

# TEN COMMANDMENTS OF STANDARDIZED TEST TAKING

**Build Your Boat**

**Deal With Anxiety**

**Breathe!**

**Look Out**

**Always Be Doing**

**One Step at a Time**

**Don't Be a Trapped Fly**

**Train for a Marathon**

**Choose to Begin**

**Work with a Great Tutor**

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# TEN COMMANDMENTS

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*Ten Commandments of Standardized Test Taking* embodies our overall approach to preparation, technique and execution. It is designed to help **YOU**, the student, reach a new level of excellence.

## (1) BUILD YOUR BOAT

The best way not to sink in the ocean of the standardized test is to build a solid “boat” to float upon. Give your boat sturdy foundations:

### Know your test content and formulas

This is the **what** of the test. For example, you have to know how many degrees there are in the interior angles of a five sided polygon. But fortunately, the content on the SAT or ACT is limited. You don’t have to know *everything* to do well on the test. In fact, you don’t really have to know very much. Be sure to find out what you must know, and learn it completely.

### Know your techniques

This is the **how** of the test. A technique is the way in which you **apply your basic knowledge** to the test. This is where test takers tend to suffer the most. One powerful technique essential to test taking is often overlooked: Underlining the key words on each math question. This will help you sharpen and maintain your concentration as well as avoid mistakes of casual reading (see Commandment #4). Underlining is only one of many very important techniques for mastering the test.

It is important to note that a technique is not the same thing as a “trick”. Don’t be seduced by “special tricks” for standardized tests. Yes, there are a few essential tricks (such as back-solving and plugging in numbers), but every tutor and tutoring company knows them, and you can easily find them in any test book at the bookstore. Remember, technique is broader than these tricks – it is your way of applying what you know to the questions at hand.

### Practice smarter

Practicing for the test is the same as practicing for a sport or rehearsing for a play. You must do it, and you must do it in a way that leads to growth. Studying smarter is not always the same thing as studying harder. For example, you can work like crazy, taking tons of practice tests, but if you don’t review your results and make sense of your errors, you might be quite frustrated to find that your score does not improve very much.

### Know your test

Be aware of the test and its structure. Be very familiar with the different sections, and be ready for all question types.

Ultimately the boat is **YOU**. With solid foundations of content, technique and smart practice, and with the guidance of the other nine commandments, you can achieve beyond your expectations!

## (2) DEAL WITH ANXIETY

For many students, the standardized testing process can become very stressful. It is not uncommon for students who get good grades in school to discover that they have difficulty excelling on these types of tests. For many students, standardized tests represent their first major academic obstacle. Parents are often mystified: “my child gets very good grades, but she is just not very good at standardized tests!” While this may be the case, the **reasons** for it may not be so evident. The truth is, achieving success on standardized tests often has as much to do with anxiety as it does with raw intellectual power.

Research shows that a high level of anxiety significantly disrupts the ability to use what are known as the Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS): critical thinking, analysis, and problem solving. All of these skills are essential to performing well on college entrance exams and other similar tests. In other words, our natural intelligence can be hindered, or even inaccessible, when we are feeling too much anxiety. So, even though a little bit of anxiety can be good—it can motivate us and focus our thinking—beyond a certain point it can be very harmful to our thought process.

So, we must deal with our anxiety. To do this we must find where it is coming from, and then we must develop practices for reducing it.

### Where is the anxiety coming from?

Here are three 3 major sources of anxiety and some questions for YOU to consider:

- 1) **Family:** How are the parents potentially contributing to the anxiety of the student? Is the family’s financial or social situation pressuring the student to do well on the SAT and gain admission to a top college? Are the parents overly involved in the student’s test prep work? Are the parents’ personal worries being carried in any way by the student? Does the student feel pressure to attend the same kind of school that his or her sibling attended? Does the family expect it?
- 2) **Peers:** Are you in competition with your friends or classmates? Are SAT or ACT scores becoming a measure of status in school? Are you feeling pressure to share your scores? Do you wish that everyone would just mind their own business?
- 3) **Self:** Are you a “Type A” personality (defined as controlling, with a strong urge to excel)? Do you always feel the pressure from within to achieve? Does the SAT or ACT truly *scare* you? Are you paralyzed by the idea of “failure”? Do you feel that if you don’t achieve a great SAT score, then your future is doomed? Are you generally feeling overwhelmed by the whole “college process”?

