

# The Truth About Test Prep

*Are you being scammed?*

By Nathan Allen

*Most parents believe that standardized test scores are important, and they're right. And most think that some sort of test prep is a good thing. After all, who would take a test without studying for it? And yet most have no idea how to determine "good" test prep from "bad" test prep. Anyone can claim to be a test prep expert, so why are so many parents willing to give them \$1000 (or more) without a thorough investigation?*

*I've worked in the test prep and college admissions sector for almost 20 years. I've conducted R&D for standardized tests, marketing for colleges and testing companies, and directed operations for the biggest SAT prep company in the U.S. Here's the scoop.*

**Reputation.** Here's the biggest scam of all. People in test prep know that the single greatest factor in determining whether a student or parent "likes" and "would recommend" a test prep course or tutor has nothing to do with score improvements. Nothing. Recommend rates are tied to whether the student or parent (doesn't need to be both) likes the teacher. That's it. I've seen and conducted many studies that show that people rarely recommend (or don't recommend) a test prep program based on results. What if the student's scores don't improve? If the student or parent likes the teacher, the student/parent blames themselves. If they don't like the teacher, they blame the teacher or the program. It's that simple. The problem is that recommendations and reputations depend much more on "likability" than actual results. And you're not paying for a friend; you're paying for points. So be wary about choosing a test prep program based on a recommendation alone; investigate the important stuff.

And here's what's important:

**Teachers.** The primary benefit you should get from a good test prep course is a great teacher – it's really what you're paying for. You can buy the materials of most test prep companies in any bookstore and save \$960. So your money is going towards a teacher. You'd be surprised who test prep companies hire: kids who attended average colleges and got average test scores themselves and probably know the test no better than your own child. Either massive training or lots of teaching enables these subpar teachers to mask their inability to really explain the test.

Ask: where did my child's teacher attend college? While some companies will lie about their teacher's own test scores, they usually won't lie about where a teacher attended college. That will be a great indicator as to the teacher's academic credentials (high school grades and test scores). Is this teacher qualified to teach such a rigorous test? Do not believe the marketing; actually find out where a teacher attended college. At the Princeton Review, we'd advertise that our teachers were graduates of top colleges and that they had scored in the top 5% on the SAT. In reality, we hired teachers who attended average colleges and had average test scores; even our master trainer was a dropout from the University of Hartford. (No, I'm not making that up.) I suppose if somebody had asked, we would have told them the truth, but nobody ever asked. You should.

**Materials.** Want to know a secret? About 60% of all test prep materials are the same. The only significant difference is the practice sets and practice tests: are they real (written by ETS/College Board) or

are they fake (written by the company or third party)? The answer will surprise you. But first, it's important to use real tests because there's no such thing as a good fake test: the question types, question distribution, answer choice creation, etc., are finely tuned on the real tests (particularly the SAT) and no fake test accurately replicates that. Further, companies create fake tests from past real ones, so a fake test is an inaccurate reflection of where the test has been; you want an accurate reflection of where the test is going (yes, these tests evolve). Nearly every company uses fake tests, including Princeton Review and Kaplan. Some companies, such as Advantage Testing and Test Takers, use fake tests without even realizing they're fake. And still other companies, such as Carnegie/Pollak, use no tests at all. Companies use fake tests (or no tests) because real tests are expensive.

**Guarantee.** Guarantees at test prep companies are determined by accountants. They look at average improvements of their past clients and see what they can guarantee without losing money. The guarantee a company offers is a very good sign of that company's past performance and confidence in delivering results. Most test prep companies don't offer guarantees, which means they don't have much confidence that they can consistently deliver results. If the company – knowing its own internal improvement numbers – doesn't have much confidence, why should you? You should always look for one of two guarantees: either a point guarantee or a general "satisfaction" guarantee. If you qualify for the guarantee, you want the company to keep working with you for free.

**The Guarantee Scam, Part 1.** A few companies, most notably Kaplan and Princeton Review, have offered a "money-back" guarantee that's really just a scam. The guarantee is that if you attend all the classes and do all the homework, you will improve or you'll get your money back.

Sounds good, doesn't it? Well, all scams do – initially. The first trick is that these prep courses give so much homework, and it's so boring, and most kids are so busy, that almost no student does all the homework – and these companies know it. Compound that with the fact that most of these students are so busy that many will miss at least one class, and nearly no student will even qualify for the guarantee. The qualification rate for this kind of guarantee is always under 10%, which means that in a typical Princeton Review class, not one student qualifies.

