What's the Best Prep Method for YOU?

Major Prep Methods and How to Decide

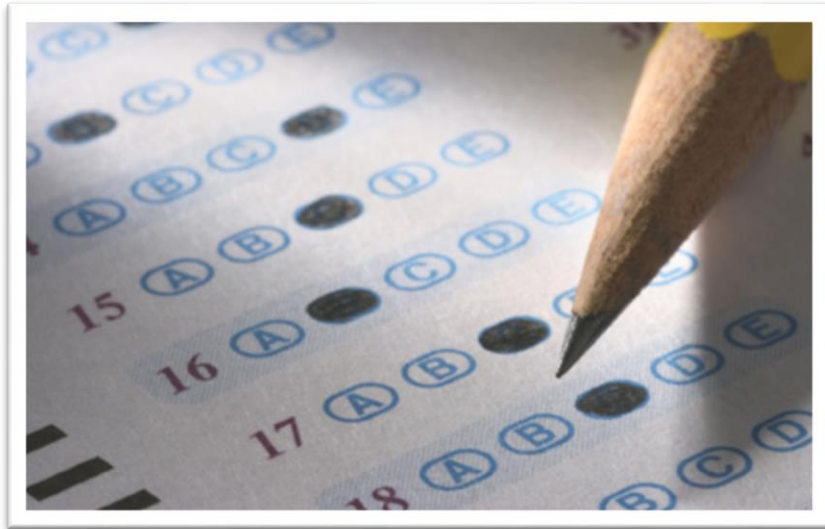*By Allen Cheng*

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INTRO
Finding the Best Prep Method

There are a lot of test prep methods out there. Some students get dedicated 1-on-1 tutors. Some students attend classes in person. Others try to study by themselves. With recent advanced technology, online prep and online tutoring options are becoming popular.

Each of these methods has its own pros and cons. Each method is ideal for specific types of students. **You need to pick the right method for yourself.** If there's a mismatch, you'll lose out on hundreds of SAT points and spend much more money than you should.

In each of the following chapters, we'll be discussing a major test prep method and how to tell whether it's right for you.

1: In-Person Tutoring

> **Key Point:** Potentially the most effective way to prep, but usually very costly. Most tutors are mediocre, and you have to know how to choose a tutor you can trust.

Many parents think tutoring is the most effective form of test prep. 1-on-1 attention is much better than a boring class: the tutor customizes teaching for the student, and the student can ask all the questions he or she wants. Meet for enough hours and you've got a perfect score, right? Below we'll talk about what tutoring involves, and myths and realities of their effectiveness.

In the best case, tutoring can indeed be extremely effective. The tutor has the chance to sit with the student 1-on-1 and work in close detail, diagnosing errors and suggesting customized strategies. The tutor can help

motivate the student and keep the student on track each week. If the tutor can build good rapport, the student will enjoy the learning time and feel supported in this often anxiety-provoking situation.

However, most practical tutoring cases fall far short of expectations.

There are two key issues to be aware of. First is cost: the best tutors often cost over $300/hour. (If you think you've skirted the issue by hiring a $30/hour college student, think again. We'll discuss why below.) Almost all tutors bill on an hourly basis, so, just like lawyers, they're incentivized to **bill as many hours as they can**. They're not rewarded for efficient teaching methods – often they'll sit quietly by a student's side watching the student solve problems. This is great for the tutor because it racks up easy, billable time. But it's bad for you – at 40 hours of tutoring, this means **over $10,000 in spending!**

Second, tutors vary dramatically in quality. While you might find an affordable tutor who scored well on the test, chances are the tutor has limited teaching experience. That $30/hour local tutor? Even if he or she has a perfect score, chances are the person doesn't have the experience to know how to teach effectively. Teaching any student is hard – you have to understand the student's thinking process in detail to find and fix mistakes. Most tutors find this hard to do because they suffer from the *curse of knowledge*: they don't understand what it's like not to know the material. As

a result, they just go through the same strategies over and over again, even when the strategies don't click with the student. This is like banging your head against the wall. All the while, the tutor is racking up tutoring hours, and you might be none the wiser until test day comes along, scores come out, and it's far too late.

We surveyed trusted college counselors and they agree: **75% of tutors are not effective**.

"Of tutors I've personally witnessed, most just go through the motions. They solve a problem in front of the student and ask whether the student understands. The student nods no matter what, and this repeats over and over again."

