SAT

WHAT IS THE NEW SAT?

The SAT, which has not changed much since 1994, significantly changed in March 2005. If you're lucky, you may not be familiar with the old SAT. This book contains practice tests and advice targeting only the new test, the one on which you are focused, so you won't be confused.

The new SAT runs 3 hours and 45 minutes and is divided into 10 sections:

- One 25-minute Essay section
- Two 25-minute Math sections
- Two 25-minute Critical Reading sections
- One 25-minute multiple-choice Writing section
- One 20-minute Math section
- One 20-minute Critical Reading section
- One 10-minute multiple-choice Writing section
- One additional 25-minute Writing, Math, or Critical Reading experimental section

The essay is the first section of the SAT and takes 25 minutes. While the real SAT has ten sections, your practice tests do not include experimental sections, so each practice test is nine sections long. Be sure to skip the "experimental" section (Section 7) when filling out your answer sheet for each test.

How Is the New SAT Scored?

Four to five weeks after you take the SAT, you'll receive a report containing your Math, Critical Reading, and Writing scores. You may choose to access your scores online, in which case you'll get them a little faster. Each score will be reported on a scale that runs from 200 to 800, and the average student scores around 500. Scores go up or down in increments of 10 points.

The total maximum score is now 2400 points instead of 1600. (Before you know it, you'll be able to brag to older folks that their 1400s are nothing compared to your SAT scores.) You'll also hear about two other kinds of scores in connection with the SAT and other standardized tests: raw score and percentile scores. Your raw score is simply the number of questions you answered correctly, minus a fraction of the number of questions you answered incorrectly, and is used to calculate your final scaled score (200 to 800). A percentile score tells you how you did in relation to everyone else who took the test. If your score is in the 60th percentile, it means you did better on the test than 60 percent of the people who took it. People who are disappointed by their SAT scores can sometimes cheer themselves up by looking at their percentile scores.

Where Does the SAT Come from?

The SAT is published by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). ETS is a big company. It sells not only the SAT, but also about 500 other tests, including ones for CIA agents, golf pros, travel agents, firefighters, and barbers. ETS is located outside of Princeton, New Jersey, on a beautiful 400-acre estate that used to be a hunting club. The buildings where the SAT is written are surrounded by woods and hills. There is a swimming pool, a goose pond, a baseball diamond, lighted tennis courts, jogging trails, an expensive house for the company's president, a chauffeured motor pool, and a private hotel where rooms cost more than $200 a night.

You may have been told that ETS is a government agency or that it's part of Princeton University. It is neither. ETS is just a private company that makes a lot of money selling tests. The company that hires ETS to write the SAT is called the College Entrance Examination Board, or the College Board.

WHAT ABOUT THE ESSAY?

The biggest change to the SAT is the addition of a section that purports to evaluate writing skills. This section is broken up into two parts totaling 50 minutes. One part will consist of multiple-choice grammar questions. But it's the second part—the essay—that has many students sweating. Multiple-choice questions are nothing new compared with the chilling sight of a big, blank space that has to be filled up with your own writing. But just because it's intimidating to some doesn't mean that you need to lose sleep over it. There's really nothing new about this writing section, or, in particular, the essay portion. This writing section is merely a cannibalization of the current SAT II: Writing exam. As a matter of fact, the "new" SAT is really not new at all, but rather a Frankenstein's monster, cobbled together from different ETS exams.

In the next few pages, we'll give you a little more information about the essay and show you how to score your essays after taking the tests in this book. Finally, we'll outfit you with some tips on how you should prepare for the essay so that you nail it on test day.

Why Is There An Essay?

Two reasons: economics and the domino theory.

The College Board and some college admissions officers will tell you that it's time to update the test so that it better aligns with the skills students are learning in high school. Don't be fooled. The College Board decided to change the SAT in part because the University of California (UC) system considered dropping the test as an admissions requirement and replacing it with a test of its own design that covered writing, in addition to math skills and reading comprehension. When you consider the number of applications for admission received by all of the system's ten campuses, it turns out that UC is among the SAT's largest customers—and has been for more than 30 years.

But the College Board was not only worried about losing its biggest single payday, but also worried that other colleges might follow UC's lead. When big, prestigious universities make sweeping changes to their admissions policies, other colleges tend to take notice and reassess their own policies. In other words, if the University of California dropped the SAT, so would many other colleges. In effect, if the College Board *hadn't* added a writing section with an essay, it could have spelled the beginning of the end of the test. And nobody at the College Board wanted to see one of their most profitable products lean toward extinction.