**The Guarantee Scam, Part 2.** The second trick is that it's impossible to do all the homework and attend all the classes and not improve at least 10 points. The rare student who actually qualifies for the guarantee will certainly improve at least a few points. Would you be happy with a 10-point improvement after spending 100 hours and \$1000 prepping? Of course not. But that's the guarantee.

**The Guarantee Scam, Part 3.** Many test prep companies offer special versions of their courses through high schools or community centers. In many cases, these special versions do not include the guarantee that is marketed in all the company's literature. The Princeton Review, for example, offers no guarantee for students in their high school courses. None. So all that talk of a guarantee doesn't apply to you. In most cases, if you get a discount, you're getting something less than the full course. One of the favorite things for the company accountants to subtract out of the course is the guarantee because it saves them a little money and they think you don't notice.

So look for a guarantee of at least 200 points or satisfaction. If the company doesn't have the confidence that they will raise your score at least 200 points, you shouldn't have confidence either.

**Refunds.** So the guarantee (or lack thereof) is a great indicator of a company's confidence that they can raise scores. Refunds are too. What happens once they get your money and you take the first class or two? What happens if it's obvious that they don't know what they're doing? What happens if you discover that the teacher isn't very good? The practice tests are fake? The class is too big? Will they give you a refund (or partial refund) after the course starts? Most test prep companies won't – once you hand over your money, you're fully locked in. You don't just lose the deposit (if there is one), you lose it all. Does it inspire confidence that a company won't refund any of your money after you've actually experienced the service?

What are they afraid of? So yes, avoid test prep companies that have a “no refund” policy. If their service is as good as their marketing claims it to be, then they won’t be so concerned about offering pro-rated refunds.

**Past Results.** Why don’t most test prep companies publish the score improvement results of their clients? Because they either don’t know or don’t want you to know, and neither should inspire confidence. A good test prep company knows how their students are doing on the real test and are willing to share the data with you. But most don’t want you to know, so how do you get that information? It affects guarantee and refund policies. If a company offers no or a scam guarantee and no refund after the program begins, then they know something they’re not willing to share: their program isn’t that effective.

**Class Size.** The effectiveness of a teacher is partially determined by class size: a great teacher is less effective with 25 students than with 8 students. Here’s another secret: the fulcrum of profitability of every test prep company is “average class size.” The cost of running a class is fairly set, so more students per class means more profit. It’s that basic. Some test prep companies weigh profitability against effectiveness while others don’t care and maximize class size. You want a company that guarantees a maximum class size.

**The Class Size Scam.** Any company that markets an “average” class size instead of a guaranteed maximum class size is scamming you. Why? Because an “average” means half the classes were smaller and half were bigger. Some may be much smaller and some much bigger. What if you’re in one of those bigger classes? Those claims of an “average class size of 12” don’t mean anything to you if you’re in a class of 25. A company that markets an “average” instead of a “guaranteed maximum” is unwilling to cap their classes. Don’t let them bait-and-switch you with “average” instead of “guaranteed maximum.” Avoid any company that doesn’t have a maximum guaranteed class size (the smaller, the better). And make sure the company offers a refund once the course begins so if your class has 25 students in it, you can get out and get your money back.

**Tutors.** What about them? Does any of the above apply to them? It’s much easier for a tutor to scam you than a class, which is ironic because they also charge much more. Again, don’t go by reputation because too many tutors are recommended despite their results. Here are the questions you should ask of any tutor to avoid spending thousands and getting no results. And be sure to get everything in writing before you start tutoring.

*Where did you attend college?* If it’s not a top 20 college, forget it. Remember that most of what you’re paying for with test prep is the teacher and you want the best. If you’re spending \$100/hr or more and not getting a graduate from a top 20 college, then you’re being scammed.

*What tests do you use?* If they’re fake, forget it. If they’re real, make sure you have practice test results after 6-8 hours of tutoring that show results. If the tutor isn’t getting results, bail out before you spend \$5000. (Cheat Sheet of Fake Tests. If the tutor mentions any of these, it’s fake: *Arco’s Barron’s, Princeton Review, Kaplan, Official Guide* – yes, even the “Official Guide” tests are fake.)