–Ivy League counselor

At PrepScholar, we designed our Complete + Tutoring package to solve both problems of cost and quality. Our comprehensive online prep program has thousands of practice problems and gives instant feedback to you so you can learn from your mistakes. Then, when you meet with your 1-on-1 tutor, the teaching is as efficient as possible. Your tutor, who has years of teaching experience, has already studied your progress and is ready to teach you new, customized strategies to raise your score.

> **Conclusion**: Traditional tutoring is expensive, and if you don't find the rare tutor who's truly effective, a waste of money. At PrepScholar, we reduce costs by making every minute count, and we hire only the nation's best tutors.

2: Classes

> **Key Point:** One size fits all; teaching is not customized to the student. Least effective for the money.

Test prep classes take place in classrooms where one teacher lectures to many students. They usually follow a pre-determined curriculum along a fixed schedule. Popular examples include Kaplan and Princeton Review classes. Many towns also have local test prep companies offering classes.

The classroom often seems like a good choice because it's familiar: in school, students sit in classrooms for most of the day, so shouldn't test prep be taught the same way?

Classes do have a few benefits for specific types of students. If you're impossible to motivate and will spend literally **no time** studying by yourself, classes are a good way to ensure

that you get at least some exposure to the SAT. Because you'll be sitting in a classroom for 30 hours, you should theoretically be absorb something from the classes, even if you find it boring and get distracted. Second, if you're performing at a below average level and just want a broad overview of how the SAT works, classes are **good introductions to the basics**. You'll get basic exposure to what's tested on the SAT and do some practice questions.

For those specific students mentioned above classes are a viable option. However, to be honest here, for general students, classes are the worst way to prep for your money. Research studies show that classes typically raise SAT scores by only 50 points. We also know because we've taken classes ourselves, before we found better methods.

Classes fail in many ways. First, classrooms offer zero customization to the student. Classes don't have the ability to adapt to every student – instead, **they put every single student through the exact same curriculum**. You'll spend most of the time on material that is either too easy or too hard for you, making little progress and wasting time. Second, classes don't leave time for individual instruction – students don't get a chance to ask questions, and they often feel afraid of being judged by peers for asking a dumb question. Third, most companies hire teachers with **little teaching experience**, since all they have to do is walk students through a pre-set curriculum. Finally, classes are **not cheap**: despite all these failures, classes can still exceed $1,000.

Beware of What Classes Promise!

In their promotional materials, classes may promise all sorts of things – customized instruction, guaranteed results, and more. Ask them tough questions to dig beneath the surface:

- Do you customize instruction to the student? How **exactly** do you accomplish this? What percentage of total time is spent on customized instruction?
- What is your **average score improvement per student**? Not your best students. Average across **all students**.

PrepScholar offers a great alternative to classes with our Complete + Tutoring Package. For the same price as a class, you succeed where classes fail. You get **full customization** so that you're always training at the level that pushes your abilities to the limit. You can ask your tutor **unlimited questions** on a 1-on-1 basis so that you get much more for your money. Finally, you get access to the nation's top test prep tutors with years of teaching experience. Read more about Online prep plus tutoring later in this guide.

> **Conclusion**: Classes fail to teach you in many key ways and are expensive for minimal results. PrepScholar Complete + Tutoring solves the problems of classes at the same price.

3: Self-Study

> **Key Point:** Works for very self-motivated, high-performing, insightful students. For most other students, it doesn't work.

Self study is the cheapest option of all test prep methods. Students who self study create their own study programs. They buy their own books and determine what they want to study and when. They might research what other students have done and cobble together resources they find online. **Beware** – you have to do this well using best practices, or you won't make progress. Even worse, you might study incorrectly and **get worse** on the SAT!

To self study effectively, here are a few tips. First, you need to choose the **right materials for your level**. For books, Kaplan is good for low and medium level scorers, while Barron's has the detail for high level scorers. Second,

you need to **create a study plan** from today all the way up to your test date. Figure out when you have time to study, pencil it into your calendar, and **stick to it**. Assign yourself practice tests at the right times – when you've had enough time to practice to build your skills. Third, you need to be able to **figure out your own mistakes**. For every single question you miss, you need to break apart your thinking process so that you fully understand the mistakes that you've been making. If you can't do this effectively, you'll make the same mistakes over and over again.

