value of  $\pi$  is a little more than 3. Let's replace  $\pi$  with 3 in the proposed answers. Choice A and B are negative numbers. From here, you could guess C, D, or E and it is a guess we SHOULD take. However, we can also eliminate E because  $8 \times 8$  is 64 and represents the whole square. What do we end up with? A one-in-two shot of getting this problem right. Neat, huh!

Well, not so fast Princeton Review ...

Let's look at the problem. How fast can we solve it?

1. Area of square?  $8 \times 8 = 64$  .... 5 seconds
2. Area of half circle? Any student sitting for the PSAT or SAT should be able to **play** with the formulas for areas of circles, squares, and triangles. In this case, the  $1/2$  circle has a diameter of 8, hence the area of the  $1/2$  circle should be  $\text{radius}^2 * \text{Pi} * 1/2$ . The answer is  $16 \text{ Pi}/2$  or  $8 \text{ Pi}$ . Time to compute this ... 15 seconds
3. Guess what? The answer to the question is  $64 - 8 \text{ Pi}$ . Now you are able to mark answer C with complete confidence, and only after about 25 seconds!

What is bad about the PR method? First, it forces the student to attempt FIVE calculations. Despite being mostly trivial, it introduces potential errors. With the building pressure, most students DO make careless mistakes; calculating  $16 \text{ times } 3$  easily falls in the category of easy mistakes. Let's assume that the student does not make a single error and gets it done rather quickly ... at the end, he still has TWO choices or a 50/50 chance. It could mean a plus 1 or a ...MINUS 0.25 in his tally, or a swing of 1.25!

Why do I consider this particular message to be wrong? It tells the student to forego attempting to solve a problem that most 7th graders can solve FAST and CORRECTLY. It also reinforces the idea that the test is all about gimmicks and tricks. While the POE taught by PR is a GOOD technique, I do not quite understand why they selected this problem to illustrate their method.

The next one involves a perennial favorite problem on the SAT: the average rate of speed. Here's the problem:

A girl rides her bicycle to school at an average speed of 8 mph. She returns to her house using the same route at an average speed of 12 mph. If the round trip took 1 hour, how many miles is the round trip.

- A. 8
- B.  $9 \frac{3}{5}$
- C. 10
- D.  $11 \frac{1}{5}$
- E. 12

PR offers this solution: First the problem is a hard problem (level 5). TCB assumes that the common student will not attempt to solve the problem and pick the trick answer of 10 since it represents the average of 8 and 12. The common student second choice will be to pick a value that is stated in the problem: 8 or 12. PR provides the strategy to eliminate those Joe Blogg answers. Again, the conclusion of PR is to end up with two choices and pick between B and D. In their words, the student will be in great shape!

What's my issue with this? In my eyes, a 50-50 chance is really not good enough. When you consider how this problem can be solved, the recommendation to guess becomes highly questionable.

What could a student have done? Use a simple formula for average rates -an opportunity that PR strangely forgets to mention. Is this formula really complicated? I could detail the way I developed it while working through similar problems, but the reality is that millions of people have seen it before. I'm absolutely convinced that many good tutors teach it, but you won't find it in the typical help book. Here it is:

$$\frac{2 * \text{Speed1} * \text{Speed2}}{[\text{speed1} + \text{Speed2}]}$$
 or in this case:  

$$2 * 8 * 12 / 8 + 12.$$

Most everyone will notice that the answer is  $2 \cdot 96/20$  or simply  $96/10$ . This yields 9.6 or  $9 \frac{3}{5}$ . The total time to do this, probably 20-45 seconds. Not a bad method to know!

It does get better. How would I solve it?

1. Check the problem to make sure we have a ONE hour unit. Most often, the SAT writers will use a one hour limit and not a different number of hours.
2. As soon as I verify that the unit is 1 hour, I will mark B because I know that the answer is ALWAYS a number slightly BELOW the straight average. It takes only a few problems OF THAT TYPE to realize that it ALWAYS works.
3. My total time including reading the problem: about 10 seconds!  
Here you have it: two methods that are faster and are bound to yield the correct answer and a healthy dose of self-confidence!

Obviously, two examples do not tell the entire story. It does, however, reinforce that the SAT is not a test that can be reduced to simple tricks. Too many students spend more time looking for quick shortcuts than working on the test itself. For some reason, they believe in a SAT Holy Grail, a mystical summary of tricks that will deliver perfect scores.