*Whose materials do you use?* Most tutors buy their materials from the bookstore (e.g., use some other company’s materials). The only company that widely publishes materials that are worth using is Princeton Review. Arco’s, Barron’s, and Kaplan’s published materials simply aren’t very good. Some tutors actually write their own materials, which would be cause for concern. How do you know that the tutor knows the test well enough to write their own material? In that case, you want to be sure to have a written guarantee/refund policy.

*What’s your guarantee?* Again, no guarantee? Forget it. In general, you want at least a 200-point guarantee. For tutoring, it should even be higher (250 points would be reasonable). And if you qualify for the guarantee, you should either get a few hours of additional tutoring for free (maybe 3-5 free “refresher” hours) or heavily discounted tutoring (maybe 50% off). Do not work with a tutor who doesn’t offer a guarantee. The tutor should have some pressure to produce the results for which you’re paying.

You could ask the tutor about average past score improvements. Tutors working for larger companies may have data; independent tutors often just make up numbers. So unfortunately, average score improvement data isn't very helpful with tutors.

**SAT versus ACT.** Tutors and test prep companies will prep you for anything you ask for, even if they don't have the expertise. So if you want to use your SAT tutor for the ACT, ask a simple question: *what's the difference between these two tests?* The answer is: the ACT is a speed and a reading test; the SAT is neither. If the tutor says "the ACT has science," find someone else. Sure, the ACT has a section labeled "Science" but it doesn't actually contain science (it tests non-inference reading skills). In order to prep for the ACT, reading skills and speed are the primary requisites to raising your score.

**Which SAT to take?** A knowledgeable test prep company or tutor will recommend that you take the January, May and/or October SAT administrations, starting with the January test your junior year. This doesn't mean that you can't take the March or June SATs, but they should be avoided if you have a choice. Here's why: the January, May and October SATs are the only SATs each year that are "released." This means the student can get a copy of the test. So if anything goes wrong – the student messes up, the test makers mess up, anything! – the student can discover and solve the problem. ETS scoring errors are only discovered on released tests. Bubbling errors are only discovered on released tests. A student's penchant for misapplying a geometry rule can only be discovered on a released test!

It's no coincidence that all the revealed major ETS scoring errors (Jan 07, Oct 05, etc) are on released tests (the Jan 07 scoring error we discovered resulted in students getting, on average, an additional 100 points on their verbal scores). It's also no coincidence that 'new' SATs or problem types or question distributions always make their debuts on unreleased tests (yes, always). ETS and College Board know that released tests are public relations events and, as such, they make sure those tests are the most normal, error-free tests of the year.

What about the "January is a harder test" rumor? It's a myth. Every SAT is independently curved -- it does not matter if 'smart' kids or 'dumb' kids take it -- it's irrelevant. I've seen all these tests -- Jan 07 wasn't more difficult than May 07. In fact, it was easier. (March '07 was about the same and June '07 was the most difficult of the four tests.) But, as I've said, they are all independently curved, so while June was more difficult, it had an easier curve. And kids are learning nothing their junior year that's on the SAT -- a few months doesn't matter in terms knowing additional content. (95% of the SAT math is Arithmetic, easy Algebra I, and the first three months of Geometry.)

For these very important reasons, you should avoid the secret March and June SATs. Take the January SAT, review the test (yes, the actual test), then take the May SAT. Two shots junior year, both on released (and very normal) tests. If anything goes wrong, then it can be addressed by your child's test prep teacher or tutor.

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Nathan Allen has been published or profiled in many magazines including *Seventeen*, *Beautiful Girl*, *Teen People*, *Today's Parent*, *PREP*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. His best-selling book, *College Admissions Trade Secrets*, was published in 2001 and his book *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Acing the GRE* was published in 2007. For many years, Nathan was a leading consultant to college admissions and marketing departments (including 22 of the *US News* Top 25 national universities). A popular speaker, Nathan has lectured on higher education, college admissions and education policy in schools, colleges and town meetings from New York City and San Francisco to Kolkata, India. Nathan has worked in the testing industry with Research & Development for a diverse group of standardized tests including the PSAT, SAT, SAT Subject Tests, APs, ACT, GRE, LSAT, and GMAT. He is currently the president of Andover, the nation's fastest growing premium education services company and has helped more than 12,000 students conquer standardized tests and navigate the college admissions process.