

COLLEGE TEST PREP TAKES A TEST

A Review of Ten Online SAT Test Preparation Services

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Taking the SAT exam has become a rite of passage for more than 1 million college-bound American high school students each year, a number that has steadily increased since the SAT was first administered by the nonprofit College Board in 1926.

Not surprisingly, demand for SAT test preparation services has grown in tandem, fueled by the competitive nature of college admissions and the ability to take the SAT repeatedly to try for a better score. There are also more students with college plans, according to statistics provided by The College Board. The number of college students rose 15 percent in the decade ending in 2003, while the number of students taking the SAT grew 35 percent, to almost 1.5 million this year – the 15th consecutive year of growth.¹

Additionally, Americans' appetite for test preparation assistance grew noticeably this year, when the "new" SAT format was unveiled. For the first time, the test featured an open-ended, essay-writing component in addition to the traditional multiple-choice test format. The scoring system also was revised, with a new high score of 2400 rather than the traditional 1600.

As a result of this confluence of factors, the market for test preparation services in general, not just for the SAT, has ballooned to more than \$4 billion, according to Eduventures Inc., a Boston-based market research firm. A student facing a forthcoming SAT exam can purchase a variety of products that promise a better score, including Web-based programs, books, flash cards, hand-held electronic devices, software, personal tutors and classes. There are also a variety of free or low-cost options, such as high school courses, and free resources provided at the site of the test maker, The College Board and others. Internet-delivered test preparation products are among the newest form of test prep to emerge in recent years, representing a growing slice of the market estimated at \$50 million, according to Eduventures.

Due to the expanding test preparation services market and the increasing role the Internet is playing in delivering these services to students and families, Consumer Reports WebWatch spent five weeks in the summer of 2005 examining 10 Web sites providing online SAT test-prep services. WebWatch wanted to learn how the market's largest, best-known and, often, most expensive options – such as services from Kaplan and The Princeton Review – fared against smaller, lesser-known services, such as the free site Number2.com. The field of 10 sites, therefore, was selected with a focus on cost variation and market share, to assure a mix of sites was included. This report reviewed only those

¹ The College Board. Available online at <http://www.collegeboard.com/press/article/0,,46851,00.html>

services offered online, not those featuring live tutors, books, classes or other offline study aids.

The 10 services evaluated were: Barron's Test Prep, Boston Test Prep, Kaplan's SAT Online Prep, Number2.com, Peterson's SAT Online Course, PrepMe, SAT Secrets, Test Preparation Program, The Official SAT Online Course, and The Princeton Review.

The evaluation process consisted of both expert and student testing. WebWatch, in conjunction with Mediatech Foundation, recruited 20 high school juniors who had already taken the SAT test in the spring of 2005 and planned to take the exam again in the fall. Each of the 10 sites was reviewed by two students during a minimum of five, four-hour sessions in a controlled lab setting under the supervision of the study authors, both experienced educators. Testers spent more than 400 combined hours reviewing these sites,

While testers deemed seven of the 10 sites generally effective in their product delivery and the overall quality of their services, WebWatch noted some troubling trends, particularly regarding the blending of advertising and educational content and aggressive marketing of promotional materials to college-bound students. In one case, a student who expressed interest in free scholarship information received an e-mail containing a link to an Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps enrollment form. Students using these services are most often legal minors, and greater care should be taken to not pressure them, either directly or indirectly, to share their personal information or to prompt them to purchase additional products with the promise of a higher score.

Moreover, marketing practices of some sites can be considered questionable, such as the implied promise of access to Ivy League educators, or combining test reminders with add-on products. Peterson's SAT Online Course, for example, promised access to a Harvard-educated essay reader whose identity was never revealed, and whose credentials, therefore, could not be verified. Some testers were surprised to learn The Princeton Review had no actual connection to Princeton University or the Educational Testing Service, which is located in Princeton, N.J. More troubling was the practice of using test anxiety as a motivator to purchase more books or products by combining e-mail test preparation reminders with product advertisements.

In addition, testers found typos and grammatical errors on some sites, prompting concern about the inconsistent quality of purchased online materials. These discoveries not only chipped away at the perceived credibility of online products designed to help students excel on a scholastic aptitude test, but also prompted questions regarding the credentials of those providing – and charging for – these services.

Overall, however, the testers appear to have benefited from the process of spending hours on these test preparation sites. The 20 high school juniors who served as testers took the SAT for the second time in the fall of 2005, after participating in this study, and saw their test scores improve by an average of 38 points per student – a 1.6% gain. While this scoring increase may be the result of many factors, including greater familiarity with the SAT test, the students did appear to gain greater testing confidence after dedicating hours to test preparation.

KEY FINDINGS

Online Services Come with Aggressive Advertising. By registering for services, including Kaplan's, The College Board, Boston Test Prep and The Princeton Review, students were suffused with messages from college and military recruiters or offers for financial aid or study aids. One e-mail message from The Princeton Review contained a link to a United States Air Force recruiting form. Additionally, The College Board marketed its Web-based online test prep service in advertising space not clearly distinguished from free test resources.

Errors Abound. Mistakes in online sample tests – including grammatical problems, questions with no answers, missing sections of text, font problems, or poorly constructed questions – were consistently present in 6 of the 10 services evaluated, but were particularly evident in Barron's Test Prep, Peterson's SAT Online Course, PrepMe and Test Preparation Program sites. Only one of the 10 services tested — Boston Test Prep — offered a means for reporting errors.

Higher Price and Reputation Don't Necessarily Make for Better Products. Number2.com was the only free-of-charge service tested, and it performed exceptionally well against expensive, better-known products, such as The Princeton Review and Kaplan's. The prep service offered by The College Board, the creator of the SAT, was buggy and lacked interactive features common on other sites. Testers also found The College Board's computerized essay grading service too general to be useful, compared with The Princeton Review's more specific feedback provided by human editors.

Technical Issues Hampered Performance. Kaplan's SAT Online Prep, The Princeton Review and Boston Test Prep may not work on older browsers with virus protection or pop-up blocking features activated, testers discovered. New versions of browsers are recommended or required, with current plugins and the ability to use cookies turned on. Unfortunately, this also makes a browser more vulnerable to pop-up advertising and adware.

Students' Privacy Protection Questioned. Some sites contained only vague descriptions about what student information would be shared, and with whom. The Princeton Review, The College Board, and Kaplan's SAT Online Prep were not forthcoming about who their "partners" were and what "opt in" actually means, definitions that should be clearly provided and easy to understand, given the target audience for these products is teenagers.

CREDITS

This project was written and directed by Warren Buckleitner, Ph.D., a consultant and adviser to Consumer Reports WebWatch. Buckleitner is editor of Children's Technology Review, a periodical covering children's interactive media. He also is the founder and interim director of the Mediatech Foundation, a non-profit public community technology center based in Flemington, N.J., where the research was conducted. This study was coordinated by Linda Bradway, a retired public school principal and researcher at Mediatech.

The project was funded at a cost of approximately \$33,000 by Consumer Reports WebWatch, with funding and staff contribution from Consumers Union's Statistics & Quality Management Department. The research report was edited by Tracy Ziemer, WebWatch's researcher and Web site producer at the time of the testing, and Beau Brendler, WebWatch's director. Consumers Union and Mediatech are not affiliated with any SAT test-prep service reviewed in this study.

