

So You've Heard Something About the New SAT?

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Maybe you saw the October 27, 2003 issue of TIME Magazine, which featured a spiky-haired teen with #2 pencil in hand, peering with astonished eyes over a test booklet labeled Inside the New SATs: The Big Test is Being Retooled (see www.time.com) . Or maybe you've heard something vague about essays soon being required on this College Board exam. Maybe you're pretty confused about what is happening.... or when. Hopefully we'll give you some sense of what is happening to the SAT, and maybe even why.

It is true -- the SAT is being revamped, and this should make a difference in how homeschoolers will be preparing for this important entry key to many colleges (we have not heard anything about any proposed major overhauls of the ACT, the other major college admissions test). The changes in the SAT will first take place in the March 2005 test administration. So, all homeschool teens graduating in June of 2005, can rest easy.... you'll already have your college applications in and finished, and many of you will have happy acceptance letters in hand, well before this new version of the SAT goes into effect. Students who will graduate in 2006, though, will need to be aware of the changes, and shift their preparation study a bit to accommodate the new sections.

The core of the change is that a new section on writing skills is being added -- and this section will include an essay prompt that students will respond to by creating a short original essay on the spot, by hand, with pen. You may wonder who is going to score these essays, and whether the procedure will be fair -- or highly subjective? The College Board is right now actively recruiting essay readers who have Bachelor's degrees, and have had experience teaching either a high school or college course that required writing within the last five years, and three years of overall teaching experience. Readers need to be able to put in 20 hours of work per week and have suitable home or office computer setups to receive scanned essays via the Internet. Some homeschool evaluators, who no longer have kids at home, may actually want to see about becoming College Board SAT essay readers - - info for applying is up on the College Board website right now. English and writing teachers will be given first consideration. Teaching certification is not required. A training course is required, including a final examination of grading 50 actual student essays to see that readers can match the grading done by College Board.

The College Board has basic scoring guidelines already up on www.collegeboard.org for these essays, taken from the current guidelines for essay writing on the SAT II Subject Test in Writing, so that students and families will be aware of just what students should be aiming for in their work. You might find this helpful as a tool in evaluating your own students' work at home or in talking about test preparation for the New SAT. Readers will realize that they are essentially looking at first drafts of an essay, and will not be expecting the polish a student might be able to add to an essay where the full writing process is followed. At least some practice with timed essay writing may become a standard procedure for many students -- something that many homeschoolers may not currently work on at home. I can imagine that some homeschool co-ops or writing groups may want to involve students in some of these types of writing activities, especially with high schoolers.

The College Board now has the sample SAT writing assignment shown at the bottom of this article on their website. (This assignment was also included in the TIME article.)

The rest of the 800-point Writing section will include the types of grammar and revision/editing questions included for the last several years on the PSAT and the SAT II Writing Test. The College Board is hoping to encourage a greater emphasis on coherent written expression by including these types of questions on the New SAT. The emphasis is not on specific knowledge of grammar terms (the testmakers know those can vary quite a bit across different curricula), but rather on recognizing correct grammatical usage, noting when there is subject/verb agreement in actual sentences, sensing when a given sentence is either awkward or elegant, understanding idioms, and avoiding redundant wordiness. Specifically, the test will ask students to identify sentence errors, improve sentences, and improve paragraphs. Looking over the practice questions on the College Board website and in materials on the current PSAT and SAT II Writing Test will give plenty of examples for families to get the idea of what is expected. You will not be asked to diagram sentences, know specific grammatical terms, or identify parts of speech, though of course knowing these things may help you understand why certain sentences do or do not have errors. A student who has a very strong awareness of how language should be used, and who has read widely and written extensively, and engaged in active proofreading work, should also be ready to do well on this section.