As you might be able to see, self study works only for a very specific group – **students who are high-performing and very self-motivated**. These students are determined to put in immense amounts of work to succeed. They are ruthless about their study techniques and need little motivation to work. They are deeply insightful into their own thinking, so they know what mistakes they're making and why. They also spend a lot of time researching SAT prep to design the best program for themselves. All of this usually means that the student is **already performing at a high level** – this might be a student already scoring 2200 on the SAT who wants to score 2350.

For students who don't fit this profile, self-study usually doesn't work. First, most students aren't experts at the SAT, which means they don't understand how to create an effective prep program for themselves. Most students buy a book and just read it cover to

cover, which doesn't give them the right type of practice to actually improve. Some students who do research find methods that aren't appropriate for them. Furthermore, students often don't know enough about the SAT to be able to diagnose their own mistakes. Finally, students often vastly overestimate their motivation to study. If you've ever promised that you'd study, but ended up spending your night on your phone or watching Youtube videos, then reconsider whether self-study is a good choice.

In our view, this is like a high school student getting injured and deciding to treat himself instead of seeking the advice of a doctor.

Financial Logic – Investing in Your Future

There is one major benefit of self study – low cost. To families who prefer self study for cost reasons, even $400 is out of their budget range.

But in our perspective, this is **missing the forest for the trees**. Research shows that improving your SAT score by 105 points doubles your odds of getting into a better college. Getting into a better school **dramatically improves your lifetime income by tens of thousands of dollars,** if not more. Furthermore, getting a higher SAT score can get you scholarships, all for the cost of a prep program. It's simple logic, but **most families don't realize this until it's too late**.

At PrepScholar, we've created a Complete online prep program that's **affordable** and gives you the **best independent study program possible**. The program was created by full scorers on the SAT with years of teaching experience. The Complete program **guides you** through the exact lessons and practice questions you need to work on to improve the most. For each of our thousands of practice questions, we give you a detailed answer explanation that shows you where you went wrong and how to avoid the mistake in the future. Furthermore, we've built in scheduling and motivational features to **keep you on track** all the way to test day.

> **"Before PrepScholar, I tried to study by myself. I did ten practice tests, and I felt good about myself because I was spending time to study. But my score never went up. This was really frustrating and I wanted to cry because I wasn't getting anywhere.**
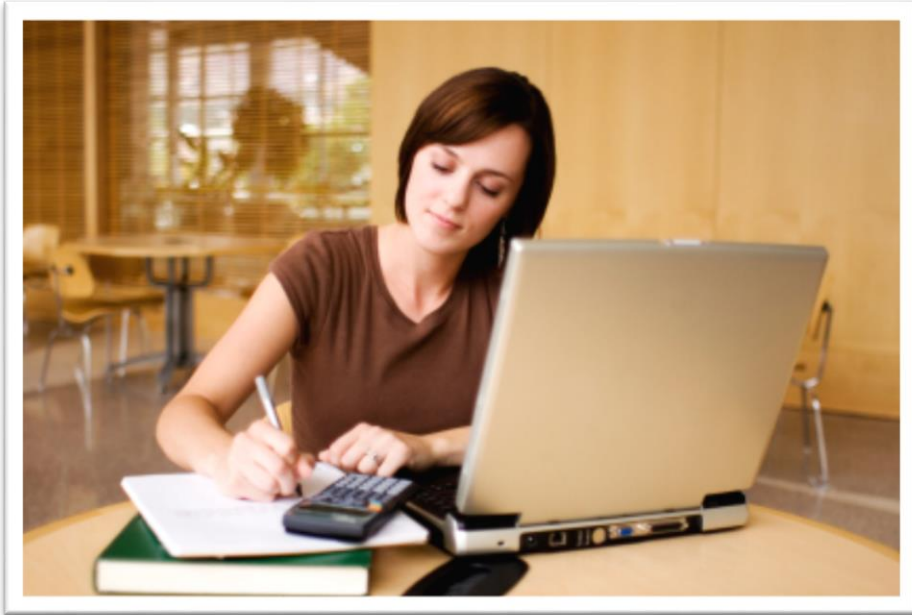>
> **When I used PrepScholar, I realized what I was doing wrong. I wasn't focusing on the skills that I was weak in, and I wasn't training those skills in the right way. I love PrepScholar because it tells me exactly what I need to work on at all times. This time, I saw my score go up steadily when I put in work."**   *-Megan M., Student*

> **Conclusion**: Self study works for highly motivated, high-performing students who know exactly what they need to do. For everyone else, it's ineffective. The investment in an affordable program like PrepScholar is worth your future.

