**ACT Basic Strategy Outline**

**English**

**Timing:** 5 passages and 75 questions in 45 minutes (15 questions per passage)

**9 minutes per passage**

**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 will often, but not always, be correct on comma usage.
  + 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.
* “OMIT the underlined portion” and “DELETE the underlined portion” are correct about 1/2 the time they are offered.
* Sometimes it makes sense to go out of order, especially if an error later in the sentence is making it tough to deal with a previous error.
* Take it slowly on questions that involve arranging the sentences in a paragraph, arranging the paragraphs within the essay, deciding whether a sentence should be kept or deleted, and similar rhetorical skills 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**

**Usage/Mechanics**

* 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.

**Rhetorical Skills**

* 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, unnecessary, or irrelevant, it probably is. Take it out.
  + Use the structure of the question to tip you of to look for the possibility of something being unnecessary, irrelevant, or redundant. If “OMIT the underlined portion” or “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 this.
* 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 sentence 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.
* 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 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.

**Math**

**Format and Timing:** **60 questions in 60 minutes**

Because the questions go from easier to more difficult, timing is more complicated than simply staying on a one minute per question pace. If you hope to score in the high 20s or above, you should spend no more than **20-25 minutes on the first 30 questions**, but you must also remain accurate during these problems. If you are trying to score in the mid-20s or below, do not worry about falling behind this pace, as the problems towards the end are likely too difficult for you anyway. Work carefully through the problems you can do while taking educated guesses on the ones you cannot. Never let any problem take up too much of your time, and make sure you have time to randomly fill in bubbles if you are running out of time.

**General Tips**

* Questions are arranged roughly from easier to more difficult.
* Despite what is stated in the directions, all figures tend to be drawn to scale.
* 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.
* If you are uncertain of how to solve a problem, think about it instead of just starting to do math. Although thinking may seem like a waste of time, it will save you time. If you can’t think of a good way to solve it, take a guess and move on.
* 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 diagrams, you can often get it down to only one or two possible answers just by looking at the diagram.
* **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.

**Reading**

**ACT Format and Timing:** 4 passages and 40 questions in 35 minutes (10 questions per passage). The passages appear in the following order: Prose Fiction/Literary Narrative, Social Science/Social Studies, Humanities, and Natural Science.

Force yourself very strictly to **stay on the good side of a 9 minute per passage pace**. For example, after two passages, make sure no more than 18 minutes have elapsed. Nine minutes per passage will actually leave you with only 8 for the last one. 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: Social Science, Humanities, and Natural Science**

* Your goal is get the author’s main point (by far the most important thing), a knowledge of what is talked about where, 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.
* Occasionally, a Humanities passage will seem more fictional than factual in nature. When this is the case, use the reading strategy described below for Prose Fiction passages.

**Prose Fiction Passages**

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

**Addressing the Questions**

* Always read the answer choices before going back to the text.
  + 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, doing so makes going back that much more productive, because you are going back to specifically choose between known options.
* Because of time constraints, you will likely be unable to go back to the passage every time you would like to. Therefore, you must be selective. Avoid going back on questions that will take too much time to go back on. Typically, these are the questions where you don’t know exactly where the answer would be found. On these questions, take your best guess, put a mark next to the problem, and move on. Then go back to these problems if you have extra time left at the end of the passage.

**Correct and Incorrect Answers**

**Incorrect answers**

* Wrong name with the wrong thing.
* Half right half wrong.
* Misrepresenting words from the text.
* Using words from the text but misrepresenting their meanings.
* Just because the answer uses words from the text DOES NOT mean it is probably wrong. They do a good job of keeping you guessing, so it gives you no evidence either way.
* Absolute language (all, invariably, entirely, etc.). Words that offer NO room for exceptions are very 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**

* Should seem reasonable and makes sense.
* Use your own knowledge when applicable.
* Very weak, vague, non-committing.
* If you have it down to two choices that seem to be saying the same thing, choose the weaker one.
* 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 is likely to 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.

**Not Enough Time**

Below are two techniques that can be useful if you have trouble finishing the Reading Test.

**Skim the Passages**

**Factual Passages: Social Science, Humanities, and Natural Science**

* Your goal is to get an idea of the main point, the tone, and what is located where.
* Read the entire first paragraph unless it is very long, in which case you can skip over some of the sentences in the middle. By the end of this paragraph, you should have actively made a prediction about the main point of the passage.
* In each of the remaining paragraphs, read until you have a very good idea of where it is going, then move on to the next paragraph. Sometimes, you will only have to read one or two sentences.
* In the final paragraph, read the last sentence in addition to the first sentence or two.
* Pay particular attention to what is located in each paragraph so you can go back effectively.
* Do not get bogged down in details.

**Prose Fiction Passage**

* Because fictional writing does not contain structural elements like topic sentences and thesis statements, it is tough to predict the most important parts of the passage. Therefore, you should simply read this passage, while attempting to skip any sections that seem unimportant.
* Pay attention to characters, plot, and setting. Pay particularly close attention to the characters.