ABOUT CONSUMER REPORTS WEBWATCH

Consumer Reports WebWatch is a project of Consumers Union, the non-profit publisher of Consumer Reports magazine and ConsumerReports.org. No Consumers Union publication accepts any funds whatsoever from advertising. WebWatch is supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts, which invests in ideas that fuel timely action and result; the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which promotes excellence in journalism worldwide and invests in the vitality of 26 U.S. communities; and the Open Society Institute, which encourages debate in areas in which one view of an issue dominates all others.

Consumer Reports WebWatch's mission is to improve the credibility of Web sites, through research, news investigations, and articulation of best practices guidelines in specific sectors of Web publishing. WebWatch's research, investigations, guidelines, conference transcripts, a list of sites that comply with WebWatch's best practices guidelines, and other materials are available for free at <http://www.consumerwebwatch.org>.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

What costs \$41.50, lasts almost four hours, and gets almost 1.5 million teenagers – actually, 1,475,623 in 2005 -- out of bed early on a Saturday morning? The answer is the SAT, an often mind-numbing rite-of-passage for almost every U.S. student who wants to attend college.

The SAT Reasoning Test was commissioned in 1926 by an association of colleges, known today as The College Board, with the intention of measuring a student's critical reading, math and writing skills needed for academic success in college. In 1947, The College Board began working with the Educational Testing Service (ETS), a large, independent, non-profit organization in Princeton, N.J., to create and administer the SAT. Today, ETS is a thriving hub of standardized testing, creator of more than 30 well-known tests that include the GRE, AP and TOEFL. The College Board remains ETS's largest client. While groups such as the National Center for Fair & Open Testing debate the value of standardized testing, there is no denying the SAT is entrenched in American academic culture.

The SAT, given seven times per year across the country, is designed to challenge even the brightest student, especially those who have not come face-to-face with a quadratic equation for some time. The test is almost entirely multiple choice, though the format of the SAT changed rather significantly in 2005 to include an open-ended essay-writing section. In addition, there are now three sections instead of two and a more difficult math section. Students can achieve a top score of 2400 instead of 1600.

A common strategy for many students, including the 20 that participated in this study, is to take the test at least twice -- once during their junior year, typically the spring, then again the first semester of their senior year to try for a better score. Students can take the SAT as many times as they are willing to pay for it, tormenting some students with the notion that, as with a golf swing, one can always do better.

A New Way to Prep: Online

The increasingly competitive nature of college admissions, combined with the ability to take the test more than once, has created a thriving SAT test-prep business. In the past, test-prep products have consisted of books, personal tutors and classes. More recently, subscription-based online test-prep courses have become available. Requiring a computer, credit card and Internet connection, these services differ considerably in price and service.

While the exact size of the online SAT market is difficult to define, it has been estimated at \$50 million by Eduventures Inc., a Boston-based education market research firm. One of the market leaders, The Princeton Review, provides prep

services for a variety of tests, including the SAT, and reported a 15% increase in test-prep revenue, from \$61.2 million in 2004 to \$70.3 million in 2005.

It's significant to recognize the lure of 1.5 million SAT takers and future U.S. college students as a market demographic group to commercial and, potentially, military interests. This is a population on the verge of spending tens of thousands dollars on college tuition, housing, books, computers and other electronics. Moreover, some families are making long-term decisions about loans, mobile phone services, scholarships and first-time credit card ownership.

Given the potential financial significance of this demographic, WebWatch also examined relationships between these business interests and test preparation sites and discovered troubling issues regarding the handling of students' private information and advertising to minors. This matter is discussed at greater length in the Findings and Concerns section of this report.

METHODOLOGY

Selection of Online Test Prep Services

In an effort to better understand the nature of the online test preparation business, WebWatch surveyed both commercial, for-profit services and non-profit options, and selected 10 sites that represented a mix of prices and market share to assure the full spectrum of options available to students was covered. The sites selected included both household-name programs, such as The College Board, Kaplan's and Princeton Review, as well as lesser-known services, such as PrepMe and SAT Secrets.

In order to be considered, a site had to meet the following criteria:

- Actively advertise test-prep services for the new SAT format on their Internet sites;
- Be available during a time period of July 15-Aug 15, 2005, when WebWatch conducted testing;
- Be delivered primarily via the Internet rather than through books, classes or personal tutors.

The following services were selected for this study, listed here with the subscription prices paid by WebWatch on or around July 15, 2005:

1. Barron's Test Prep from Barron's Educational Series, Inc., \$10.95 for 6 months; www.barronstestprep.com.
2. Boston Test Prep from Boston Test Prep, \$99.00 for 3 months; <http://sat.bostontestprep.com>.
3. Kaplan's SAT Online Prep from Kaplan, Inc., \$399.00 for 6 months; www.kaptest.com.

4. Number2.com from Xap Corp., free, with no time limit; www.number2.com.
5. Peterson's SAT Online Course from The Thompson Corporation, \$169.95 for 4 months; www.petersons.com.
6. PrepMe from PrepMe Corporation, \$499.99 for 4 months; www.prepme.com.
7. SAT Secrets from Morrison Media LLC, \$49.95; www.secretsstudyguide.com/sat/
8. Test Preparation Program from Online Test Prep, \$29.95 for 3 months; www.onlinetestprep.com.
9. The Official SAT Online Course from The College Board, \$69.95 for 4 months; <http://store.collegeboard.com>.
10. The Princeton Review SAT Online from the Princeton Review, \$399.00 for 4 months; www.review.com

Selection of Student Testers

These 10 online SAT test preparation services were evaluated by 20 high school juniors in New Jersey, where Mediatech, a non-profit community technology center, is located. The students, recruited through a local newspaper article, received free access to two randomly selected services in exchange for their site evaluations and future SAT test scores. The test-prep sessions took place every weekday morning from 9am to noon on Internet-enabled computer stations over the course of four weeks.

This field of 20 students (11 male, 9 female):

- Was willing to share past and future SAT scores, and high school grade point averages;
- Was from four different New Jersey high schools (three public, one private);
- Had already taken the SAT test, with the new essay format, in the spring of 2005 and planned to take it again in the fall;
- Was doing no other test preparation over the summer in addition to the work at Mediatech for this study.

It should be noted 20 testers is not large a large enough sample to claim statistical significance with any of the measures. No statistical validity should be assumed by the reader with regard to the quantitative measures in this report. Instead, the student responses provide qualitative indicators of how a small group of randomly assigned student testers felt about a particular service during a specific time period.

The Testing Process

Students were randomly assigned a test-prep service to evaluate, then were registered to that service using real names and home mailing addresses. They were also given an operational e-mail address created specifically for this project. This e-mail address was continually monitored by one of the adult researchers to track ongoing correspondence from the sites, such as promotional offers, reminders or billing issues.

While students were encouraged to stay with their assigned programs, four of the 20 students requested permission to change to another service after alerting adult researchers as to significant site performance and/or content issues with their assigned sites. Researchers made note of the issues at hand and, if agreed the student's test preparation needs were not being met, granted permission for students to evaluate another service.

Eight of the 10 services were evaluated by two or more students for a minimum of 10, four-hour sessions for a total of 40 hours per service. The two exceptions were PrepMe and SAT Secrets; in these cases, students requested permission to terminate participation in these services. (For more information, see Results by Service). In all, students logged more than 400 hours at Mediatech evaluating services, with additional hours logged at home.

