

Last-Minute Emergency PSAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test Prep for Juniors
by Katie Kirk

1. Why the PSAT is important
 - a. PSAT qualifies students for National Merit.
 - b. If students make above the Alabama cutoff score (can fluctuate about 4 points around last year's level, which is about a 211), they become National Merit Semifinalists. Some paperwork later, they become National Merit Finalists.
 - c. Those people are eligible for the National Scholars Scholarship at Auburn. I know not everyone can fathom staying in Auburn, but it's nice to have options that are basically free.
 - d. Alabama also offers a pretty big scholarship to National Merit Finalists.
 - e. Call me if you need more info about National Merit. I'm in that process as of Autumn 2013.
2. There are simple strategies to help you maximize your time.
 - a. The PSAT is done on a bubble answer document (fill in the bubble with a #2 pencil).
 - i. Use kindergarten/fat pencils to bubble in the bubbles faster!
 - ii. No mechanical pencils are allowed. That's not a problem at all because mechanical pencils are way too small anyway.
 - b. PLEASE write, draw, etc. in your test booklet.
 - i. Once, I found a question I really felt like I needed a straight line for, so I folded the page that had the shape on it to help me draw a better line.
 - ii. Do ANYTHING to your test booklet.
 - iii. At the end of the section when you have extra time and need to relax, you can draw nothing in the margins if you need to. (It helps me.) 😊
 - c. Bring and use a watch WITH HANDS. Not a digital watch.
 - i. Make sure you know how to reset it.
 - ii. Reset it so that both hands will reach 12 at the end of the section you're on.
 - iii. If it's a 25 minute section (will say at the top of each page), for example, set the watch to 11:35. 25 minutes later, at the end of the test, both hands will be at the top of the watch's face. This is just to get a good visual of how much time you have left. Call me if you have any questions about this and I'll try to do a better job explaining. I've had way too much coffee and I'm having a hard time focusing.
 - iv. This is so you don't have to waste mental energy trying to calculate how much time you have left from the clock at the front of the room.
 - d. When you're bubbling in your answers, it might help to do them a page at a time. When you solve a question, write the letter you chose really big over the question. Proceed to the next question. Once you solve a page, write them in all at once.
 - i. This gives your brain a rest from solving questions.
 - ii. Some say it helps you not to miss a question.

- iii. Just be REALLY CAREFUL if you have to skip a question. Don't let yourself get off.
- iv. Use the number-letter-number-bubble method to help you.
 - a. Look at the number in the test booklet.
 - b. Look at the letter you chose.
 - c. Look at the number on the answer document.
 - d. Bubble in the letter you chose.
 - e. Now look back at me.
 - f. Now look at your man.
 - g. Now look back at me.
 - h. Sadly, your man is not me.
 - i. Please attribute E through H to the influence of Starbucks.
- e. Stick with your regular coffee routine. If you don't regularly drink it, please don't make this your day to start, even if you love coffee. If it's part of your daily routine, please don't make this your day to stop.
- f. Eat breakfast.
- g. If you can, bring a snack. I like to bring salt and vinegar almonds (I think they have them at the Publix near ACA), but that's just me.
- h. PLEASE put your stuff in the car THE NIGHT BEFORE. I know a guy who left his calculator in the car right before a big test and had to run back and get it RIGHT before the test. Talk about adding stress to your day.
- i. The object of the game is not to be stressed out. Whatever that takes. Tuesday night after practice, please just get a milkshake and watch Psych reruns. Don't try to cram for the PSAT. Go to bed at a reasonable time.

3. Guessing

- a. The whole watch thing is so you can see how much time you have left and figure out whether to continue struggling with a question or move on.
 - i. Although it varies by a few seconds on each section, just assume that you have about a minute per question to solve math and reading problems and a little less than a minute to solve writing problems. From here on out, most of my explanations will assume you're working on the math section, because that's my personal weakest subject.
 - ii. Okay. If you're five minutes into a section, and you get stuck on #8, you're ahead of the game. Unless you know how to solve it and you can't for some reason (you know it involves dividing exponents and you've forgotten the rule for that), KEEP WORKING ON IT.
 - iii. If you're 15 minutes into the test and you get stuck on #8, it's time to move on.
 - 1. If you've eliminated 2 or 3 answer choices (an excellent way to start out), GUESS between the remaining choices.
 - 2. If you can't eliminate anything, LEAVE BLANK.
 - a. Because.
 - i. If you get a question right, you get credit for it.

