**PSAT Basic Strategy Outline**

**Reading**

**Format and Timing:**

5 passages and 47 questions in 60 minutes (9-10 questions per passage). The first passage is fictional, and the last four are factual. Of the four factual passages, two are on science topics and two are on history topics. Two will contain graphs, and one will be a dual passage, consisting of two shorter passages on a related topic.

Force yourself very strictly to **stay on the good side of a 12 minute per passage pace**. For example, after two passages, make sure no more than 24 minutes have elapsed. Stay on this pace even if it means not spending as much time as you would ideally like on certain questions.

**Basic Technique**

Read the passage, then answer the questions, going back to the passage as necessary while making certain to stay on pace.

**How to Read**

* Read the entire passage.
* Although reading faster is better than reading slower, understanding the passage is far more important than being fast, so adjust your reading pace according to the difficulty of the passage.

**Factual Passages (Passages 2-5)**

* Your goal is get the author’s main point (by far the most important thing) and the author’s tone (positive, negative, or neutral).
* Don’t feel like you need to completely understand every single detail; you can go back when you need. Avoid getting bogged down in facts and details, as doing so can interfere with your ability to grasp the main point.
* Pay extra attention to the places most likely to contain the most information.
  + Entire first paragraph, but especially the last sentence. Consciously look for a thesis.
  + Beginnings of paragraphs, until you have a good prediction of what the paragraph is about. Look for a topic sentence.
* After the first paragraph, pause for a few seconds to make a deliberate prediction about the main point.
* In each of the remaining paragraphs, your job is to figure out how the paragraph supports or develops the main point and how, if at all, you need to adjust your understanding of the main point in response to the paragraph.
* Passages written before 1950 are often extremely wordy and can take several long sentences to say what could be said in one short sentence. Filter what is important from what is not. Some sentences will be dense with meaning, while others will be nonsense. If you get caught up in the sentences that essentially mean nothing, it will be easy to misunderstand the entire passage.

**Fiction Passage (Passage 1)**

* Fictional passages do not typically have a main point. Therefore, you should pay attention to characters, plot, and setting.

**Addressing the Questions**

* Always read the answer choices before going back to the text (except for on vocabulary in context questions).
  + Use process of elimination.
  + You never know when the answer will be obvious, and you don’t want to waste time going back if you didn’t need to.
  + Even if you need to go back to the passage after reading the answers, reading the answers first makes going back that much more productive, because you are going back to specifically choose between known options.
* If you are given a line reference and you do not know the answer after reading the answer choices, go back to the text to the lines indicated. Always begin by reading the entire sentence that contains the underlined portion. If this sentence is enough to help you answer the question, then answer the question. If this sentence is not enough and you need more context, use contextual clues to decide whether to read the previous sentence or the next sentence.
* On vocabulary in context questions, do not read the answer choices first. Instead, go back to the passage right away and read the entire sentence that contains the word. If this sentence is enough to give you a good sense of the word’s meaning, come up with your own definition of the word. If this sentence is not enough and you need more context, use contextual clues to decide whether to read the previous sentence or the next sentence. Then, after reading the additional sentence or sentences, come up with your own definition of the word. Once you have your definition, choose the correct answer. Read your answer in the sentence to check your work.
* Watch out for two part questions in which the second question requires you to identify the evidence for the first question. On any question without a line reference, before you go back to the passage to find the answer, you should check the next question to see if it is an evidence question. If it is, do the two questions together, examining the lines referenced in each answer of the second question to see which one helps you answer the first question. Watch out for false pairings – evidence that seems to support an incorrect answer to the first question but does not actually make sense. On these evidence questions, the evidence must be found precisely in the lines referenced in the answer choices and not in their immediate context.