Students were instructed to deny permission to share personal information with outside partners, or opt out of this process, when registering. This occurred for all but two services: Kaplan's and The Princeton Review. In the case with Kaplan's, a student accidentally opted in after becoming confused by a registration form. With The Princeton Review registrations, a student who needed to have materials mailed to a home address was required to opt in, in order to receive the booklets. In both cases, students could later adjust their personal preferences to opt out of the information exchange.

All registration fees were paid by WebWatch, and each student was given a \$5 cash incentive at the end of each test preparation session.

Data Collection

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Students took screen captures of each site during the registration process, then used a personal log to document any site errors, events or comments during the testing process. At the end of the 20-hour period, researchers used a checklist designed to capture strengths and weaknesses about each test preparation service to interview each student. These checklists were tallied and scored, providing more specific information about each service's strengths and weaknesses (see Appendix 1).

In addition, sections 6-11 of the instrument were designed specifically to examine factors that have been associated with the trustworthiness of an Internet service. These include such issues as identity, disclosure, payment and order confirmation, privacy and the use of advertising.

MAJOR FINDINGS AND CONCERNS

The online test preparation services evaluated in this study varied significantly in price, features and quality. While, in most cases, student testers were pleased with their online test-prep experience and would recommend this course of study to others, the research also cast light on serious issues of aggressive advertising and site performance users of such online services should be aware of.

Before detailing these and other observations, the limitations of this research should be noted. First, Internet-delivered services, including the 10 SAT test-prep services considered in this study, are objects in motion. The observations and details described here occurred between July 21 and August 15, 2005.

Second, the group of 20 testers was not large enough to provide valid statistical evidence. Instead, this survey information provides qualitative indicators of how a small group of randomly selected student testers felt about a particular service.

Third, when it comes to the issue of SAT test performance, there are many potentially confounding variables that can emerge, and sometimes did. These can include test anxiety, exposure to outside test-prep materials that may not have been disclosed, and learning disabilities, to name a few.

Despite these statistical limitations, this research provides a thorough qualitative assessment of online test-prep site services and functionality, when the target audience is young adults under age 18 making major decisions about their futures.

Researchers interviewed each student to capture detailed individual reactions to each test-prep site reviewed. Researchers used testers' perceptions, as well as culled observations during the testing process, to assess a site's trustworthiness and to arrive at the following findings:

Online Services Come with Aggressive Advertising

By registering for services, including Kaplan's, The College Board, Boston Test Prep and The Princeton Review, students often received messages from banks, college and military recruiters, or offers for financial aid or study aids. One e-mail message from The Princeton Review contained a link to a United States Air Force recruiting form.

Additionally, The College Board, the maker of the SAT, mixed free "official" test information, such as sample tests and parental guidance, with advertisements for "The Official SAT Online Course," a \$69.95 product, without disclosing the price upfront.

If students were careful to opt out of promotions when registering, nearly all e-mail solicitations were avoided. However, this process was not always obvious. In some cases, such as with The Princeton Review and Kaplan's, opting out was not a forthright process. In the case of Boston Test Prep, promotional offers arrived via e-mail despite students' requests not to receive such offers.

Higher Price and Reputation Don't Necessarily Make Better Products

Number2.com was the only completely free service tested, and it performed exceptionally well against expensive, better-known products, such as The Princeton Review and Kaplan's, which cost \$399 each.

The College Board, the creator of the SAT, was a better-known brand than Number2.com, but was buggy during testing and lacked interactive features common on other sites. Testers also found The College Board's computerized essay-grading service to be too general to be useful, compared with The Princeton Review's more specific human feedback.

Students' Privacy Protection Questioned

Some sites contained only vague descriptions about what student information would be shared, and with whom. Student testers expressed difficulty finding information on business and marketing partnerships and what "opt in" actually means when using online products for The Princeton Review, The College Board, and Kaplan's SAT Online Prep. These definitions should be clearly provided and easy to understand, considering the target audience is teenagers.

In all but one case – SAT Secrets – the process for storing or handling student information, including credit card information, was not clearly defined, nor for a student's personal mailing address, phone, e-mail, passwords and personal interests.

In fact, with most sites evaluated, understanding who has access to students' personal information is vague at best. Take, for example, this text from The Princeton Review site:

"From time to time, we obtain lists of people who may be interested in our products and services from third-party marketing list suppliers. We use these lists to send direct marketing promotions by mail or by email. We do our best to only obtain these lists from suppliers who have opt-in policies for third-party marketing, but we are not responsible for the conduct and policies of these suppliers. Please note that even if you are a registered customer of ours and have asked us not to use the information you provided to us to send you promotional material, a third-party marketing list supplier could still provide us with your name and

address, in which case you will receive the promotional material sent by us to others on the supplier's list. If you have received a promotion from us and do not wish to receive future promotions, please contact us at: privacy@review.com." (http://www.princetonreview.com/footer/privacy_policy.asp)

Given the price of the services being sold – some approaching \$500 – and the confidential nature of student information being collected, it is clear online test-prep services need to do a better job disclosing who is behind the service, what information is collected, and how student information is used.

Site Functionality Influences Perception of Trust

The overall design and functionality of a site contributed not only to higher student satisfaction, but a higher level of trust in that service, testers said. When asked to react to design-related site elements, such as ease of use, interactive features and technical robustness (see Appendix 1), students gave high marks to Kaplan's, Number2.com, Boston Test Prep, Petersons and The Princeton Review. Of these, Kaplan's and The Princeton Review were singled out by testers for providing the best combination of content, coaching methods and individualized record keeping. The College Board's Official SAT Online Course was deemed trustworthy despite having design problems, because, as student testers noted, The College Board also publishes the SAT test.

Three of the services – SAT Secrets, PrepMe and the Test Preparation Program – were found by students to have significant design problems, including a frustratingly complex sign-in process and poorly designed user interface. These issues interfered with site functionality and, therefore, user trust.

Interactivity Distinguishes Online Services, Needs Improvement

Making online test prep more than just a book on a computer was best achieved by Kaplan's SAT Online Prep and Number2.com, according to students. Testers particularly appreciated these sites' immediate feedback functions and efforts to organize content into shorter sections, which made material easier to digest. Testers also liked being able to track their improvement via record-keeping features, tools that heightened the online experience over traditional test-prep books. A site's use of audio, Flash-based video and other multimedia components rather than merely listing long sections of questions – as one might find in a book – was valued by student testers.

However, all sites tested lagged behind other electronic educational and entertainment materials in terms of dynamic interactive features. When asked about each site's use of interactive techniques – including context-sensitive help, blogs by other students, rollover hints, word definitions, Flash-based games,

autocorrecting and auto-leveling – students said all services tested could improve.

Errors Abound

Mistakes in online sample tests – including grammatical problems, questions with no answers, missing sections of text, font problems, or poorly constructed questions – were consistently present in 6 of the 10 services evaluated, but were particularly problematic with Barron's Test Prep, Peterson's Online SAT Course, PrepMe and Online Test Prep. These errors diminished students' trust in these sites as scholarly resources.

Only one of the 10 services tested — Boston Test Prep — offered a means for reporting errors.

Site Identity Often Confusing

Three of the services tested – Number2.com, Boston Test Prep and Barron's – provided more than one company name during the registration and payment process, raising questions about which organization was actually behind these services and the relationship between the firms.

In the most troubling case, researchers discovered the Test Preparation Program was registered to “Nicole Smith” in San Antonio, Texas, with an Internet service provider located overseas (ZoomBangkok.com). The site did not respond to, nor did it comply with, testers' requests for refunds.