4: Online Prep Program

> **Key Point:** Affordable, effective, and convenient, but you need to pick the right program.

   With the spread of the internet, online test prep programs have appeared over the last ten years to teach students nationwide. They usually feature practice questions and lessons and are designed to be used independently by the student, without a human teacher. They're a great alternative to self study because, for a low cost, you can get the **benefit of SAT experts** and a **program that guides your learning**.

   Even though many such programs cost about the same – a few hundred dollars – they differ dramatically in quality. It's important to study what these different programs offer and which one is best for you. We've studied and purchased
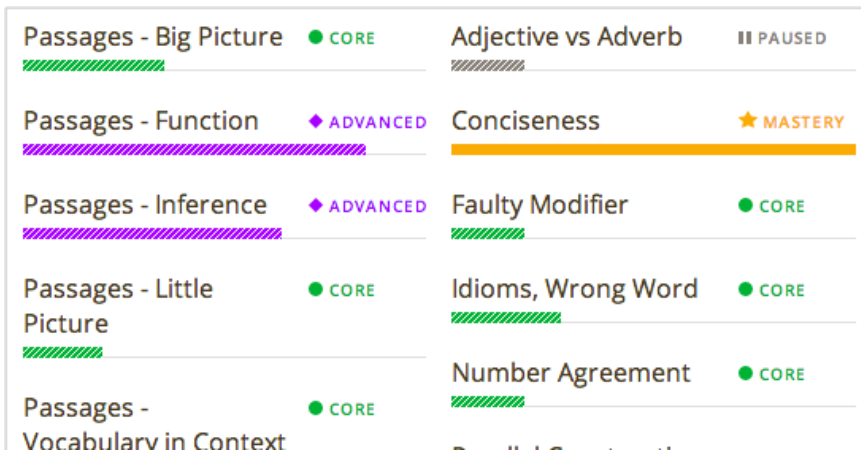
nearly all the online prep programs available to form these opinions.

The **IDEAL** online prep program is comprehensive and covers all aspects of the student's learning. It guides the student through a **structured study program** so the student knows what to work on at every point in time. It **customizes the learning** to the student's strengths and weaknesses so the student can make the most progress with every minute spent.

Unfortunately, many online prep programs fail in these respects. We think of **bad online prep programs** as online textbooks that are **no better than paper books**. Bad online prep programs will just present a collection of lessons and questions to you. They offer **no guidance** to you on what to work on, when, and how. They also **don't customize** to you, so you get the same experience as everyone else, regardless of your unique strengths and weaknesses. These programs still charge you hundreds of dollars with little benefit, because most families don't know better. Beware of online programs that do this!

Instead, at PrepScholar we've created a prep program that succeeds in all the ways we described above. This is based on our founders' own study methods when they got their perfect SAT scores, and honed over time with the thousands of students they've taught. Our Complete online prep program guides you through a structured study plan from beginning to end. You come in and take a diagnostic,

and we automatically determine your strengths and weaknesses through advanced statistics. Next, we create a customized study plan for you, assigning you the right lessons and practice questions to work on every week. We track your progress and automatically adjust your schedule so that you're always working on what's best for you. We also integrate real practice tests into your program so you get training for the real test.
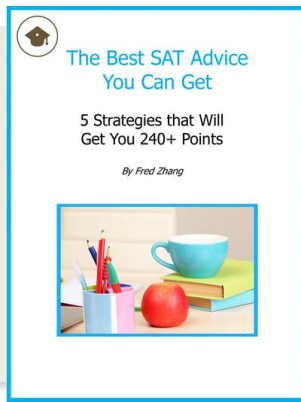

Good programs learn the strengths and weaknesses of the student and customize to their needs.

We also go above and beyond the teaching by caring about **student motivation**. We know that it's easy for you to get distracted, even if you know that SAT prep is important. That's why we send out progress reports every week to you and your parent so you know you're on track. We also help you schedule prep into your schedule and help you commit to your study times. These features have been proven to increase study time by over 200%, leading to better score results.