As I will repeat often, I do not pretend to know everything about the SAT. I've spent enough time on the SAT to know what works well and what does not work that well. There are merits to a number of strategies, and one has to TRY them in earnest. One of the biggest misconceptions is that the use of strategies represents a shortcut for PREPARATION TIME. Nothing could be further from the truth. The strategies only work for people who invest an adequate amount of time in troubleshooting the techniques and ascertain the relevance to their individual case.

## Should I Read Famous Lists of Words?

Studying selected lists of words can be helpful, but in very limited occasions. For the overwhelming majority of students, lumbering through the list will provide a false sense of accomplishment and yield few positive results. I offered this opinion when analogies were on the test; you can safely assume that the removal of one of my favorite parts has done little to change my mind about the effectiveness of spending much time memorizing words out of their natural context.

In preparing for the SAT, it would be much better to simply read all the past SAT tests. You would be even better off by taking all the practice tests AND pay close attention to the style and tone of the test.

If you are set on spending the time working with lists and flashcards, you need to understand how the lists were compiled. Most of the lists started by compiling the words that appeared on past tests. The best lists are the ones that do NOT pretend to be more than a historical compilation. The worst lists are the ones that pretend to be better by adding a lot of seemingly difficult words that miss the SAT mark. The most egregious offender is Barron's: by recycling their mostly ineffective GRE list of words, the authors of the 3500 words are doing a gross disservice to unsuspecting high school students. I performed a mathematical analysis of the number of Barron's words that have appear on new tests, and

the results confirmed my worst expectations. While Barron's provides a good indication of what showed up in the **past**, it does a horrible job of predicting future occurrences. The difference is important to know.

This said, there **is** value in working on your vocabulary, but it has to be gradual and constant. Several websites –and some tutoring companies- offer a service that sends out a number of words on a daily basis. Since it would take only a few minutes to open the emails or log in at the website, it is a good idea to start subscribe to a few of them. This is the kind of repetition that helps you prepare without really “feeling” it.

I'll leave you with a last tidbit of information. The SAT does not really test your vocabulary but your reasoning ability. The challenging questions are made difficult, not by testing arcane words, but by testing the secondary and tertiary meanings of EASY words. Examples of such meanings are "air" when used as a verb, "low" when representing a sound, and a slew of others. Do you think that "low" would ever show up on a SAT list and convey the meaning of "the characteristic sound uttered by cattle as in a moo?" Pretty doubtful!

If you want to improve your verbal scores, spend most of your energy understanding the techniques to recognize the patterns of Sentence Completion, and especially critical reading. If you truly have time to waste, spend it on the wordlists. Studying any wordlist without the absolute mastery of the verbal techniques is a recipe for disaster.

## Prep Companies and Tutors

As far as organized classes a la Kaplan or PR, I believe that an overall assessment has to yield a grade of no more than a C Minus, being a combination of a few B and a majority of F.

In my opinion, Princeton Review and Kaplan are pros at exploiting the feeling of inadequacy and guilt of parents. Simply stated, I think that the classes offered by the national chains are worthless, and this in spite of their cost of \$600 to \$1,200. The real downfall of this type of classes is that they have poorly prepared tutors simply rehash the same material that is widely available in their \$30 books. Realize that there is a good chance that your “tutor” preparation did not entail much more than attending the same class you're sitting in.

Except for forcing students to allocate 20 to 40 hours towards an organized event, I see few benefits. Anyone with a modicum of drive and desire should do much better by self-preparing. Learning techniques and strategies is only a small part of the preparation. Just like it is for sports and music, the key to success is repetition and practice. Duh, isn't that a profound statement? It is, however, so true!

On the other hand, I believe that there ARE tutors and tutoring companies that are well worth the price. It is pretty easy to find them and verify their credentials: they are mostly local, smaller, have an owner who is involved in the business, have verifiable references, and do not mind showing examples of their portfolio. If you are set on using PR or Kaplan, I would highly advise anyone to stick to the more expensive one-on-one tutoring. This is a way to ensure that the tutor will have a bit more than a few months of experience.

My overall conclusion: if you consider taking one of the organized classes from a large national

company, DON'T! Consider using the budget to buy every book written on college admission. When you are finished with the process, you could resell the books at Amazon or, better, donate them to your local school. It may sound overwhelming to buy a bunch of books, but it does not take long to separate the bad ones from the very good ones. The bad news is that you may get tired to find a SAT prep book in every bathroom of your house. A fact that may cause your visiting neighbors and family to wonder about your life's priorities!

I think it is important to clarify one issue. While I strongly believe in the merits –and lower cost- of self preparing for the SAT exam, I need to recognize that there are cases in which professional help is warranted. Self preparation does not only require discipline and dedication, but also requires an appropriate environment.