What Will I Write About?

You will read a pair of quotations or a short passage that states multiple viewpoints on some generic topic, and you will then write an essay arguing your position on that opinion.

What Does the SAT Measure?

If you are like most high school students, you think of the SAT as a test of how smart you are. If you score 800 on the Verbal section (now called Critical Reading), you probably think of yourself as a "genius"; if you score 200, you probably think of yourself as an "idiot." You may even think of an SAT score as a permanent label, like your Social Security number. ETS encourages you to think this way by telling you that the test measures your ability to reason and by claiming that you cannot significantly improve your score through special preparation.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. The SAT isn't a test of how well you reason, and it isn't a test of how smart you are. More than anything else, it's a test of how good you are at taking the SAT.

Can you learn to be better at taking the SAT? Of course you can. That's what this book is all about. You can improve your SAT score in exactly the same way you would improve your grade in chemistry: by learning the material you are going to be tested on. Let's get to know this test.

What Has Changed on the New SAT?

If you have not seen the old test, don't sweat it: In this book (and in general), you will focus exclusively on the new test. For those who do know the old SAT, the new test includes the following changes:

- The Verbal sections have been renamed "Critical Reading" but will still be scored on a scale that runs from 200 to 800. The best score will remain an 800, with the average score around 500.
- The new SAT includes a Writing section, which is scored in three parts: a student-written essay and two sections of multiple-choice grammar questions. For the essay, you will have to take a position on an issue and use examples to support your position. The multiple-choice questions will include grammar and usage questions very similar to those on the SAT Writing Subject Test and the Writing Skills section of the PSAT.
- On the Critical Reading sections of the new SAT, the analogy questions have been eliminated, and new, shorter, critical reading passages with questions have been added.
- On the Math section of the new SAT, the quantitative comparison questions have been eliminated, and new, slightly more advanced topics have been added. Topics include exponential growth, absolute value, and functional notation. More emphasis is placed on additional topics such as linear functions, manipulating exponents, and tangent lines.
- Total testing time on the new SAT has been increased to 3 hours and 45 minutes, which is 45 minutes longer than the old test.

How Will My Essay Be Scored?

In a word, quickly.

More specifically, your essay will be scanned into a computer and posted on an Internet server. Two official, College Board–trained "readers" will each read your essay online at their own personal computers. And yours won't be the only essay they read when they boot up, either, and it's important to keep that in mind. In fact, each reader has to be available to score essays for *at least* four-hour blocks of time. Each reader will spend a minute (two if you're lucky) reading your essay. They will read it once, and only once, and then score it immediately. That means that readers will be scoring at least 100, and possibly more than 200, essays at one sitting. After reading some 200 timed essays on the exact same topic, it isn't far-fetched to say that readers will probably be a bit fatigued or that their attentions might start wandering. That's why it's important to give readers exactly what they are supposed to be looking for. Your essay may be #203 instead of #4, and by that point in the scoring process, the readers probably just aren't going to have the will or the energy to dig any deeper than necessary to find reasons to award your essay a high score.

Your essay will most likely be scored by high school teachers who have been trained in the College Board's essay-scoring guidelines. The College Board favors high school teachers as readers for two reasons. First, they are familiar with high school students' writing, the common mistakes students make, and the skills they should have developed by the time they take the test. Second, high school teachers, traditionally not the best-paid professionals, are more willing than most others to take the wage the College Board is offering to people to read and score essays. There will probably be a few college professors who also read SAT essays, but the majority of readers will be high school teachers.

The possible scoring range for each reader is 1–6, for a total combined essay score of 2–12. Essays not written on the assigned topic will be awarded a score of 0. If the two readers award your essay significantly different scores (for example, if one gives it a 2 and the other a 6), a third "master" reader will be brought in to, well, settle the score.

You'll receive two subscores for the Writing section: a multiple-choice subscore on a scale of 20–80, and an essay subscore on a scale of 2–12. Those two subscores will be combined to calculate an overall Writing score on a 200–800 scale.

What Does My Score Say About My Essay?

According to the College Board, a score of 6 should be given to an essay that "effectively and insightfully addresses the writing task"; "is well-organized and fully developed, using clearly appropriate examples to support ideas"; and "displays consistent facility in the use of language, demonstrating variety in sentence structure and range of vocabulary," although it may have "occasional errors." In contrast, a score of 1 should go to essays with "very poor organization," "very thin development," and "usage and syntactical errors so severe that meaning is somewhat obscured." (Visit www.collegeboard.com to read the entire essay-grading rubric.) There are four gradations between these two extremes.