Once you’ve identified some sources of your anxiety you will be better equipped to deal with the anxiety effectively.

If you are a student who is prone to high stress or anxiety, you are probably putting a lot of pressure on yourself. Take this opportunity to go a little easier on yourself. There **is** such a thing as working **too hard**. When the pressure feels too great and everything seems impossible, this is the time to back off and to change to a “lower gear,” as you would on a bicycle when preparing to climb a steep hill. By slowing down a little and cutting down on your own, internally-generated stress, you take some of the pressure

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off of yourself. When you do this, you may find that you become even more productive than before you slowed down!

This is also a wonderful opportunity for a family to provide the right kind of support for their high school junior or senior. The right kind of support involves a healthy balance of acceptance and pressure. Peers can also be a positive influence in this process. They can motivate one another to work harder, and even help one another with weaknesses.

The best way for the student to perform well is to maintain a **healthy balance** between the pressure to do well and the understanding that no matter what happens on the test, college will follow, and life will continue. If the student doesn't care enough, he won't find the right amount of energy to prepare well for the test. But if the student is too worried about the test result, he will find it very difficult to relax enough to concentrate on test day and put his natural intelligence to work for him.

## (3) BREATHE!

Before reading this Commandment, take a moment and a deep breath...

Proper breathing is incredibly important and the implications are so far reaching that it might be the most important of the Commandments. Breathing is a great enigma: it is very obvious (we all do it), but it is the last thing we think about. Consider this. Breathing is the only bodily process that is both conscious and unconscious at the same time. You can choose to breathe. But even when you don't choose to breathe, you breathe. It's mind boggling.

Better breathing is the key to great focus, concentration and thinking power. Doing breath work with some simple, repeatable exercises will reduce anxiety and fear, increase concentration and focus, and build self-esteem and confidence. All of these are what you need to perform well on the test.

How does it work?

In two ways. First, on a chemical level, proper breathing increases the amount of oxygen intake. Oxygen is literally food for the brain. Higher oxygen levels lead to better brain function. Second, on a psychological level, working on the breathing process is a powerful way of becoming truly present from moment to moment. Focusing on breathing snaps us out of our daydreams. These daydreams are passive states. We are not actually thinking. We are having passive thoughts. However, when we remember to breathe, we become present again, and we are able to actively think.

Andrew Weil, one of the global pioneers of alternative therapies, suggests that "Practicing regular, mindful breathing can be calming and energizing and can even help with stress related health problems ranging from panic attacks to digestive disorders." He recommends a simple and teachable 4-7-8 breathing pattern:

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- 1) Inhale through the nose for a count of 4
- 2) Hold the breath for a count of 7
- 3) Exhale through the mouth for a count of 8

Do this exercise or any variation before sitting down to study or work. You will soon see the change in your ability to concentrate and perform at your best.

Breath work is easy to learn, quite beneficial, and very effective. As with the other Commandments, the effects of this work can have far reaching potential—both on the test and beyond!

## (4) LOOK OUT

Standardized tests are above all reading tests. Of course, there are math questions on the test, but more often than not, the math questions are composed of words. Students who excel on these problems are not math geniuses, but effective readers and thinkers.

One of the most common instances of ineffective reading occurs when the student reads what he or she **wants** to read rather than what is actually written.

All of us, from the student to the pundit, make reading errors. Read this simple sentence:

***The cat ate the garbage.***

What do you see? What do we know?

The truth is, we know only this: A cat ate garbage. However, it is easy to make mistakes. There are two broad categories of reading errors:

- 1) Adding meaning (the imaginative error)

Very often a reader will substitute or invent meaning beyond what is given. For example, one might conclude that there is a city cat that is starving or that a cat is eating out of a dumpster. But do we really know this? Of course not – this information is not given in the sentence. And while it is important to engage our thinking power while we read, to ask questions and to make hypotheses (see Commandment #5), it is essential to be very clear about the difference between what is **written on the page** and what comes from our fertile imagination.