In the next future, I plan to invite a few test preparation executives and tutors to post rebuttals. It is my hope that they might provide the board with a different point of view and illustrate the benefits of their services through specific examples.

## Using Released Tests

When I started working on this issue, the world of the SAT was a bit easier. Since most SAT books had gone through several revisions, the job of identifying the best books was much simpler. For instance, nobody would confuse the Gruber's anthology with the REA books. An important consensus was also reached regarding the published tests, and the differences between the official tests and the tests published by PR, Kaplan, Barron's, among others. I believe that it was Incognito, a former CC poster, who coined the term "synthetic" tests. I have borrowed that term very often, or pushed the envelope by labeling them wannabe or fake test. In simple terms, using the synthetic tests was a bad, a very bad idea. It was also absolutely unnecessary: between the various publications of the 8 or 10 Real Tests and the purchase of released tests from The College Board, one astute test taker could have build up a collection of about 45 official tests. Enough to satisfy the appetite of the most voracious SAT candidate. I have to admit that I attempted to collect ALL of what was available and that I did go through ALL the ones I purchased.

Alas, we know a lot less about the current SAT than we did about the old one. The College Board no longer sells disclosed tests, except through a more restrictive Q&A Service. ETS sells only past versions of the PSAT. The situation is even more complicated for the current SAT.

Based on past experience, we CANNOT trust the companies that have tried to write tests for the new books. The issue is that most of the tests DO contain mistakes that can lead to students' confusion. As an example, the SAT book of Barron's contains good strategies but the tests are mostly irrelevant as they do NOT match the difficulty of the test. It is worth noting that it does NOT help to take a test that is more difficult than the real thing: the extra difficulty does not help a student prepare for the SAT if the type of question will NEVER show up! It is a pure waste of time. It would similar to using a book written for the former SAT Math-IIC test to prepare for the SAT. While you'll learn "something", it won't be what you seek to learn. The same can be said for books such as the Princeton Review 11 Tests for the New SAT. The book was rushed to capture last summer's market. Notwithstanding that Princeton Review had never been able to write a single test that was valid for the "old" SAT, one had to question the integrity of PR to engage in such broad speculation about the contents and format of the



March 2005 tests.

However, the situation is not as bleak as it seems. The College Board DID release an update to its must-have 10 Real Tests. At this time, I would encourage everyone to purchase and read the Official Study book, as well as consider subscribing to the TCB online help. I think it is important to understand HOW the writers of ETS/TCB think. Getting "in the head" of the test writers makes a lot of difference. When reading the solutions proposed by TCB, it is worth remembering that they usually offer lengthy solutions which cover all bases. Again, an important part of your preparation work is to devise shortcuts - some are available in the source books, but the best and most effective ones will be ... your own.

Lastly, if you run out of published tests, do not hesitate to work with older tests. Obviously, you'll have to discard the analogies' and QCs' sections, but the rest is still golden. Please consider that ETS will have their hands full with creating new content for Algebra II or Writing that they won't consider throwing out their older questions for A LONG TIME.

The conclusion is rather simple: there is no reason to use any of the non-official tests.

## Does it Work?

Since I am not a professional tutor -and not even an amateur tutor- I do not keep track of score improvements. You may have noticed that I do not even recommend a diagnostic test before starting the preparation. The reality is that most people I start talking to have taken a few tests and have earned some type of diagnostic score. In a way, I believe that students can self-diagnose their weaknesses after going through the starting phases. I plan to add a few posts tomorrow that will discuss how one progresses in his or her preparation.

However, I want to add something regarding scores. In the past years, I have helped a good number of people and they came to me from very different parts of the world and very different scores. I have helped people asking to boost a score of 850 with a 350 verbal, many 1100-1300 scorers, as well as helped others "grab" the last 60-100 points that separated them from a perfect score. In my neck of the woods, I have had dozens increases of 300 points, a fact made easier by living in an area that is predominantly represented by URM with a SAT average well below 1000.

Unlike the professional tutors, I cannot take credit for those results. I always felt that the credit belonged to the students. I do, however, want to make sure readers know that many people have increased their scores substantially by following the simple steps I have now started to outline. I also want to make sure that readers know that the only limitation that exists is the number 800. People who self-prepare do not necessarily reach an illusory plateau that requires the help of a professional to overcome. Actually, at the highest level, all improvements have to come from the student as the tutoring help reaches its own limit. Lance Armstrong has the best team and best supporting staff, but for the last miles of the Galibier or Mt Ventoux, he is the one who has to pedal his way up while the technical director sits in his car. While I do not keep track of statistics, I have been overjoyed by reading a lot of thank you emails confirming acceptances at dream schools during the past two admissions' seasons.