In addition to confirming the identity of the bricks-and-mortar institutions that publish each test-prep site, researchers reviewed whether sites provided the credentials or identities of human essay readers, particularly since at least one site touted the use of “Harvard-educated” readers. In only one case, PrepMe, were readers' qualifications and expertise detailed.

Technical Glitches Hamper Site Performance

Over the course of four weeks of testing, students logged hundreds of glitches and errors. These could be categorized in two ways – errors due to the service provider (service outages, problems logging in, sluggish performance as a result of the publisher's hardware); and those caused by the student's computer or browser (font errors, missing plug-ins, pop-up blockers).

In general, most of the services performed fairly reliably on a day-to-day basis, as long as a newer version of Microsoft Internet Explorer browser was used on a Windows XP computer system. When sites were browsed using an older Macintosh computer or a more obscure browser – such as Mozilla Firefox, Netscape or Apple Safari – there were more problems, including screen layout

issues, missing fonts or sections of text, or an inability to log in. New versions of browsers are therefore recommended or required, with current plugins and the ability to use cookies turned on. Unfortunately, this also makes a browser more vulnerable to pop-up advertising and adware from other Web sites. (Note that systematic testing with different browsers was not part of this study.)

Students rated Boston Test Prep, Kaplan's SAT Online Prep and Number2.com as generally reliable. Also good, but with minor glitches or occasional server outages, were Barron's Test Prep, The Princeton Review and Peterson's SAT Online Course. Students reported a pattern of both server and browser errors with The Official SAT Online Course, PrepMe and Test Preparation Program.

Customer Service Generally Good

Researchers reviewed each site's payment and order confirmation process to assess the proper handling of confidential credit card information. For three of the 10 services reviewed – Test Preparation Program, PrepMe and Peterson's SAT Online Course – testers experienced either improper credit card charges or didn't receive services that were promised. In two cases, researchers were able to resolve the problems by calling sites directly. Because there was no phone or e-mail contact information for the Test Preparation Program, researchers were unable to obtain a refund.

RESULTS BY SERVICE

Barron's Test Prep

Barron's Educational Series, Inc.

\$10.95 for 6 months

<http://www.barronstestprep.com>

Basic, easy to use and affordable (\$10.95 for six months of access), testers found Barron's Test Prep to be lacking in features but effective for taking self-scoring practice exams. Barron's trustworthiness was eroded by the use of five different publisher names on the site. Barron's, Barron's Test Prep, Barronseduc.com, Barron's Educational Series, Inc. and Plug & Play Technologies, Inc. were all used at various points in either the registration process or in the initial pitch screen, leaving the consumer to wonder, "Will the real Barron's please stand up?"

After a straightforward sign-in process, students were presented with a summary of their activities, including prior SAT practice test scores. Site content included long lists of dry SAT hints and techniques and graded practice exams. One tester found the math section to be harder than the actual SAT test. In addition, some of the same questions were used on different practice tests. One tester wanted better help on some of the questions and found the essay-scoring feature to be "useless" because essays were returned with a computer-generated score.

The vocabulary section was nothing more than lists of high-frequency SAT words, with standard dictionary definitions. Testers noted that their trust in Barron's was eroded by the low price ("what's the catch?"), an "unprofessional" look to the graphics and presentation, and the confusing publisher identity.

Boston Test Prep

Boston Test Prep

\$99 for 3 months

<http://sat.bostontestprep.com>

Well-organized and easy to use, Boston Test Prep (BTP) offered a comprehensive service with some innovative options, like the ability to interact with other students online. While testers found the site to be dry and lacking in interactive features, they liked the clean design, with the math, writing and reading sections broken into easily digested subsections. They also liked having the ability to custom build custom quizzes around specific weaknesses.

No essay-grading features were noticed, just general writing tips and sample essays for students to compare. Testers were disappointed to find that one of the essay-writing options consisted of nothing more than a PDF file of a blank sheet

of essay paper. One tester submitted a question using the "contact us" form asking if an essay grading option was available, but did not get a reply. To its credit, BTP is one of the only sites to ask for suggestions on how to improve the site, by way of a "Bug Submission Form" to report errors using e-mail. Trust in BTP was diminished both by unfamiliarity with the brand name, and the appearance of more than one organization's name in the purchasing process. This was noticed on the Mediatech's credit card statement, when a company called "Acadient, Inc." was listed instead of Boston Test Prep, as the company that processed the registration fees. During registration, testers, who had difficulty finding a phone number and confirming the site's identity, were relieved to find a Boston, Mass., mailing address. BTP was the only online test-prep service tested to use a potentially confusing "free trial" registration system, with an automatically renewable subscription plan. If the user selected the monthly plan, BTP would automatically bill the credit card for \$99, even if the service was not used. Researchers were able to cancel the service after the testing period, by calling technical support.

The first attempt to register resulted in a cryptic error message, requiring a successful call to technical support, which blamed the problem on an "upgraded server."

Advertising appeared on the home page for additional BTP products, but not inside the test-prep areas. While there was a stated privacy policy, we could not find a way to opt out of e-mail correspondence. For example, on September 1, 2005, both testers received the following e-mail promotion:

"Do you have an MP3 player? (if not, here is a new reason to get one.) Boston Test Prep has partnered with Audible.com to bring you BTP TO GO: SAT Prep Talk. Part motivation, part preparation, SAT Prep Talk gives you the tools and techniques to conquer the new SAT. SAT Prep Talk is a great compliment to our online SAT prep program. When you can't be online, put your headphones on and keep preping. Download our SAT Prep Talk MP3 today."

Kaplan's SAT Online Prep

Kaplan, Inc.
\$399.00 for 6 months
<http://www.kaptest.com>

Part of The Washington Post Company, Kaplan's SAT Online Test Preparation provided a well-designed but expensive service that was easy to use and full of state-of-the-art tutorial features. SAT Online Prep was just one of a variety of services for sale at [kaptest.com](http://www.kaptest.com).

After some initial trouble finding the login page, students were able to sign in and take a "course introduction" section of the site. The features were clearly explained in both text and audio, which students liked. After a diagnostic exam, Kaplan's presented a personal study plan based on the user's stated anticipated SAT test date. For example, one student was encouraged to begin with her weaker subject area and proceed to her stronger subjects, math and writing. The service provided comprehensive progress tracking, using roll-over graphics and color-coded graphs. Students liked the extra hand-holding when they needed it, and Kaplan's provided it, by way of remedial lessons, immediate feedback, and step-by-step assistance. These features made Kaplan's the most liked of any of the services used by our testers.

Kaplan's SAT Online Test Prep was run by a known company, with functional e-mail and telephone contact numbers. Refund policies were defined, and Kaplan's used a "higher score or money-back guarantee" that promised additional test-prep help at no cost, if a higher score was not provided. This guarantee was not tested as part of this study.

However, of all the online test-prep services, Kaplan's used a troubling technique to harvest and share student information. Trying to avoid giving permission to release personal information on a Kaplan's registration form is like a game of whack-a-mole, due to "spring-loaded" opt-in fields that repopulate themselves as a default condition, unless a vigilant student notices and re-unchecks them. For example:

Kaptest Profile:

*Username: Let Kaplan pick one

*Select Password: *Confirm Password:

*First Name: *Last Name:

*Email Address: *Confirm Email Address:

How did you hear about Kaplan Test Prep and Admissions?

Select an Area of Interest:

Which best describes you?