The truth is that these tests are not testing our imagination. They are testing our ability to read the text clearly and to absorb it and process it efficiently, **without adding any meaning**. In other words we must build the muscle for concentrating on what is written. We must hone our ability to **LOOK OUT!** Such a skill is valuable beyond the SAT; it will come in handy in college coursework, in the workplace, when reading the newspaper, and generally for any task that demands clear, focused attention.

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## 2) Misreading words (the visual error)

Let's go back for a moment to our cat sentence.

As an exercise, let's **change** one word in our sentence: ***The dog ate the garbage.***

The meaning is quite different now. And it invites a whole other series of associations and questions.

Another option is that we can **add** a word: ***The cat ate in the garbage.***

By adding the little word "in", the whole picture shifts. Now our cat is *inside* the garbage. Do we know that the cat is in a dumpster? In a garbage can in the kitchen? Be careful!! We don't have any answers to these questions. At least not yet. Maybe if we keep reading the passage we will find out. Aren't you curious? Good reading should naturally generate curiosity to find out more!

Now let's see what happens when we make three visual errors simultaneously, just for fun: ***The dog danced in the garbage.***

Okay, you get the idea. Remember, reading errors are often the obstacles between you and the correct answers on the test. Don't underestimate the importance of strengthening your ability to concentrate on the actual words on the page.

## (5) ALWAYS BE DOING

Being active is the key to effective learning and test taking. Passively looking at words on a page is what most people do and never get beyond. However, your task on the test is to choose the right answer. To choose the right answer, you must understand the information. To understand the information, you must absorb the information. To absorb the information, you must concentrate. To concentrate you must be active! Did you follow that?

The key to increased concentration in any task, whether it be performing well on a test, winning a gold medal, or building a career is to **actively work with technique**. One who is working with technique is always able to answer the question: "What are you **doing**?" It is only after working with a clear technique for a long time that we can "let go" of the technique and simply **do**. For example, a serious guitar student does not pick up the guitar and randomly pluck on strings wherever he feels the impulse. He knows to practice the finger positions, the strumming patterns, and fingerpicking. He also knows to sit down and learn to read music and understand music theory. There is nothing casual or passive about his development.

The same goes for mastering a standardized test. We need a rigorous technique. On these big tests, we need a technique that helps us to continually concentrate, focus, and read clearly. By practicing a technique over and over, you will be able to "let go" and simply **do** on test day.

As an example, let's look at how technique is essential on the **reading comprehension** section.

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1) First you must actively read the passage.

This means:

- activating your knowledge based solely on the italicized introductory text
- underlining the text as you read
- following with your finger or pencil
- asking yourself questions as you read
- forming flexible hypotheses
- making small notes as you read
- tracing the transitions

2) Next, you must deal with the questions.

Here is what typically happens when a student works without technique:

He reads the question. He feels he understands what is being asked of him. Then he reads the answer choices.

**Choice A: maybe.**

**Choice B: could be.**

**Choice C: well, ok.**

**Choice D: Definitely not....well, maybe not...well maybe. Uh-oh, I'm confused. Wait, what was the question?**

**Choice E: I don't have a clue anymore! I'll just circle this one, because I'm lost!**

What has happened here? He's been de-railed by the answer choices! He's been defeated by the trickery of the test. Why does this happen? Because he didn't have the proper technique to fight the battle.

Here is what you must do to fortify yourself from the attack:

*You must answer the question on your own, using the passage, before you look at the answer choices.*

With your own answer in your pocket, you are prepared to stand strong as you read through the answer choices. You will usually clearly see the correct choice. You have built a strong and sturdy castle that can withstand the winds of distraction! This is a learned skill and it must be practiced. At first it might take more time to answer the question on your own, but keep at it and watch as your reading score (and your reading level in general) shoot up!

## (6) ONE STEP AT A TIME

We take for granted how complex and amazing our brains are. Every day we complete the most difficult, complicated tasks without even thinking about it. We cross busy streets, we drive cars, we eat food with sharp objects, we put one foot in front of the other, one at a time, and never both at the same time! It's truly a miracle we survive at all. Somehow, we do it. But when we add a little pressure, then we often collapse. We enter into performance mode, and whether it is giving a public speech or taking a standardized test, we often somehow lose our ability to work naturally and effectively. Therefore, it becomes necessary to develop a technique for dealing with these pressure-filled situations so that we can access our organic intelligence.