**Correct and Incorrect Answers**

**Incorrect answers**

* Wrong name with the wrong thing.
* Partially correct – if even one word is wrong, eliminate the answer.
* Misrepresenting words from the text.
* Absolute language (all, invariably, entirely, etc.). Words that offer NO room for exceptions are rarely found in correct answers.
* Answer choices that just seem too strong. Be suspicious of any answer choices that seem like they are making big claims.
* Illogical answers and answers that go against common sense.
* Answers that are inconsistent with the passage’s main point or tone.

**Correct answers**

* Are specifically and irrefutably justified by the text.
* Should seem reasonable and makes sense.
* Use your own knowledge when applicable.
* Think about finding the answer that can’t possibly be wrong. You want the least wrong answer, not the most correct one.

**Dual Passage**

One of the passages will be a dual passage, consisting of two short passages on a related topic. On this passage, read the first passage as described above, and answer the questions that relate to the first passage only. Then read the second passage, thinking not only about its main point but also about how it relates to the first passage. After you have read the second passage, answer the remaining questions.

**Writing and Language**

**Format and Timing:** 44 questions in 35 minutes, divided into four passages of 11 questions each. Force yourself very strictly to **stay on the good side of a 9 minute per passage pace**. Nine minutes per passage will actually leave you with only 8 for the last one.

**General Strategy**

* Read the entire passage and do the questions as you get to them. Do not skip over parts even if there is a big space between questions, since some questions might ask about the passage as a whole.
* Always finish reading the entire sentence that contains the underlined portion before answering a question.
* It is a test of formal written English, not spoken English, so you must know the rules instead of always relying on your ear.
* Know when your ear is likely correct and when it is likely incorrect.
  + It will often fool you for pronoun agreement and verb agreement and will often miss redundancy.
  + It is all you have to go by on idiomatic language questions.
  + It can be very useful on awkwardness questions.
* Concentrate on the differences between the answers to figure out exactly what you are being tested on so that you know which rule to apply.
* “NO CHANGE” is correct about 1/4 of the time it is offered.
* DELETE the underlined portion” is correct about 1/2 the time it is offered.
* Take it slowly on nongrammatical questions. These types of questions take much longer to be certain of.
* Be careful of questions that feature the words “EXCEPT,” “NOT,” or “LEAST.” Missing these crucial words is a common cause of careless errors. Put a giant X over the entire question as an unmistakable visual reminder.

**Specific Tips**

**Grammatical Questions**

* Match every pronoun with the word it renames (its antecedent) to check for agreement.
* Match every verb with its simple subject to check for agreement.
* The subject is never found within a phrase.
* Use the is/are test to see if a noun is singular or plural. If “is” sounds good after the noun, the noun is singular. If “are” sounds good after the noun, the noun is plural.
* Each, either, and neither are singular.
* Never put a comma between a subject and its verb. For example, there is no comma in the following sentence: “The best part about skiing is that you get to go fast.”
* A semicolon followed by a lowercase letter is identical to a period followed by a capital letter (for the purposes of this test). If both are offered, neither is correct, assuming there are no other differences between the two answer choices.
* “Who” is followed by a verb and is not preceded by a preposition. “Whom” is followed by a noun or pronoun or is preceded by a preposition.
* Before choosing a period, semicolon, or comma-conjunction, be certain that what comes before and after are both independent clauses.
* Only combine two sentences if one of them is incapable of standing alone. If they both work alone, keep them as separate sentences.
* For awkwardness questions, process of elimination often works well. Look for specific errors to help you eliminate answers, and also use your ear. Anything that is overly wordy is definitely wrong. Before you choose your answer, make sure it has no subtle misplaced modifiers. If given the choice between active and passive voice, choose the active unless there is a reason to choose the passive.
* When you add a dependent clause or a phrase to the beginning of an independent clause, ALWAYS separate it from the independent clause with a comma.
* When you add a dependent clause or a phrase to the end of an independent clause, typically do not use a comma, unless your ear is strongly telling you that you need one.
* When adding a phrase to the middle of an independent clause, consider whether it is essential or nonessential. If it is essential, no commas are used. If it is nonessential, separate it from the rest of the sentence with commas on both sides.