Some changes in the Verbal section may be very welcome to some test takers. Verbal analogies ("captain is to ship, as pilot is to ____") will no longer be included. Some may miss these verbal puzzles -- and the heady 'aha!' feeling you can get when you finally untangle a complex relationship. But those homeschoolers who are like a young friend of mine, who once said, "Mrs. Richman, I can't figure out the word relationship in these SAT analogies, because I don't even know what half of the words even mean," may feel relieved. The College Board is trying to make the test more like what instruction either is or should be like in the nation's high schools. The test is moving further away from being a 'higher level thinking' test, measuring aptitude (which analogies do quite nicely), and more of a measure of what kids have learned to do in school. Also adding in the Writing section, meant something had to go, so that the test wouldn't take all day -- and analogies were a quick thing to zap. I personally think that learning to think through making analogies is a pretty important part of learning -- the best writers and lecturers use analogies all the time to help us grasp the core of highly abstract concepts in the sciences. But it's now gone from the SAT in the old format of "A is to B as C is to D," just as the old section of verbal antonyms was deleted in the last major overall of the SAT exam in the early 1990's.

Some new things also have been added in the Verbal section -- now renamed Critical Reading. Currently students are asked to read single sentences to gauge their understanding of vocabulary and syntax relationships, and longer passages (and paired passages) for comprehension and critical understanding of an author's intent and tone. On the New SAT, kids will now also be reading short paragraphs for comprehension exercises -- again focusing not on recall, but on implied meanings, sensing cause-and-effect relationships, recognizing rhetorical devices, and more. At least one fictional passage will also be included, along with expository writing related to various disciplines.

And on to the math section. There will be questions that require specific Algebra II concepts and vocabulary, beyond the basic algebra and geometry and problem-solving questions

now on the exam. The total math section will also be shortened by five minutes. The section on comparing two quantities has been zapped -- again, some students will welcome this change, others may be sad to see these thought-provoking questions go. Students will continue with the relatively new section of student-generated answers (this was added in the last major revision of the SAT in 1993 -- this was the first departure from the strict multiple-choice format developed in 1926). Again, the College Board is trying here both to reflect changes in schools (many more students are actually taking higher-level math courses now) and to drive instructional change and encourage students to keep on taking more advanced math classes.

The TIME article feels that many of the changes in the New SAT are directly related to the threatened move by the huge California state university system to stop requiring the SAT for their applicants. The president of the University of California stated that he was appalled to visit a private school that was spending inordinate amounts of time teaching students to do things like analogy questions -- an exercise that had little to do with their academic core studies, but was related only to developing their test-taking abilities. He apparently feared real science learning, in-depth engagement in history studies, work with real writing and reading quality literature, might all get swept aside in favor of such focused test-prep work. He urged the university system to only require tests that were more clearly achievement tests, based upon core academic disciplines. The ACT is commonly viewed as more achievement oriented, as are the College Board SAT II exams.

We will carry any new College Board study materials to help students prepare effectively for the New SAT as soon as these are available. Until then, check out the www.collegeboard.com site to be up on all of the latest developments -- and be ready for the changes by being aware.

Sample SAT Writing Assignment

Directions: Consider carefully the following excerpt and the assignment below it. Then plan and write an essay that explains your ideas as persuasively as possible. Keep in mind that the support you provide -- both reasons and examples --will help make your view convincing to the reader.

Please note that the essays are considered "first drafts" and are scored holistically. This means readers will award a score according to the overall quality of the essay. They will take into account aspects of writing such as the development of ideas, supporting examples, organization, word choice, and sentence structure.

"The principle is this: each failure leads us closer to deeper knowledge, to greater creativity in understanding old data, to new lines of inquiry. Thomas Edison experienced 10,000 failures before he succeeded in perfecting the light bulb. When a friend of his remarked that 10,000 failures was a lot, Edison replied, "I didn't fail 10,000 times, I successfully eliminated 10,000 materials and combinations that didn't work." -- Myles Brand, Taking the Measure of Your Success

Assignment: What is your view on the idea that it takes failure to achieve success? In an essay, support your position using an example (or examples) from literature, the arts, history, current events, politics, science and technology, or your experience or observation.