If we look at life and its complexity, we see that all complex things are a combination of many simpler, basic elements. For example, everything is composed of circles and lines. Look at your face in the mirror. A brilliantly complicated composition of circle parts and lines. With this principle in mind, we can approach a seemingly difficult, complex standardized test and break it into its smaller, simpler pieces.

Take a look at this math question:

**What is the difference between the sum of the digits of the largest three digit number and the product of the digits of the smallest three digit number, where all three digits are positive?**

This is a question written in true SAT fashion. At first glance it seems so complicated that it is not even worth trying. Or we could stare at it for several minutes, trying to make sense of it. But if we remember our principle of finding the simple parts, we can begin working on the problem immediately. We must find something—anything—that makes sense, even if we don't yet understand the whole question.

Right away we can see the phrase: **the largest three digit number**

Okay, the largest three digit number is 999.

Then we notice that it says: **the sum of the digits of the largest three digit number**

Okay, the sum of the three digits means we have to add  $9 + 9 + 9 = 27$ .

Now we can do the second part more easily: **the product of the digits of the smallest three digit number, where all the digits are positive**

the smallest three digit number with all positive digits is 111, so the product is  $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ .

Now for the final step: **the difference between the sum.....and the product.....**

So, we take our first two parts and subtract them:  $27 - 1 = 26$ .

We have our answer!

We need a practical technique for dealing with complicated-seeming questions. Giving the brain one task at a time is a great way to dismantle even the most intimidating SAT questions.

## ONE STEP AT A TIME (A STORY)

One of my students, Alex, came to me with a math score in the 400s. He had good grades, and in conversation seemed like an intelligent, well-spoken, thoughtful young man. I wondered why his math scores were so low. I had him work through some math questions out loud so I could see his process. I watched Alex as he read the question aloud and then proceeded to stare at it for a lengthy period of time. Eventually, he would begin working on the question, but then he would stop again and stare at it. Finally, he would shake his head in frustration and look to me for help.

As his witness, I wondered what was going on in his head during those long silences. Since I am aware that this is a timed test, I knew that he didn't have the luxury of taking so much time on each question. But also I saw that even with all that time spent, he wasn't getting to the answer. I imagined that for Alex, doing math was a very unpleasant experience.

I tried various things to get him to move more quickly, but ultimately his original habit of "the long silences" remained in place. We worked on other sections, and slowly he progressed. His math score even rose over 100 points. But still, I knew that he had a greater potential.

Often Alex would not complete all of the homework I assigned him. He said that it just took too long and that his study sessions left him feeling drained. On top of that, even when he sat down, he wasn't getting that much work done, particularly in math. We talked at length about his study habits and soon it became clear that Alex was having difficulty **starting**. He would procrastinate and watch movies, thinking about the homework he was supposed to be doing, feeling rotten, but never sitting down to do it. So I gave him an assignment. I told him that he had to do five "starts" over the course of the week and that his study sessions could be **no longer than 20 minutes**. He seemed to like this idea. When he returned the following week, he beamed as he showed me his schedule: he had done 10 study sessions over the course of the week, each ranging from 10-20 minutes in length. For someone who was having trouble "starting," that was truly a great accomplishment. And the real clincher was that when we looked at the math work he'd done, he was getting many more questions right than he ever had before! He was so happy.

I became very curious about how this was all happening. I had him do some math questions out loud in the moment to watch his process. What I witnessed was astonishing. Now, for the first time, Alex was working through each question **one step at a time**. His long silences were significantly shortened, and more importantly he was arriving at the correct answer via a patient, step by step approach.

Then I finally understood what had been going on during those long silences. Alex was trying to understand the whole question right from the start. He wasn't letting himself "start" the **work** until he felt he understood the question completely. Now, both in his study habits and in his technique on the test, he was working in a way that was both more efficient and more effective. He had learned to take things **one step at a time**.

## (7) DON'T BE A TRAPPED FLY

We've all watched as a fly bangs itself again and again against the window pane. It makes you want to say to the fly: "Fly! The door is open over there! Go that way!"

We often do the same mindless thing on a question that is not opening its door to us. It happens even on very easy questions. We "bang our heads" on it over and over, and maybe we get it right (eventually), but by that time, five minutes have gone by, we are exhausted from all the effort, and we are discouraged and frazzled. And we've lost our flow, so the rest of the section will suffer for it.

