

Time to Think about College Board Testing

from Susan Richman

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It's that time of year-- your high schooler is now in 11th grade, and you're pretty sure there's something called the PSAT coming up this year, but you're not quite sure exactly what it is or when or how you take it. Or your teen is now a senior, and you realize that with college applications looming it's time to figure out about taking the SAT I and you're wondering what in the world the SAT II exams are and who takes them?? And isn't there some question about some school code number you're supposed to put down on the registration form??

But don't worry-- you can easily become your own guidance counselor, and learn all the ins and outs of the College Board. You can start by picking up the basics right here, and then head out with a roadmap for further investigations on your own.

First some definitions, so you aren't confused by the "alphabet soup" of tests from the College Board.

PSAT/NMSQT: This stands for Preliminary Scholastic Assessment Test/ National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test. As this name implies, it has two purposes-- it's a practice SAT exam for somewhat younger students so they can learn just what the SAT is all about, and it's a scholarship exam for National Merit. When? The PSAT/NMSQT is given only in October-- this year the official dates are Saturday October 17th or Tuesday October 20th (school choose one date or the other). The test is given in most high schools, both private and public. To take part you just call up a local school, ask which day they are giving the test, say you'd like to sign up, and ask when they want you to pay the \$9 fee. You do not need to mail any fancy computer registration form to the College Board.

Who takes the PSAT? Typically 11th graders take the PSAT-- and it only counts as the National Merit Qualifying Test for 11th graders. That is, if a 10th grader takes the test and does really well, way up in the 99th percentile (yep, that's what you need for National Merit), that student will not qualify for National Merit Scholarships. The student must take it again in October of 11th grade for his score to count for this purpose. The PSAT has a verbal section, including questions on sentence completion, analogies, and critical reading. The math section covers arithmetic, algebra, and geometry, and calculators are expected. Not all questions are multiple choice-- ten questions require the student to write in the answer. Then there a section on writing skills-- but you don't have to write anything here! Instead you are answering multiple-choice questions aimed at identifying effective written expressions, recognizing faults in usage or structure, and choosing appropriate revisions of sentences and paragraphs.

School code number? Every state has their own homeschoolers code just for use in the PSAT-- in PA this is 993999. And don't miss out on one of the very neat things about the PSAT-- you can actually get your own test booklet back to see exactly what those pesky questions were that you missed. Just ask the guidance counselor at the school where you take the test about this.

SAT I: This stands for Scholastic Assessment Test I: Reasoning Test. This is the test most colleges require students to take for admissions decisions. This is basically the same as the PSAT, but longer (3 hours, instead of 2 hours and 10 minutes for the PSAT), and there's no writing skills section. Scores in verbal and math range from 200 to 800, with 500 being considered about average. When? Testing dates are Saturday mornings: Oct 10, Nov 7, Dec 5, Jan 23, Mar 20, May 1 and June 5, and you must register before hand through the College Board-- either on-line (my favorite) or with a special registration form sent by mail. Fee is \$23. Most kids take the SAT I in spring of 11th grade, giving them a chance to retake it as needed in 12th. Where? Big high schools and many state-related universities give the SAT I. And no, sorry, your homeschool group isn't allowed to give the SAT or the PSAT. The registration booklet or the College Board website lists all the possible test sites and which month each offers the test. School code? If you're in the PHAA diploma program this is the time to use the 392057 code. If you're not in a program with a school code, just leave it blank-- nothing bad will happen. A school code just insures that copies of your scores also get to your school. You automatically get results sent to your home no matter what.

SAT II: This stands for Scholastic Assessment Tests II: Subject Tests, and as you can probably guess, these tests cover material actually learned in different subject areas-- English literature, writing (and here you really will write a brief essay), US and world history, higher math, biology, chemistry, physics, and six different foreign languages. You can take up to three SAT II subject tests on one Saturday morning, and each test is one hour long. Testing dates and locations are the same as the SAT I (though SAT II exams are not given in March, the big time for juniors to take the SAT I). Here too you get the College Board scale of 200 to 800 for your scores. Fee is \$13 plus \$5 per test, with the writing test costing \$10.

When is the best time in high school to take SAT II tests? Best bet is right after you've had a good solid course in that area-- which could be as early as 9th grade, or anytime later on.

Why take SAT II exams? Some very selective colleges require SAT II exams, but most colleges do not. However, I encourage homeschoolers to think about these exams even if not required. They offer an opportunity to show in an objective way that homeschoolers are knowledgeable. In talking with many college admissions folks I've certainly found that even when these tests aren't required, they're greatly appreciated. After all, they don't know what homeschoolers' grades really mean, but they do know what SAT II scores mean. Also in areas like foreign language study they can really help your teen see if they really are at the French III or IV level-- or if it's back to the audio tapes. And they can be great prep for related Advanced Placement exams but of course SAT II exams will not give you college credit as AP can.

Again, use that PHAA code of 392057 if you are part of the PHAA diploma program.

So now that you're through this quick intro to what the College Board offers, w

here to go for more info so that you're really ready to take part? Best bet if you have Internet access is to check out www.collegeboard.org and follow the links to the testing program you want more info about. You can even register right there for the SAT I or SAT II. you'll also want something to leaf through-- and we have the free test info booklets directly from the College Board covering the PSAT, SAT I, and SAT II exams, plus registration materials. Just send \$3 to cover postage to PA Homeschoolers, and we'll send them on.

And for more thorough preparation, check out the order form at the end of this issue for the full-length College Board books we offer: Ten Real SATs and The Official Guide to SAT II: Subject Tests. And do check out other practice materials you can find-- many homeschoolers love the Princeton Review materials (I'm wowed by their comprehensive CD-ROM on the SAT I), and Kaplan has lots of followers too. But don't pass up the chance to practice with the real thing, straight from the College Board.

We are also now offering the excellent Chalkdust SAT Math Prep video series in our catalog it's terrific. Price is \$107.05 (for 5 videos) and it goes with the Ten Real SATs book. We'll buy back good used copies of the video sets, also.

For verbal skills always remember that the best help is wide reading in challenging books and articles. Barron's Guide to the SAT even recommends reading 25 books a year. (Did they see PHAA guidelines!?)

So head out to find out more, and be ready to do your best on any College Board exam. More next issue on the difference between CLEP and AP exams, and how to decide which to go for.