**Nongrammatical Questions**

* Slow down. These questions require much more time than the grammatical questions, so they interrupt the rhythm you have established on the other questions. Therefore, it is easy to rush without even realizing you are rushing.
* If you think something could possibly be redundant, irrelevant, or otherwise unnecessary, it probably is. Take it out.
  + Use the structure of the question to tip you off to look for the possibility of something being unnecessary, irrelevant, or redundant. If “DELETE the underlined portion” is an option, or if one or two answer choices are shorter than the others, the question is giving you the option of taking something out. You should think carefully about why you might do so.
* When a question asks you to insert a sentence to accomplish a specific purpose, pay close attention to that purpose and pick the answer that accomplishes it. Pay no attention to the context unless the purpose itself is context dependent, as many of the choices will sound good in the context.
* On transition word questions, you must pay attention to the sentences before and after the transition, unless it is transitioning two parts of one sentence, which is uncommon. Read both sentences and see which transition logically connects their meaning. Occasionally, the transition will rely on a knowledge of more than one sentence before or after the word, so reading two sentences on each side of the word is a good idea.
* When given the option of a transition word or no transition word, always choose a transition word if one works. Only choose not to use a transition word if none of the transition words really fits.
* On yes/no questions, decide whether the answer is yes or no and come up with your own reason before looking at the answer choices. Doing so will help prevent you from being tempted by answers that sound good but do not actually make sense.
* On sentence placement questions, look for a vague reference in the sentence or elsewhere in the paragraph. If you find one, place the sentence where you need to in order to clarify the vague reference. If you do not find a vague reference, pay attention to any shifts in verb tense in the paragraph, as such shifts can also provide valuable clues.

**Math**

**Format and Timing:**

**No calculator section:** 17 questions in 25 minutes. 1-13 are multiple choice and are arranged from easier to more difficult. 14-17 are student produced response and are also arranged from easier to more difficult. **Do the first 13 questions in no more than 18 minutes.** Be willing to guess on the last few multiple choice questions, which are very difficult, in order to get to the first few student-produced response questions, which are easy.

**Calculator section:** 31 questions in 45 minutes. 1-27 are multiple choice and are arranged from easier to more difficult. 28-31 are student produced response and are also arranged from easier to more difficult. **Do the first 27 questions in no more than 38 minutes.** Be willing to guess on the last few multiple choice questions, which are very difficult, in order to get to the first few student-produced response questions, which are easy.

**General Tips:**

* Answer every question. There is no guessing penalty.
* Do not let any one problem take up too much of your time. If you think you can get it correct but are worried about how long it will take you, take a guess and fill in the bubble, mark the question so you can go back if you have time leftover, and move on.
* Do not be *too* quick to give up on a problem. Just because you don’t immediately know exactly what to do on a problem does not mean you cannot figure it out. Think about it for at least 30 seconds before you give up on it.
* When guessing, guess intelligently. Take guesses that make sense according to the problem or according to the diagram instead of guessing randomly. Use your estimating skills when guessing. On geometry problems with figures (unless it states “Figure not drawn to scale”), you can often get it down to one or two possible answers just by looking at the figure.
* Come up with a good plan of how to do a problem before you begin doing work. Although taking this time to think may seem like a waste of time, it will save you time by helping you avoid doing work that goes nowhere.
* Three great ways to avoid careless errors:
* Make sure your answer makes sense (according to the diagram, according to the problem, and according to your number sense).
* Make sure you are answering what the question is asking, since it is easy to answer something one step away from what the question is asking.
* Look out for situations in which you could see yourself making a careless error, so you can slow down and avoid making the error.
* Three great non-traditional ways of solving problems:
* Plugging in the answer choices is a great way to solve difficult “solve for x” problems.
* Graphing on your calculator can help you solve a wide variety of problems.
* Making up your own numbers can help you figure out certain problems, especially those with one or more variables in the answer choices.
* Be aware of what formulas are given to you at the beginning of every math section.