Thus the important thing to remember is this: ***learn to skip a question that is not unlocking itself to you.*** Come back to it later, and the window might be open!

For most of us, skipping questions is not easy to do. We are trained in school to answer things in order, and it is easy to become stubborn. It feels uncomfortable to skip a question that you cannot get. On some deep level, you feel anxious that if you skip a question, you are losing the game. But if you make it your practice to come back to the question, sooner rather than later, then you will give yourself a second shot and often you will discover something wonderful: Now the question makes sense! Now you know what to do! Now you can get the right answer.

How does this work?

Several psychological factors are at play here:

- 1) Familiarity – when seeing something for the second time, we are already familiar with it, and so we can see it more clearly, with more precision.
- 2) Less anxiety - because we are already familiar with it, we feel less anxious and therefore we can see the answer more clearly and readily.
- 3) The "Sleep" Factor - it's just like in the story where the mad genius can't figure out the answer to a great big problem, and then he falls asleep and he wakes up the next morning and yells: EUREKA! When you skip a question, you are taking a little "nap", letting the question go, so that your subconscious mind can work on it while your conscious mind works on later questions. It sounds crazy, but it works!

A final note:

Often students are afraid to skip because they are all too aware that time is ticking. "But I'm not going to finish the section," they worry. They will then try to solve the time problem by actually speeding up. This is a mistake. Speeding up is the last thing you want to do on a test like this. Remember, this test is measuring your ability to think and focus clearly, step by step, in the moment. Speeding up is only letting pressure take you off of your game and out of your comfort zone.

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The true antidote for a student who is not finishing the sections on time is to increase his or her flow. By skipping and coming back, one will save time and increase accuracy. Try it and see for yourself!

## (8) TRAIN FOR A MARATHON

Standardized tests like the SAT, PSAT and ACT will measure your ability to concentrate for a longer period of time than you may be used to. In fact, the only significant difference between the PSAT and the SAT is the length of the test. The SAT and ACT are each a whopping **four hours** long! It's unlikely that you've ever had to stay fully concentrated for this long. This is a big challenge. You'll have to prepare yourself much like a marathon runner must prepare himself for the 26.2 miles ahead.

Here's what you need to do to get ready!

### Develop Good Study Habits

Just as a marathon runner must build up his cardiovascular endurance, so too must you build up your "muscles" of concentration so that you are at your best for the entire four hour test period.

How does a marathon runner typically train? First he develops a plan that he will follow over time. He builds himself up to the task. Each week, he takes several short runs on the weekdays and one long run on the weekend. This serves as a good model for test prep: During your period of preparation, you must get in the habit of working more often for shorter periods of time. For example, an hour of test prep, four days per week, will be much more beneficial than one four-hour day of heavy study.

### Set Goals

Just like concentration, goal setting is a "muscle" that requires exercise. You must decide what is most important and start now! Write down your goals, keep lists, and set specific priorities. Good goals are those that are **clearly connected to** one another, and are **specific**. Here is a sample set of goals:

- Immediate Goals - Do one 25 minute section per day, and learn 50 new vocab words per week
- Short Term Goals - Get in the 700's on all three sections of the SAT
- Medium Term Goals - Attend the UNC creative writing program
- Long Term Goals - Become a Pulitzer-Prize winning author and live in a rustic home in the hills of California (Long term goals are your dreams!)

Of course, goals are different for every person. They have to be worked out by trial and error. By being flexible in your goal setting, you can find what works best for you. But you must also be firm in your **commitment to execute the work**.

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## Believe in yourself

You can achieve more than you probably realize! Self-confidence is a powerful tool for activating the brain's potential to learn. Remind yourself of your past achievements. Put up positive messages or quotations in your study space. By sticking to your clearly defined short-term and medium-term goals, you will find that your confidence and self-esteem will grow immensely.

## Stay motivated

Your training period for this test can last as long as 14 months. If you begin the work at the start of your junior year, for example, you are in a great position to maximize your test scores, because you've given yourself time to fulfill your study goals. Staying motivated for this whole time is possible **only if** you keep your eye on your long term goals. You can also reward yourself along the way, as you check off the items on your list of immediate goals. For example, you can tell yourself: "After I finish my section and my school homework, I'm going to watch a movie with a friend." Establishing little rewards along the way like this is a great way to help you maintain focus and motivation.