Select Your Primary Language:

As a benefit of Kaplan membership, I would like to receive the Business School Edge, a free, monthly email newsletter.

I would like to receive promotional offers and information about products and services from Kaplan Test Prep & Admissions.

I would like to receive promotional offers from Kaplan Test Prep & Admissions on behalf of its affiliate partners.

Kaplan's Registration, Screen 1: Note that the three "opt in" boxes are not checked, and one of the more obscure fields ("How did you hear about Kaplan's Test Prep and Admissions") has been overlooked, which is easy to do, because it looks full.


Checkout: Billing and Shipping

 Please indicate how you heard about Kaplan Test Prep and Admissions.

Ordering online with Kaplan is a quick and easy 4-step process. And every order is completely [safe and secure](#). However, if you prefer, you may [order by phone](#).

Please note: www.kaptest.com can only ship orders to street addresses, and cannot ship orders to P.O. Box addresses.

Kaptest Profile:

*Username:	<input type="text" value="buckfeet"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> Let Kaplan pick one
*Select Password:	<input type="password" value="*****"/>	*Confirm Password: <input type="password" value="*****"/>
*First Name:	<input type="text" value="William"/>	*Last Name: <input type="text" value="Johnson"/>
*Email Address:	<input type="text" value="warren@dogfood.com"/>	*Confirm Email Address: <input type="text" value="warren@dogfood.com"/>
How did you hear about Kaplan Test Prep and Admissions?	<input type="text" value="Select an Option"/> 	
Select an Area of Interest:	<input type="text" value="Business"/>	
Which best describes you?	<input type="text" value="College Student"/>	
Select Your Primary Language:	<input type="text" value="English"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	As a benefit of Kaplan membership, I would like to receive the Business School Edge, a free, monthly email newsletter.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I would like to receive promotional offers and information about products and services from Kaplan Test Prep & Admissions.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I would like to receive promotional offers from Kaplan Test Prep & Admissions on behalf of its affiliate partners.	
<input type="button" value="CONTINUE"/>		

Kaplan's registration, Screen 2: The checkout form was rejected, with a request to fill in the missing field (top arrow). Kaplan's also populates, or checks two of the three opt-in boxes, so that they have to be manually unchecked each time the form is viewed. Because these are located away from the CONTINUE box, a student may overlook the boxes.

Number2.com

Xap Corp.
Free -- no time limit
<http://www.number2.com>

This well-designed, free service combined depth of content, record keeping, and individualized features with SAT test practice. Number2 matches up with sites costing \$500, and in some cases does things better. So, what's the catch?

Number2.com was created by Xap, Corp., a company that sells software and services to college admissions personnel. Xap is no stranger to the college admissions business, and access to the eyes and ears of thousands of soon-to-be college students obviously is of key interest to Xap's clients. While it is

possible to opt out of e-mail solicitations, this is not the default condition. We could find no evidence of direct selling to students. In addition, Number2.com was the only service to include banner advertising (for a bank) throughout the test preparation portion of the service.

Because of a lack of need for credit card and subscription verification steps, the registration process for Number2.com was the easiest of any other site, requiring only a name, address and valid e-mail account. It was possible to register using fictional information, although a valid e-mail address was required to access the login information.

Number2.com generated weekly e-mail messages to remind students of their impending date with the SAT, as follows:

"It's been over five weeks since you logged into your account at Number2.com for your SAT prep course. Remember, practicing at regular intervals (at least once a week) is the best way to prepare for the SAT. Since you have not visited Number2.com for so long, we're going to assume now that you don't want any more reminders. We won't send you any more tutorial emails, unless you log in again, in which case they will automatically restart. If you want to continue receiving emails, don't worry. You can restart the emails at any time by just logging into your account. And we'll keep your account active for at least a year from signup. If you have forgotten your password, you can get a new password by going to the lost password page at <link to signin.> Or you can go straight in by following this link <link to student account>_For your convenience, following this link will automatically log you in; (but to protect your security, it will only work once). With most email readers you can just click on the link, but for some you need to cut and paste the link into the web browser. Good luck with your test prep!

The service maintained a student page with bookmarks for where the user left off, as well as hints, test tips and daily questions. Number2.com used e-mail to reach students, sending out a daily tip and a progress report, and researchers encountered no evidence of using e-mail to tempt students with upgrades, a chance to win a laptop, surveys or ROTC scholarships, as with other sites tested.

Testers reported that using the service was straightforward, with tips, quizzes and plentiful hints. Students reported that Number2.com was especially helpful with the math section of the SAT by providing instant feedback for questions, along with hints if needed.

The site explained that revenue is generated from sponsorships and licensing, but does not disclose sources or provide details.

Peterson's SAT Online Course

The Thomson Corporation
\$169.95 for 4 months
<http://www.petersons.com>

This test-prep service costs about half of Kaplan's and The Princeton Review and promised customized lessons, practice tests and expert strategies, including essay help from "a Harvard-educated editor." Both testers were happy with their Peterson's test-prep experience, recommending it to others.

After a straightforward sign-in and registration process, the program started with a diagnostic test. Based on the test results, each was assigned a "Customized Learning Path," with lessons based on weaknesses. Testers were able to choose to take lessons and tests as often as needed in each area, finding the site flexible and easy to read, with helpful graphics.

The essay-grading section was not as good as promised. There was no coaching, other than general tips. After submitting their essays, testers immediately received an auto-generated score from 1 to 6, on each of the five sections of a computer-generated scoring rubric, along with a message stating that their essay would be scored by a Harvard-educated editor after one to two days. Neither tester received a response. Below is a screen grab documenting the process for submitting an essay, along with a sample question.

Your essay will be scored automatically and also submitted to a Harvard-educated Editor for review and a critique. The critique takes 24-48 hours to be processed. You can access your critique from the Explanation page associated with this question.

Essay Title: Requiring Protective Helmets

Do you think that people under the age of 18 should be required to wear protective helmets when skateboarding, in-line skating, bicycling, snowboarding, or skiing? Why or why not?

Write a persuasive essay for or against the idea that young people should be required to wear helmets when taking part in these activities.

Despite being a solid and useful test-prep service, several factors decreased student trust in Petersons. It was difficult to pin down the exact name of the company (Petersons, Thomson Petersons and EssayEdge were each used at various points), and questions about the essay-grading policy were not answered. The site was highly commercialized, selling college consulting and help finding scholarships through banner advertising and e-mail correspondence. During registration, testers were able to successfully opt-out of receiving promotional messages.

PrepMe

PrepMe Corporation
\$499.99 for 4 months

<http://www.prepme.com>

PrepMe combined online advice, a box of books worth about \$38 shipped directly from Amazon.com, and phone/e-mail access to a live tutor who, according to promotional materials, had already "aced" the SAT.

The online registration process for PrepMe was primitive at best. After filling in the required information, including a valid credit-card number, an error message appeared: "Transaction processed. However we have encountered a problem. Click to retry post to merchant." After two retries, testers tried a third time using a different computer-browser combination, resulting in the same error. We then contacted the telephone number given as technical support, which turned out to be a mobile phone. We were told that our credit card had been billed \$1,499.97. The problem, according to the company, was, "we just switched servers to Yahoo." Test administrators were relieved to reach help, and were able to successfully get two registrations refunded.