Our online program is accessible on any device that has a connection to the internet, so you can study whenever and wherever you want. This means you can fit
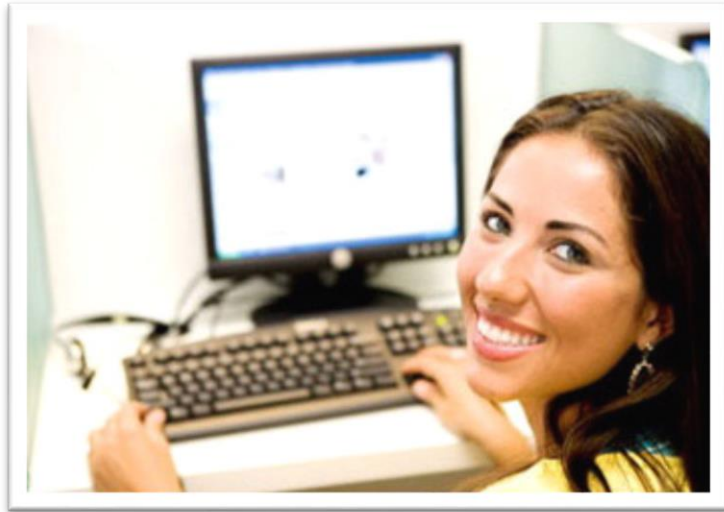
in SAT prep whenever is most convenient for you.

The Best SAT Advice
You Can Get

5 Strategies that Will
Get You 240+ Points

By Fred Zhang

Read more about best practices for SAT prep.

> **Conclusion**: Online prep is an affordable method that can lead to better results than self study and textbooks. Only some online programs are actually effective. At PrepScholar we avoid the mistakes that other programs make and deliver a comprehensive prep program.

5: Online Prep + Tutor

> **Key Point:** Get the best of both worlds: a complete online program and effective human tutoring. But you have to choose the right program that has both effective parts.

Online prep plus tutoring programs combine an online prep program, as described in the last section, with 1-on-1 tutoring. This type of program gives you the **best of both worlds**.

There are things **technology** is really good at, such as delivering the perfect blend of content, calculating advanced statistics from student data, and automatic adjustments to schedule. There are things **human tutors** are really good at, such as identifying subtle patterns of problems, understanding a student's thinking process, and customizing strategies to the student. Combining both gives you an effective, cost-effective way to get SAT score results.

One good way to consider this type of program is to compare it to its alternatives.

Compared to classes, online prep plus tutoring provides **many more benefits for the same cost**. Classes are expensive, feature many students to one teacher, and don't customize teaching to the student. In contrast, the online prep plus tutoring package solves all the problems of classes, for the same price as a class. Our package **customizes prep** to the student's strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, students have the chance to ask as many questions as they want and get **customized strategies** catering to their needs.

Compared to a single 1-on-1 tutor, online prep plus tutoring is **more affordable** while **delivering better results and higher guaranteed quality**. Typical tutors teach inefficiently because they bill by the hour, so they're motivated for extended, inefficient teaching. It's also hard for you to guarantee the quality of a tutor, since many don't have teaching experience. At PrepScholar, we hire only top scorers on the SAT who also have **years of teaching experience**. You also pay less for the same results, because you spend most of your time working on the customized online prep program. Therefore, our tutors are rewarded for delivering results, not for billing more hours.

A few companies offer this type of combined online + tutoring package, but you have to be careful to evaluate each company in detail and understand what they truly

have to offer beyond what they state on their websites.

First, evaluate their online prep portion (see the last chapter, Online Prep only). Make sure the program:
- customizes to the student's strengths and weaknesses
- uses realistic practice questions
- gives guidance to the student on whether the student's on track and gives custom feedback on how to improve
- has built-in features to motivate the student
- tracks student time spent studying and sends reports to student and parent

For the tutoring side, make sure:
- the tutors have extensive teaching experience
- the tutors have access to data on student performance so they can customize their instruction
- the tutors are rewarded for teaching results, not for billing hours

> **Conclusion**: Online prep plus tutoring gives you the best of both technology and human tutoring. For the same prices as its alternatives, online prep plus tutoring delivers better results in less time and less money.

AND NOW WHAT?

Through this guide, you've learned a lot about choosing the right SAT prep method for you. Make sure you match your specific needs with the test prep method to get the best results.

We at PrepScholar believe we've built the best SAT prep program in the world. But even if you don't work with us at PrepScholar, we hope you found this guide useful.

Next up: Read our free Ebook on the PrepScholar system today: [Click here to get your Ebook!](#)

or **call us** at **1(866) 811-5546**, where one of our Academic Advisers will walk you through the best options for you and your family.

We'd love to hear from you.

Finally, if you found this guide helpful, please share it with any other people who might benefit.

Good luck!
-The PrepScholar Team