**Concentrate on 3 Passages (ACT)**

* Devote all your time to 3 of the passages, leaving only enough time to randomly fill in bubbles on the 4th.
* You can spend 11 minutes each on two of the passages and 12 minutes on one of the passages. Doing so leaves you with 1 minute to randomly fill in bubbles on the fourth passage.
* Randomly fill in bubbles on the passage that tends to be the most difficult for you.
* It is still possible to get a score in the mid or even upper 20s using this technique.

**Science**

**Format and Timing:** 40 questions in 35 minutes

*Check the last passage to see if it is the 6 or 7 passage format. The 6 passage format is more likely.*

**7 Passage Format**

Stay on the good side of a 5 minute per passage pace. For instance, make sure no more than 15 minutes have elapsed by the end of the third passage. Try to build up a cushion of time ahead of this pace, since you will probably need 6-7 minutes for the Conflicting Viewpoints passage, which contains 7 questions and requires you to read.

**6 Passage Format**

Stay on the good side of a 6 minute per passage pace. For instance, make sure no more than 18 minutes have elapsed by the end of the third passage. Be aware that if you are precisely on a 6 minute per passage pace, you will only have 5 minutes for the last passage.

**Data Representation/Research Summary Passages**

Do not spend any time reading the passage. Go directly to the questions. Attack the questions using a three step process. A breakdown in any of the three steps will result in a missed question.

**Step 1) Read and understand the question.**

* When reading the question, ask yourself two questions – What are they giving me and what do they want me to find? Concentrate on the concrete or numerical pieces of information in the questions.
* Make sure you fully understand what they are asking for in each question before going back. If you don’t understand what they want you to find after the first reading, read it again.
* Look out for the common structure where they make an association between two things and then ask you about one of them. They are really asking about the other.

**Step 2) Figure out where to find the answer.**

* Try to avoid the text whenever possible. Questions with numeric answers and any questions that ask what, how many, or when can most likely be answered just by looking at the data (charts, tables, graphs, etc.), as can questions asking about a trend, hypothesis, conclusion, or relationship.
* Use the text when asked questions that could not be answered by the data, such as why and how questions and questions regarding the experimental procedure in Research Summary passages (unless there is a diagram of the procedure).
* Also use text when you need a definition. Most any term you don’t know will be defined. Be careful, though; just because you don’t know what something means doesn’t necessarily mean you need to. Evaluate whether a knowledge of what you are dealing with is truly necessary to getting the question right.
* Use the text immediately preceding a table, chart, or graph if you need something about the table, chart, or graph clarified.
* Look for limiting language: If it says “Based on Table 1,” “According to Experiment 2,” etc., it is pointing you specifically to that place. The answer will be found there.
* Look for nonlimiting language: If it says “One would expect that the bacteria from Table 3 would…,” “If the hypothesis from Experiment 1 is correct…,” etc., it is simply mentioning a certain table, chart, or experiment, not specifically pointing you there. The portion of the passage mentioned is often a good place to start, but realize that with this type of wording, the answer may be found elsewhere.
* If it says “According to the information in the passage,” note that “the passage” refers to the entire thing, not just the text.
* Use your own knowledge to avoid having to consult the passage. With the exception of Conflicting Viewpoints passages, science passages don’t have incorrect information.

**Step 3) Interpret the data correctly.**

* Make sure you read the fine print on the graphs and tables: units, keys, labels, etc.
* Avoid making assumptions about how to read the data, since the data frequently is not presented in the most intuitive manner.
* Look out for reversible questions, questions that you could understand perfectly but then get backwards in your answer.

**When in Doubt**

* If you are confused by or running out of time on a numeric question, concentrate on the concrete and line stuff up. Let the units of any numbers in the question and units of the answer choices guide you.
* If you are confused by or running out of time on a conceptual question, choose the answer that seems to make sense or at least echoes the language of the question.

**Conflicting Viewpoints Passage**

* Read and attempt to understand the passage. The text at the beginning of the passage is information that all parties agree upon or is background on the issue. Read this, and then proceed to each theory. When reading each argument, try to zero in on the main point, which is often stated in a topic sentence. As long as you understand the basics of each argument, don’t worry if you aren’t getting every detail; you can come back for these.
* Sometimes you will notice that one person is obviously right and the other obviously wrong. The right person will likely have good predictions/explanations about other things and the wrong person will likely have bad predictions/explanations. If it isn’t obvious that one person is wrong, don’t try to figure out who is right and who isn’t. This will only get you in trouble, since you must evaluate all arguments on the basis of the evidence presented.

**Writing**

**Timing:** 40 minutes. Use up to 10 minutes to plan (planning is not graded), leaving 6 minutes per paragraph, assuming a 5 paragraph essay.