After the cumbersome online registration process, both testers received a welcome e-mail from their "live tutors," ready to help. The testers were interested in the online component of PrepMe, which consisted of a series of slides of poorly written hints, tips and suggested strategies for "acing" the SAT. There was no way to practice what was learned from the slides, and no writing exercises. In addition, grammar and spelling mistakes were noted throughout the test-prep portion of the service, which lowered student trust in the program as a scholarly resource. Finally, both students noted feeling uncomfortable sharing correspondence with a stranger online, even though this person was a hired tutor.

Because of these issues, both students eventually asked to be put on another program, one within four hours and the other after five days. Test administrators were successful in receiving a partial refund for one of the students (\$499.97 minus \$38, the cost of the Amazon.com books).

PrepMe provided a legal business name, physical address and background information online, and gave every appearance of being an established company. However, information about the site's length of service was not obvious, and there was no defined privacy policy.

The service offered a 100-point increase guarantee, or the student would be allowed to take the course again at no cost, for as many as three times. The guarantee only applied to a student who scored below 2260.

Both students found the online component of PrepMe to be crudely done, "like reading a really bad book on the computer screen." Both PrepMe tutors made diligent efforts to contact the testers by e-mail. As a way to connect with a real

tutor, PrepMe may have been effective, but as an SAT online test-prep resource, it did not meet testers' needs.

SAT Secrets

Morrison Media LLC

\$49.95

<http://www.secretsstudyguide.com/sat/>

Our two testers dropped out of this \$49.95 service, as it actually was more of an elaborate order form for a 145-page book previously published by Morrison Media to "teach the test." This book is available in either electronic (pdf or Word document) or print form. There were no interactive features on the site. Unfortunately, the only way to learn the true nature of the program was to register and pay the \$49.95.

As part of the order, we received a special offer in the form of a report titled "How to Overcome Test Taking Anxiety" and "Contact Information for Major Colleges and Universities."

The publisher, Morrison Media, sold a variety of other publications, such as "What your test score can tell you about your IQ" and "Scholarship Secrets." While the sales pitch of the site was misleading, the company provides sufficient background and working contact information, and answered the tech support line, offering a "100% cash refund within one year if not satisfied." Researchers tested this money-back guarantee in January 2006, six months after testing, and promptly received a full refund from Morrison Media within 10 days.

Test Preparation Program Online Test Prep

\$29.95 for 3 months

<http://www.onlinetestprep.com>

Poorly designed, full of errors, and hard to use, both testers dropped out of this test-prep service, one after one day, and the other after five days. The site was functional enough to take a \$29.95 registration fee, twice. The test-prep experience was ridden with errors, and not interactive.

The program progress and practice tests contained frequent spelling and grammatical errors, including words like "whore" instead of "where." Content included non-interactive pages of techniques, tips and strategies that students were told to memorize before going on to the practice tests.

This service lost trust quickly, with 20 non-functional links on the home page, and no information about the publisher. No technical support number or address was

listed, and payment was handled by PayPal, a third-party service. Unfortunately, one of the registered students could not sign back into the service and there was no recourse due to the site's lack of technical support.

Using Network Solutions' "WHOIS" function to learn more about who the site is registered to, we discovered the listing "Nicole Smith" in San Antonio, Texas, with an Internet service provider located overseas (ZoomBangkok.com). E-mail requests for a refund or for help signing in were not answered.

The Official SAT Online Course

The College Board
\$69.95 for 4 months
<http://store.collegeboard.com>

Promoted as "created by the same experts who created the SAT," The Official SAT Online Course was one of hundreds of items sold at The College Board's online store, along with books, reports, and teaching materials that deal with the SAT Reasoning Test. The fact that this service was published by The College Board – a detail highlighted in marketing efforts – helped boost its perceived trustworthiness among testers. One student said, "Considering that they make the SAT and I registered with them already to take the actual SAT, I trust them."

The service was easy to use, providing plenty of test-taking practice, especially for math, but was lacking in interactive features. The service was also buggy, with more server down time than the other services. In one case, a section of the test appeared twice. Another page was missing an essay, making it impossible for the student to answer a set of questions. Testers complained that the presentation was dry ("like a book on the computer"), with tips and "lessons" consisting of nothing more than non-interactive slide shows.

The ordering process was straightforward, but the claim "students receive detailed personalized feedback on all practice tests and quizzes" did not square with the actual student experience, according to testers.

Researchers noted the promotion of "official" books and test-prep services, listed alongside free test-prep resources, with no indication which were free, and which were for sale. Items promoted included print books on the SAT, and a series of subject-specific workbooks. Testers were able to effectively opt out of receiving a monthly newsletter and being contacted by colleges.

The Princeton Review

The Princeton Review, Inc.
\$399.00 for 4 months
<http://www.review.com>

The Princeton Review's Online SAT test-prep program was available in three formats: SAT ExpressOnline (\$99), SAT Online (\$399) and SAT LiveOnline (\$599). Each provided identical online presentations, with different lengths of access time, varying sets of printed materials shipped by mail. The SAT LiveOnline service, which we did not test, included real-time, online class sessions with a live instructor. Researchers tested the \$99 and the \$399 services and found both to be well designed and highly commercialized. The Princeton Review offered the best essay-grading service of any other service tested, according to students. Other strong site characteristics included interactive features, student record-keeping tools and diagnostic features.

WebWatch found The Princeton Review's registration process to be time-consuming. Moreover, in one case, the site strongly compelled a student into opting in so that books that were part of the \$399 service would be mailed to his home: "You have requested test-prep information but have not granted us permission to send it to you. Please check the opt-in box regarding Princeton Review Test Prep products and services." Afterwards, the student received a steady stream of promotional offers, including these:

"Upgrade your computer. Upgrade your life. Complete this form to receive more information from our partner institutions about distance learning—and all that it could offer you—and you'll automatically be entered to win an Inspiron 6000 laptop computer from Dell. Maybe it's your time to upgrade!"

"Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) Scholarship program for high school students is a great way to cover the costs of school so you can get the most out of your college experience. Air Force ROTC has scholarships that can cover up to 100% of your college tuition. ... Plus, a scholarship from Air Force ROTC offers something traditional scholarships don't—a guaranteed job immediately after graduation where you can make a difference."

Note: This latter email promotion asked for the student's Social Security Number on the first screen.

Students were asked for their prior SAT scores, high school grades and future goals. The service then used this information to prescribe a complete study plan, using frequent e-mail notices to remind students of their activity level or suggest additional services. Testers noted the math questions were harder than those on the actual SAT, and some of the multimedia features seemed off topic. But the overall presentation was deemed useful for holding interest. In addition, students liked the test-taking advice and noted the math tips section was especially helpful.

Like the other services tested, The Princeton Review was not without technical glitches. Students experienced a significant amount of server down time. One

day (August 9) in particular, an entire morning was lost due to an unexpected server problem. Calls to technical support were always answered promptly, though accurate information regarding the status of the server was not provided.

The Princeton Review's \$399 test-prep offering was the service tested to provide live, human feedback electronically on one of the submitted essays. Feedback included personal comments and recommendations, as follows.

Hi <student name>, Your results are in! You earned a score of 12 on your essay. Here's what our graders had to say about your essay and how to improve it to maximize your score on test day.

Content: Interesting introductory paragraph! Your argument is well reasoned - nicely done. You go into a good level of detail with your examples. Your examples are appropriate for the topic.

Other: This typewritten essay was very long. Please aware of the fact that you will not be able to write this much on the real essay, which, as you know, must be handwritten. You don't have to give three examples. It's fine to go with one or two examples, as long as they are well developed and you still reach two pages. Your conclusion is more important than a third example. Your essay displayed a great historical awareness and a talent for writing.

