

More Than A Score

Holistic tutoring, academic life coaching, and educational therapy

www.MTAS.school

(786) 529-0509

How to Master the Inner Game of the SAT

A Harvard English graduate and tennis coach wrote the influential book, “Inner Game of Tennis,” which inspired athletes and non-athletes to excel, both on the court and in their lives. The book’s popularity has extended to Wall Street the White House and the NFL, inspiring people from many walks of life to use positive thinking and the imagination to expand their own personal capabilities and improve their lives.

After decades serving as a tutor and academic coach, I can assure you there is an “inner game” to the standardized tests like the SAT, ACT, AP, etc.

I used to have a sign in my office that read “Positive Mental Attitude,” and I would vigorously correct my students from any nay-saying. Phrases like “I’m a bad test taker” were transformed to **“I used to struggle with tests, but I’m getting better all the time.”**

But it is really that simple? Can telling yourself the opposite of what you think you believe (or have been taught to believe) really work?

In short, yes it can.

My colleague across the hall used to tease me, incredulously, “You’re not teaching anything, you’re just giving pep talks! How do your students’ scores improve so much???”

The following tools will help you develop your own inner game so that your scores can improve, too.

Like the book from which I hacked the idea, the inner game of the SAT is really the inner game of *anything* you need to master in this life: athletics, debate, acting, cooking – whatever, even taking a standardized test.

Whatever the test, you can think of it as your game to play.

Let’s start playing!

1. Be Affirmative!

What’s the deal with positive thinking?

Disclaimer! If you feel like you are in need of a therapist (mental health counselor), please see one.

Do you ever notice yourself talking to yourself? In your head, silently perhaps? For most of us, this is where negative self talk can creep into our heads and inhibit our flow and performance, often even negatively affecting your emotions.

Sometimes it appears that other people are in control of our lives, from parents and teachers, to bosses and proctors, and even to the Test itself! But.... The most influential person in your life is You. You wake up with You, you eat with you, and live with you – always. The

internal dialogue you have with yourself directly influences your state of mind.

The more you talk to yourself, the more you affirm what you are saying to yourself.

Some studies indicate that “positive affirmations” don’t work. However, the kinds of things you reinforce to yourself can and clearly do make a difference.

While there are certainly disadvantages to overly positive thinking, it is inarguably better than persistent negative thinking.

Take, for example, “Negative Nancy”. We all know somebody (or more than one somebody) who is a downer, always looking on the not-bright side, seeing the cup half-empty, with a pessimistic attitude on life. She’s always telling herself in her mind just how awful everything is.

The first trick for her is simply to stop repeating those negative self affirmations!

This is not to suggest that one ignore any painful or negative emotions, or cover up feelings with platitudes that are inauthentic.

For many people, it’s quite difficult to stop talking to themselves. That’s fine! **Just make the talking productive.**

So I do suggest that you try to remain genuine in your authenticity but make a slight shift in your perspective.

(Remember: shift happens!)

Here is something to say to yourself that is truly authentic: **“I can get better.” Or even, “I’m getting better.”**

If you're telling yourself, "I'm bad at math," then say instead, **"I was bad at math, but I'm getting better every day."**

If you hear yourself saying, "I'm terrible at _____," then say instead, **"I used to be terrible at _____, but I'm getting better all the time now."**

Here's something to think about: what do you tell yourself? What are the stories you tell yourself about test taking?

2. Calm down your fearful thinking

There are two simple considerations that can help calm down a stressed mind.

The past is not the future!!

Can the past repeat itself? Maybe.

Do we learn from the past? Yes!

I love to remind my students that as babies they struggled to walk, falling constantly. Yet each falling defeat was a step toward mastering how to walk.

Each mistake is a chance to learn from that failure.

The people who keep repeating their past mistakes are those people who didn't learn from them.

Learn from your mistakes. Practice when you stumble. Keep on becoming a better test-taker (and a better person).

Your past failures are in the past, and they serve as reminders for how to get better.

Your past is in the past. Your future is yours to make.

Don't believe the hype!

Hey, did you hear how hard the test is? Did you know that it's totally impossible to get a perfect score?? Are you aware that the world is going to end very, very soon???

I don't predict the future very much, but there certainly will always be such doom and gloom. Don't believe the hype!

Is the world going to end? Probably, according to astrophysicists. Is it going to end very very soon? Probably not. Is the test really hard? I guess it depends on how you look at it.

If you've heard the gloomy and doomy rumors about the test, and if you're feeling a little trepidatious, just remember: Shift happens.

Shift your thinking! Just like the world is probably not going to end tomorrow, so also the test is probably not as awful as you may have heard from the fear mongers.

Let those mongers hype their gloom, but you can simply heed to exhortation: Don't believe the hype!

3. Stay centered

Stay connected to your "center" or midline. Your midline can be physical, emotional, and bio-energetic. Staying centered whenever you perform (like at a running race, acting in a play, or taking an exam) is popular advice for a reason.

By staying emotionally centered, you protect yourself from wild or subtle mood swings that negatively affect your Flow and detrimentally impact your performance. “Staying centered” or “staying connected to your midline” is simple to do.

A way to help you stay centered is to place your hand on your belly, take a few deep breaths slowly, and just feel your belly and chest expand and relax.

4. Breathe deeply, from your belly

Often, just simply reminding yourself to breathe will bring you back to your midline. Perhaps you already know from experience the difference between breathing with your chest (shallow breathing) and breathing with your belly (deep breathing). Your best breath is your steady and deep breath, using your core (or diaphragm, belly). Deep, consistent breathing is the best breathing.

5. Get into the Flow and stay in the Flow

The “flow” is just what it sounds like. It’s when you are really engaged and connected to the process RIGHT NOW (like quickly perusing a chart in the SAT reading section). Be in this moment – fully! – RIGHT NOW! You become “one” with the test – or game, or dance, or job. Being in Flow is the best being to be.

BONUS: Use your Power of Vision

You can use the power of your mind to rehearse positive effects in your life. This trick is utilized by many athletes and successful businesspeople in their professional and personal lives.

The key to a successful creative visualization session is to use *all* of your senses to visualize the intended results, as if tricking your mind into believing that you are actually experiencing that moment. Studies in neuroscience hint to the extraordinary power of the imagination to create real and tangible results in the physical body.

Here's an example. (Notice there's a Beginning, Middle and End.)

Beginning

Visualize waking up in the morning, on the day of the test. Breakfast, shower, clothes, etc. – feeling Refreshed and Rested.

Visualize driving easily to the test center, arriving easily at the location, finding a nice parking spot, walking confidently to and through the front doors of the building, where the staff or teacher smiles at you to greet you to the test.

You see other students at the site, and you smile and wish them all well. Everybody can, and will, do great on this exam.

There's enough points for everyone to score their highest score ever.

When you arrive at your testing station, your chair is comfortable, the temperature in the room is perfect, and you feel great!

Middle

Now you sit to the exam. As you open the test, you can already sense that you are well prepared for this test. There is a giant "answer vault" in the sky; if ever you should be unsure, the answers are in the answer vault.

End

You complete the final answer on the exam with a sense of confident satisfaction. You stand up feeling great, and you walk out of the test center, *confidently, into the possibilities of your life.*

More Than A Score

Holistic tutoring, academic life coaching, and educational therapy

www.MTAS.school

(786) 529-0509