**Planning:** Determine your perspective on the issue. You have the option of either agreeing with one of three perspectives or creating your own perspective. *Agreeing with one of the three perspectives makes the essay easier to write, so this approach is highly recommended.* Keep in mind that it does not matter what you actually believe; write on whichever perspective will be easiest. Create the briefest of outlines consisting of a bullet point for each paragraph followed by one to five words.

**Grading:** The essay is scored out of 12. The ACT will evaluate your essay based on the following competencies: ideas and analysis, development and support, organization, and language use.

*While there are many organizational structures that could result in a top score, I recommend using the outline below. It is simple, easily repeatable, and should allow for an essay that meets all the criteria for a top score. The more complex or creative your structure is, the easier it is to end up with an essay that is disorganized or fails to cover everything you need to.*

**How to Organize it:**

**Five paragraph essay**

1. **Intro** (4-5 sentences) Lead-in to the thesis statement, which should be the last sentence of the intro. Before the thesis, frame the issue. Avoid plagiarizing the prompt.
   1. Place the issue in context (often historical). How has it always been?
   2. Describe the controversy.
   3. **Thesis statement** that clearly states your position. Should refer to one of the perspectives and summarize that perspective’s viewpoint.

ex: *Although an increasingly mechanized world can at times be unnerving, machines ultimately improve our world by performing work that humans cannot or will not do, as articulated in Perspective Two.*

1. **Body paragraph #1** (6-7 sentences) – Explain why your chosen perspective is correct.
   1. Open with clear topic sentence stating which perspective you think is correct.

*ex: Perspective Two fully appreciates the possibilities machines offer for improving human societies.*

* 1. Explain the perspective in greater depth.
  2. Use evidence to illustrate why the perspective is valid. Good evidence could consist of anecdotes from your own experiences, observations from the present day world, or historical evidence. For the machines prompt, you could discuss self-checkout machines at grocery stores performing a monotonous task or machines that manufacture computer chips performing a precision task humans would be incapable of performing.

1. **Body paragraph #2** (5-6 sentences) – Discuss one of the other perspectives in the context of your thesis. Just because you support one perspective does not mean the other perspectives are unequivocally wrong. Determine whether the other perspective is fully compatible with your thesis, severely flawed and incompatible with your thesis, or partially/conditionally compatible with your thesis.
   1. Open with clear topic sentence that provides a transition and summarizes the perspective

*Ex: Despite the ability of machines to enhance the human experience, Perspective 1 argues that machines somehow make us less human.*

* 1. Explain the perspective clearly and discuss why one might reach the conclusions offered by that perspective.
  2. Critically evaluate the perspective in light of your thesis. If the perspective is contrary to your thesis, explain why it is false. Use reasoning to expose flaws in its logic. Use counterexamples to show that it is untrue. If the perspective is compatible with your thesis, explain why it too is valid and how it fits into what you discussed in the previous paragraph. Again, use specific evidence. If the perspective is partially compatible with your thesis or compatible only under certain circumstances, explain the nuances of how and when it is compatible. As always, use evidence.

1. **Body paragraph #3** (5-6 sentences) – Same as body paragraph #2 but for the other perspective.
2. **Conclusion** (4-6 sentences)
   1. Restate thesis in different words (1 sentence)
   2. Review main points (1-2 sentences)
   3. Draw conclusion (1-3 sentences): Bring the essay to closure by considering the implications or consequences of what you have discussed. Answer the question “so what?” or “what should we do?”

*ex: While new technologies represent change, and change is by definition scary, we must learn to embrace intelligent machines, as they are the key to reaching our full potential as a species.*

**General Tips**

* Make sure you write on the topic given to you.
* Your ideas do not need to be brilliant; they simply need to be good enough and make sense.
* Keep the structure of your essay very simple. Show the reader that you have been taught how to structure an essay. Keep your structure simple without dumbing down your sentences or ideas. Pretend you are writing a sample five paragraph essay to teach ninth graders how to write one.
* Because you do not have the editing tools available to you when you write a paper on a computer, you must plan things out better in advance. During your 5 minute planning stage, write an extremely brief outline that consists of three bullet points, one for each body paragraph, followed by 1 to 3 words each. Before you begin writing a paragraph, take a moment to consider the flow of ideas. Before you begin writing a sentence, construct the sentence in your head rather than simply writing and hoping it works out.
* Do not throw in large words simply to try to impress the reader. By all means, use your full vocabulary, but trying to use large words just to use them is rarely a good idea. Instead, strive for accuracy of language.
* A longer essay will usually make a better impression on the reader than a shorter one. Write as much as you can without being repetitive or overly wordy. Write a sentence a minute after spending 10 minutes to plan, and you will have a 5 paragraph essay with 6 sentences per paragraph.
* Make sure your handwriting is legible. Although the readers likely become quite good at deciphering students’ handwriting, they cannot give you a good score if they cannot read your writing.
* If possible, use short (1-3 word) direct quotes from the perspectives.