Overall, students rated The Princeton Review high in terms of trust. However, testers did not know that The Princeton Review was located in New York City and had no affiliation with Princeton University. While this fact was disclosed on the books and print materials sent from The Princeton Review, researchers were not able to find this clearly disclosed online – either on the home page or in the "Who We Are" section of the Web site, perhaps explaining why testers were confused.

While there were no advertisements in the password sections of the actual test-prep service, the student's sign-in screen featured advertisements for additional test-prep tools, mediatv.com, banks, loans, and colleges, as well as frequent exposure to advertisements for service upgrades.

As with the other test-prep sites reviewed, The Princeton Review was vague at best in describing how it collected student information, who its business partners were, and what information was shared. The Princeton Review "guarantee" was vague: "Your score is guaranteed to improve by at least 200 points combined, or we will work with you again for free."

TIPS FOR STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

The SAT is designed to be challenging, and despite marketing claims made in the promotional materials of many online SAT test-prep sites, there are no secrets or tricks that can substitute for years of elementary, middle and high-school education. Just as you can't grow a plant faster by watering it more, you can't get a higher SAT score with last-minute cramming.

When it comes time to take the test, valid online test-prep services are one of several ways students can familiarize themselves with the SAT format, and this familiarity can reduce anxiety, according to Ken Hartman, the former Director of Admissions and Guidance Services for The College Board. Other test-prep options, generally priced much lower than many online test-prep services, include books, CD-ROMs, or high school courses.

Based on this report, WebWatch makes these following recommendations to students and parents:

- * Costlier options are not always best. Consider free or affordable services, such as Number2.com and others. Take advantage of free test-prep resources available at The College Board (www.collegeboard.com).

- * Make sure your browser, computer and Internet connection are up-to-date prior to enrolling in online programs. Older browsers and slow Internet connections can result in sluggish performance or errors in the way information is displayed on the screen. In addition, be aware filters and pop-up blocking software may need to be disabled in order to use a commercial test-prep service.

- * Before purchasing, contact the service by phone to confirm who is running it, and that it will be possible to receive a refund if you cannot successfully log in. Also during this call, ask the customer service representative about the site's privacy policy and whether a student's private information will be shared with companies and advertisers.

- * Don't purchase services that won't be used. We found that once the mandatory testing period was over, students' use of the services quickly diminished. Unless your student is self-motivated or can follow a schedule established prior to the SAT test, online test prep may not be a viable option.

- * Be vigilant and present during the registration process, to make sure your child does not accidentally authorize the release of personal information, unless you want him or her to.

* Know that information sent to your child regarding college scholarships, student loans, or additional test-prep services most likely is advertising, with business motives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLISHERS

Consumer Reports WebWatch recommends that online test-prep service companies take these steps to improve their products:

- Clearly label advertising and establish more firm boundaries between editorial, test-related content and promotions for test materials.
- Make it easier for users to sign in and begin using the service immediately after registering and paying for the service.
- Clearly identify your business name and location. Provide a working phone number and/or e-mail address so students and parents can follow up if necessary.
- Make it easy for users to report errors.
- Assure your service functions on a variety of browsers. If it doesn't, state so clearly, up-front, before students pay for services they won't be able to use.
- Be more diligent in checking your site for accuracy, from correcting spelling and grammar errors to testing the validity and effectiveness of sample tests.
- Keep in mind people purchasing online SAT test-prep services are students and, therefore, legal minors. As a result, care should be taken to guard student information and adhere to stated or best-practice privacy policies..
- Clearly disclose business relationships and other affiliations.

Appendix 1: Online SAT Test Preparation Evaluation Instrument

Title of Service:

Browser & OS Used for Review:

Name of Reviewer:

Tester Code:

Date of Review:

Number of Hours Using the Service:

Start and end date that the service was evaluated: Start____ End____

KEY

A= Always (1 point) SE= Some Extent (.5 point) N = Never 0 points NA = Not Applicable (not calculated)

PART 1: DESIGN

I. Ease of Use

The service is easy to install, register for, and use over an extended time.

A SE N NA

1. _____ The registration process is simple
2. _____ Starting a session is easy
3. _____ Ending a session is easy
4. _____ It is possible to get in and out of menus and activities at any point
5. _____ The experience is responsive and easy to control
6. _____ Instructions are clear and easy to follow
7. _____ A clear, consistent menu system is used

NOTES:

II. Educational Validity

What do you walk away from the experience with, that you didn't have when you first came to the service? The service provides an effective test preparation service.

1. _____ Question sets match the actual SAT test
2. _____ The service considers the strengths and weaknesses of the student
3. _____ The service creates an individual profile, including prior test scores
4. _____ The service employs a varied presentation with a degree of novelty
5. _____ Test Taking Skills: includes strategies, techniques & facts about the test, before test day, stress techniques, last minute advice

6. _____ Critical Reading: The practice exams simulate the actual SAT (pacing in critical reading, comprehension, short passages, long passages, paired passages, word branches)
7. _____ Writing: Examples are given to judge that simulate the actual SAT (pacing, style, common errors)
8. _____ Math: The practice exams simulate the actual SAT (grid-ins, working backwards, calculator strategy, trigonometry, word problems)
9. _____ Questions are well designed
10. _____ Provides valid test taking advice and techniques
11. _____ Questions reflect the new SAT format

NOTES:

III. Motivational Techniques

The site uses state of the art graphic and programming techniques to provide an engaging interactive media experience.

1. _____ Allows the student to vary the order of studying
2. _____ Uses audio feedback
3. _____ Uses drag and drop features (e.g., move parts of sentences around)
4. _____ Uses rollover features (e.g., roll over words to see them highlighted)
5. _____ Uses flash and shockwave features

NOTES:

IV. Features

The service adapts and adjusts, using a students time wisely

1. _____ Remembers -- allow bookmarking of student progress
2. _____ Individualizes -- Adjusts in difficulty according to student level
3. _____ Is Diagnostic -- Recommends the best path to success based on survey or pretest information.
4. _____ Listens -- Allows for student input into the process

NOTES:

V. Technical Robustness

The service works as promised, at different times of the day and on different computers.

1. _____ Provides system requirements up front
2. _____ Provides an initial pass/fail system check
3. _____ Provides links to needed plugins
4. _____ Has reasonable system requirements
5. _____ Works from different computers (e.g.,home/laptop/school/library)

6. ___ ___ ___ Works with more than one browser
7. ___ ___ ___ Does not have server down time
8. ___ ___ ___ Can "limp" with an older system, and still function

NOTES:

PART 2: TRUST

VI. Identity

1. ___ ___ ___ Provides legal name of the business
2. ___ ___ ___ Provides phone contact
3. ___ ___ ___ Provides email contact
4. ___ ___ ___ Provides location of business (geographical address)
5. ___ ___ ___ A consistent company name is used throughout the

transaction

NOTES:

VII. Disclosure prior to purchase.

1. ___ ___ ___ Features are clearly described
2. ___ ___ ___ The term or length of service is provided
3. ___ ___ ___ Notice of additional costs is provided
4. ___ ___ ___ Terms, condition and methods of payment are provided
5. ___ ___ ___ Restrictions, limitations or conditions of purchase are defined
6. ___ ___ ___ Other limits are defined, e.g., geography, language or parent approval
7. ___ ___ ___ Refund policy information is provided
8. ___ ___ ___ Guarantees are defined
9. ___ ___ ___ Sponsors or affiliations are disclosed, and any other motive other than test prep is identified

NOTES:

VII. Payment and order confirmation

1. ___ ___ ___ Can the consumer confirm the item/items selected before finalizing the purchase?
2. ___ ___ ___ Are consumers provided with easy-to-use, secure payment mechanisms and information on the level of security such mechanisms afford?
3. ___ ___ ___ Does a dispute resolution process exists?