- ii. If you leave a question blank, you get 0 points for that question.
 - iii. If you get a question wrong, you get $-1/4$ point for it (negative one-fourth) in addition to not getting credit for it.
 - b. But.
 - i. It's better to guess wherever you can, especially if you can eliminate one or two.
 - ii. Statistically, odds are in your favor if you're guessing after you eliminate one or two or three out of five answer choices.
- 4. Specifically on math...
 - a. Know that there are a lot of trick answers.
 - i. If the answer asks, "what is $4x$," then x will be an answer choice. Quickly skim the question after solving, ESPECIALLY if it's an easy one that has several steps. The key to the problem might be remembering what they're asking for rather than anything complicated in the problem itself.
 - ii. If you'd like to review stuff, review parallel lines cut by a transversal, vertical angles are equal, a straight line is 180, a circle is 360, a square is 360, a triangle is 180, Pythagorean theorem. That's like half the math on there. 😊 If you think reviewing will freak you out, DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT. A calm test-taker is better than a freaked-out one who knows the Pythagorean theorem. Trust me, everyone, and trust me, everyone's parents. 😊
 - iii. Formulas for shapes are given on the test at the beginning of each math section.
 - iv. Look for back-door answers. If you don't remember how to solve a problem, FIGURE OUT A WAY, and it'll normally work. This is TRUE ON THE PSAT, and less so on the ACT. So this might be easier for you.
 - v. In general, the PSAT math is WAAAAAY easier than the ACT math. As in, no trig and easier algebra and geometry in general.
 - vi. For the last three facts, you are welcome. 😊
 - b. The SECOND-MOST IMPORTANT THING I HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THIS EVER
 - i. On the second math section (section 4) there are a few multiple choice questions and then a NON-MULTIPLE CHOICE SECTION.
 - ii. For these, you will be required to bubble your answer in number-by-number instead of picking A, B, C, D, or E.
 - iii. The multiple-choice questions right before this non-multiple choice section are MEANT TO EAT UP YOUR TIME SO YOU DON'T HAVE TIME TO DO THE NON-MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS.
 - 1. Because.
 - a. The non-multiple choice questions have NO PENALTY FOR WRONG ANSWERS. YAY!!!

- b. They're also WAY EASIER than the last few multiple-choice questions right before.
 2. So.
 - a. On section 4, do the multiple-choice questions as long as they seem easy.
 - b. Once the non-multiple choice questions start to seem hard, **MOVE ON TO THE NON-MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS.**
 - c. After that, try to get back to the multiple-choice questions.
 3. You can only work on Section 4, but both those multiple-choice questions and the non-multiple choice sections are part of section 4. You can go back and forth.
 4. Call me if you need more clarification or information. I can explain this concept several different ways, and I haven't come to a perfect way to explain it yet.
5. Specifically on reading...
 - a. **DO NOT READ THE PASSAGES FIRST.**
 - i. Find the first question on that passage that says a line number or paragraph number.
 - ii. Read around that line number (maybe a few sentences before and a few sentences after, for context).
 - iii. Answer that question.
 - iv. Keep going, **CIRCLING QUESTIONS THAT APPLY TO THE WHOLE PASSAGE SO YOU CAN COME BACK TO THEM.**
 - v. By the end, you'll probably have read most of the passage.
 - vi. If time allows, you can skim the passage again before tackling the questions that relate to the whole passage.
 - vii. If you have short passages, you might have to read the passage before answering the questions if none of the questions indicate a part of the passage. That's fine. There are ones like that.
 - viii. Sometimes it will ask you to compare two passages. For these, just remember that you can circle things and draw arrows, etc. Write all over the test booklet if you need to- it's there to do what you need to do with it.
 - b. **DO NOT FREAK OUT ABOUT THE VOCABULARY.**
 - i. You won't know all the words, but you can figure out what they're looking for from context and eliminate the ones you know don't make sense or just sound like they don't make sense.
 - ii. This is a go with your gut kind of thing.
6. Specifically on writing...
 - a. It's grammar, and you can do a lot of it by eliminating the options that just sound terrible when you read them.
- I. Lastly, I **KNOW YOU CAN DO THIS.**
 1. National Merit qualifying scores **ARE ATTAINABLE.**

2. I mean that. The PSAT tests how well you can take the PSAT.
 3. Even if you don't have time to practice, playing around with the above tricks can really help improve your score.
- II. Remember TWO THINGS. (This is the most important thing.)
1. PSAT doesn't matter for admissions. It's just for free money.
 2. The PSAT just captures how well you can take the PSAT on a random Wednesday morning in the first semester of your seventeen-year-old life.
 - i. That is all.
 - ii. It's not an intelligence test, it's not study-proof, and it certainly doesn't measure how well you're going to do in college. I know a guy (now an adult) who had to pass a math test to qualify for a class in college. He bombed it multiple times, and when he finally got into the class, he made like a 97 in the class. This is not an isolated story. It happens ALL. THE. TIME. There are just some people who aren't measured well by certain tests.
 3. There are lots of resources online to help you review things if you need anything!