## Take care of your body

Don't forget that the brain is a physical organ. Its performance is fully connected to the rest of your body! Muscle tension will affect your brain function. Be sure to stretch before sitting down to work. Position your body properly at the desk when working. And learn to recognize when muscular tensions arise in the neck and shoulders and back so that you can eliminate them.

Also, just as a marathon runner needs to eat well and sleep well to run 26.2 miles, you need to do the same to improve your study efficiency and maximize your score. If you feed your brain the right nutrients, you will improve your memory and concentration.

## One last word

Learning all of these new habits, even if you only begin to make these changes, will have far reaching positive effects on many levels throughout the rest of your life. So begin the journey now!

## (9) CHOOSE TO BEGIN

Answer choices, Score choices, College choices.....

The word "choice" seems to be a major theme on the big standardized tests. But how many students are actually *choosing* to take this test, and how many are doing it because they feel they have to?

Often, the transition between high school and college is the first time a student is actually choosing which way he wants to go. Sometimes the choice of college is made as a compromise between parent and child. Many factors are involved. But it is almost always a critical crossroads in the journey—a key moment in the separation of parent and child and the development of the student's own individuality.

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When preparing for and taking the big tests, it is essential that you ask yourself a big question:

Why am I taking this test?

- A) Because it's what people do at my age
- B) Because I want to go to my top choice school
- C) Because life isn't fun and the SAT is designed to make me miserable
- D) Because I love challenges and I want to ace this test
- E) Because if I fail, I'll be miserable

The only actual answer choices are B and D. The others are not really **choices** at all.

Something very powerful occurs when a real choice is made. But making a real choice is difficult, because it involves real thinking. And real thinking is hard to do. That is what the college process is really about.

A student who has made choices is in a position of power. Consider this familiar scenario:

The proctor says the dreaded word—"Begin"—and the whole classroom becomes a frenzy of shuffling papers as students turn to the first page as quickly as possible. The students have suddenly become robots following orders in a reflexive manner. This is a very bad way to start and unfortunately, most of us do this. Instead, try something better. Before you start, take a moment, look around, take a deep breath or two, and calmly **choose** to begin the test. It takes some courage and a lot of practice to do this.

If you can find a way to actually **choose** to take the test, for your own individual reason, this leads to a sense of empowerment. From this vantage point, you will soon see that this test is conquerable! It is not something to be feared or loathed. It is a mountain, but it can be scaled! You can achieve truly amazing results if you make this important shift of perspective.

## (10) WORK WITH A GREAT TUTOR

After reading the previous nine commandments, perhaps you are thinking: *This is way more than I bargained for. I simply wanted to prepare for the SAT or ACT and move on!*

This is a perfectly valid thought. But perhaps you have not yet considered the potential that exists in the collaboration between a tutor and a student. If you have already decided to hire a tutor, why not seek out the very best? A great tutor will prepare you for the big test, but in doing so, he will bring much more to the session than you might expect.

A great tutor treats a single session as more than a chance to convey information and test content. He sees the session as a critical opportunity for real growth in the student's ability to read, think, and concentrate. In this vein, he sees the SAT or ACT not as an irritating obstacle that stands in the way of the student and the rest of his life, but rather as a training ground for the development of practical study

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skills and more effective learning habits which will inevitably open the student up to a greater range of experience in the information world.

Furthermore, a great tutor is one who walks his talk. He understands the previous nine commandments on a level of personal experience. He is himself a highly trained, accomplished, and free-thinking individual. He is in a position to teach the commandments, and to guide the student toward a fuller practice of the principles of good study and greater concentration.

A great tutor gets a lot more done in one session. He goes to the root of the problem, whether it is a reading challenge, a concentration or anxiety issue, bad study habits, lack of motivation, or simply the need to review important test content.

A great tutor is committed to the student beyond the session itself. Between sessions, he keeps the student in mind, checks in during the week, sends interesting articles to stretch and inspire the student, and provides motivation and support when needed.

To sum it up, a great tutor has the means and the desire to bring a high school student to a new level of achievement and fulfillment in the realm of learning and performance.

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## NOTES