NOTES:

VIII. Privacy

How does the service handle information that could be considered confidential?
This includes credit card information, physical address, phone, email, passwords.

Information related to the test process includes test preferences, test scores, performance data and essay questions.

1. ___ ___ ___ Is it possible to request that your email information not be distributed?
2. ___ ___ ___ Is there a privacy policy in place before the purchase, describing how personal information (such as scores on tests or essay content) will be handled?
3. ___ ___ ___ Is the default condition one that does not distribute or share personal information? (The student must indicate in some way (e.g., check a box) to request additional information and services during the registration process)
4. ___ ___ ___ Does the service use student correspondence to market its own products?
5. ___ ___ ___ Does the service release student data to outside firms? Is there evidence that the email address has been given to third party groups?)

NOTES:

IX. Technical Support?

Does the service provide technical support?

1. ___ ___ ___ By telephone (check listed numbers to see if they are working)
2. ___ ___ ___ By email contact (check for a response)

Rate your experience with customer service

not helpful very helpful
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

X. Advertising

1. Were external products advertised behind the sign in screen? Y N
(external products are products not produced by the publisher)
2. Were internal products advertised behind the sign in screen? Y N
(internal products are additional books, tapes or services offered by the service provider)

XI. Trustworthiness

Rate this site on a scale of 1 to 10 on its general trustworthiness

not trustworthy very trustworthy
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Do you suspect that there is any other motive other than test prep? (yes, no) If so, please define.

NOTES:

Appendix II: Student Responses

Note: A minimum of two students used each service, independently of one another, for five four-hour days. In some cases, more than 2 students used the same service. Students were surveyed on only the services they used.

After 20 hours, each student was interviewed, guided by the checklist (Appendix 1) with results recorded both on paper and on videotape. The scores were checked for validity -- in other words, if two students gave different answers about the Princeton Review's use of advertising or had not yet tried the essay grading feature on Kaplan's, an adult research would explore further. In some cases, as many as four students tested the same service.

The mean survey score is reported on this chart. Our goal was to eliminate variability among tester answers, or to understand why there was variability, until we understood each product.

	Barron's Test Prep	Boston Test Prep	Kaplan's SAT Online Prep	Number2.com	Peterson's Online SAT Course	PrepMe	SAT Secrets	Test Preparation Program	The Official SAT Online Course	The Princeton Review
DESIGN	63	76	86	83	74	31	43	31	64	72
Ease of Use	82	93	89	100	93	64	NA	64	96	79
Educational Validity	70	85	95	82	82	30	43	23	93	91
Motivating	51	40	90	90	75	5	NA	10	40	75
Features	31	75	69	57	50	0	NA	25	31	38
Technical Robustness	81	89	88	88	72	58	NA	31	59	80
TRUST	75	77	92	82	86	72	92	13	92	91
Identity	80	80	100	70	100	50	100	20	100	100
Disclosure	50	100	94	75	83	67	100	22	100	83
Payment & Order Confirmation	100	100	100	NA	67	60	100	0	83	100
Privacy	40	40	75	80	80	80	100	13	80	80
Technical Support	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Noticed advertising outside prep sections?	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N

Notice advertising inside the prep sections?	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Overall trustworthiness	80	90	85	85	85	75	60	10	96	83

Appendix III: Academic Profile of Student Testers

SAT Online Test Preparation Study Participant Data

Student #	Gender	Age (yrs)	Prior Tutoring	H.S.	SAT Math	SAT Reading	SAT Writing	SAT Essay	HS GPS	Total SAT	Birth Order
1013	F	18	Y	1	510	530	600	8	3.8778	1640	2
1014	M	18	N	2	360	240	240	3	21,370	840	1
1016	F	17.4	N	3	420	450	460	8	3.2785	1330	3
1011	M	17.1	Y	3	490	440	550	8	3.7122	1480	3
1019	M	18	N	3	630	530	590	10	3.2929	1750	1
1015	M	17	N	4	480	430	530	8	n/a	1440	1
1021	M	17.6	N	3	650	700	650	10	3.9043	2000	1
1008	F	17.6	N	2	410	500	470	9	3.2484	1380	3
1012	F	17.7	Y	1	690	630	680	n/a	3.9253	2000	2
1003	M	17.7	N	2	670	500	450	7	3.1734	1620	1
1002	M	17.2	N	4	520	500	430	6	2.9475	1450	1
1020	M	17.6	N	5	690	630	640	9	n/a	1960	1
1001	M	17.2	N	2	520	550	550	8	2.5737	1620	1
1017	F	17.1	N	3	570	580	800	12	2.8265	1950	3
1005	F	17.6	N	2	470	380	370	6	4.0696	1220	twin
1004	F	17.6	N	2	520	400	340	6	4.1366	1260	twin
1006	M	16.8	N	3	470	470	420	7	2.7969	1360	3
1010	M	17.3	N	3	580	490	480	8	3.3231	1550	1
1022	F	17.4	N	2	620	590	590	10	4.444	1800	1
1009	F	17.4	N	2	530	680	580	7	3.9219	1790	1
					540	511	521	7.5		1572	

Appendix IV: Student Tester SAT Scores, Before and After Study, by Service

	Gender	Reading	Math	Writing	Total	Reading	Math	Writing	Total	Change
BTP	F	530	510	600	1640	530	540	640	1710	70
BTP	M	470	470	420	1360	*	*	*	*	*
Barrons	M	500	520	430	1430	520	530	440	1490	60
Barrons	F	680	530	580						
PR Express	M	490	580	540	1610	570	510	520	1600	-10
PR Express	F	400	520	340	1260	470	440	410	1320	60
Princeton Review	M	500	670	450	1620	680	500	510	1690	70
Princeton Review	F	590	620	590	1800	670	620	560	1850	50
Petersons	F	500	410	470	1380	410	500	530	1440	60
Petersons	M	700	650	650	2000	670	630	650	1950	-50
College Board	F	630	690	680	2000	---	---	---	---	---
College Board	M	630	690	640	1960	640	680	710	2030	70
College Board	M	550	520	550	1620	570	510	480	1560	-60
Number 2	M	240	360	240	840	320	440	260	1020	180
Number 2	F	450	420	460	1330	440	480	470	1390	60
Number 2	M	530	630	590	1750	*	*	*	*	*
Number 2	F	580	570	800	1950	640	560	710	1910	-40
Kaplan's	F	380	470	370	1220	420	340	370	1130	-90
Kaplan's	M	470	510	450	1430	470	570	530	1570	140
Prepme	M	430	480	530	1440	400	580	510	1490	50

Percent

Total

620

Mean

38.75

Percent change

1.61%

* = did not take second exam due to a change in plans.

-- = scores not yet turned in.

	<i>1640</i>	<i>1710</i>
Mean	1526	1562.666667
Variance	100940	84663.80952
Observations	15	15
Pearson Correlation	0.974145509	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0.05	
df	14	
t Stat	1.918295991	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.037849819	
t Critical one-tail	1.761310115	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.075699638	
t Critical two-tail	2.144786681	