
FREE GUIDE FOR FAMILIES

7 MISTAKES HIGH-ACHIEVING STUDENTS MAKE ON THE SAT & ACT

Why smart, hardworking students still underperform — and what top scorers do instead

Elite One-on-One SAT & ACT Strategy Coaching



INTRODUCTION

The assumption that costs points.

Most families believe this: If a student is bright, works hard, and earns strong grades — the scores will follow. It sounds reasonable. But it's wrong.

The SAT and ACT don't reward intelligence the way school does. They reward:

- **Strategy** — knowing how to approach the test
- **Timing** — knowing how to pace under pressure
- **Pattern recognition** — knowing what the test is actually asking
- **Emotional control** — knowing how to recover when things go sideways
- **Decision-making** — knowing when to push and when to move on

That's why many high-achieving students walk out of the testing room confused, frustrated, and scoring well below their actual ability. It's not a talent problem. It's a strategy problem.

In this guide, we'll walk through seven of the most common mistakes strong students make — and what top scorers do instead.

MISTAKE #1

Treating the test like school

High-achieving students are trained to be thorough. In school, that approach pays off — complete understanding, careful work, full effort. Teachers reward it.

The SAT and ACT don't. These tests measure how well a student applies skills efficiently under pressure — not just how much they know. That shift changes everything.

A student who reads every word too slowly, solves every problem the long way, or spends too long on one question is leaving points on the table — not from lack of ability, but from the wrong approach.

"The test isn't asking: How smart are you? It's asking: How well can you manage the test?"

KEY TAKEAWAY Success on the SAT and ACT requires strategy, not just intelligence.

MISTAKE #2

Spending too long on hard questions

This might be the single most costly mistake high-achieving students make.

Strong students are wired to push through. They hate leaving something unfinished. On a hard question they dig in – convinced the answer is just one more step away. But the test doesn't reward stubbornness. It rewards smart allocation.

Here's the part most students don't realize: on the SAT, harder questions actually carry less scoring weight than easier ones. When you get an easy question wrong, it costs you more points on the scaled score than a hard question does. That means spending three minutes on a question you might get wrong – while rushing through questions you'd almost certainly get right – is a losing trade every time.

The best test-takers know when to push, when to make a strategic guess, and when to move on. Protecting your easy and medium points is almost always worth more than chasing a hard one.

"You lose more by sacrificing easy points to fight for hard ones than you do by simply moving on."

KEY TAKEAWAY Smart test-takers don't battle every question equally – they protect their highest-value points first.



MISTAKE #3

Relying on instinct instead of a system

Many students walk into the test planning to figure it out in the moment. That works in practice. Under pressure, it falls apart.

High scorers don't rely on instinct for every decision — they build clear rules ahead of time so on test day they're executing, not deliberating.

Without a system, students make the same mental decisions dozens of times per test — draining focus and consistency. With a system, they become faster, calmer, and more reliable.

"Confidence is not just about ability — it comes from having a system that works."

KEY TAKEAWAY The more decisions you simplify before test day, the better you perform on it.



MISTAKE #4

Taking practice tests without learning from them

More practice does not automatically mean better scores. Repetition without analysis just reinforces the same patterns – including the ones holding a student back.

Most students review what they missed and move on. That's too shallow to drive real improvement.

A high-value review asks harder questions: Was this a content gap, a strategy error, or a timing problem? Did I know this but second-guess myself? Is there a pattern in the type of questions I'm missing?

"Improvement comes from diagnosis, not just repetition."

KEY TAKEAWAY A focused targeted review is often worth more than an entire additional practice test.

MISTAKE #5

Letting one rough stretch derail the entire section

High-achieving students are often the hardest on themselves. That drive is an asset in most areas of life. On test day, it can become a liability.

A cluster of difficult questions triggers more than frustration — it triggers a mental spiral. The student stops focusing on the next question and starts evaluating the whole test: I'm falling behind. I should know this.

Top scorers need reset skills: the ability to recognize when they've spiraled, step back, and refocus quickly. Sometimes the most important move isn't solving the problem faster. It's recovering faster.

"A test is not about perfection. It's about staying steady through imperfection."

KEY TAKEAWAY Emotional control is a performance skill — one that can be learned and practiced.

MISTAKE #6

Using generic prep for a high-level goal

Many families assume any prep is good prep. For students with ambitious goals, that assumption can quietly cost them.

Students who are already strong often don't need more content review — they need targeted strategy, faster decision-making, advanced pattern recognition, and personalized feedback rather than generic explanations.

Standard prep tends to produce standard results — and it rarely addresses the specific factors limiting that student's ceiling. The closer a student is to their goal score, the more precise the preparation needs to be.

"At the highest levels, volume isn't the answer. Precision is."

KEY TAKEAWAY Students aiming high need individualized strategy — not just more hours.

MISTAKE #7

Waiting too long to build a real plan

The most common mistake isn't on the test at all — it's in the months before it.

Families often wait until scores feel urgent, schedules are already packed, and stress is already high. At that point, options narrow. Prep gets rushed. Students cram.

A thoughtful plan addresses everything before it becomes a problem: which test to prioritize, when to begin, when to test, and how to build progress without creating burnout. The earlier a plan is in place, the more options a family has.

"A strong result usually starts well before the test date."

KEY TAKEAWAY The right plan reduces panic and creates space for real preparation.

WHAT TOP SCORERS DO DIFFERENTLY

What top scorers actually do differently.

It's rarely about who studies the most. More often, it's about who prepares the right way.

- Understand how the test actually works — and prepare accordingly
- Manage time strategically across each section
- Recover quickly from hard stretches without losing momentum
- Review mistakes with real intention, not just a quick glance
- Use clear decision systems instead of relying on instinct
- Focus on the improvements that move the needle most
- Prepare with a plan — not just effort

They work hard. But more importantly, they work with direction. When a capable student starts applying the right strategies, score gains that felt out of reach often start to look entirely achievable.



Your student may not need more pressure. They may need a better strategy.

If your student is bright, motivated, and performing below their potential – the missing piece probably isn't effort. It's approach.

At Crownridge Coaching, we help high-achieving students develop the strategy, timing, and mental systems they need to perform at their highest level – with elite one-on-one coaching built around them.

[Schedule a Free Strategy Consultation](#)

crownridgecoaching.com

grace@crownridgecoaching.com



GRACE DUNN

Founder, Crownridge Coaching
Columbia University Graduate