What Is the Best Strategy for the ACT to Get a Higher Score?

There's no single trick that turns a mediocre ACT score into a great one. But there is a strategy, and it starts with understanding that the ACT changed significantly in 2025 and 2026, and a lot of advice floating around online still describes a test that doesn't exist anymore.

If you're prepping right now, your strategy needs to be built around the current Enhanced ACT, not the three-hour, 215-question version your older sibling might have taken.

Here's what that strategy actually looks like, section by section and skill by skill.

Know the Test You're Actually Taking

As of the 2025–2026 rollout, the ACT is shorter, has fewer questions, and treats the Science section as optional rather than mandatory. According to ACT, Inc.'s own announcements, the core exam now covers just English, Math, and Reading, totaling 131 questions instead of the legacy test's 215, with core testing time down to roughly 2 hours and 5 minutes.

Add the optional Science section and you're looking at closer to 2 hours 45 minutes.

The Composite score, still scaled 1–36, now reflects only English, Math, and Reading when Science is skipped.

This matters strategically in two ways. First, you get noticeably more time per question, roughly 18% more on average, which changes how much you can afford to slow down and double-check your work.

Second, ACT has trimmed out a lot of the easier, more straightforward questions along with the longer test, so the remaining questions tend to skew slightly harder on average.

For the latest format details, including the revised Composite calculation, shorter testing experience, and optional Science section, students can also refer to ACT's Enhanced ACT guidance.

Start With a Real Diagnostic, Not a Guess

Before building a study plan, take one full-length, timed practice test using official Enhanced ACT materials. This is non-negotiable.

Skipping this step is one of the most common reasons prep plans stall out in the first few weeks, because without real diagnostic data, it's easy to spend hours polishing your strongest section simply because it feels productive, while your actual weak points go untouched.

Once you have a diagnostic score, you'll know two things: which sections need the most work, and whether skipping the optional Science section is actually the right call for you.

Some students score notably higher on their Composite without it; others, especially those applying to STEM-heavy programs, benefit from keeping it.

Guess Strategically, Never Leave a Question Blank

The ACT does not subtract points for wrong answers, only awards points for correct ones. That single fact should shape your entire pacing strategy.

If you're running short on time in any section, fill in an answer for every remaining question before time runs out, even a random guess.

A blank answer and a wrong answer cost you the exact same number of points, so there's never a reason to leave one empty.

This approach also aligns with What Works Clearinghouse research on test preparation, which identifies guessing strategies, understanding whether an exam penalizes incorrect answers, and practicing test-taking techniques as components of test-preparation programs.

Protecting your ability to answer every question you're capable of getting right matters more than perfecting one difficult item.

Section-by-Section Strategy

English: This section rewards speed and pattern recognition more than deep grammar knowledge.

Most questions test a recurring set of rules: punctuation, sentence structure, redundancy, and transitions.

Learn to spot the pattern being tested rather than treating every question as a fresh grammar puzzle, and read each answer choice against the full sentence, not just the underlined portion, since context often eliminates choices instantly.

Math: One meaningful change in the Enhanced ACT is that answer choices dropped from five options to four, which statistically improves your odds on any question where you're narrowing down through elimination.

Since the test doesn't penalize guessing, always eliminate at least one clearly wrong answer before making an educated guess on anything you're unsure of.

Prioritize the question types that show up most consistently, algebra, geometry, and basic trigonometry, and don't sink disproportionate time into rare, highly specific problem types.

Reading: With shorter passages and more time per question, the Reading section rewards a more careful first read than it used to under the old, rushed format.

Skim for structure and main ideas first, then go back to specific lines when a question requires it, rather than trying to memorize every detail on your first pass.

Science (if you choose to take it): Despite the name, this section tests data interpretation and scientific reasoning far more than it tests memorized science content.

Practice reading graphs, tables, and experimental setups quickly, and don't get pulled into reading every word of the passage text before jumping to the questions.

Build Your Prep Around Official, Enhanced-Format Materials

Older ACT practice tests are still useful for content, since the underlying grammar rules, math concepts, and reading strategies haven't changed.

But they don't reflect the current question counts or timing, so practicing exclusively with legacy materials will train you for the wrong pacing.

Prioritize official Enhanced ACT practice tests and any prep resource that's been specifically updated for the new format.

This is also where choosing the right prep platform matters. Different programs vary a lot in how quickly they've adapted to the Enhanced ACT and how they structure diagnostic-driven study plans.

If you're comparing options, it's worth looking at how a prep service actually differs from others before committing.

A breakdown like Magoosh vs GregMat can help you see the differences in question banks, video explanations, and pricing side by side, rather than guessing based on marketing alone.

Practice Under Real Timed Conditions, Repeatedly

Content knowledge and test-taking stamina are two different skills, and the ACT tests both.

Even with more time per question in the Enhanced format, sitting through a full section, or the full core test, under strict timing is a different experience than working through untimed practice problems.

Schedule at least two or three full-length, timed practice tests in the weeks leading up to your real exam, spaced out enough that you have time to review mistakes and adjust your focus before the next one.

Also Read: Top ACT Strategies for Better Scores

Time Your Prep Investment Wisely

A structured prep platform can meaningfully shortcut the trial and error of building your own study plan, especially with a format this new.

If you're deciding when to commit to one, it often makes sense to wait for a discount window rather than paying full price.

The 87% off Magoosh Black Friday deal is worth checking if your test date allows you to time your purchase around that period, since prep platform discounts tend to be deepest during major shopping periods.

The Bottom Line

The best ACT strategy in 2026 starts with recognizing that the test itself has changed: shorter, fewer questions, more time per item, and an optional Science section that deserves a real decision rather than a default.

From there, the fundamentals still apply. Diagnose your actual weak points before building a study plan, never leave a question blank since there's no guessing penalty, practice with materials built for the current format, and build in enough full-length, timed runs that test day doesn't feel like the first time you've faced the real pacing pressure. Strategy beats raw hours studied, especially on a test this format-sensitive.