James Fong’s Tips for Studying for the SAT/PSAT:

General tips:
- Take as many practice tests as possible beforehand: I took at least 9 practice tests before actually taking the test (~36 hours!). I find that the test has certain nuances that can really only be understood through first-hand experience and practice. For example, in the Writing section, there are "Sentence improvement" questions that have the student replace an underlined portion of a given sentence with one of four given choices. The directions say to pick the "best" choice, but what constitutes the "best" replacement is not based solely on the concrete rules of grammar. It also has a certain element of subjectivity concerning if a sentence sounds "awkward" or uses a "clearer" synonym. Through practice, you can develop an ear for those vague rules.
- Cross out answers you know are incorrect: You can write in the test booklet. Use this to your advantage by helping you with the process of elimination.
- Do not leave anything blank, guess if you have narrowed it down enough: There is a 0.25 point penalty for getting a wrong answer. This might be a matter of personal opinion, but I believe that if you are trying to get the best possible score on the SAT/PSAT, you may as well go "all-in" on the test and guess even on the questions you are unsure about, betting that you randomly get those right.
- Memorize the directions for each section: Do not waste 1-2 minutes reading the directions if you already know what they will be.
- Stay calm while taking the test: Breathe.
- Try to relax the day before the test.

Essay-specific:
- Refresh your memory on important works of literature and moments in history: The essay directions require that you use concrete examples to support your essay's claim. These examples can be drawn from virtually anything, but I find that it is easiest and fastest to write about stories from history and literature. For example, suppose the prompt is "Should all members of a society be active participants in the governing of that society?". You might write about a personal experience where you influenced a class officer to consider your idea for a Homecoming theme, which made it a great success, and therefore this is an instance where the governed made a beneficial choice for the government. However, this would take at least an entire paragraph to write out, and is slightly far-fetched and definitely a case of anecdotal evidence. If instead you referenced a moment from the Civil Rights movement or Henry David Thoreau's Civil Disobedience, then you could provide stronger well-known cases that demonstrate agreement with your claim—and only in a few sentences!
- Spend at least five minutes planning your essay: Taking the time to make sure your paragraphs will flow nicely is well-worth the effort, and saves a lot of "writer's block" moments further down the line.
- Be confident in your position or claim: Showing confidence automatically makes the writing sound better, less "on-the-fence" on an argument. Eliminate phrases like "I think that" or "This could possibly mean ..." when appropriate.
- If possible, reference the opposing position or claim, but do not agree with it: Saying "Although others may think ..." shows that you have carefully considered multiple positions before deciding on the one you chose to be the subject of your essay. It also demonstrates to the reader that you acknowledge that there is no "perfect" or "absolutely correct" position in this argument.

Writing-Specific:
- Recognize when a sentence sounds "awkward": As described above, although some answers may seem grammatically correct, they might not be the most concise or the most clear of the choices. Even then, sometimes grammar takes precedence over clarity, and at other times it is the opposite. It takes practice to learn this.
- Know the difference between casual grammar and formal grammar; the test uses formal grammar.
- Some good grammar to know: (In no particular order; this list is not completely comprehensive)
  - Pronoun/antecedent agreement
  - Noun/verb agreement
- Verb tenses
- Irregular verbs
- Difference between pronouns as the subject, as the object, and as a part of the predicate
- Recognize that sometimes moods or meanings are only implicated: For example, if a writer states that he enjoys nature, then make sure you know what is it about nature that he enjoys. Is it because it is undeveloped? peaceful? raw? green? Sometimes a writer only hints at these kinds of underlying thinking.

Math-Specific:
- Avoid using your calculator! As a general rule, I notice that if I have to use my calculator, then my methods are incorrect or excessively difficult. Using the calculator may still lead you to the correct answer, but every operation increases the chance of mistake. Try to find the fastest, simplest, or even "lazy" way of solving problems.
- Use the test booklet as working space.
- Make sure your calculator is in the correct angle mode (Degrees/radians).
- Some good maths to know: (In no particular order; this list is not completely comprehensive)
  - Triangle theorems (SAS, Pythagorean, all angles add up to 180 degrees, etc.)
  - Arithmetic and geometric sequences.
  - Mean, median, mode
  - Various properties of circles (tangent lines, arcs, pi, etc.)
  - Inequalities and their relationship to absolute value
  - Reading graphs (pictograph, bar, pie, etc.)
  - Quadratic formula
  - Dimensional analysis
  - Parabolas (vertex, x-intercept, etc.)
  - Number lines
- In the questions that are something like "Which of the following can NOT be true?" try find counter-examples for each rule.

Critical Reading-Specific:
- "100% correct clause": This is something I made up: unless an answer is 100% correct, it is wrong. There are no "almost correct" answers. If there is something in an answer that even remotely disagrees with the passage, then it is wrong. For example, if an answer says that the writer is "angrily" expressing her opinion, but the passage clearly states that she is "disheartened" by her thoughts, then it is wrong, even if the rest of the answer correctly describes her opinion or otherwise "sounds correct.'
- Underline or circle portions of the excerpt while reading that stand out to you; you might refer to them later.
- Do not confuse the question numbers and the line numbers: This sounds silly, but sometimes when I read question #10 that says "refer to line #29," I end up searching in vain on line #10. Do not let this be you.
- In the "fill-in-the-blank" questions, just because you may not know the definition of a word does not mean it is wrong.

Hope these help,
James Fong